

INDIA: Mothers' quest for justice

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In commemoration of the International day for Women Human Rights Defenders, 29 November 2013

Women's movements often find their roots in motherhood as a symbol or weapon to create space. Motherhood has in fact proved instrumental for women struggling for justice worldwide. One of the rare positive impacts of armed conflict can be said to be the increase in women's leadership in society through a change in their gender roles. This occurred in Argentina for instance, when mothers of disappeared persons mobilized themselves to seek justice collectively for the atrocities committed by the military government between 1976 to 1983, a time often noted as a period of 'dirty war'. An estimated 30 to 45 thousand people went missing during this period. In 1977, mothers of these missing persons formed the Association Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Association of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) and peacefully demanded information about their missing ones. Mothers were able to overcome their gendered roles in society and took leadership in the struggle for justice. Similar movements are also visible in Brazil, Chile and also in Sri Lanka.[1]

Meira Paibis, ('torch bearers') is a popular women's group in the Indian state of Manipur, active for over a century to address issues affecting women. The changing socio-political landscape in Manipur with the advent of British administration in the late 19th century and its end in 1947 had a profound influence on the subsequent course of women's networks like the Meira Paibis, which is based on solidarity. The historic Nupi Lal (women's agitations) of 1904 and 1939, the running of the Ima Keithal (mothers'/women's market), the organization of Nupi Marup (women's revolving credit group) are but a few examples. It was this solidarity among women that led to the withdrawal of the use of forced labour in 1904. The Nupi Lal that started in 1939 was against the Manipur Maharaja's oppressive economic and administrative policies under the supervision of the political agent Mr. Gimson (1933-45), which evolved later into a movement for constitutional and administrative reform in the Kingdom.

The Meira Paibis movement is rooted in the Ima Keithal of Imphal city, Manipur. Ima Keithal is the world's largest all women's market, where sellers are women, selling daily essential items. Presently there are 34 women's solidarity groups in the Ima Keithal.

In the late 1980s, the Meira Paibis became a household name for curbing alcoholism and for being in the forefront of protests against the excessive use of force by armed forces and non-state armed groups. They came forward in public grouping themselves as 'mothers', since the maternal platform provided the space required to raise their voices. The mobilization for this movement started between March 1975 and June 1976. The group was initially called the Nishabandi due to their activities against alcoholism. Changes in the socio-political and economic spheres were also reflected in the women's movement. In the last two decades therefore, the Meira Paibis are mostly seen as active against atrocities by the armed forces and the armed opposition groups. They received worldwide attention for their bold protest against the sexual violence and custodial death of a woman named Manorama in 2004. 'We are all mothers of Manorama', declared one of the protesters.

One deviation from this trend, a mammoth hunger protest staged by a single woman, is worth mentioning. The killing of ten persons by paramilitary forces at Malom, Manipur on 2 November 2000, followed by a brutal combat operation, left Irom Sharmila shocked at the anarchical act of the state agencies. She decided to begin a fast unto death demanding the repeal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, which was responsible for such brutality on the part of the state. Sharmila, also known as Manipur's 'Iron Lady', completed 13 years of her fast recently. Despite Sharmila's protest, 13 years later, the investigation

into the Malom massacre has still not been completed. Only on 7 January 2010, did a team of judicial officials led by Ms. T. Surbala, the District and Session's Judge, Manipur East, conduct a spot inquiry as part of an initial investigation at Malom. The victims are yet to get justice however. Since 2 November 2000, Sharmila continues to be arrested under section 309 of the Indian Penal Code for her 'attempted suicide' each year.

Another glorious example of a women's movement in North East India that used motherhood as a platform, is the Naga Mothers Association (NMA). Formed on 14 February 1984 as a voluntary organization, the mothers committed to fight social evil, which they do even today. In the 1970s and 1980s, they initiated resistance against alcoholism and drug addiction. However, challenges emerged as counter insurgency operations intensified in the state, resulting in enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and violence against women.

NMA adopted various strategies as mothers. They offered themselves as negotiators and engaged in dialogue with soldiers deployed by the state or those enrolled as the 'nationalist' non-state armed groups, appealing to both parties for the total cessation of bloodshed. NMA also supported mothers and family members of the disappeared and started a campaign to honour the dead. They would arrange for the funeral of the unidentified deceased by covering them with traditional shawls, preparing coffins and burial grounds.

NMA joined hands with other Naga organizations like Naga Hoho, Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) and Naga Students Federation (NSF). A peace movement under the banner, 'Shed No More Blood' was launched in the 1990s to engage in dialogue with all parties to the conflict to cease bloodshed. Mothers took journeys to the hill terrains in Burma and other difficult places to reach the rebel leaders as well as army officials for support. This trust-building process continues even in the midst of occasionally resurgent violence and constant suspicion. The NMA has provided a common platform for different parties and factions to meet and conduct dialogue with one another.

Similarly, in Assam, Matri Manch and Mahila Samities played a seminal role in political mobilization in both the pre and post Indian independence period. They addressed violence against women, killings and sexual violence by armed forces. Journalist Teresa Rehman writes that, "the first Mahila Samiti was established in Dibrugarh in 1915. These groups were formed as local associations in Assam's urban centres and particularly picked up momentum during the 1920s." To ease the life of women and to secure leisure time for them, the Samities passed a resolution back in 1948 to set family mealtimes: lunch was decided to be at 12 noon and dinner at 10pm. These groups continue to address women's rights issues even today. [insert pic04: Members of Assam Mahila Samiti protesting violence against women, 14 July 2012. Source: Dasarath Deka]

In recent times, widowhood is another emerging platform creating social space for women to raise their voices for justice. In 2008, the state of Manipur witnessed a spree of extrajudicial executions allegedly committed by the armed police commandos and central armed forces taking advantage of draconian laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958, which grants virtual immunity for arbitrary killings. Most of the victims of such killings were men of the age group of 25-40 years, leaving their spouses widowed. The victims' young widows as well as mothers mobilized themselves while searching for solace. By creating loose networks and sharing their grief in informal meetings and gatherings, they also expressed solidarity with others. These gatherings helped them to overcome their victim mode, become human rights defenders and pledge to a long struggle for justice. Their determination found a formal shape as they formed the Extrajudicial Execution Victims Families Association, Manipur (EEVFAM) on 11 July 2009 at Imphal. The group received unconditional support by civil society members and media. With this empowerment, in 2012, EEVFAM in collaboration with Human Rights Alert, a human rights organization

in Manipur, filed a joint petition in the Supreme Court of India requesting investigation by a special investigation team in 1528 cases of extrajudicial killings committed in the state over the past two decades. The outcome of the petition was unprecedented; the Supreme Court constituted a committee of retired judges to investigate into six cases taken as a sample. The Committee found all six cases to be murder in cold blood, staged as the casualty of an armed encounter. The final verdict of the apex court is still pending.

Despite the shield of motherhood, women human rights defenders face particular challenges due to existing gender discrimination in society. Women activists in the region often cite domestic violence, restricted mobility and sexual harassment at workplace as reasons for their limited participation in human rights activities.

The social notion of women as a symbol of family 'honour' and dignity has created silence over the issue of violence against women. Women in general and women activists in particular, constantly feel challenged to overcome stereotypes. The need of the hour is that each member of society fosters a culture of respect and cooperation with women human rights defenders. This is in the interest of the whole society. Hands should be raised in help and dignity, not violence.

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[1] Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo: First Responders for Human Rights , <http://www.du.edu/korbel/criic/humanitarianbriefs/rachelkoepsel.pdf> last accessed on December 10, 2013