

BUILDING PEACE

Listen To Your Mother Before You Kill Your Brother

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[The women of the Northeast have halted violence between warring villages and tribes, campaigned against AFSPA by stripping naked, as the Meira Paibis did, or by fasting for 11 years as Irom Sharmila has done. But though women have been at the forefront of peace-building, there is not a single woman in the state assemblies of Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur: clearly, women can be relied on to stop the violence, but not to shape the peace.]

IROM CHANU SHARMILA, Manipur's own Gandhian icon, watched from her prison hospital in distant Imphal, the other Gandhian, Anna Hazare, who, with the moral force of his 'fast' mobilised an urban middle class multitude and disarmed India's structures of authority to do his bidding on monitoring corruption. "So short! Only 11 days of fasting, and the government agreed," she said. Irom Sharmila has been fasting for 11 years (force-fed via nasal tubes) to get the Indian state to repeal the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), the symbol of state militarisation. In a bid to appeal directly to policymakers, she escaped to Delhi in 2007. There, she was a magnet for human rights defenders, but Delhi's power elite remained indifferent to the frail Sharmila's act of moral courage to free the people of the Northeast from a martial law-like regime. But then, AFSPA concerns national security issues, and the Northeast is a frontier area, where a 'zone of exception' can be tolerated.

The women of the Northeast are not to be daunted. Seven years ago, on July 15, 2004, a Manipuri mothers' group, the Meira Paibis, stripped in front of the Assam Rifles headquarters in Imphal, holding aloft a banner on which was written in blood red: 'Indian Army, Rape Us'. The mothers were denouncing the rape and death in custody of Manorma Devi (33), accused of belonging to an insurgent group. It was an act of patriarchal shaming, accusing the Indian security forces of using rape as an instrument of war. The event catalysed a nation-wide campaign for a repeal of AFSPA (1958) and the arbitrary use of force. Under pressure, the Union government withdrew the Assam Rifles from Kangla Fort, the historic seat of the Manipur kings. A committee was set up to review AFSPA. The Reddy Committee report was submitted, but not officially released. It recommended that the Act be repealed.

Irom Sharmila comes from a vibrant tradition of women's collective peace activism across the Northeast. In 2000, Sharmila resolved to fast unto death after the Malom massacre in which 10 civilians at a bus-stand were gunned down by the security forces on suspicion of being insurgents. It was a routine manifestation of the abuse and misuse of powers under AFSPA to kill any person on mere suspicion, and with impunity.

The Northeast is a region of separatist insurgencies that have spread like wildfire from the Naga to the Mizo hills, Manipur to Assam. Its remoteness is reinforced by a different ethnic, cultural and religious mosaic. Disaffection with the Indian state has given rise to popular ethno-

nationalist mobilisations that challenge the Union's integrationist project. Alongside are faultlines of inter-ethnic hill valley conflicts, and competing bids for ethno-territorial homelands.

As the state became more repressive and the conflict more militarised, women at the grassroots emerged as the frontline of the protest against militarisation. Narratives of the her-story of conflict and peace-making are strewn with incidents of women shielding men; lying on the road to block army trucks loaded with village boys from leaving; getting hostages released; and stopping inter-factional violence. As the women of Jotsoma, a Naga village, said: "When the Indian army came, it was women who stepped forward between the soldiers and the villagers... We mothers would go to the warring factions, walk to their camps and plead with them not to kill each other and not to harass the villagers."

Masses of Naga women interceded to defuse tension during the 2009 Shirui siege. In Shirui village, in Manipur, when hundreds of paramilitary troops laid siege to the Naga armed group NSCN (I-M) camp, trapping civilians in between, Naga women staged a sit-in for 15 days and eventually averted the violence. "We're just doing our job as peacekeepers," the women told the commanding officer.

Amongst the Meiteis, the Meira Paibis are ubiquitous, in pink phaneks (sarongs) and white inaphies (stoles), marching down the streets protesting against AFSPA, braving lathi blows, or sitting in silent protest against enforced 'disappearances'.

The Meitei women's protest drew its inspiration and social legitimacy from a long history of women fighting injustice, memorialised as the colonial Nupi Lai wars of revolt against imperial rule and the unjust orders of the maharaja. In Nupi Lai I (1904), the women revolted against the practice of forced labour as collective punishment for the rebellious act of burning the British residency; in Nupi Lai II (1939-40) the women mobilised to ban the export of rice in a time of famine. The Meitei women derive socio-economic status from their traditional control of trade and vending. In the 1980s, these women were transformed from social activists into activists against state militarisation by the April 1980 Lamjing incident in Manipur when, following a bomb blast, a paramilitary group unleashed a brutal combing operation, assaulting, arresting and raping women.

1980 marked the extension of AFSPA to the Manipur valley. Since then, the Meira Paibis with their flaming bamboo torches have patrolled their neighbourhoods, sounding the alarm on search and cordon operations, marching to police/army camps and to the insurgents to get the 'boys' or hostages released. The Meira Paibis believe the 'Under Ground' (UG) are 'misguided'. State agencies have branded them 'Mothers of Insurgents'.

Their peace activism remains largely at the grassroots level with each locality having its autonomous group. There is no apex body.

Social sanction for Naga Women's peace activism is rooted in the traditional role of Naga women as peacemakers between warring villages and tribes - a demi or apukrelia who steps

forward in the midst of battle and halts the violence. Such a role is re-evoked in the 1988 story of Neidonuo Angami, then president of the Nagaland Naga Mothers Association (NMA), stepping forward between two fighting factions in Phek district of Nagaland declaring: "Listen to your mother before you kill your brother."

The NMA's emphasis on motherhood as a mobilisation strategy secures social legitimacy but de-politicises their activism, thus enabling the NMA to claim a non-partisan stand.

Spiralling fratricidal violence in the 1980s and 1990s pushed the welfare-oriented Naga women's organisations into peace work. Every morning would bring bodies lying unclaimed in the bazaars of Kohima and other Nagaland district towns, with people too terrorised to come forward and claim them. The NMA, in alliance with the churches, performed a mourning ritual, giving everybody a dignified funeral in a tribal shawl, thus asserting that every life was precious. In 1994, the Naga Mothers launched a 'Stop All Bloodshed' campaign with non-partisan peace teams fanning out to the district headquarters to urge an end to the violence, reaching out to the segregated tribal action.

In 2003, the NMA renewed that pledge to stop all bloodshed, a sad testament to the continuing inter-factional killings. Between 2004 and 2008, fratricidal violence surged claiming nearly 500 lives.

Because the issue of 'unity' continues to stymie the Naga peace process, the NMA and Naga Women's Union of Manipur (NWU) strive to keep the channels of communication between rival factions open.

As a conscious strategy, the NMA avoids commenting on the political agenda. The NWU, on the contrary, pursues a rights-based agenda in the private sphere of marriage law reform and the public sphere of representation in the all-male Village Tribal Council and the apex body United Naga Council of Manipur.

The Naga women's profile in peacemaking is singular because one may glimpse the possibility of women peacemakers with moral authority in the 'informal' grassroots sphere of politics being incrementally accommodated as peacemakers in the formal sphere of politics. It is not incidental that the current president of the influential Naga People's Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) is Gina Shankham, former president of the NWU.

Similarly, in May 2010 in Kohima, women representatives from the NPMHR and other groups played a meaningful advocacy and monitoring role in a crucial dialogue between the home secretary and that Th Muivah. Government officials were surprised that Th Muivah had invited the women. It showed Naga women no longer passive or only a ceremonial presence as the group's cultural makers. They were participating as equal interlocutors. But the traditional backlash is never far. The Committee for Alternative Arrangement representing the United Naga Council in the tripartite talks with the Union and Manipur governments for special

autonomy for the Naga hills, included Naga women at the initial Delhi meeting. At the formal talks in Senapati, in December 2010 and June 2011, there were only men.

In the Northeast, alongside the remarkable visibility of women's peace activism is their invisibility in state politics. In the state assemblies of Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, there are no women. The chief ministers of the northeastern states have asked for a waiver on reservations for women in elected bodies. It was a reminder that identity-based national movements are hostile to women and minorities. Women are needed to stop the violence, not to shape the peace. □□□ —*TWNF*