

IRON LADY OF MANIPUR

Black Law, Unique Resistance

Subhash Gatade

Irome Sharmila (age 34). Does that name sound familiar? This youngest daughter of Irom Nanda and Irom Sakhi Devi has many identities. For sister Vijayanti or brother Singhajit she is their dearest sister who had the “never say die’ spirit ingrained in her since childhood. For some of her dear friends she is an Yoga enthusiast who at times also dabbled in naturopathy. For litterateurs of Manipur, she is a budding poetess who has written hundreds of poems but till date only one of her collections ‘Imadi Khongdai Setlaroi’ has been published. And for the vast majority of Manipuris, she is not Irom Sharmila Thanu rather she is the ‘Iron Lady of Manipur’ who has challenged a callous and apathetic government and its regime of draconian law with her unique struggle.

Interestingly, despite plethora of TV channels and a boom in the print media, not many from ‘mainland’ India would be able to tell what made this young girl from a lower middle class family who could not even continue her education after 12th, a legend in her own lifetime.

It is difficult to believe the saga of struggle of Irom Sharmila Thanu.

In fact it will be nearly six years that she would be on her hunger strike. She has remained without solid food since then, demanding withdrawal from her state, of one of the most draconian laws in the statute books called Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA).

At present she is lodged in AIIMS, New Delhi where she is being “nasal fed” by a team of doctors.

Her reaching Delhi from the environs of Jawaharlal Nehru Hospital, Manipur where she was kept in judicial custody and was nasal fed was another saga of her glorious struggle. Taking advantage of the release from custody after serving a ‘yearlong custody’ at the hospital, her supporters literally smuggled her out of Imphal to reach Delhi to turn her “regional” campaign into a “national” one. Her first stop in Delhi was Rajghat, where she laid a wreath at Mahatma Gandhi’s samadhi. Later she told a journalist “I want to tell the people of India that if Mahatma Gandhi were alive today, he would have launched a movement against the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act. My appeal to the citizens of the country is to join the campaign against the army act.” (*The Telegraph*, October 05, 2006) Of course, the historic fast launched at Malom was no planned affair. There was a firing by security forces at Malom bus stand, which is nearly 15-16 km from Imphal, on 2 November 2000. It saw blood of ten innocents spilled on the streets. But it was not the first event of its kind, the streets of Manipur had been witness to the killings of innocent citizens umpteen times before.

Mother Irom Sakhi Devi had no inkling of what was in store of her youngest daughter Sharmila. She merely sought her mother's blessings to work for 'betterment of humanity' and left. Sharmila straight away went to the very spot where the bloodbath had occurred and started her fast unto death. Her demand was simple to articulate but for the powers that be difficult to implement. She demanded repeal of the draconian law. Initially for the residents of Malom or adjoining areas it was difficult to fathom the idea of the peaceful resistance put up by this young woman. For a handful of them she was an object of ridicule also. And none of them had even imagined that she would persist in her determination in such a way that there would be uproar all over the state in support of her demand. By 21st November the administration was forced to give her a 'nasal feed' in a hospital in Imphal.

The maximum sentence which a court can give for 'trying to commit suicide is one year' and Sharmila has endured many such turns in all these years. She is released after this one year judicial detention and immediately rearrested and put in the same ward and the cycle continued. This year also the government expected the same. Embarrassed police officials later admitted that they had no inkling of the plan to "smuggle out". Chief minister Okram Ibobi Singh pleaded ignorance, too.

Irom Sharmila's legendary struggle for human rights has become an important symbol of the resistance of the Manipuri people who are fighting their present day suffering at the hands of policy makers. This has meant 'excessive militarisation of the region' and the 'promulgations of many a black laws like AFSPA at the cost of the life and liberty of the people of this region.'

It is a sad commentary on the state of affairs that the rest of the world came to know about Sharmila's unique struggle only two and a half years ago. It was in the aftermath of a militant struggle launched by Manipuri people demanding the abolition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 and punishment to the Assam Rifles people for killing Thangjam Manorama on 11 July 2004.

This upsurge of the Manipuri people was marked by the way in which women played a leading role in furthering the movement. It was on 15th July 2004 that around dozen elderly and respectable Manipuri women marched to the area headquarters of the Assam Rifles and stripped naked and waved a banner which read as : "Indian Army Rape Us", "Indian Army Take Our Flesh". The naked march of these women electrified the masses and within no time the protests against the army reached new heights.

The conspiracy of silence which had surrounded Irom Sharmila's solitary struggle can't be called an exception, it is part of a general silence which surrounds developments in northeast which for all practical purposes exists on the 'borders of our consciousness'. A report brought out by a National Campaign Committee against militarisation and repeal of AFSPA had rightly observed a few years back : "Armed militancy, intercommunity killings, 'encounters' with security personnel ... conversely, pretty girls and boys dancing in traditional costume. The northeast has always been a collage of the most contradictory images, that only reflect how little is known of the reality that lies behind them."

There is no doubt that if the atrocities at the hands of the security forces as are witnessed in northeast would have taken place in any part of 'mainland India' then it would have become a cause for national uproar. But for all those areas which are under Armed Forces Special Powers Act all such acts by the the security people are 'covered under the infamous act' itself. As the provisions of the infamous act make clear the security forces have been given unlimited powers and even if they commit atrocities (which is not exception but the rule) people have no right to approach the courts.

This 'draconian law' which has generated tremendous anger in the minds of the people and is in many ways worse than the infamous POTA empowers the security people in many crucial areas. It empowers the government (governor of the state, or the administartor of the union territory, or the central government) to declare any area a 'disturbed area' if it reaches a conclusion that [t]he whole or any is in such a disturbed or dangerous condition that the use of Armed Forces in aid of civil power is necessary,' the concerned authority may 'declare the whole or such part of such a state or union territory to be disturbed area.'

Section four *delineates* the powers sanctioned to any commissioned officer, warrant officer, non-commissioned officer, in a disturbed area :

- a) if in his opinion, it is necessary for maintenance for public order to fire even to the extent of causing death or otherwise use force against a person who is acting in contravention of an order prohibiting the assembly of five or more persons or the carrying of weapons or of things capable of being used as weapons.
- b) If in his opinion, it is necessary to do so, then to destroy any arms dump or fortified position, any shelter from which armed attacks are made or are 'likely to be made', and any structure used as training camp for armed volunteers or as a hide out for armed gangs or absconders.
- c) arrest without warrant any person who has committed a cognizable offence or against whom a reasonable suspicion exists that he has committed or is likely to commit a cognizable offence and to use whatever force is necessary to affect the arrest.
- d) to enter and search without warrant any premises to make an arrest or to recover any person wrongfully confined or to recover any arms, ammunition, explosive substance or suspected stolen property.

Section 5 makes it mandatory for the army to hand over a person arrested under the act to the nearest police station with least possible delay.

Section 6 lays down that prosecution, suit or other legal proceedings can be instituted against a person acting under the act, only after getting previous sanction of the central government. (Ref: The Illusion of Justice : Supreme Court Judgement on the AFSPA) May 1998. People's Union for Democratic Rights, Delhi)

The existence of this law on the statue books has thus meant disallowing the people the right to protest, the right to legal redress or right of any lawful democratic activity. Ordinary people who want to live a life of peace and tranquility, can thus easily be

framed as “terrorists’ and ‘suspects’ linking them to banned organisations. Democratic rights activists who merely document the excesses by the Army or an end to army rule have also been picked up, tortured and killed. The continuation of this law for the last 48 years has effectively meant that under a formal democratic set up 38 million people residing in northeast are forced to live under an undeclared emergency or defacto military rule.

Brigadier Sailo who served in the army for 31 years, in a letter written nearly 30 years ago to Ms Indira Gandhi, the then prime minister of India, said. “The feelings of the entire villages and population of Mizoram are now totally alienated by the denial of all decencies of human rights and any picture which may have been painted to you to the contrary, is totally false.” (Quoted in where ‘Peacekeepers’ Have Declared War : Report on violations of democratic rights by security forces and the impact of the AFSPA on civilian life—in the seven states of North East—National Campaign Committee against Militarisation and Repeal of AFSPA, 2000, Delhi). It can be said without any iota of doubt that what Brigadier Sailo said about Mizoram can be applied to the whole of northeast today.

One cannot say with certainty what will happen next.

Hunger strike by Irom Sharmila continues unabated. If earlier the venue was the dingy rooms of the Jawaharlal Nehru Hospital in Imphal, today she lies in a similar position in a private ward in AIIMS, New Delhi where she is forcibly fed liquids through a nose-pipe, it was only last month that BBC (Tuesday, 19 September 2006, 09:46 GMT 10:46 UK) had carried a report on this marathon fast wherein it had mentioned the deteriorating condition of her health : “Doctors say her fasting is now having a direct impact on her body’s normal functioning - her bones have become brittle and she has developed other medical problems too”.

As far as the repeal of the black law is concerned, things seem to be going nowhere, it is being said that the Justice Jeevan Reddy committee appointed by the Prime Minister in 2004 in the aftermath of the militant protests in Manipur has recommended repeal of the legislation AFPSA itself. According to reports in a section of the media, the 146-page report submitted by the Jeevan Reddy committee talks about “The act is too sketchy, too bald and quite inadequate in several particulars”. According to the report “the act, for whatever reason, has become a symbol of oppression, an object of hate and an instrument of discrimination and high-handedness’ (*The Hindu*, October 8, 2006)

According to few analysts a careful reading of the report also creates an impression that the Jeevan Reddy panel merely wanted the prerogatives of the armed forces transferred wholesale onto another law, the Unlawful Activitis Prevention Act, 1967. If this holds true then people will have a situation where the dreaded black law AFPSA which is basically applicable to Northeast and Jammu-Kashmir may be scrapped forthwith while the revised ULP act 1967 which incorporates all the necessary provisions of AFPSA would come into force, it would mean the whole of India may come under the ambit of a substitute of AFPSA.

In any case this cannot be tolerated at any cost. All those people who yearn for a life of peace, justice and progress for the broad masses of people would have to come together to defeat the machinations of the powers that be.

While talking to the BBC correspondent Irom Sharmila had mentioned “My fast is on behalf of the people of Manipur. This is not a personal battle–this is symbolic. It is a symbol of truth, love and peace.”

It is worth mentioning that while Sharmila is waging this unequal battle against the Indian state, many of her dear and near ones have stood solidly behind her. Not only her brother lost a government job, because he preferred to remain on her side always but the family had also to go bankrupt since it gathered lot of loans during this period.

But none of the sacrifices can match what Irom Sakhi, Sharmila’s 75-year-old mother has endured all these years. She has never met her daughter since she blessed her on the momentous day when she undertook her fast, Irom Sakhi, with tears in her eyes told a correspondent : “It is just possible that my getting emotional on seeing her may weaken her resolve. And I do not want that my daughter lose in this battle, which is for the betterment of humanity.” ~~██████~~