

Irom Chanu Sharmila and the Movement against Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA)

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Abstract

This paper, through the narratives of activists and Meira Paibis reiterates the slogan—repeal the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which is draconian and anti-people in spirit. The atrocity, which has been meted out on the people of Manipur because of this Act, is a profound violation of human rights. Rape, mindless killings, kidnapping, fake encounters have been normalised by virtue of this Act. The youths have been badly affected due to the conflict emerging out of this Act which treats people in Manipur as ‘objects’ against the imagined boundaries of the Indian nation-state for security from the neighbouring nations. In this process, the lived experiences of the people have been pushed to the periphery against the massive motive of the state to protect borders and the imagined nation, which is a direct offshoot of the legacy of colonialism in India. The paper has tried to capture the history of Manipur on a capsule to concretise the struggle of Irom Sharmila and the ‘hopes’ she gives to the people of Manipur for ‘peace’ and ‘justice’. Alongside, it makes a humble attempt to describe the ‘life’ of Irom Sharmila. In addition, it describes the rage of Manipuris, which have given rise to insurgency asking for ‘freedom’ through various platforms.

Key words: Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), Irom Chanu Sharmila, Hope for peace, Meira Paibis, Malom massacre, Manipur, India

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Building Hopes: An Introduction

The annexation of Manipur into the Indian Territory in 1949 was not fully welcome to the people of Manipur. It was annexed through an accord signed between the King of Manipur Bodhchandra and the Indian state. The seeming discontent of the people was eventually expressed through various insurgent movements in the state. The militarisation of the state of Manipur was followed thereafter to curtail the voice of people for freedom and human rights. The armed forces of the state were stationed with special powers. Gradually the powers became a form of atrocity for the civilians and their rights. Horrifying stories of atrocity meted out by the armed forces became a regular feature of the lived experiences of the people. Mostly under the guise of an encounter, such atrocities took place and people bore the brunt without 'protest'. In the process a 'fear psychosis' was created in the minds of the people perpetuating a culture of silence towards the extreme form of violation of human rights and dignity (Laishramchan, 2014). In these existing conditions, the event, which triggered off the people's movement in Manipur, was the Malom massacre. Malom massacre took place in a small place called Malom where nine civilians were killed by the Army in broad daylight aftermath of a bomb attack on an AR convoy at Malom Makha Leikai (Manipuronline, 2014). As a witness to this incident, Irom Sharmila was deeply perturbed by the sufferings of the common people because of such heinous state policies and the rest is history. In this paper, Irom Sharmila's struggle would be discussed in the form of a 'hope' for change and transformation. Her form of struggle is concretised against the historical specificity of the state and its formation in postcolonial India. Further, it discusses how along with an individual transformation collective transformation is important in order to experience both praxis and poesis for peace.

Irom Sharmila's struggle began with the 'hope' for change (see also, Pulla and Kharel, 2014). The change from peacelessness to peace, from violence to violence-free society, from conflict

to problematization is not a facile phenomenon (Pulla and Kharel, 2014). It is loaded with responsibility, rights, novelty and transformation of the culture of violence for forging mutual love and respect for the 'Other'. The trope of 'hope' (Pulla and Kharel, 2014) requires primarily a dialectical engagement in a committed, rigorous and humanising manner, which is more and more degrading in the current scenario. The concept of 'hope' has been theorised adequately by a number of renowned scholars (Desroche, 1979; Freire, 1994; Giroux, 1997 Gramsci, 1997; Kant, 1932 and many others). As Desroche (1979: 32) puts it:

The sociology of Hope will better illustrate how a hope without an echo or viaticum, slides towards an empty hope, according to whether its springboards are absent or short lived.

Hope, as mentioned above, definitely cannot be grounded without concretising social relations and engaging it dialectically. Desroche (1979) further illustrates Hope, as an awakened dream, however it cannot be reduced to a daydream as understood by many. Giroux (1997: 84) in his *Pedagogy and Politics of Hope* states:

Understanding the contemporary stages of capitalist development according to what they represented was a crucial step for both writers to avoid a sense of fatalism and keep alive the quest for working to attain a better world is driven by an anticipatory utopia prefigured not only by critique of the present but by an alternative pedagogical/cultural politics.

This is what is very close to Friere's (1994) notion of 'Critical Hope', which is simply hoping but building an understanding of both the past and contemporary issues to break the 'culture of silence'. This requires working towards transformation along with a hope for change. Such a hope is embedded in the entire process of dialogue and working with people for understanding hegemony, questioning it and eventually countering it. I began this paper with a note on

Hope because not only I, but also the youth of India (especially those from Manipur) finds Irom Sharmila as an epitome of hope and love. She has carved out spaces where she could live 'hope' and make 'others' 'hopeful' by her life. Her body has surpassed from the narrow boundary of privacy and have transformed into a 'lived' ideology of non-violence, love and hope of Manipuri people. Anyone who meets her is touched by her relentless commitment and hope she lives with—"Repeal the AFSPA she started saying even before Malom Massacre, however henceforth she could no longer live for anything else but the cause, for justice of everyone who is living under the atrocities carried out in the name of security and defence" (Mehrotra, 2009: 13). She is a splendid example of using the human agency (especially the body) for transformation by building hopes through her unending commitments. Although sociology has not extensively looked at the 'body', in its theories, however Goffman, as early as 1949, writes:

Our very ability to intervene in social life, to make a difference to the flow of daily affairs, is dependent on the management of the bodies through time and space. (21)

For the last 13 years, her body has become contentious due to her complete denial to take food and she is only surviving on forced diet fed by the state (Bhattacharyya, 2013). Her body has acted as the centre in her agency for transformation in an astounding manner varying from the usual mind and consciousness, which occupy centrality while discussing agency (Shilling, 1993). Kant (1932) viewed bodily passions and emotions as impediments to self-determining actions and looked at them suspiciously because of their lack of self-determining powers. However, in the context of struggle in Manipur, the use of body has played a significant role in building a culture of Hope in the region particularly in the context of the life of the 'Iron Lady', Irom Sharmila (Bhattacharyya, 2013).

Methodology

Drawing from the struggles of people in Manipur and further locating 'hope' for peace and people-centred development was an interesting journey for me. Engagement with the people who are so passionate about 'peace' in Manipur which more or less centres around the scrapping of AFSPA not only from Manipur but also from the whole of India was a learning experience for me. With much enthusiasm, I embarked on this research to initially speak to a comrade from Manipur based in New Delhi, when I first hoped to meet Irom Sharmila through him and write this article in the form of a biographical narrative. However, I was told that he himself has a dream of writing a biography on Iron Lady but his dream continues to be so because of the regimented nature of state policies imposed on her movement and mobility. Nevertheless, this did not diminish my curiosity and I contacted another comrade and activist working with Irom Sharmila. He also seemed reluctant and reiterated the same story. Therefore, my theoretical engagements and the research methodology changed keeping the objectives of the research similar if not the same. Therefore, the course and the respondents changed accordingly.

In this research, I have drawn my data from secondary sources like biographies written on Irom Sharmila, websites on the protests movement and on Manipur. In addition, for primary data I spoke to 10 Meira Paibis, 10 students and 10 activists, using pseudonyms (similar to Manipuri names) for all respondents. However, before discussing further, it is worth discussing who the Meira Paibis are? Meira Paiba is a collective of women in Manipur, which has been proactive in the process of transforming the culture of violence and silence. They mostly work at the grassroots level and act as signifiers for *peace* and *pluralism*. Such collectives are found everywhere in Manipur and even in Malom. Meira Paibis were born as early as 1980s because of the atrocities on innocent people.

Moreover, I also conducted three Focus Groups among these respondents in order to gain a

deeper perception about Hope for *peace* and the on-going struggle for peace. In order to meet these respondents, I visited Lai Haroaba. Lai Haroaba is a religious festival of Manipur, conducted annually in New Delhi where women and youths come to Delhi to attend the festival. Further, my association with the *Campaign for Peace and Democracy* made me write this paper with not only theoretical convictions but also with the reaffirmation of certain convictions on the basis of the field inquiry and engagements with people who are equally engaged with Sharmila's fight, and constantly problematizing and concretising their concerns for *peace* which is the beginning of people-centred development in Manipur.

Concretising the Forms of Struggle in Manipur

Manipur was formed as a constituent state of the Indian Union in 1972. There was a discontent among the Manipuris right from 1949, the widespread perception that the Indian state had forced the merger upon Manipur (Mehrotra, 2009). This was also a moving factor for insurgency in Manipur. In 1963, the Naga Hills district of Assam was made into a state; however, in case of Manipur, it remained a Union Territory for almost 10 years (Mehrotra, 2009). There was a serious discontentment surrounded around the dismantling of the indigenous system of economy by the colonial rulers and the imposition of the colonial capitalist system. As a result of this, the existing terms such as 'Manipuri' given to them by the foreigners (Mayangs: Manipuri word for foreigner) were cited to illustrate that the people of Manipur, irrespective of their caste, community, religion, regional and class backgrounds, defended Manipur from both external invasion and internal crisis (Ningthouja, 2014).

The systems introduced by the colonial rulers seemed to continue even under the jurisdiction of the Indian government. As Ningthouja (2004) writes, the One Nation theory and the colonial divisive policy were particularly designed to construct integrity through projections against the threat from external enemies, which the Indian state experienced from other nations. This was not the need of the Manipuri people

per se. Nationalist feelings were also imposed on the indigenous people, which were gradually resisted by them through various means, both violent and non-violent. Colonialism, which was barbaric and violent, like Nazism and Fascism, decivilised the colonisers (Boise, cited in Cesaire, 1972) and led to the decivilisation of the indigenous culture. Education and other development policies were designed in a manner to make education as a privilege (Gramsci, 1997) which came to be associated with a particular group in the society. Violence, alterity, barbarism and exclusion embedded in colonialism penetrated into indigenous people's lives. In fact while trying to speak to Irom Sharmila, which did not happen, I met her fellow activist and neighbour who gave me a detailed interview. I could sense the deep anguish, when he spoke about the insensitivities of the state government towards Irom Sharmila and the cause. The barbarism displayed by the state, which is often justified in the name of justice and defence of the state, further aggravates when it tries to influence the direction of such movements. Irom Sharmila is fed, rather overfed, to use her weapon of fasting for the state, through false hopes, by sometimes calling it suicide, through imprisonments, threats and also persistent indoctrination by offering alternatives rather than a dialogue on repealing the draconian Act.

One of the major ramifications of the imposition of nationalist tendencies on the people with which they failed to identify was the rise of many resistant movements clamouring for separation from the state of India. The background to identity politics thus lies not only in ideological and cultural changes but also in transformation of social structure and social integration (Calhoun, 1995). Forceful integration, as in the case of Manipur, unleashed a series of movements for secession from the Indian Union. Various insurgent movements like those that the NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland) which was the first of its kind was followed by People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipa (PREPAK) and People's Liberation Army (PLA) aimed at consolidating the demand for independence. This happened during the 1970s and 1980s; however today there are an ever-

burgeoning number of underground groups in Manipur. The colonial legacy in terms of social and economic exclusion faced by the indigenous people was not accepted after some time. The ruling class is not exclusively responsible; it is rather a dominant group, which perpetuates social, political and cultural ideas, assumptions and habits. The worldview of the ruling class, in other words, was so thoroughly diffused by its intellectuals as to become the 'common sense' of the whole society. Gramsci (cited in McLellan, 1979: 200) writes about the notion of a *Historical Bloc* within which economic, social and ideological forces combine in a temporary unity to change society. This notion was central to many of Gramsci's analyses. A historical bloc implied something more than just an alliance:

....the dominant group is co-ordinated concretely with the general interest of the subordinate groups, and the life of the state is conceived of as a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria (on the juridical plane) between the interest of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups-equilibria in which the interest of the dominant group prevail, but only up to a certain point, i.e. stopping short of narrowly corporate economic interests. (Gramsci, 1977: 36)

The state in understanding hegemony becomes important as it plays a crucial role in reinforcing and reproducing the 'equilibria' as stated above. In Manipur, Irom Sharmila ruptured the equilibria through her struggle for love, peace and justice by questioning the hegemony of the Indian state and its strategies of oppression through AFSPA. Her 'worldview' emerges from her lived experiences, her deep understanding of people of Manipur and her belief of the innate goodness and empathy for all human beings. Writing about her, one thing that really struck me was what Dalton wrote about Gandhi: "[l]ocal struggles have been seem legitimizing collective agency in pursuing justice through human rights. Gandhi in his life have shown what it is to conceptualise a value and in his truly uncanny ability to put his theory into

practice" (Dalton, 1993: 113). The philosophy of praxis propagated by Gramsci (1997) stand in good stead in the context of democratising public spaces conditioned by material relations where everyone has ownership of the common property. However, it is highly contested and in case of Sharmila's struggle, contestations are multi-layered and multidimensional.

Her Journey: Building Hopes for Transformation

Irom Sharmila was born on 14 March 1972, the same year Manipur got the status of a separate state. From her childhood, she used to listen to the tales of Manipur, its history and culture from her grandmother. She learned that Manipur was a home to a self-sufficient economy and grandeur of peace and non-violence, which she constantly looked for as she grew up and now, she has become an example for the youths of Manipur. Each Manipuri mother and grandmother talks about her courage, love and affection. As Mehotra (2009: 49) states:

Sharmila grew up listening to the stories of Tonsija Devi told about the Nupilans. Tonsija was just a year old at the time of the first Nupilan in 1904. The 'women wars' against imperialism are still recalled with fierce pride. People were angry at their loss of sovereignty compounded by an alien judicial and administrative system. Women's rights of appeal honoured over the centuries, had been revoked. Such injustice was unacceptable to ordinary people like Tonsija Devi. Her family lived in Shinzamai Bazaar near the centre of Imphal city. It was an ordinary working class family fervently patriotic with strong women who participated in the Nupilans.

An Individual Protest for the Massive Collective Cause

Sharmila's protest was the protest of the common people. Her protest was not planned or organised. It was a reaction against the oppression, which she refused to take. The

Malom massacre was the deciding event, which acted as the precipitating factor for her to end the oppression, which was meted out to the civilians in the name of security and defence. The AFSPA act becomes draconian because of the following features, which have failed to understand and recognise the 'human rights' (see, Pulla and Kharel, 2014) of the people in Manipur.

- As the name suggests, the Act bestows undue (special) power to the armed forces to counter insurgency
- It led to militarisation of the state which questioned both equality before law and equal protection of law
- Due to this lack of clarity, common people mostly women, children and youth suffered tremendously
- It legitimised the superiority of the state over people which led to acute human rights violations and violence against women everyday of their lives
- Section 4 of AFSPA mentions:

Any commissioned officer, non-commissioned officer or any other person of equivalent may, in a disturbed area,.... if he is of the opinion that it is necessary to do so for the maintenance of public order, after giving such due warning as he may consider necessary, fire upon or otherwise use force even to the causing of death, against any person who is acting in contravention of any law and order for the time being in force in the disturbed area.

These features of the Act led to the happenings of Malom massacre where 10 civilians were gunned down without warning by Assam Rifles based on mere 'suspect'. This was not the first of its kind but as mentioned by one of the Meira Paibi had become a part of everyday affair of the indigenous people. In the words of Chanu Pakhangba (name changed), a Meira Paibi herself, "We came up as Meira Paibis to save Manipur [from being a land of blood and tears]".

As discussed above, these women collectives stand against the atrocities of Indian Army and violations of human rights. It was started in 1980 after the innocent killing of a boy by the Indian army. The words of these valiant collectives of women came true once again in the most powerful way, 24 years after the Meira Paibis first emerged—on 15 July 2004, when Chanu Pakhangba and 12 other women stripped in front of the Kangla to register their protest against the arrest, torture, rape and extra-judicial killing of Th. Manorama Devi, an act of defiance and courage that shook not only the Indian subcontinent but the entire world (Nepam, 2014).

The Malom massacre acted as reaffirming and legitimising the hegemony of the Indian state and Sharmila's voice echoed the voices of dissent of everyone. This is the strongest part of her struggle and the weakest part—strong, because it reflected the praxis and transformation of an individual and combined beautifully with poiesis.

At the same time, it was weakest because the collective transformations did not follow with equal verve and intensity as it should have been, which reduced this legend into a symbol of people's movement, non-violent protest, emancipation for women with her main demands still manipulated by the Indian state. Indeed, her body has become a mere symbol of protest which is getting caught with portrayal of her body with reference which are not only derogatory but a systematic plot of the state to implant seeds into people's mind which would deviate from the entire discourse of peace and emancipation of the people of Manipur for which she stand for. Today media discusses her 'body', its changes and personal life instead of the silent atrocities and forced consent created in the state. One of the villagers said:

We are asked to forcefully sign by the Assam Rifles that everything is fine in the village and peace prevails.

Extreme human rights violations are taking place under the projected narrative of *peace* and *change*. Sharmila's image is deliberately distorted in the public through mainstream

media to shirk the demands laid down by the people of Manipur. The ethnic divisions created between the tribes and subtribes in Manipur similar to the other states of Northeast is aggravating the situations today and creating ruptures everywhere. In Manipur, one can witness increasing distrust among each other, which in turn, is wavering the core issues: mainly repealing of AFSPA and restoring the human rights of the people.

Following the Malom massacre, another incident, which gave further impetus to the movement, was the alleged rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama by Assam Rifles. There was a humongous protest against the incident and women stripped themselves in rage and desperate drive to repeal the Act and end atrocities. The body again resurfaced which displayed reaction against the Act in a different way from Sharmila has but bore similar commitment and rage against the inhuman mechanisms of the state. Sharmila's protest was further strengthened as this was followed by a nationwide protest. In fact, it treaded globally and the message was spread vehemently. Like always, the Meira Paibis went on a rally fasts and marathon fasts vigorously than before. One of the activists interviewed said:

My mother is a Meira Paibi and has been on a marathon fast since 2000 onwards in solidarity to Sharmila. However, the state pays no attention. It is only when Anna Hazare or someone from India fasts it matters to the state. Except India, it nowhere happens in the world.

The feeling of alienation and dejection is looming large in every corner of Manipur. The state, instead of acting towards problematizing, is spreading its malicious plans today not only through AFSPA but also in the different ways in which development is planned for this region. Many indigenous people have been displaced or further pushed to the periphery. In fast-spreading neoliberalism, the state is now acting as agents of the multinational corporate for building trade relations with neighbouring countries, especially Myanmar. Thus the Indian

state, which was formed after the colonisers left, was a seedbed of colonised ideas and hegemony. The impositions of the colonisers remain but have taken a different shape. However, in both systems, the Manipuri people faced challenges and devised counter-hegemonic ways to confront the Indian state. The Indian state, on the other hand, very courageously showed no sympathy to the voices and even relentless protests of Sharmila, who until today, is not considered a political prisoner. She is not allowed to meet visitors barring some, suspecting some anti-state action, which have considerably weakened the movement. However, Sharmila has been a layperson and until today, people who have experiences working with her have told me that she is like an angry child and without due attention, she would not budge. She is only asking for more love and peace, malice is the word unknown to her. She continues to be a symbol of non-violent protest and fasting, however the collective appears to be more and more dispersed.

Towards Collective Transformation: Strengthening Collectives like 'Meira Paibis'

Individually driven protests are not uncommon in India. We have always found movements spearheaded by an individual leader, however, in all such cases, mass support also played a very important role. In Manipur, politicisation of everyday life was invoked with the struggle of Sharmila and people came out to the streets demanding for human rights. Ethnicity and re-claiming the uniqueness of Manipuri identity also became very strong which found expressions in the form of so many insurgent movements. Another observation, if we flip through the history of the movement against AFSPA, is that, the state of Manipur like any other states of India have been entangled in the neoliberal trajectory of development, where there is a visible change in terms of developing infrastructure, roads and dams and also job creation for the youths, so on and so forth, and slowly creating a silence by withdrawing from the public sphere into private comforts. What remains

goes unsaid is that the AFSPA continues with its harsh provisions intact.

There were attempts made to amend the Act, however, no action plan has been chalked out until today. On repeated clamouring for amendment not only in Manipur but also in Jammu and Kashmir, there has been no action taken so far. The Minister of State for Home, Mr Mullappalli Ramachandran, said recently after Sharmila was again accused of suicide by the state:

On such security-related issues, all factors, including the ground reality are taken into consideration before taking a decision and hence no time limit can be specified. (cited in Ningthouja, 2014)

Such repeated statement from the political rulers, irrespective of the party, is disturbing, and has weakened the movement and the morale of the people. With such an approach towards the Act, the state as well as the central government presents it as a lack of development and unemployment issue rather than the core issues of cultural invasion, superimposition of mainstream patriarchal values, and neoliberal incursion. These developments not only in Manipur but also throughout Northeast India have ruptured the collective spirit of the movement as the contested 'public' in the public spheres is also gradually withdrawing to the private spaces. The political community and the state is also providing leeway to the corporate in order to penetrate into the territories for profit and thus the 'people' and 'public' further gets marginalised. The massive displacement of people, which happened in Lie-Ingkhol, is an apt demonstration of this anti-people on-going development. The new political domination have capitalised upon one section of the society by securing their development and building consent around their idea of equality and peace. This process has been beautifully encapsulated in the words of Jane Mansfield (1990: 127):

[T]he transformation of 'I' into 'we' brought about through political deliberation can easily mask subtle

forms of control. Even the language people use as they reason together usually favours one way of seeing things and discourages others. Subordinate groups sometimes cannot find the right voice or words to express their thoughts, and when they do, they discover they are not heard. [They] are silenced, encouraged to keep their wants inchoate, and heard to say 'yes' when what they have said is 'no'.

From Sharmila's struggle today requires a process of rigorous conscientisation, dialogue, articulations compounded with organised action to counter this political domination through hegemony, combination of consent and subtle repression of 'public' rather 'people' voices. Meira Paibis have been doing this and is exemplary for the entire nation. However, the state has been successful to an extent in separating these collectives from the individual struggle of Sharmila. Not only these, even the frivolous media depictions of Sharmila and her life are adding fuel to the fire and deepening these ruptures.

Hope, as discussed, flows from concretising historical, political and cultural past of the region vis-a-vis the present developments. This would free hope from a daydream, which have already emerged from the lived experiences and the democratic aspirations of the people of Manipur. Individual transformation is incomplete; rather easily made inchoate without an organised collective transformation. For a new history to emerge, a dialectical engagement with multiple variant publics is indispensable.

About the Author

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