

# Women, Nation and the State: A study on North-East India with special reference to Manipur.

<sup>[1]</sup>Kabyashree Borgohain, <sup>[2]</sup>Augusty Kashyap, <sup>[3]</sup>Bishnu Pal Hazarika.

E-mail: <sup>[1]</sup>kabyashree9678@gmail.com, <sup>[2]</sup>augustykashyap@gmail.com,  
<sup>[3]</sup>bishnupalhazarika@gmail.com

**Abstract:** North –East India which is considered as the most vulnerable region of India consists of eight states which are Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Manipur and Sikkim. North –East region of India is the home of diverse nationalities and ethnic minorities. The Northeast region of India is a classic example of linguistic and ethno-cultural diversity. Conflicts and ethnic differences are neither new nor unusual in India's northeast. India's Northeast part has been also termed as a minefield of militant activities and a theatre of inferno( Kom,2010). This paper is an attempt to uncover the political history of Manipur and how women become victim of objectification and commodification during any conflicting situations. It is also an effort to reinvestigate the issue of violation of rights of women during political trauma in Manipur and the center's response to the very issue of the Manipur .

**Keywords:** Ethnic conflict, eviction, influx, peace- building, refugee,

## 1. Introduction

Manipur , which means 'Land of Jewels'. It is a state in north-eastern India with a population of approximately three million people. There are more than 39 ethnic communities in the state and they practice various faiths, including Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as indigenous religious traditions like Sanamahi.

Recently the state of Manipur has grabbed the attention of National politics and media due to ongoing violence and conflicting events . The unrest in the state began on May 3rd, when ethnic majority Meitei clashed with the hill tribal groups, over economic perks and quotas in government. The Manipur state government initiated an eviction drive in February to evict tribal tribes from forests in the hills, claiming they had encroached on government land, creating outrage among tribal people who were being forced to leave their homes.

As the state grapples with ethnic clashes that have claimed death of 115 people and displaced nearly 40,000 people, women from both the Kuki and Meitei communities have taken to the streets to voice their grievances. Their protests target not only the state government but also each other and the security forces conducting operations to recover looted weapons and ammunition. Strikingly, women also led protests in Delhi against the violence perpetrated by Meitei and Kuki groups, emphasizing the influential role women play in Manipuri society.

Northeastern Indian state of Manipur has had a number of clashes throughout time , such as racial unrest, insurgent activities, and human rights worries. These problems have also had an impact on women in the area. Parts of Northeast India, especially Manipur, have experienced insurgency and bloodshed movement for a long time as a result of diverse ethnic groups and insurgent organizations vying for independence. Conflicts and violence have occasionally resulted in the area. Women in such areas frequently experience particular difficulties, such as displacement, family member loss, and the effects of violence on their communities. They could also encounter prejudice and violence on the basis of gender.

Similar demands from other groups were sparked by the possibility of increased autonomy for one group. Thus, ethnic identification spread like wildfire throughout the Northeast, especially in Manipur. Nevertheless, despite all of its flaws, the Northeast's democratic experiment has gone a long way. The formation of contemporary ethnic identities in relation to the recently established nation-state of India may be occurring at the same time as the rebirth of ancient identities from the past. From restructuring to persistent conflict, the majority of political developments in the Northeast are inextricably tied to the issue of ethnicity. Due to the

proliferation of violent militant groups calling for varying degrees of autonomy, from independent states to full secession, the whole situation is becoming more and more problematic. Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, and Tripura in particular are dealing with ethnically motivated violence and militancy, which poses a severe threat to peace and security, development, and even India's process of developing its country. In Northeast India today, militancy is closely linked with one's ethnic identity, whether for a reason or for no purpose at all. As a result, North-East India is now seriously concerned about this phenomena. The most common strategy for ethnic negotiation and assertion in the area is militancy. Militants may or may not participate in violent acts. Prior to the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, Manipur was a sovereign princely State that was independent of British authority. Manipur had a sizable area that reached as far as the Kabaw Valley in what is now Myanmar before the British era. However, the decision of the Government of India to give up Manipur's claim to the Kabaw Valley in favour of the Burmese Government, without the consent of Manipuris continues to be contested even today by some Manipuri intellectuals particularly Meitei militants. Manipur was merged with India by virtue of the Manipur Merger Agreement signed by Maharaja Bodhochandra Singh on October 15, 1949. However, some Manipuris consider this was violation of democratic norms, as the signing of the document was never ratified by the democratically elected leaders of the then Manipur State Assembly.

## 2. Review Of Literature

There are extensive literature available on ethnic conflict in Manipur, how women's bodies and women are projected during any conflicting events.

L.P Sinha (1987) in the essay entitled *The Politics and Governance in Manipur* discusses about the government and political system of the state of Manipur. In the article the author provides insights of the state from the pre-independence period. The author is also highly vocal on the state's political conditions from a historical standpoint.

S. Mangi Singh in his article *Understanding Conflict : An Insight into the Factors Responsible for the Kuki-Naga Clashes in Manipur during the 1990s*, published in *The Indian Journal Of Political Science* provides insight on the Kuki and Nagas long lasted conflicts and clashes. The author also addresses the various causes of the conflict between Kuki and Nagas.

Oinam Jitendra Singh(2011) in the article *Armed Violence in Manipur And Human Rights* published in *Indian Journal of Political Science* explains how armed conflict violates human rights in Manipur and how innocent people suffer as a result. The author delves deeply into these topics..

Shekhola Kom (2010) in the article *Identity And Governance : Demand For Sixth Schedule In Manipur* provides an in-depth study on demand for sixth schedule and tribal autonomy movement in Manipur state. The issue of identity and governance in Northeast India particularly Manipur is the core of defining principles of identity. Most importantly, an undisputed and effective Autonomous District Councils needs to be evolved to accommodate assertive identities, including minorities, in this administrative and political set-up to enable them to exercise certain degree of self-governance. However, ethnic propensities may continue to define and contour the process of governance. The writer analyses the various issues regarding it.

Paromita Chakravarty (2010) in her article *Reading Women's Protest in Manipur* published in *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* revisits the Manipuri women's protest against the rape and killing of Thangjam Manorama Devi, a suspected Maoist insurgent, by the Indian Army in July 2004. The 'Mothers of Manorama's naked demonstration in front of the Indian Army headquarters, where they called for army personnel to rape them, stands out as an unusual form of nonviolent protest. Its covert aggressiveness exposes the Indian state's blatant predation of its own female inhabitants. They startled the country into realizing the unprecedented conditions created in Manipur and elsewhere by the army's deployment and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958, which affords them legal protection, by playing out the unnaturalness of violence on their bare bodies. In light of the history of the region's exploitation by the colonial and Indian states, as well as the history of women's rights, this article examines the significance of the Manipuri women's protest.

Gita Hariharan (2017) in the article *When Bodies Speak* published in *World Literature Today*, provides a comparative analysis between Draupadi, a story by Mahasweta Devi and real victim of Manipur in 2004.

### 3. Objectives:

The principal objective of this research paper is to provide an analysis on the issues of Manipur state. It seeks to achieve the following objectives-

1. To provide a conceptual understanding of ethnic conflict in Manipur and to investigate the implementation of Arm Forces( Special Powers )Act 1958 , in Manipur and related political events to it.
2. To analyze how the women's bodies are objectified and commodified in the conflicting situations and political events in Manipur.
3. To provide a systematic enquiry on the role of state machinery , political opponents and human right activists, organizations on the issues of women in the context of Manipur.

### 4. Research Methodology

The methodology of this paper is basically descriptive in nature. The paper is qualitative and based on secondary sources such as books, journals, newspapers and online sources.

### 5. Discussion

Manipur has a long history of political unrest, with various armed insurgent groups operating in the region. Amidst this backdrop, women have played a significant role in voicing their concerns and demanding change. Throughout the years, they have actively participated in protests, marches, and strikes, becoming a driving force for political mobilization.

In the state of Manipur, women occupy prominent positions in various spheres of life. Women play an very important role in the social life of Manipur . Notably, Imphal's Ima Keithel (Mothers Market) is the world's largest market run solely by women, attracting both locals and tourists with its products.

Throughout history, Manipuri women have spearheaded significant movements, particularly during the two *Nupi Lan* (Women's Wars) of 1904 and 1939. The first *Nupi Lan* was a remarkable uprising reportedly led entirely by women against a labour system imposed by the British agent of Manipur. Thousands of women marched to the agent's residence, successfully prompting the withdrawal of the system. Women's bodies in India have unfortunately been associated with various forms of violence, reflecting deeply entrenched social, cultural, and systemic issues.

The second *Nupi Lan* focused on the export of rice, which caused local shortages and harmed the region's economy. Protests erupted in Imphal in 1907, culminating in thousands of women gathering outside the royal durbar office and refusing to disperse until their demands were met. In response, the Maharaj issued a directive to halt rice exports. The significance of the Second Nupi Lan remains commemorated on December 12 as Nupi Lan Day.

Meira Paibis (Women with Torches) formed in Manipur in the late 1970s as an unorganized women's group advocating for action against illegal liquor, drug usage, and the application of the Armed Forces (Special Powers Act) 1958. Their non-violent protests also attempted to limit the army's and security forces excessive powers in arresting, detaining, or employing force against suspected insurgents.

In 17<sup>th</sup> December 2020, the Home Ministry of the Indian state issued a notification that extended the imposition of the Arm Forces (Special Powers) Act for a year. This notification is one amongst several to be issued to extend the status of Manipur as a "Disturbed Area," and thus, sustain the presence of the armed forces in the region. The purpose for the implementation and extension of AFSPA in the state is claimed to be the ongoing armed conflict in Manipur. Despite many challenges the implementation of AFSPA and demands for its repeal throughout the decades, the Indian government continues to impose it in various conflict areas along its borders most notably in Northeast India, and Jammu and Kashmir – for 'security' purposes.

There are distinctly gendered dimensions to the militarized violence that occurs under AFSPA. The Act blurs the boundaries between the public domain of war and the private domain of the home and family. Under the Act, officials of the military are provided 'special powers' that enable them to arrest without warrant, enter and search any property or persons without warrant, and to fire upon or use force on suspicion of involvement in underground insurgent groups, even if it causes death. Therefore, under the Act, the private space offers no sanctity from violence.

Manorama Devi, a 32-year old Manipuri woman who was arrested from her house in the early hours of 11 July 2004 by personnel of the Indian paramilitary, Assam Rifles. Although no evidence was provided, mere suspicion of her involvement with the People's Liberation Army (PLA, an underground insurgent group) was sufficient grounds for her arrest. Manoram Devi's bullet-ridden body was found a few hours later, approximately four kilometers away from her house. Her body bore evidence of torture and rape in the form of gashes in her inner thigh and gunshot wounds to her genitals. The personnel Assam Rifles denied that Devi was tortured and raped, they claimed that she was shot while trying to escape from custody.

Thus, Manipuri women mobilized under the Meira Paibi organization to safeguard the Manipuri people from social issues such as alcoholism and substance abuse, as well as militarised violence. Members of the Meia Paibi are primarily married women, and thus, they foreground their identities as Ima (mother) and deploy a rhetoric of protective motherhood to gain legitimacy for their resistance.

The twelve women of the Meira Paibi staged a nude protest against Manorama Devi's death on July 15, 2004, in front of the Assam Rifles headquarters, held up placards stating "Indian Army rape us", "Indian Army take our flesh" which garnered global attention. Their protest eventually resulted in the withdrawal of the AFSPA from Imphal, the state's capital city, however the Act remains in effect throughout the rest of the state. Another example of women-led protest against the AFSPA and military violence in Manipur is the 16-year-long hunger strike of political activist Irom Sharmila from 2000 to 2016.

Notably, Manipuri women made global headlines on July 15, 2004, when 12 women disrobed in front of the Assam Rifles headquarters to protest against the brutal killing of Manorama Thangjam, who had allegedly been raped while in custody.

Recently the incident of Kuki women being paraded naked in Manipur in response to show Meitei's discontent against Kuki grabbed the attention of entire country as it is worth noting that the participation of women in the Manipur clashes goes beyond mere numbers.

Manipuri women played crucial roles in organizing protests, strategizing movements, and effectively challenging authorities. It is crucial to recognize the multifaceted contributions of women in political movements and to provide them with the platforms and support necessary to create lasting change. Women took the lead in opposing security operations and demanding justice for their community. In the ongoing protests, women from both the Kuki and Meitei communities have taken the forefront, blocking roads and preventing security forces from conducting operations in various areas, women-led protests disrupted security operations, marking a significant shift in the dynamics of Manipuri agitation. They fearlessly confronted the armed forces, displaying immense courage in the face of adversity. The involvement of women has not only made the movement more inclusive but has also challenged the traditionally male-dominated spaces of resistance.

The women-led movement has garnered attention not only for its strength but also for its success in securing tangible outcomes. As reported by Deccan Herald, the collective efforts of women compelled the army to hand over 12 militants affiliated with the Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL), an armed group operating in Manipur.

Their unwavering commitment has inspired and mobilized countless others, fostering a culture of collective action and resilience among women in the region. In Manipur, women and political resistance have a long history together. Iconic figure like Irom Sharmila, who went on a 16-year hunger strike in opposition to the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), she constantly demanded repeal of AFSPA during her hunger strike. Irom Sharmila's steadfast dedication has motivated and inspired a great deal of people, encouraging a resilient and group-minded attitude among women in the area.

## **6. Centre's Response to the very recent incident of Manipur :**

Narendra Modi, the prime minister of India, has not visited Manipur since the unrest started and has refrained from speaking publicly about the tensions and conflicts there for several months. It was only after a viral video of two Kuki women being forcibly stripped naked, publicly groped and then allegedly gang raped by a Meitei mob caused outrage across the country (Elis-Peterson, 2023). Modi commented that what happened to the daughters of Manipur can never be forgiven and also added that the entire country had been shamed by the incident of Manipur.

However, he has faced criticism for not addressing the broader conflict or referring to those who have died in the conflict. There are some allegations that the Hindu nationalist Modi government is not stepping in to protect the Kukis, who are Christian, from the Meitei, who are Hindu.

Home Minister Amit Shah, visited Manipur at the end of May, but he failed to bring about a ceasefire between the groups or bring the two parties together for negotiation. Police have been accused of refusing to assist those in the Kuki community who have been attacked and have not investigated reports of rape, torture and violence against the Kukis. It wasn't until the video of Kuki women being stripped naked, assaulted and allegedly gang-raped went viral that the police arrested four Meitei men – more than 70 days after the attack took place.

The government was reprimanded by the supreme court for failing to handle the situation in Manipur. Chief justice of India Dhananjaya Chandrachud commented that it's time that the government really steps in and takes action because this is simply unacceptable.

Opposition parties also condemned the state and central government for not addressing the Manipur issue properly. Rahul Gandhi, the leader of Indian National Congress alleged during a poll rally in Mizoram that the Prime Minister Narendra Modi is more interested in Israel rather than Manipur.

## 7. Conclusion:

The women of Meira Paibi not only criticized the government for not living up to expectations, but actually challenged the Indian army which also represents the Indian state (Chakravarty,2010). They exposed the nation's defenders as perpetrators of crimes on its own women and they questioned the basis of ideas of citizenship, democracy and the role of the nation-state (Chakravarty,2010). Manipuri people, especially women, have been reduced to a biological existence devoid of political agency; they have been arbitrarily labeled as "insurgents" and de-nationalized, denied basic citizenship rights and raped and killed with impunity (Chakravarty,2010).

Furthermore, the relatively recent Manipur case demonstrates how ethnic conflicts victimize women. Here, Kuki women experience double oppression due to their ethnic minority status and gender. According to the aforementioned study, women experience double and triple marginalization, and any painful political event results in bodily harm to women. Frequent violation of rights of the women and humiliating publicly indicates the failure of the state government to preserve the basic rights of the women.

## References

- [1] Chakravarty, P. (2010). Reading women's protest in Manipur: a different voice? *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 5(3), 47–60. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48603378>
- [2] Chowdhury, Kavita (2023). In Manipur both women are both victims and instigators of sexual violence, *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/in-manipur-women-are-both-victims-and-perpetrators-of-sexual-violence>
- [3] Ellis-Petersen, H. (2023, July 24). Manipur: Why Is There Conflict and How Is the Government Responding? Retrieved October 23, 2023, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/21/manipur-india-why-is-there-conflict-and-how-is-the-government->
- [4] Githa, Hariharan. (2017). When Bodies Speak. *World Literature Today*, 91(2), 16–20. <https://doi.org/10.7588/worllitetoda.91.2.0016>
- [5] Kipgen, N. (2011). Ethnic conflict in India: A Case Study of the Kukis and the Nagas in Manipur. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 72(4), 1043–1060. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41856539>
- [6] Kom, Ch. S. (2010). Ethnic mobilization and militancy in northeast India: A Case of Manipur. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 71(3), 869–879. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42748416>
- [7] Kom, S. (2010). Identity and governance: demand for sixth schedule in Manipur. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 71(1), 313–322. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42748389>

- [8] Manipur : how violence against women has become a weapon during conflict . Retrieved from <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/manipur-how-violence-against-women-has-become-a-weapon-during-conflict-news-306206> . Outlook . 28July,2023
- [9] Manipur. (1891). *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography*, 13(5), 291–293. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.2307/1800885>
- [10] Memma, L. (2010). Condemn Attack on Ima Keithel. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(36), 5–5. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25742031>
- [11] Misri, D. (2011). “Are you a man?”: Performing Naked Protest in India. *Signs*, 36(3), 603–625. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1086/657487>
- [12] Phanjoubam, P. (2005). Manipur: fractured land. *India International Centre Quarterly*, 32(2/3), 275–287. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23006034>
- [13] Kom, S. (2010). Identity and governance : demand for sixth schedule in Manipur. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 71(1), 313–322. Retrieved <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42748389>
- [14] Sanamani Yambem. (1976). Nupi Lan: Manipur Women’s Agitation, 1939. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 11(8), 325–331. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4364388>
- [15] Waikhom, R. (2002). Women’s society and politics in pre-colonial Manipur. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 63, 1356–1357. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44>
- [16] Sinha , L. P. (1987). The politics and government of Manipur. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 48(4), 487–493. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41855332>
- [17] U. A. Shimray. (2001). Ethnicity and Socio-Political Assertion: The Manipur Experience. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36(39), 3674–3677 Retrieved from. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4411161>