

The Role of MEIRA PAIBI in Bringing about Social Change in the Manipuri Society: An Analysis

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Abstract

The Literal Translation of the term MEIRA PAIBI is women torch bearer. The official origin of the term was from Kakching under Thoubal district in 1977. Meira Paibis are groups of like-minded women, philanthropic in nature with no formal sources of funding. Their work reflects that they are instrumental in bringing about social change, through social advocacy and social action.

Manipur was earlier known to be a male dominated society, where women had no say in the family. During the developmental stages, the Manipuri society, has witnessed different trends. Over the years, the womenfolk of the society became empowered. Within the umbrella of the Meira Paibis, the womenfolk stood together to fight against like Alcoholism, Drug Abuse etc., where the use of these was considered fashionable. Women in the family now have the courage to counter their husband if they came home drunk. They are present even in the smallest of locality in Manipur. After the success stories are learnt from certain localities, it mushroomed all over the state. The initial agenda of controlling Alcoholism graduated to controlling drug abuse, looking after the law and order in an informal way and for the development of the society at large. As one can see in newspaper and various journals, for a Manipuri society every new day comes with fresh agenda for survival negotiation. Coping of fear and management has been every day dinner table discussion for a household. The imposition of Arm Forces Special Power Act 1958, an Act which gives right to police and army personnel to shoot an individual on mere suspicion, truly it is a draconian act. The popularity of Meira Paibis gained momentum after this Act has been imposed as police and Army personnel are constantly raiding ones house. During these course of action the Meira Paibis would stand together to protect those members who are innocent.

The paper will focus on the contribution made in various ways to the society by citing relevant examples and case study conducted. It will also cover on the various aspects of women empowerment.

"The Manipuri story indicates that active participation by women in public affairs can and does contribute to better conditions for children and society at large" - UNICEF

Keywords: Torch bearer, Philanthropic, Alcoholism, Drug Abuse, Negotiation.

Introduction

Manipur characteristics: Manipur lies in the extreme north eastern parts of the country. It covers an area of 22327 sq. kms. The state

shares boundary with Nagaland in the north, Mizoram in the south and Assam in the west and has an international boundary of 358 Km. with Myanmar. The north eastern states of India and Manipur in particular are beleaguered with conflicts in the form of General strikes, Protest demonstrations etc. State after state and country after country has a recent past or current involvement in some form of conflict or repression. Manipur being the border state to Myanmar which comes under the notorious golden triangle having a long history of Psychotropic substance use with opium and cannabis and pharmaceutical drugs use such as Buprenorphine or a cocktail with Antihistamine injections or sedative

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injection preparations like the Benzodiazepines coupled with sharing of contaminated syringes and needles, unsafe sexual practices under the influence of drugs is one of the most important factors making Intravenous Drug Users (IDU) a cause of concern. Trapped in an insurgent-affected zone together with poor management of law and order by the government, the womenfolk perceive the state as an impending disaster of colossal proportion requiring immediate intervention from various stake holders.

Manipuri women

Women's of this tiny state plays major role in diverse activities since early times. The contribution made by the women group in the state economy cannot be ignored. They are the main workforce of the state; the famous Khwairamband Bazar in the heart of the city is all taken care of by Women. From locally made handloom products, kitchen wares, handicraft products to different varieties of vegetables and rice can be found in this market. Rice cultivation is also mainly done by women groups of the state. What is perhaps most important is the tradition of collective action that Manipuri women have. Nupi Lan is a word that translates as "women's war".[1,2] In 1939, women of this tiny north-eastern region organised an agitation against the British which came to be known as Nupi Lan. They held the British political agent confined for several hours, in spite of a bayonet charge by mounted police. The British could not conquer this region. During 1970s the women of Manipur rose again, this time to fight collectively, another battle - against alcoholism among the men.[3] In what became famous as the "Night patrollers movement", woman in groups patrolled the streets after dark and either extorted a fine from men who had been found drinking or beat them up. They raided breweries and forced their closure. Earlier, in 1904 and 1925 too, women had resorted to collective action, against forced labour conscription and against arbitrary tax

imposts respectively.

The Advent of the term Meira Paibis to bring about social change

The Literal Translation of the term MEIRA PAIBI's is women torch bearer. In Manipur the role of women in bringing about social change can be traced back to the pre British period when Manipur was under monarchical system. Women's movement emerged in a more organized manner with a creative ideology from the early part of the 20th century though movement could be traced back as early as 1904 which stir up due to discontentment, dissatisfaction and contradiction in the then society of Manipur. Women's movement in Manipur is norm oriented type and connected with reformations. The official origin of the term MEIRA PAIBI was from Kakching under Thoubal district in 1977. Meira Paibis are groups of like-minded women, philanthropic in nature with no formal sources of funding. Their work reflects that they are instrumental in bringing about social change, through social advocacy and social action.

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every new day comes with fresh agenda for survival negotiation. Coping of fear and management has been every day dinner table discussion for a household. The imposition of Arm Forces Special Power Act 1958, an Act which gives right to police and army personnel to shoot an individual on mere suspicion, truly it is a draconian act. The popularity of Meira Paibis gained momentum after this Act has been imposed as police and Army personnel are constantly raiding ones house. During these course of action the Meira Paibis would stand together to protect those members who are innocent.

The role of Meira Paibis on controlling drug abuse and alcoholism

The Meira Paibis of the state are stronger in their presence among the society comparing with the other likes of social organizations.[4] Their presences are felt among the different sections of the society in every locality. Their main objectives and works include banning of all intoxicating drugs available in the market. In many occasion they hauled up alcohol and drug vendors, seize their products and burnt them down in front of the public and the media.

Mention can be made of one such organization called All Manipur Anti Drugs Association (AMADA) where their objectives complement with the Meira Paibis. This organization also works for the betterment of the society in which youngsters were hauled up for their drug abuse. They are then counseled for a behavior change and sometimes when a repeater is being caught up, they inform their parents about their habits. In certain cases some of the highly addicted persons are referred to care homes being run for drug users. The initiatives and steps taken up by Meira Paibi's (women torch bearer) are one and the same with AMADA except for the case that Meira Paibi's are located in every locality.

Given the ability of the Meira Paibis, they can be mobilize and partnered with the government agencies to mobilized the

community and spread awareness about Drug abuse and alcoholism. Many a times large consignment of alcohol and drugs are seized from the vendors by the Meira Paibis and they burnt them down. They also treated the users and the vendors alike. When interacted with one general secretary of a particular Meira Paibis, she said they started their organization 10 years before to help control the menace of drug use in the society. Apart from the many social problems they are involved in they tried solving different levels of family feud.

The traditional belief of promoting drug use by promoting Needle and Syringe Exchange Program still holds true for this organization. According to them, they organize seminars, meetings etc to educate the society in bringing about a change. Funding to both the social organization discussed above is a big problem. For the maintenance of the organization they go from door to door and seek people's donation. There are many examples of families whose son and wards were addicted to drugs that have changed their behavior after these social organizations interventions. Those are the types of families who are the largest contributors in cash or kind for the organizations.

Due to the intervention of these types of social organizations the rate of domestic violence and petty crimes has come down to a certain level. Encouraging, promoting and partnering with them would yield the desired results of prevention of drug use and promotion of peace in the society.

Meira Paibis in the fight for repealing AFSPA 1958

Mention can be made of one landmark achievement made by the Meira Paibis in the case of rape, torture and murder of Th Manorama by paramilitary soldiers in Imphal, capital of north-eastern Indian state of Manipur on Thursday, July 15, 2004. In a highly unusual protest, some 40 women stripped naked and staged an angry demonstration outside the Assam Rifles base to protest the death in custody of 32-year old

Th Manorama. The state was in total chaos for more than a month. The outcome of the protest made by the Meira Paibis was that the Assam Rifles had to shift their base from Kangla the heart of Imphal city to outside the city. The women of Manipur are highly politicized.

In another unique case of extra Judicial Killing on November 2, 2000, in Malom, a town in the Imphal Valley of Manipur, ten civilians were allegedly shot and killed by the Assam Rifles, one of the Indian Paramilitary forces operating in the state. A social activist Irom Sharmila Chanu also known as the "Iron Lady of Manipur" started her hunger strike for the removal of AFSPA 1958 since 2nd November 2000. There has been recognition from the international forum but 11 years has lapsed and the controversial Act has not been repealed. However due to her AFSPA has been partially removed in the Municipal area.

Meira Paibis in the fight against human rights violation

The Meira Paibis are very much concerned with human rights abuses committed by the Indian government than they are with their rights as women. Consider these two contrasting incidents. In 1997, during a routine cordon and search operation, Indian Security Forces raped a woman, holding her husband at knifepoint outside the room while her seven-year-old son, bedridden with polio, witnessed the crime. For months, hundreds of thousands of Meira Paibis supported by human rights activists and organizations, protested on the streets of Imphal. Yet in 1999, a young woman was physically threatened with violent reprisal by community activists when she chose to be sexually involved with a trooper of the security forces. In this case, the public was widely sympathetic to the activists. Meira Paibis a women's association and one of the largest grassroots human rights movements in the region, comprising virtually the entire adult female population in every town and village. It is the watchdog of civil rights violations at the community level, initiating and engaging

in campaigns against rights violations, such as arbitrary detention, cordon and search operations, and torture, committed by the security personnel of the federal government of India.

But in the true sense of word women do suffer very much from rights abuses because of their gender, and they are not accorded adequate protection. Increasingly, Indian security personnel assault women for their support of opposition groups as a means of demoralizing and insulting the community at large. The recent report by an organization, the Imphal-based Centre for Organization of Research and Education (CORE), suggest incidences of violence against women, including rape, are increasing at alarming rates.

Moreover, while the community still arbitrates most disputes according to local customary law, which is more gender equitable, parties who stand to benefit from them, are increasingly accessing Indian laws that are strongly patriarchal regarding issues such as inheritance. In customary law, rape is an offense punishable by death and ostracization of the rapist's family and judgment is passed by a local court of senior women who examine the victim. However, the way that modern Indian policies address rape is unnecessarily protracted and traumatizing for victims. Because of moral and social conditioning, local judges are often sympathetic to the "innocence" or "extenuating circumstances" of the perpetrator.

However, the Meira Paibis are little concerned with women's rights in and of themselves, and believe that they must "get general civil rights implemented first." [5] This is perhaps the inevitable attitude of people in a situation of violent strife that has lasted for generations and where civil rights are routinely flouted. The tendency to dismiss women's rights is also likely due to the culture, which prides itself on the traditionally high status and prominent role of its women. Consequently, many women are reluctant to

see themselves as objects of human rights violations particular to their gender.

Conclusion

There is a paradigm shift in the ideologies of the Meira Paibis from solving local and petty problems to the governance of Manipur. Different types of Meira Paibis manned different Ministries of the state Government in different directions. This Meira Paibis seems to be more engaged in banging Lamp Posts, tonsuring peoples' heads for 'heinous' crimes like polygamy, unauthorized elopement, drinking, solving family disputes, setting up small roadside huts for 'Round The Clock' security coverage, organizing Demonstrations as and when called for by other 'vested interest' groups etc. Indeed, Meira Paibis have contributed a lot to various social reforms, more productive developmental issues. If these Meira Paibis can organize huge demonstrations on human rights issues, certainly they can be expected to organize such rallies, demonstrations etc. for pressuring the Official State Government to create a more conducive atmosphere for investment and corporatisation of Manipur. Considering the

work and achievement of the Meira Paibis, it is important to identify, engage and increase the capacity of community support structures to support young people on drug prevention behavior. The government should engage different law and policy instruments to support youth prevention initiatives on drug abuse. The government and various social organizations in Manipur should come together and foster networking among all the likes of social Organizations.

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