

THE LIBERAL FEMINIST: AN OVERVIEW ON MANIPURI WOMEN

Dr. RK Lilapati Devi

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Mass Communication, Manipur University

Received: Oct. 2018 Accepted: Nov. 2018 Published: Dec. 2018

Abstract: Manipuri Women have been taking an active role in the socio-economic –political affairs of the state for many decades. The idea of liberal feminist which relies on an equal footing with the sameness and equality of men and women has been a social theory, rather a social norm since time immemorial in the Manipuri Society. The paper explores the perspectives of Liberal feminism on narratives of the instances and historical events relating to women’s role in geo-political affairs, social ecology, community justice and economic powers. The paper highlights the activities of ‘Meira Paibis’, the social interest groups which is found in every locality and engages actively in coercing a balanced, and good social order from time to time. The activities of these women have rechristened the liberal feminism across a range of areas in militarism, ecology, economy, ethnicity, human rights, social welfare, moral guidance and self-determination.

Keywords: Meira Paibi, Liberal Feminism, Geo-Politics, Economic Empowerment.

Introduction: Liberal feminists perceive men and women as having essentially the same potentials for achievement (Deckard, 1979; Friedan, 1977). The sameness and equality of men and women, however, have been hidden, liberal feminists believe, by social conditions that have hindered women's development. However, in the case of the Manipuri women, they have proved that they are equally strong and independent as their male counterpart be it in economic platform, or in the socio-political activities. The evidence of women’s market in every locality is a testimony that women actively involve in the economic activity of the state. Another stronghold of women’s involvement in social-political affairs of the community and for the state as a whole is the creation of Meira Paibi groups in every neighborhood of the state. The patriarchal sex-gender system and the capitalist class system are not recognized by liberal feminists (Eisenstein, 1981). The issue is not oppression but the denial of equal opportunity and the freedom of individuals to choose their life course (Friedan, 1977). For liberal feminists, women can achieve equality, freedom to choose their life course and opportunity to achieve equality, within "patriarchal" capitalist society. The prescription for sex role changes is that women should become more competitive, assertive, individualistic, and self-directed. It is not male nature that needs to change, but male attitudes and actions that block opportunities for females.

According to 2011 census, the population of women in the state is 11, 81,296 out of total population of 23, 88,634.76. The sex ratio is 978 females per 1000 males and the density of population is 107 per square kilometer. The female literacy rate in the 2011 census is 59.70 percent. In household works women participation is 16.50 percent while that of male is only 3.3 percent. In agricultural works, female’s participation is 14.27 percent and male labourers in agriculture is 8.9 percent which is lower than female. In other sectors like government employees, factory workers and in trade and commerce to name a few, there are as many as 23.94 percent women engaged as pointed out by the 2011 census.

Any form of present-day women’s resistance in Manipuri society, the activism engrained in any case can be seen as woven around the activities of Meira Paibis of Manipur. Meira paibis are the interest groups of Manipur society. It may consist of tightly knit and well-recognized entities or loose coalitions or even emergent (or incipient) networks. Such groups are situated not only within a matrix of political, economic, and social forces but also within the flow of their own experiential histories (G Cheney & G Beck & R.J. Cline, 2013).

The literal meaning of Meira Paibi is women holding the torch'. This torch is made of bamboo stick filled with kerosene and stuffed with a piece of cloth acting like a torch when ignited that piece of cloth. The works of Meira Paibis and liberal feminism in them is discussed below.

The Nature of Social Order and Liberalist Manipuri Women: The liberalist feminists manifest that they are individualistic, rational, competitive, and altruistic under various circumstances, men and women's nature basically the same. When it comes to social order, free market and private property are foundations of economic and political freedom. Welfare state capitalism is with government fine tuning, fair meritocracy-equal opportunity to compete and maximize potentials and freedom of opportunity in public sphere.

Manipuri women's role in the socio- economic and cultural life is significant. They take an active role in economic activity of the state. This can be evident from the presence of the women's market in every neighborhood. The activity of buying and selling of goods are solely conducted by women. Their unique role in market will be known if one visits Khwairamband Bazar which is at the heart of Imphal. It is regarded as the biggest women's market in Asia. They are also involved in the agricultural related activities. Their artistry and creativity in producing handloom products are a world class apart. From the time immemorial, the handloom industry has been playing a vital role in the economy of North-Eastern India and specially to Manipur. The traditional skill of handloom weaving is not only a status symbol for the women folk but is also an indispensable aspects of the socio-economic cultural life. Handloom weaving is by far the largest and the most important cottage industry in the state. From the employment point of view, it has occupied a position providing employment to a great number of people. The employment potential of handlooms were both direct and indirect. The handloom industry, by virtue of its being the largest cottage industry were provided means of livelihood to about 10 million persons particularly in the villages. Further, the industry has also provided indirect employment to loom manufacturers, dyers, twister, traders, cloth printers, tailors, fabric designers, others and so on. Again it has provided employment to tens of thousands of salaried employees who worked in various sales, managerial and technical sectors in various developmental schemes in the handlooms sector which is in Central and State Govt. Dept., govt. Sponsored agencies or enterprises including weaver's co- operatives, etc. One significant observation that we find today in Manipur is the rise in the number of women entrepreneurs and women self help groups. The numbers of working women in different sectors are increasing.

Marup or Cooperative movement is another movement spearheaded by women for generating income. From the early days the Manipuri society has inbuilt system of socio-economic cooperation known as Marup which continues till now successfully throughout the state. Marup, a type of self help group, is a group or association of with common economic needs who undertake an economic activity by participating directly in decision making and sharing the benefits on an equitable basis. This not only makes them economically strengthened but also helps their families with their financial contributions and acts as the financial intermediaries. Among the Manipuri women, Marups are the best vehicles for financial security and it drives a major force for the effective and efficient financial management of the households.

Socio Political Conflict and Liberal Feminists: Women have contributed and proved their might in times of instability and conflict. The feminine power at the core and their ability and strength have moved the state in many cases of conflicts. Women activists in Manipur can be considered to be a homogeneous group of women deeply rooted in community spirit, no matter what their educational qualification and social standing are. They are a collective community oriented informal groups taking part in day –to-day 's social, political, economic conflicts. There are elites who pioneered to take up social conflict issues to the international platforms. Their activism reflects the other collective activism of the liberalist feminists.

Conflicts can happen at many levels and circles of interpersonal, organizational, community, social, religious, intercultural and international. Manipur society is replete with many types of conflicts at

various levels: local, district and the state. The origin of its conflicts lies in the deep rooted indigenous culture, patriarchy, corrupt practices of authority, insurgency and the colonial nature of centre. From time to time, civil societies, local people and student parties and other social organisations have actively put up their voices and sought resolution and answers through protest rallies and sit-in protests. In all of these conflict situations, Manipuri women have taken part either a lion's share or entirely by themselves only. Women's activism in Manipuri society runs strong, and it takes up the whole picture of any socio-political, geo-political conundrum.

Manipuri women's activism in conflict communication may be analysed through macro processes (eg., social, economic, and political structure). Multilevel approaches include terms such as the social ecological framework/model, multiple levels of analysis, and multilevel theorizing. (J G.Oetzel, ST-Toomey, and W J.Anderson, 2013). Multilevel approaches focus on understanding concepts at multiple levels as well as between different levels. Multilevel approaches have a good fit for "naturalistic environments" (Upton & Egan, 2010).

There are many approaches to examine the specific levels in multilevel frameworks including meso-organizational research (Rousseau & House, 1994) and social ecological frameworks (Stokols, 1996). Conflicts in Manipuri society and women's activism in it are largely shaped by family value system, social ecology, cultural values and inherent community spirit of these people. These are the various levels and strata to be looked at when analyzing the conflict situation and the way to communicate for resolution of the conflict. In any case women have played a huge role in appeasing a crisis of any

The earliest women's movement and collective activism which showcased the liberalist in them can be traced back to the historical event 'Nupi Lan (Women's war)' which occurred in 1904 and again in 1939 AD. It was the collective resistance against monopolist Marwari rice traders of the state. When the government lifted the ban on the export of rice in 1939, there followed excessive uncontrolled export of rice by the monopolist Marwaaris creating an adverse effect on the petty women rice dealers of the state. Huge price rise of rice and then artificial famine followed. The fear and apprehension of the common people were aggravated by the heavy rain and floods occurred at that time. Women who were holding the reins of the total household activity came forward against this unruly prevalence of the society and surged a great uproar against the lawmakers of the state.

The Nupi Lan, which started as an agitation by Manipuri women against the economic policies of the Maharaja and the Marwari monopolists, later on changed its character to become a movement for constitutional and administrative reform in Manipur. The original demands of the women were confined to the banning of rice exports, but later their demands also included changes in, the Darbar and the administrative set-up.

The importance of the Nupi Lan lies in the fact that it prepared the ground for the leading role played by the women of Manipur in the emergence of a new Manipur after the end of the Second War.

(S Yambem, 1976).

Next to the Nupi Lan, the Nisha-Bandh movement which started in 1970s is regarded as the foundation of the present day Meira Paibi group in Manipur society. Nisha bandh movement was a movement against the rise of usage of drugs, narcotics and alcohol among the menfolk of Manipur. The menace of drinks and its consequences in family and the society as a whole were intolerable amongst the homemakers. Social disorder, domestic violence and other crimes started occurring rampantly. Women in the family bore all the brunt of this menace. Groups of women in every locality came forward in order to stop this untoward behavior of menfolk. The seizure and destruction of drugs and alcohol in mass scale, beating of drunkards and humiliation in public were executed by these Nisha Bandh women. This movement is termed as Nisha Bandh movement (stopping of drugs, narcotics and alcohol). This Nisha bandh movement gave rise to the birth of 'Meira Paibi' groups in Manipur. The literal meaning of Meira Paibi is 'women holding the torch'. This torch is made of bamboo stick filled with kerosene and stuffed with a piece of cloth acting like a torch when ignited the piece of cloth.

Any form of present day women's resistance in Manipuri society and its related activism engrained in any case can be seen as being woven around the activities of Meira Paibis of Manipur. Currently there are four State level Meira Paibi organisations. the All Manipur Women's Reformation and Development Samaj (also known as Nupi Samaj), the Poirei Leimaro, Kanglamei, the Meekhol. Ideologically, the Nupi Samaj is supported by UCM (United Committee of Manipur) and the Poirei Leimaro by the AMUCO (All Manipur United Clubs Organisation). The President of each State level group is selected by an understanding and consensus. There are numerous Meira Paibi groups in every leikai (small locality). The structure of the Meira Paibis is loose and strong at the same time. They don't have any fixed office in every leikai nor do they meet to discuss issues every day. Only when there is a crises situation do these women gather as Meira Paibis.

Manipur women Gun Survivors network, an NGO under the organization, Control Arms Foundation of India describes the Meira Paibi as a women's association, one of the largest grassroots human rights movements in Manipur, comprising virtually the entire adult Meitei female population in every Meitei 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. Every women's collective resistance is associated with Meira Paibi. Every women in a leikai (locality) is virtually a member of Meira paibi. A formal body exists comprising of president, secretary, treasurer, advisor. Meira Paibis may work at the leikai level, district level and state level. These Meira Paibi groups may or may not register under society's registration act.

The advent of Meira Paibi movement in the valley of Manipur came along with the imposition of AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Power Act, 1958 which legitimized full scale military operations, permitting even a non-commissioned officer to kill anyone on mere suspicion with guaranteed immunity) in Sept 1980. After the imposition of this act, Indian Army assumed extra power to violate basic civil right of the common people. Young men were randomly picked up, women were raped, and many were killed on suspicion of being insurgents. The Nisha Bandh women shot up their agenda to safeguard innocent youths from the atrocities of security forces under the aegis of AFSPA. Thus came the birth of Meira Paibis to counter the inhuman acts under AFSPA. During the time of combat operations, Meira Paibis stay alert. They communicate with one another, once a signal of danger looms. Hitting the electric post hard with a stone is the way to give the information of urgent summoning of other women. They would form a human shield not letting the army to intrude the area or house.

For years, or even decades, security forces in Manipur have faced allegations of human rights violations and extrajudicial murders committed under cover of the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). In 2000, Irom Sharmila, shocked by the massacre of 10 civilians, including an 18-year-old National Child Bravery Award winner, by the Assam Rifles, started her hunger fast — that lasts to this day — in protest against the AFSPA.

Meira Paibis and Community Justice: Meira Paibis have been taking a great role in delivering community justice in any case of conflicts in the society. Community justice is a concept that addresses how criminal justice operations should be carried out in areas where public safety is a major concern. A definition of community justice, provided by David Karp and Todd Clear (2000) is that it encompasses all crime prevention and justice activities that include the community in their process have as their primary goal the enhancement of community quality of life. Such initiatives include crime prevention, community policing, community defense and prosecution, community courts, and restorative justice. (J R. Hamilton Jr., 2013)

Meira Paibis are successful in influencing formal system of social control as well as informal system of social control. Formal system of social control such as criminal justice system, law courts may not directly and immediately provide public safety. Meira Paibis do many a times the Informal social

controls weaving around families, neighbours, and the society as a whole rendering public safety. Women's organization, the so called Meira Paibis have been doing rounds from time to time the various social services for overall moral, political, socio-economic control in many situations. They work as informal social control mechanism in delivering community justice. These controls have a stronger and longer-lasting effect on reducing crime (ibid).

Besides taking part in socio-political movement of the state, other issues taken up at leikai level range from neighborhood fights, theft, threat from UG for extortion, elopement, extra-marital affair, desertion of women to combing operations done by the Army. The leikai level groups also join the State level groups (whoever they are affiliated to) in order to carry out a protest rally or a dharna. Meira Paibi groups which are not registered and function on their own.

Conclusion: Every socio-political-economic conflict in Manipuri society has a collective movement staged by women, the so called Meira Paibis. The sameness or roles between male and female in socio economic political standing in Manipuri society no doubt exudes the abundance of liberalist character of women. The discourse on local media text throughout the year are full of narratives of women's collective movement against the authority or the other half of the dialogical party in every conflict situation-micro, meso and exo. The conflict communication of the liberalist voice has been acted through sit-in-protest, dharnas and protest rallies. Meira Paibis are the emblem of fervent Manipuri women ready to act against any disharmony in law and order situation of a leikai, or district or the state. Equity in solidarity, gender balance, power relations between women and authority runs high in the Manipuri society. It is more of a matriarch in the patriarchal society as evident in the resistance. That is the brilliance of the repertoires of collective activism amongst the liberal feminists across a range of areas in militarism, ecology, identity, ethnicity, ethics, human rights, social welfare, moral guidance and indigenous self determination .

References:

1. Deckard, B. S. (1979). *The women's movement: Political, socioeconomic, and psychological issues*. New York: Harper & Row.
2. Eisenstein, Z. (1981). *The radical future of liberal feminism*. New York: Longman.
3. Friedan, B. (1977). *It changed my life*. New York: Dell.
4. George Cheney & Gary Beck & Rebecca J. Cline, —Community Conflict, Ethics, and Civic Engagement in *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Communication*, ed John G. Oetzel & Stella Ting-Toomey, 2013, Sage Publication Ltd. Thousand Oaks.
5. John G. Oetzel & Stella Ting-Toomey & Willow J. Anderson, "Conflict Communication in Contexts: Organizing Themes and Future", in *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Communication*, ed. John G. Oetzel & Stella Ting-Toomey, 815-830, SAGE Publications, Inc. Thousand Oaks, 2013
6. John R. Hamilton Jr., "Community Justice" in *Encyclopedia of Community Policing and Problem Solving*, Kenneth J. Peak, SAGE Publications, Ltd., Thousand Oaks, 2013
7. Karp, D. R., & Clear, T. R. (2000). *Community justice: A conceptual framework* . In *Criminal Justice 2000* . Washington, DC: National Criminal Justice Reference Service.
8. Manipur women Gun Survivors network "MEIRA PAIBI" , Product ID: MWGSN-P10, <http://www.womensurvivorsnetwork.org/product-detail.php?id=16>
9. Sanamani Yambem, "Nupi Lan: Manipur Women's Agitation, 1939 ", *Economic and Political Weekly*, (Feb. 21, 1976), Vol. 11, No. 8 , pp. 325-327+329-331
10. Upton, M. G., & Egan, T. M. (2010). *Three approaches to multilevel theory building* . *Human Resource Development Review* , 9, 333-356. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1534484310380333>
