

FROM IROM TO THE IRON LADY OF MANIPUR – HER ONGOING STRUGGLES

Tanusree Sengupta*

Abstract

The paper tries to study certain pertinent issues related to North–East India. Based on secondary sources of study, the paper focuses on Irom Sharmila Chanu – the “Iron Lady of Manipur”. Barring recent interest shown by some Multi-national Energy Corporations, and some narrow political interest, until recently the region was secluded from mainstream Indian population and business. The reasons are unknown and varied. Who should be blamed – the Central Government? The geographical location? Political reasons? Or is it something more or someone else? The North Eastern states have always remained a part of the Indian Territory but remained isolated and reclusive. With its many tribes and sects it is difficult to make a general appraisal, especially in recent times when the internal strife have come to the fore in the form of separatist movements – most of them of an armed nature. There is a general alienation rooted in its geography and history.

Keywords: AFSPA; Manipur; Irom; Iron Lady; Indefinite hunger strike.

***Research Scholar at West Bengal State University, West Bengal, India**

1. Introduction

Located in the extreme north eastern part of India, with Imphal being its capital, Manipur is known for her scenic beauty, huge mountains and greenery all around. In 1891 Manipur came under the British rule as a princely state. The Manipur Constitutional Act of 1947 established a democratic government with the Maharaja, as the Executive Head and an elected legislature as well. In 1956, Manipur became a Union Territory, and later in 1972 became a full-fledged state, a part of the Indian state. Gradually a separatist movement began in Manipur. The demand for an independent and sovereign Manipur became quite articulate with time. We focus on a true warrior and important figure, waging almost a lone battle for the people of Manipur since a long period of time— Irom Sharmila Chanu. The Iron Lady of Manipur started a hunger strike demanding the repeal of the ARMED FORCES (SPECIAL POWERS) ACT, 1958 (AFSPA). Born in 1972, Irom Sharmila, daughter of a Grade IV veterinary worker, began her protest after the *Malom Massacre*, where almost 10 civilians were gunned down by the Indian Security Forces on 2nd November, 2000. Since then she began her hunger strike and began a lone struggle and journey highlighting the major crisis in Manipur which remained neglected since a long period of time.

Objectives:

1. To study the Government marginalization attitude.
2. The angle of gender biasness of society.
3. Drawing similarities between the imposition of AFSPA in the NE states and the efforts to introduce the NCTC in India – a forecast of the future we are heading towards.



Figure 1. A file picture of *Irom Sharmila Chanu*

2. Research Method

My study in this paper is an assimilation and interpretation of information collected mainly from secondary sources/data. The paper has a multiple paradigm research. I propose to use Mixed Methods for the analysis of the topic. The focus will be on both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. The study includes an in depth multifaceted investigation whereby both the qualitative and quantitative research methods of a single social phenomenon is being used for analysis. Field research, first hand observation all will be of extensive use along with reference to biographies and articles on the topic. Reliability is interpreted as the ability to replicate the original study using same research instruments and to get the same result. Analysis could be done by labelling actions and codifying materials that represent empirical data on original issue and question. I wish to study the case of Irom Sharmila Chanu and place it within the contemporary socio – economic context of India and analyse its relevance.

3. Discussion

The Governments response to the issue of AFSPA was strongly opposed by Sharmila. Her main demand was to the Indian Government to withdraw AFSPA, which allowed soldiers to indefinitely detain any citizen on suspicion of being a rebel. She refused to take food and water for more than 500 weeks.

After three days she was arrested by the police and charged with an “attempt to commit suicide”, which is against the section 309 of IPC. Her health conditions began to deteriorate rapidly and the police had to forcibly use nasogastric intubation in order to keep her alive while under arrest. Irom Sharmila was kept in solitary confinement keeping her security in mind. With several discussions and decisions on arrest and re-arrest, finally on March 28, 2016 Sharmila was released from judicial custody on clearance of all charges against her. But keeping to her vows Sharmila still denies to enter her house or meet her mother until the Government actually repeals the AFSPA. On the very day of her release she continued her fast at Shahid Minar, Imphal. The mockery of the situation continues with Sharmila being re-arrested for charges of attempting suicide once again.

In 2006, 2nd October after her release Sharmila went to Rajghat, New Delhi. According to Sharmila this was “*to pay floral tribute to my idol, Mahatma Gandhi*”. On the same day Sharmila headed for Jantar Mantar to lead the protest movement jointly with students, human rights activists and many common citizens. Sharmila was taken to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, after her arrest and as a protest she wrote letters to the P.M, President and Home Minister. This was an important juncture for Sharmila’s fight because she got the support of the Nobel Laureate and human rights activist, Shirin Ebadi, who promised to take up her issue to the United Nation Human Rights Council.

In 2007, March 7th just a day after her release Sharmila was re-arrested as she was sitting on a hunger strike outside a club in her hometown. This has been her journey and saga of life. The court sets her free and Sharmila the IRON LADY resumes her campaign, with the same demand. The Janata Dal minority opposition party publicly agreed to campaign for AFSPA repeal during the monsoon session of the Parliament. Within the Cabinet the then PM Dr. Manmohan Singh asked for taking actions to reform the AFSPA, in order to make it more humane. Sr. V Moilly, the chairperson of the second administrative reform committee, Home Secretary, Sri Pillai, Home Union Minister Chidambaram all came out in support of the cause at that moment. On 25th June, 2011 the ‘SAVE SHARMILA’ campaign organized a candle light solidarity prayer at Rajghat, New Delhi. National Signature Campaign was planned in this campaign. The volunteers requested the Government, to take positive steps of talk, to send all party delegations to meet Sharmila, to send special team of Doctors for health checkup of Irom. Many other attempts, volunteers, NGOs and the common people have come out in open to support the cause of Sharmila. But the irony of the movement is that even today it is being carried forward mainly by a single lady. In spite of several attempts and support the cause is not being dealt with seriously. The root issue still is being left unattended. The reasons are unknown and the common people are kept in complete darkness. Even the Indian media and press remained rather silent on the issue.

But to say she achieved nothing would be complete injustices to the ongoing struggle and tremendous resilience of the Iron lady with a mission. Under immense pressure in 2004 the Government constituted a five member committee with Justice B P Jeevan Reddy, as the

Chairperson. The Committee was to review the provisions of AFSPA and also advise the Government simultaneously whether to amend, protect human right or to replace it with a more humane and just act. In 2014, Irom Sharmila wrote an open letter to newly elected Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi about the differentiated treatment of North Eastern states. She wanted the basic right of being human *“Please, do provide us with the basic right of being a human so that we can live with self-respect and dignity.....Please don’t see me as a supporter of any insurgent party by the only notion of the way I protest against. Instead, please do see me as conscientious human being”*

4. Conclusion

The basic ethnic – linguistic diversity and socio political barrier acts as a major hindrance to the development of the North Eastern States. The feeling of alienation and being deprived of the basic rights has deepened over the years. The majority minority clash, the feeling of being excluded from the so called mainstream population has only increased day by day. Perceived marginalization, minority - majority clash and the ethnic rivalry today has taken form of a severe political tug of war. The external forces have been playing an instrumental role in deepening the alienating vision of the states. But the basic aim of the paper is to focus on the ongoing struggle of the Iron Lady. The paper tries not to support the Government’s decision of imposing AFSPA or to hold a strong standpoint against AFSPA. The basic aim is to study the struggle of a woman who represents a whole region. When the security of the common people is concerned, when innocent people lose their lives, then situation demands a rethinking or revision of the AFSPA. Of course security of states and people has to be ensured against terrorism or violent acts but not at the sake of lives of other innocent men and women. This is the controversy and the debatable area.

There has been lots of national and international recognition which Irom Sharmila received for her long battle; in 2007 she was awarded the Gwangzhou Prize. From the Asian Human Rights Commission, she received the lifetime achievement award in 2010. The Amnesty International,

along with National Human Rights Commission of India declared Sharmila as a “Prisoner of conscience” and said that “she is being held solely for a peaceful expression of her beliefs”.*

It was acts of violence by 4 insurgent groups, which led to the rule of AFSPA in Manipur in 1980. Strangely, after 36 years of AFSPA intervention intended to bring law and order back into the land, the number of insurgent groups has increased to 35 and more. A lot of it is attributed to the conversion of a sizeable native population to Christianity, resulting in convent education and western ways. But the region, due to its geography and strange neglect of the central administration – has not yielded many employment opportunities for its ‘male’ youth. There is a popular theory that the youth are taking up arms, in absence of viable employment opportunities. The surest way of earning money is extortion and covert intimidation of the public. In eyes of the government, this forms insurgency – leading to prolongation of the AFSPA rule.

Marxian Theory of Alienation, where there is alienation in modern industrial capitalism, acts as a reference point. Under capitalism, workers will be alienated from the product they produce, production process, from fellow workers and from themselves. In the study a typical angle of alienation, separation of the so-called mainstream population and the backward, neglected section of society was observed. The entire nation and any Central Government in power have been depriving the people of NE, according to the common mass of the regions. Barring J&K there has been no other regions in India where AFSPA has been in force for such a prolonged time. Indecisions and lack of moral obligation of the Government is clearly noticeable by now.

The Patriarchal society has been always neglecting issues of women and women rights. Whereas the typical woman of Manipur is still busy with her daily chores, the men have been used to warring with other tribes since ages. After independence, there has been education, but huge unemployment. Instead of an organized and constructive movement to merge with the mainstream population, there has been insurgency. The resultant victims of such insurgency have been the females of the state and Irom Sharmila seems to be a perfect example of a victim of the male dominance of the social structure.

On 8th July, 2016 The Supreme Court in a landmark judgement said that the army or the paramilitary cannot use “excessive and retaliatory force” during any counter – insurgency

* *Amnesty International, 2013: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/08/india-release-prisoner-conscience-irom-sharmila-welcome-long-overdue/>*

operations in the disturbed areas. Hardly few people would raise voice against the struggle of the Iron Lady. Her peaceful commitment towards her cause and her courage and strength deserves a salute and particular emphasis. Yet her cause has actually failed to gain the center stage or strike collective conscience of the nation. Media attention and Government intervention along with mass involvement would be a major help to achieve the goals the Iron Lady of Manipur has been fighting for since so many years. A further attempt would be to have a direct face-to-face interview with the Iron Lady and find out her grievances, issues and the way she looks in to the state's situation at present.

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