A Seat at the Table: Women in Manipur Strive for Peace in a Militarized State

Weaving is among the traditional arts of women in Manipur and is one of the sources of livelihood for survivors of gun violence. Photo credit: Rucha Chitnis. Mumtaz Begum had pinned her hope on the Supreme Court of India to deliver justice. “I feel optimistic,” she said. “Those who killed my husband should be brought to justice. This is the only way we can stop other innocent people from losing their lives.” On March 7, 2009, Azad Khan, a respected lecturer, was killed in an encounter in Manipur. “I lost my sanity. Those were dark days for me and my five children,” shared Mumtaz. In her grief, Mumtaz connected with Manipur Women Gun Survivor Network, an advocacy group that serves women widowed and bereaved by gun violence from state and non-state actors. She found community with other mothers, wives and sisters, who had lost their male relatives to such encounters with the army and police. Mumtaz also connected with Extrajudicial Execution Victim Families Association (EEVFAM), which filed a petition in the Supreme Court of India to investigate 1,528 cases of alleged fake encounters in Manipur.
Mumtaz, a gun widow, continues to fight for justice for the extrajudicial killing of her husband. Photo credit: Rucha Chitnis

“The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) is a failure of India’s policy in the northeast,” said Binalakshmi Nepram, founder of Manipur Women Gun Survivor Network (MWGSN). “Since AFSPA, the number of militant groups has increased, not decreased in Manipur and the number of casualties has soared.” Human rights advocates have deemed AFSPA as a draconian act that gives special powers to Indian armed forces in places deemed as disturbed. Nepram is a prominent disarmament and peace activist from Manipur.

“There are nearly 20,000 gun widows in Manipur,” she said. This staggering number of widows and ongoing violence faced by women and girls in the state led her to found the Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network in 2004. The network offers livelihood opportunities for women, who are survivors of gun violence and connects them with psychosocial support and counseling. Mumtaz is now an integral part of the core team and supports their outreach activities for women who are traumatized by the violence of militarization. In August 2016, Nepram joined women advocates from northeastern states at Northeast India Women Peace Congregation in Guwahati. Their manifesto underscored the role of women in northeastern states as peace builders and called for their inclusion as decision makers in peace negotiations. Nepram also founded Control Arms Foundation of India, an advocacy group that addresses the proliferation of small and light arms and its disproportionate impact on women and children. “We discovered weapons from 13 countries in Manipur. We must understand this reality in India, where 12 Indians are shot everyday by gun violence.”

Nepram’s activism connects the dots between the proliferation of guns, drugs and trafficking of women in the northeast and the continuum of conflict, which has besieged the lives of many civilians in the northeast since India’s independence.

Binalakshi Nepram is a prominent Manipuri peace and disarmament activist. Photo credit: Stefan Mentschel

Question: How do you contextualize today’s conflict in the historic events of how statehood evolved in Manipur?

Nepram: Manipur has 3,000 years of recorded history. We were our own nation state with a rich history, script and traditions. We were a multi-cultural and multi-religious state. The British divide and rule policy was continued in Manipur by New Delhi. These divisions of ethnicities have come up in the past 30 years in post independent India. It’s an attempt to create ethnic fissures as part of new body politic, and New Delhi has to be blamed for that. Earlier, we had 4-5 armed groups. Today, we have 72 armed groups in Manipur alone, created by the political class and intelligence agencies. And women are fed up of this. We don’t want to live in this future for the next 50 years.

Question: Women in Manipur have a long legacy of resistance fighting British imperialism and continuing to advocate for peace and human rights post independence. How has this history converged into actions taking place in Manipur today?

Nepram: We have to give credit to mothers, who stripped to protest the rape and killing of Thangjam Manorama (by the Indian army personnel) in 2004. At our women’s peace congregation in Guwahati, we looked at the issues of drugs, guns and trafficking of women in the northeast. They are deeply interlinked. We will have peace in the region when stakeholders genuinely focus on good governance and not continue to arm us. Our region
is flooded with guns and drugs. The peace congregation appealed to groups, state and non-state, to lay down their arms. We called for a complete disarmament. Question: How does the proliferation of small arms and weapons affect the lives of everyday lives of citizens, particularly women, in Manipur and the northeast? Nepram: We have more than 100,000 troops in Manipur. Manipur has become a conduit for weapons going to Southeast Asia. We continue to have human rights violations by state and non-state actors. For us, it’s about the insecurity this brings to women’s lives. After the United States, India has the highest possession of small arms by civilians. At the peace congregation, we adopted a resolution that women in the northeast will lead war on rape in India. The new government that came in 2014 reduced rape crisis centers in the country from 600 to 18. It’s a shame. We have requested government of India to have a rape crisis center in every district in the northeast.

Question: What would a shift in policy look like in the context of conflict, increased climate vulnerability and women’s rights and wellbeing?

Nepram: A shift in policy is when you begin to include women in all aspects of decision making. When women are allowed to own land and become property owners, we can truly fight climate change. We need to take charge of our lives and become integral parts of all decision-making processes. We have also developed a manifesto for a women’s political party, in which climate change, peace building and good governance is prioritized. We know our Earth is being destroyed by human greed. In Manipur, in so many ways, there is still a question of basic survival.

Question: What are the environmental impacts of militarism and conflict in Manipur? Nepram: Militarization destroys the environment. In Manipur, our hilltops are militarized. Many army camps and insurgency camps are mined. Mining destroys the environment. Besides, we have drug trafficking in the area and poppy is growing in the golden triangle, where chemicals are added to make heroin. These chemicals are coming from Chennai, Gujarat and other places. Conflict deeply affects the environment and destroys tracts of land.

Question: You have criticized mainstream Indian educational syllabus and history curriculum for excluding the history of Manipur and the northeast. What needs to happen to bridge this chasm of understanding?

Nepram: Manipuri women’s history is powerful, and is not reflected in the school textbooks or university curriculum. We are advocating to change this. After the death of a 19-year-old youth from Arunachal Pradesh in Delhi, we felt it was important to address this. If we don’t inform children about the history of northeast India, people will continue to think we are savages with no culture or that our women are morally lose. Northeast India is home to 272 ethnic communities, and there’s not a single chapter of 45 million Indians living in northeastern region in the textbooks of our country. Noticing this major lacunae, a joint team of Manipur Women Gun Survivor Network and Northeast India Women Initiative for Peace, two women-led civil society movements in the northeast region joined hands with the Indian Council of Historical Research and in coordination organized a conference "Documenting History - Written and Oral Histories of Manipur", at Imphal, Manipur in 2012. Many eminent personalities including historians, scholars, activists, media people and representatives from women's organizations attended the meet. The meeting concluded with a historic resolution in which we called upon Indian Council of Historical Research to start work on documenting history, both written and oral of Manipur. Contact the author