

**ROLE OF WOMEN IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: A STUDY OF
INSURGENCY IN VALLEY AREAS OF MANIPUR**

Research Report

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By

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Manipur is a strategically located northeastern State. It, though geographically and culturally a part of India, was an independent nation-state under Meitei monarchy. It became politically a part of India on being defeated in Anglo-Manipur war of 1891 when British made it a native Indian State in 1892. It was merged with India on 21 September 1949. On integration with India, it first became a part C State, then a Union Territory and finally a State on 21 January 1972.

It has two distinct geographical regions, namely, valley and the hills surrounding the valley. Total area of the State is 22327 square kilometers. Hills are inhabited by 29 tribal communities- 13 Naga and 16 non-Naga. All of them are Christians. Meitei Hindus are predominant among the mosaic population of the valley. Total population of the State is 2,293,896 (2001 census). Around 60 per cent population of Manipur resides in the valley which comprises 10.02 per cent area of the State. Agriculture, pisciculture and weaving are backbone of economy of both the regions. The entire State is economically backward.

Manipur has been acclaimed all over the world for its unique culture, martial art, scintillating dances, excellent sports persons and thrilling indigenous sports. At the same time, this birth place of polo is also a home to various problems: unemployment, insurgency movements, rampant corruption, drug abuse, AIDS, political instability, ethnic unrest and threat to its territorial integrity. Of them, insurgency in the valley is the most disastrous.

With a view to understanding the role that women can play in resolution of the problem of insurgency, a study titled “**Role of Women in Conflict Management: A Study of Insurgency in Valley Areas of Manipur**”, as sponsored by BPR&D, has been undertaken.

Objectives

- ❖ Give a gender perspective to the insurgency and conflict resolution process.
- ❖ Discuss the impact of insurgency in day-to-day lives of women in Manipur valley.
- ❖ Discuss the role of women in conflict management and resolution.
- ❖ Suggest measures to make the role of women’s movement and associations more effective in handling insurgency-related problems.

Methodology

The study covered all the four districts of Manipur valley viz. Bishnupur, Imphal East, Imphal West and Thoubal. The respondents for the interviews were selected randomly from all the four districts. Methods for data collection included interview of 385 women in the valley; library and internet research; case studies; observations of field researchers; and interaction with scholars, security, administrative officials and social activists. Quantitative data were coded and analysed by using SPSS software. Qualitative data, on the other hand, contributed to analysis of different components of the report.

Hypotheses

The study tested the following hypotheses:

- ❖ Women's role in conflict resolution has not been given due recognition and importance. Their energy, eagerness and wisdom have not been properly harnessed to curb insurgency in Manipur. *The study has affirmed this hypothesis.*
- ❖ Women bring different perspective than the prevailing majoritarian view on security and insurgency related issues. *Women do bring different perspective.*
- ❖ The voices of the women can be mainstreamed in conflict management and resolution. Their skills and experience will be valuable to solve the insurgency problem. *This hypothesis appears correct.*

Manipur and its Insurgency Problem

Whole of Manipur is afflicted by insurgency movements. Hills are affected by Naga and Kuki-Zomi insurgent groups. Because of various ceasefire pacts, hills are at present more or less peaceful.

Continued high intensity violence by Meitei insurgent groups in Manipur valley is a matter of concern. They often commit depredation in hill areas also. These outfits have women cadres and child warriors. Besides them, numerous armed groups of criminals, smugglers, extortionists, drug paddlers and kidnappers for ransom masquerade as insurgents. Hankering for power, authority and wrongful gain are at the root of this multiplicity. This multiplicity of groups/ gangs is a dreadful manifestation of gun culture in Manipur valley and a serious hindrance for peace process in the valley.

The genesis of insurgency is embedded in the history of Manipur. Several causes are responsible for insurgency in the valley. They include perceived wrongs and feeling of hurt of Meitei people over a long period at the hands of authorities of central government, unemployment, economic deprivation, poor governance, corruption, extortion, foreign support and fear of Meitei people of balkanization of the State for meeting aspirations of Nagas of Manipur to be a part of *Nagalim* (Greater Nagaland) consisting of Nagaland and Naga inhabited areas of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Meghalaya. The primary objective of Meitei insurgent groups is to free Manipur from Indian occupation.

A two-pronged strategy has been adopted in Manipur for tackling insurgency in valley areas, namely, use of security forces for containing militancy and taking of political and developmental measures for addressing issues that have created, promoted and sustained insurgency. For settlement of these issues, the Government of India is open to talks within the framework of the Constitution of India with any group that abjures violence. No serious effort to bring about negotiated peace in Manipur valley, however, has been made. Counter insurgency measures launched by the government have not yielded the desired effect.

Status of Meitei Women

It is widely believed in India that Meitei women are liberated and advanced and enjoy status equal to their male counterparts. This impression is highly exaggerated. At the same time, it is true that there is certainly no excessive male domination. Meitei women enjoy high social

standing. They have proved that women power has enough punch to bring the stiffest opposition down on its knees. They have rendered yeoman's service in social sphere, exposing human rights violations, fighting drug abuse and creating awareness about HIV/AIDS. Their contribution in economic sphere is laudable. Undoubtedly, Meitei women have vast potential for public good.

Gender Perspective

- ❖ Women's awareness of insurgency is very high (91 percent), which is indicative of all pervasiveness of the problem in valley.
- ❖ Most important reasons of insurgency, in the opinion of women, are underdevelopment, unemployment & economic disparities (53 percent), and greed and lack of morality in the society (30 percent).
- ❖ According to them, the principal steps taken by government to resolve insurgency are police, administrative & armed measures, programmes for rural development and employment generation. According to women and field investigators, armed measures are more visible than other measures.
- ❖ Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), women organisations and individuals in Manipur valley take initiatives from time to time for mobilisation of people for building a mass movement for peace. These initiatives include awareness and advocacy campaigns such as *dharnas*, public meetings and rallies. Fifty seven percent women are aware of steps being taken by NGOs etc. for peace building.
- ❖ The women contend that individuals and NGOs should do a lot more to restore peace as out of those who know the activities of individuals and constituents of civil society, 65 per cent felt that the activities are not adequate in light of the present situation.
- ❖ The women feel that the government has to undertake, besides the present activities, many additional steps to resolve insurgency including rapid industrial development and inculcation of moral values and elimination of corruption in the society.

Impact of Insurgency

Because of insurgency, administration has collapsed, development activities have been dislocated, corruption has become rampant and people have been impoverished. Funds for development are systematically and at a large scale siphoned off by coalitions of corrupt politicians, dishonest bureaucrats, unscrupulous contractors and local insurgent groups, leaving little for investment both in hill and valley areas.

Women are worst affected due to insurgency as 84 percent of the women interviewed alleged that they have suffered in one or the other way due to insurgency. In this connection, a social activist and leader of an NGO says, "The prevailing situation forces them to earn money by selling vegetables and even by selling their bodies to support their children. Women of Manipur are still facing/ struggling with the challenges at their level as best as they can, without any proper support from the government."

Women in Conflict Management

- Women organizations and other civil society groups undertake from time to time activities such as peace marches, *dharnas* etc. for bringing peace in the valley.

- They also agitate against human rights violations by security forces (state actors) and insurgent groups (non-state actors).
- No women organisation or any other civil society group can impose a settlement on insurgent groups and state authorities.
- But, as experience of Mizoram and Nagaland shows, women organisations and other civil society components collectively can build a mass movement for peace and persuade insurgent groups and government to cease-fire and take up negotiations in a congenial environment. They can also be of great help in overcoming deadlocks that such negotiations encounter. In this connection, Sajal Nag (2006) remarks that studies reveal, “In an otherwise doomed situation in India, the women in northeast India have been playing an important role, that of peace makers, to bring order in their conflict ridden societies. It was peace making not between families or clans or tribes but underground insurgents, called national workers, and the government of India. It was not only unique but also unparalleled in entire South Asia.”

Recommendations

Advocacy and Awareness Programmes

Need for Concerted Action: Opinion makers of all sections, including women, should actively work in concert for building and sustaining a mass movement for peace in the Manipur valley.

Women’s Empowerment: Women groups, when suitably empowered, can play a significant role in creating a mass movement for peace in the valley. To empower them, the government, political establishment and different civil society groups should provide them financial support, involve them in consultation process, give them representation in decision making positions, and associate them with schemes for employment generation, social change and rehabilitation.

Administrative Measures

Drive against corruption: Both by government and people.

Better Coordination with Foreign Countries: To stop assistance to the Indian insurgent groups, uproot camps of insurgents on their soil, deny the insurgents space for launching operations in India and share intelligence about their activities.

Better Inter-State Police Networking: To deny insurgents safe houses at places like Guwahati, Shillong, Coimbatore and Delhi.

Police Primacy in Counter-insurgency: Giving primacy to State police after necessary reorganisation and strengthening, as it being local, has several advantages for operational work and does not need special laws like AFSPA for it has necessary powers under ordinary law of land.

Women’s Involvement in Peace Process: Government should make women’s organisations and organizations that are working on women’s issues a part of every peace effort in order to make the process representative of different views.

Recognition to Women and Other Organisations: Individuals and organizations that devote themselves for the cause of peace should be given recognition at the state and national level.

Confidence Building Measures

Preservation of Meitei Interests: The central government should assure Meitei people, both through categorical policy pronouncements and firm deeds, that it values their legitimate aspirations and shall not balkanise/ damage their interests to appease other nationalities and they need not harbour insurgent groups for defending their heritage, rights and interests.

Withdrawal of Unpopular Measures: Unpopular law and order measures like AFSPA should be withdrawn.

Economic Measures

Trade and Commerce: Out of box measures such as facilities for trade with neighbouring countries are necessary for addressing the problems of unemployment, lack of livelihood opportunities and backwardness of Manipur.

Productivity and Industry: Manipur valley has a sizable potential for improving productivity of its agriculture, pisciculture and growing horticulture crops, as also for improvement of tsar industry, setting up of food processing industry, readymade garments and electronic/electric goods assembly factories. Upgradation of technology can give a substantial boost to the traditional handloom industry. Tourism is another sector that can give fillip to the economy.
