GENDER POLITICS: THE STRUGGLE FROM OUT AND FROM WITHIN

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ABSTRACT

It is not that we are undermining the women’s movement in Manipur. By Gender politics, we mean the political participation of women in their respective societies. There have been numerous socio-political movements around the world started by man and later joined by women, converting it into successful movements. However there will be very few examples across the globe about political movements which were organised and led by women.

We can never undermine the role taken by women in our society. Our society is a traditional society, governed by strict customary laws. Women are encouraged and appreciated for their social role. They are known for their fight for social justice and are honoured as human rights defenders. Despite all these facts, women’s political participation in this state is very low. Does this means that their fight is for justice only and equity _ aberrations?

Our women in present context need to start looking forward to the new emerging enterprising women and their political aspiration. They need to adopt a model. The paper will be an attempt to critically analyse the political nature of women in Manipur by providing a comparative analysis of some success stories of South African sisters in the post_ apartheid era.

Key words: - political participation, political movement, traditional society, equity, justice, fight, societies.
GENDER AND GENDER POLITICS IN MANIPUR

By the term ‘Gender Politics’, we mean the political behaviour of women, their participation as well as their disengagement from politics in their respective societies. By politics we mean the political activities of the individuals in their respective societies. If it means the activity of every individual, then why gender politics is to be focussed as a separate paradigm is the striking key note here. The statement connotes a well conceptual segregation between ‘sex and gender’. Sex is the biological factor of being male or female while gender is the matter of determining the social repercussion of being man or woman. Gender is the social creation of how we want to perceive females. History accepts the fact that there is/has always been an unequal segregated treatment between man and woman, where the later is ever subordinate to the former. Man is the ‘self’ and woman is the ‘other’. That may be the reason why we need to study gender politics as a separate field to be focussed. There have been numerous examples of socio-political movements around the world started by men and later joined by women, converting it into successful movements. However there will be few examples across the globe about political movements which were organised and led by women.

In our Manipur society, we can never undermine the role taken by women and their contributions to the society. We have a traditional society governed by strict customary laws. Women are encouraged and appreciated a lot for their social role. They are known in the history for their fight for social justice and are honoured as human rights defenders. They are famous for the two ‘Nupi Lal’ (women’s wars), ‘Ima Keithel’ (mother’s market) and ‘Meira Paibies’ (women torch bearers). Despite all these facts, women’s political participation in this state is very low. Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) scores of the states of the country has been analysed from 1996 to 2006 in the Summary Report of the ‘Gendering Human Development Indices’ by Ministry of Women And Child Development, Government of India. It was reported that in Manipur, women’s participation in Political Arena and Decision Making rate by 1996 was 0.585 while in 2006 was 0.498. In Economic Participation and Decision Making Power, it was 0.404 in 1996 and 0.336 in 2006. In Index of Power over Economic Resource, it was 0.151 in 1996 and 0.353 in 2006. While in the overall GEM score it was 0.380 in 1996 and 0.396 in 2006. It clearly shows that women’s developmental path in this state degenerated in all the paradoxes of social and political life except for the Power over Economic Resources. When the world is over the development talks with perspectives of Human Rights, political empowerment and economic development, why is our development only in the field of economic resources? Besides Kim Gangte, there has not been any woman M.P from this state in this long post independent tenure. “Sharmilla” the Iron Lady of Manipur is on indefinite fast since the last 14 years for the sake of people against atrocities faced by the people of this state. Women have been the mantle against the social injustices and have been playing a very decisive role in social injustices. Is it that women can take part in social processes but not in political decision making? Does this means that their fight is for justice only and equity-aberrations? To arrive at a better understanding, we need a comparative analysis of our society with a successful model at present by revisiting the past from the present context. African societies have striking similarities with societies in North Eastern states of India being societies...
bound by strict customary laws. Even our African Sisters will have many things to learn about social
leaderships from the Manipuri women, still Manipuri women will have many things to learn from the
African sisters.

MANIPURI WOMEN IN THE PAST AND THE PRESENT IN BRIEF

It is generally believed that the prevailing socio-cultural ideologies and the religious beliefs of a particular
society influences greatly the formation of the women’s self-image in which they were a part. Starting from
the myths till present, women have experienced constant appreciation by the roles they have played.
There are many important mythical women such as Imoinu, Panthoibi etc. Since the historical period the
role of the Meitei priestesses (Amaibi) in the ritual processes is worth mentioning. The ‘Amaibis’ or the
‘Maibies’ were considered to be endowed with supernatural powers, who could foretell one’s fortunes.
And the fortunes she forecasted were taken with seriousness in the traditional Manipuri society. She
performed several rituals connecting to the natural calamities, ‘pleasing of gods’ (Lai-Haraoba) ceremony
and many other personal superstitious functions. (Amal: 2010: pp87-88) She was the only reliable mediator
in the regeneration process of new-borns. The strict observances they followed in their life instigated a
sense of ‘sacred’ towards them. They were accorded high honour and respect in the society. In the
administrative sphere in ancient times, it had been only a woman who could convert a king’s death
sentence into a life sentence. Women’s issues were dealt separately in the women’s court called the
“paccha” during those days (Brara: 2008: 122). Even during the wars and catastrophes, women had been
the sole guardian of this society who was responsible for nurturing their children’s and state’s future.
In the social sphere, Manipuri women had been leading its way by igniting their collective spirits of
womanhood against any malpractices that hurt the ethos of people of this state. Their efforts may be best
described with the two ‘Nupi Lan’ or the women’s wars consecutively in 1904 and 1939. They foster and
keep alive that spirits of solidarity and let it burn bright in their hearts. They explore such a spirit during the
time of needs such as they took to streets demanding a responsible government and statehood during
1954 and 1959. During the 1975 various localities formed their Nisha Bandh associations with the sole
objective of controlling the consumption and sale of liquor. From 1980 onwards there has been a drastic
increase in the cases of human violations and other problems like HIV/AIDS in the society. As an active
response of the womenfolk to those inhuman acts, the Meira Paibies or the torch bearers emerged to
maintain a vigil against the repressive activities of the law enforcing agency(Gangte:2011:pp17-23). Since
then this organisation is responsible to fight against any major social issues. The Meira Paibi , along with an
equally impressive organisation called The Naga Mother’s Association of this state has been conferred ‘The
Times of India Social Impact Award’ for life time contribution as a cognizance to their social activities by
Times of India. They have gained National and International recognition and are referred to as the human
rights defenders of this state.

In the economic sphere, the contribution women have made and the status they have enjoyed had always
been the centre of admiration by the others. They have been actively engaging in many productive
activities like agriculture, animal husbandry, cottage industries, internal trade etc, besides compulsory
household chores. Rice is the main staple food of this state and there are many activities to be massively

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done by women only i.e. transplantation, weeding and harvesting (cutting down rice with sickles) etc. They are also engaged in rearing and caring livestock, weaving and most probably in local trade of household consumption. The *Ima Keithel* or the Mother’s Market is the prominent example of the economic role played by women in this state. It is the most important socialising agent for every women’s movement in Manipur. They not only contribute but also enjoy economic autonomy in the society and in the family to an extent. They have been inherited with active economic participation since the mythology. The active participation of women in the socio-economic and political realms of the life from the past to the present is evident with the presence of the *Ima Keithel* (Mother’s Market). Manipuri women have been enjoying a unique social status in the society. They have been playing roles in the governance, economy and civil society in the past.

There have been prominent women in all facets of life here in this state like cultural icons like Imoinu, Panthoibi, and Phouoibi etc, courageous queen like Linthoingambi, sports star like Kunjarani, Mary kom etc, revolutionary writers like Mk. Binodini, Pramodini, Thoibi devi etc, numerous social leaders and intellectuals. There are also few women politicians in the state legislative assembly. After the 73rd amendment, with its reservation policy women in rural areas have started entering politics at grass root level. And at present there are only three women MLAs at the state legislative assembly. Probably this is the present women’s political participation rate.

**AFRICAN WOMEN THAT SHAPED THE HISTORY**

Africa is a continent of International interest known for its backwardness and anti-apartheid movements across the globe. The plights of women of African societies in those days were beyond imagination. However they made remarkable progress in all the realms of socio-economic and political life in a short span. In the history of Africa, out of many, there were/is seven women icons that shaped history.

The first woman was Funmilayo Ransome Kuti-The Woman Activist. She started her movement years before the second wave of feminism began in the West. Her movement leads to the formation of The Abeokuta Women’s Union (AWU) and later Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF), organisations which attempt to promote women’s right to education, employment and to political participation. When the king wanted to impose tax on women, the AWU protested using the slogan ‘no taxation without representation’, citing that they were not the equal representatives of the society and the injustice must be rectified. Their actions lead to the abdication of the king.

The second woman was the Yaa Asantewa-The Commander in Chief. She is the leader of the Asante war against the British and became to known as the ‘Joan D’ Arc of Africa’ by the British. She is the best women in the African history known for her reactions and responses to European powers.

The third woman is Winnie Mandela-The President’s Wife. While Nelson Mandela is considered the hero of South African anti-apartheid movement politics, this woman played an equal role in the anti-apartheid campaign.
The fourth woman was Margaret Ekpo-The Fashionable Feminist. She combined the Western and Nigerian fashion influences. But in political activism she wear traditional clothes and plaited her hair leaving behind a legacy of ‘One Nigeria’, ‘Women in Politics’, ‘Women in Business and Leadership’ and ‘Emancipation for Women’.

The fifth woman was Miriam Makeba-The Mother of Africa. She was the empress of African songs and popularly known as Mama Africa. She was involved in radical activity against apartheid, civil rights movements and black power.

The sixth woman was Queen Nzinga-The reformist. She was an important queen who is known to have assigned important government offices in present day Angola. She organised a powerful guerrilla army, conquered her enemies and develop alliances to control slave routes. She negotiated with the Portuguese but refused to pay tribute.

The seventh woman was Ruth Williams, Lady Khama-The Reformist. She was the wife of Botswana’s first president. She was born in South East London and married to a Botswana man with much disapproval and embarrassment. She was a very politically active during her husband’s tenure. After her husband’s death, everybody was expecting that she would be back to London, but out of surprise, she became the president of the country’s Red Cross.

African Women in Politics at Present

African women have fascinatingly increased political participation since the mid 1990s. This continent has now become the leader in women’s political participation globally. Some African countries have the highest rates of women’s representation globally. Rwanda claims the world’s highest ratio of women in politics in 2003 with more than 64% women representatives, Senegal, Seychelles and South Africa 40% seats held by women. While in US women hold 18% in the House and 20% in the Senate. More women than men vote in South Arica. There are some reasons for the drastic increase of women’s political participation 1) The decline of conflict in Africa; 2)The expansion of civil liberties with the emergence of autonomous women’s movement and 3)Pressure from different actors including International, regional, national and state organisations that influences the state political activity and awareness. The fact is that their country follows a ‘fast track’ model with which the Nordic model is replaced. This leads to the dramatic jump in female parliamentary representation with the adoption of electoral quotas. With the surmountable similarities of the socio-cultural traditions of the Africa with our society, as being administered by the traditional laws, we may succeed in adopting and experimenting their model.

Conclusion: The Need to Adopt a Model

If women are not represented politically, their voices will not be heard and their interests are less likely to be advanced. It is not that we are undermining the women’s movement in Manipur, but what we need to do is to start looking forward into the new emerging, enterprising women and their political aspirations.
For this we need to adopt the African model of the African Sisters because even though there are several models to encourage the women’s political participation, their model is regarded as the most successful and accepted one. When their society was fighting for emancipation from the Whites and carrying out anti-apartheid movements, at the same time the women in their society evolved a change from within and broke the shell of tradition and transformed themselves as formidable heads of the state and other responsible positions. They follow the natural rule of hatching eggs that breaks from within and transform itself to a chick. Women in our state too, besides all socio-economic participations, they must start steps for political participation. This must be a step that should be spontaneously evolved from within the framework of the society. This will prevent the breaking of the eggs from outside where the yoke and the white spread but does not give a new life form. Our women have been fighting for justice since long time back in the history, so their steps for more political representation and political decision making must not sound as aberrations. To get a gendered dimension we need to bring changes from within. We need to change the patriarchal order and usher in egalitarianism. This exactly was the way what the African sisters did. Hence, the steps for more women representatives - struggle from within.

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