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# Indian Streams Research Journal

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## MEIRA PAIBIS: THE RISE OF WOMEN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' MOVEMENT IN THE STATE OF MANIPUR



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### ABSTRACT:

The role of women has changed dramatically within the last century. The changing role has influenced the actions of many women. Organization and mobilization of social movements, especially by women's organizations can be a challenge because of India's diversity. Women's movements have shaped much of the events and attitudes that have defined modern life. Nowadays, they do not raise only women's issues, but raise all others social issues such as peace, poverty, dowry, negligence to culture, language, violation of human rights etc. One such movement of extreme importance is the Women Civil Society Organization or Meira Paibis movement in Manipur. This

movement through these women organizations has its roots in the history of Manipur. On numerous occasions, womenfolk of Manipur stood against the strong forces including the mighty British Empire for the sake of sons of the soil.

These women groups in the form of 'Meira Paibi' in every locality of the state have been involved in protecting the youths from the commissions of the security personnel, in controlling drug abuse and alcoholics and in maintaining peace and order in the state. They have been protecting the society from various social evils by burning the midnight oil in local streets everywhere since decades back. Given this background, the paper aims to trace the origins of this significant movement by the women civil society organizations in the state of Manipur. The paper will also attempt to analyse and highlight the contribution made by these women organizations with reference to today's society in Manipur.



**KEY WORDS:** *Women; Civil Society Organization; Meira Paibi; Movement.*

#### INTRODUCTION:

The role of women has changed dramatically within the last century. The changing role has influenced the actions of many women. The women of northeast India and particularly of Manipur have been recognized as having a relatively high status in their communities and have witnessed the successful role of collective women's power in the past and also in the present day.

Manipur women's role in the social-economic and cultural life of Manipur is significant. Manipuri women do not stay behind the veil. They keep the family together and worked harder than men in running the many daily fish and vegetable markets across the state. In fact, they do all the buying and selling of goods in the market. Women dominate the markets in the rural and urban areas. They are greatly involved in the agricultural related activities. They are artistic and inventive which they have proven in the field of handloom and handicrafts and dance.

Another important sphere, which is in the limelight, is the political participation of women. The level of Manipuri women's political participation is not quite up to the mark. However, their participation in the local self-government is a positive signal for the success of democracy at the grass root level. This will bring a major thrust in the process of rural development and women empowerment.

Co-operative movement is another movement spearheaded by women for generating income. From the early days the Manipuri society has inbuilt system of socio-economic co-operation know as Marup which continues till now successfully throughout the state. Marup, a type of self help group, is a group of association of individual with common economic needs who undertake an economic activity by participating directly in decision making and sharing the benefits on an equitable basis. It strengthens the existing income generating activity of members and also helps the members to start a new activity of members. Manipur women have thus contributed immensely in the social –economic transformed and upliftment of the society.

#### Role of Women in Historical Struggle in Manipur

Women in Manipur have a long tradition of participation in public spheres. Unlike women in other parts of India, they are found to be independent, courageous, and assertive and react effectively against any wrong doings of the ruling authority.

The independent, assertive and courageous qualities of the ordinary common women might be due to many factors, the first is the nature of the political system of Manipur in the pre- British period. The king was engaged in most of the time in warfare with neighbouring chiefs and rulers, especially with the Burmese rulers. Adult male members of the families had to accompany the king in his warfare against the neighbouring rulers and in normal times they had to attend "military service or military training" in the palaces. As a result, male member of the families were not at home and women had to bear the responsibility of the maintenance of the families, thereby developing their skills capabilities, knowledge in all matter relating to family welfare.

From the very beginning the women of Manipur took very active role at every social issue, political issues. If we traced back we could see that there was a big agitation in the history of Manipur which was revolted by the women folk against the king and the colonial rules in the Manipur Kingdom. These women gallantly came out to fight for the nation during the two historic Nupi Lals (Women's War) in 1904 and in 1939 (Serram, 2012). By the time Manipur was ruled by British and many restriction were imposed on the Manipur King, forced labour were started, introduction of free trade especially rice, grains to outside markets led into hardship and starvation on people where the women suffered the most in maintaining their families and children. Gradually the agitation by women against the

colonial British repression and discrimination came into focus and expended in each and every corner of the kingdom.

Manipuri women then organized themselves and took upon the responsibility to control the rising disorder in the society. Beginning as a protest against price rise, the demand extended over to administrative reforms against the oppressive economic and administrative policies ruled by the Manipur Maharaja and the Political Agent—Mr Gimson—of the British Government (Mukherji, 2010). It also showed that political consciousness has grown in Manipur and the popular vigour which was heightened by the “Women war” or “Nupi Lan” began from 12th December 1939 and it threw up the question of introducing reforms in Manipur.

In both the women's war, the women of the region revolted against the repressive measures of British rule, but the history of females taking the lead — in matters concerning the economy, politics as well as the defence of their motherland — goes back even further, to the endless depredations over the centuries by their ancient Burmese neighbours. Each time, it had always been women who led from the front.

#### Women Civil Society Organizations' Movement (Meira Paibis) in Manipur

Meira Paibi, as the name stands today, originated as a mass social movement to prevent and control public disorder due to alcohol abuse in 1970s.

The middle of 1970's may be described as very important stage for the women of Manipur to come out from home and started a mass movement for the maintenance of social order and peace in Manipur. It was in 1975 that women in large numbers stated anti-liquor movement in urban as well as in rural areas when the peaceful social order in the localities was disturbed by the persons involved in selling and drinking of liquor. Women in the concerned localities gathered their strength and asserted their capabilities in checking and controlling the persons who were involved in the selling and drinking of liquor as well as those persons involved in the transaction of liquor business. The women in groups at this stage were known as Nisha Bandish and their organizations as Nisha bandh organizations.

But the actual trouble came in the 1980s when the army under *Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958* was called out in Manipur to curb the increasingly threatening insurgent movement in the state. This ACT legitimised full-scale military operations, permitting even a non-commissioned officer to kill anyone on mere suspicion with guaranteed immunity. In fact, the central forces brought their own problems with the coercive measures they adopted against the locals.

As a result there were large-scale deployment of security and Para-military forces. The innocent youths and women had suffered much at the hands of these security and Para-military forces. When civilians were affected resulting in the arresting and beating, killing, physical injury, disappearance of youths arrested by the security personnel, sexual abuse, etc. these women's group spontaneously start a movement in order to protect the innocent persons.

So, the women group's activities widened and this women's mass social movement came to be known as *Women Civil Society Organization or Meira Paibis movement in Manipur*. The movement spread in every nook and corner of Manipur's valley within short span of time and in the middle of 1990's even women of the hills of Manipur joined the movement in large numbers. The Meira Paibis stood against the oppression of the people of the state by Indian security forces under the draconian law of AFSPA.

When narcotics abuse, primarily heroin abuse and consequently public disorder and crimes dramatically increased a few years later, Meira Paibis took up this problem as well. At the superficial level of analysis, these problems were and are generally perceived even by Meira Paibi, as largely social

evils, requiring measures of social control, traditionally exercised by women.

#### What is Meira Paibis?

The name 'Meira Paibis' literally means Women Torch Bearers. *The use of Meira (torch) as a weapon symbolizes the declaration of a just war.* The use of fire- a sacred symbol of the Manipuris adds sanctity to the movement (Yenning, 2014). *Every woman in Manipur becomes a Meira Paibi during any difficult situation.*

These civil society organization is comprised of groups of women's' organizations working in the interest of the citizens but operating outside the governmental sector. They are groups of like-minded women, philanthropic in nature with no formal sources of funding. Their work reflects that they are instrumental in bringing about social change, through social advocacy and social action (Lalzo.S, 2013). *These women organizations are not controlled by the government and they assist people without charging any fees. Their area of operation is infinite.* They look after cases and tiny as household quarrels to big ones as issues of regional security like ILP (Inner Line Permit), ceasefire etc.

It is one of the largest women's groups with the entire adult Meitei female population as its members. They are also referred as "*Imas*" meaning Mothers in Manipuri language, as most of the participants are women in the age category of 50 – 75 years. These women have emerged to save their children, at the initial times, it consist only of mothers, gradually now even young woman married and unmarried women are also a part of this movement . Regardless of age or reproductive status whoever go out for the movement they are entitled as Imas, so now they are known as "*Ima Meira Paibis*".

Within the umbrella of the Meira Paibis, the womenfolk stood together to fight against like Alcoholism, Drug Abuse etc., where the use of these was considered fashionable. They are present in almost all the locality in Manipur. After the success stories are learnt from certain localities, it mushroomed all over the state. These women started forming groups and doing night vigils/ patrols in their respective locality with an objective of controlling the social evils and rising disorder in the society. *In case of any danger, the women picked up a stone and clang it against the nearest lamp post like a bell. This is a signal for all the women and men in the vicinity to come out their houses.*

The Meira Paibis are also becoming more and more organised and not merely voicing their spontaneous reaction to injustice. *They have very successfully created a space for women to come out in public.* At present, they are playing crucial roles in resolving family conflicts, in checking and controlling in moral traffic, in arresting and handling over the person involved in drug trafficking, illegal and immoral relationship between man and women, land disputes between neighbours, theft, threat from militants for extortion, elopement case etc. Whenever there is any social issue affecting the interest of the people, the Meira Paibis in large numbers participate in dharnas, sit in protest, rallies, demonstrations, etc organized from time to time.

The contribution made by these women organization (Meira Paibis) to society is huge. They supplement the police force from within. They have greatly reduced anti-social activities in Manipur, thus solving off the burden from the law enforcers of the state to great extent. They also discourage prospective criminals. A person would think twice before committing a crime than to be ostracised by society. This woman groups act as a deterrent force in the State of Manipur, which nobody would dare to invade. They are not typical/regular organizations with stylish goals and objectives. Their reason for operation in the society is clear and simple, to promote healthy living habits and to protect the society from any untoward social evils.



## CONCLUSION

It is thus seen that these women civil society organizations are group of women who are engaged in informal law enforcement activities. This has been continuing till today taking different forms and in different situations but always fighting for civilian's right and protection and trying to bring law and order in the society. These women cannot tolerate any kind of injustice and violence whether it is committed by the state authority or insurgents. These women are quick to point out that they are mothers, sisters and wives. And as such, if there is anything predictable about them is that they cannot remain indifferent when the safety and the human rights of their social members get seriously endangered (Kipgen, 2010).

The name Meira Paibis bears a positive and constructive sense in the minds of the common people in solving any conflicts and ultimately believed that justice will be delivered. They are trusted with the most confidential and delicate matters, because they don't come under the preview of national laws. *Being flexible and not having a rigid structure they are able to take up any issue which pertains to the community. This also makes the Meira Paibis not a group confined to agitating on strictly women's issues. They solely exist for the people of the State of Manipur and their existence in the society has become inevitable as people have bestowed their trust upon them.*

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