



Irom Sharmila's Protest Fast: 'Women's Wars', Gandhian Non-Violence And Anti-Militarisation Struggles

Deepti Priya Mehrotra

Abstract

This paper explores contemporary politics of resistance and peace-building in north-eastern India, specifically the state of Manipur. Through the lens of the ongoing indefinite fast by Irom Sharmila, the paper seeks to understand the roots of civilian discontent and possibilities of resistance. The paper places Irom's protest in terms of unique histories of women's movements in Manipur, and examines her location vis-à-vis the theory and practice of Gandhian non-violence. Against the background of spiraling violence fuelled by militarization and insurgencies, Irom Sharmila's stance articulates the popular demands for justice, peace and human rights, and poses a challenge to statist paradigms of development, nationalism and national security.

Author Profile

Deepti Priya Mehrotra is an independent writer and thinker. Among her recent publications are *Burning Bright: Irom Sharmila and the Struggle for Peace in Manipur* (Penguin, 2009) and *Irom Sharmila aur Manipuri Janta ki Saahas Yatra* (in Hindi, Daanish, 2010). Other books include *A Passion for Freedom: the Story of Kisanin Jaggi Devi* and *Home Truths: Stories of Single Mothers*. She teaches as visiting faculty at Lady Shri Ram College and Ambedkar University, Delhi, and is engaged in research and activism in education, human rights and gender issues.

In India's north-eastern state of Manipur, one woman has engaged in nine years of non-violent struggle, against militarization and the violence that is ravaging her homeland. Irom Sharmila has been fasting for repeal of a specific law that grants special powers to military and para-military forces, enforced throughout virtually the entire state since 1980.

Irom Sharmila began her fast after Assam Rifles personnel shot dead ten ordinary persons standing at a village bus-stop, on 2nd November 2000. This was not the first such atrocity: protected by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), "Indian security forces have repeatedly committed human rights violations and brutal atrocities.... Over the decades, they have committed murders and rapes, destroyed dwellings, subjected people to arbitrary arrests, and humiliated people."¹

After she sat on fast at Malom village (site of the 2nd November killings), countless citizens, women's groups and human rights workers expressed solidarity with her cause; many of them had been struggling against AFSPA over the years. The official reaction has been to arrest and jail her for a spurious crime: 'attempt to suicide'. Through most of the past nine years, she has been in judicial custody. The state keeps her alive through force-feeding, but has so far failed to negotiate on the issues she is raising.

Here we explore Irom Sharmila's protest in the context of women's activism in Manipur, and the theory and practice of non-violence. The paper places her specifically in terms of the history, and contemporary politics, of women's resistance movements in Manipur, including the two Nupilans (Women's Wars) against colonial exploitation. It also examines her location vis-à-vis Gandhian non-violence, satyagraha and civil disobedience.

Section I

Women's Resistance and Protest Movements in Manipur

Manipur has a rich history of people's struggles, with women at the forefront. Working-class women have formed the backbone of many movements in the

¹ Kranti Kumar , "India: Popular Agitation Against Army Atrocities Engulfs the Northeast State of Manipur", *World Socialist Website*, September 15, 2004. Also Kavita Joshi's documentary film, *Tales from the Margins*, 2006; and CNN-IBN documentary, *True Lies*, 2009. Local newspapers *The Sangei Times* and *Imphal Free Press*, and the website <http://www.epao.net> provide coverage to many of these atrocities.

state - including the contemporary struggles against militarization and state violence.

Over the centuries, women have held a central position in management of household and agricultural economy, as well as trade.² However, they have been oppressed by patriarchal social customs, operating within the family and personal domain. During the past decades, sex ratio, livelihoods and health status has been declining, along with increased trafficking, rape, dowry and related crimes against women. Yet, women continue to play prominent roles in the articulation of public protest, individually and in the collective: "The ancient and medieval period of folk oral literature of Manipuri language was the literature of protest. The protagonist was always a woman . . . The nucleus of female power in the group form is intact [even today]."³

This spirit of female resistance is prominent in everyday life. Particularly within families, especially working class families, caring and mutually respectful bonds exist between women, forming a strong base, facilitating participation in wider public struggles. Irom Sharmila's emergence in public life is a case in point.

Within the Family: Caring and Inspiration

Born on 14th March 1972, Irom Sharmila was the youngest of nine children. Her family is Meitei, the majority ethnic community of Manipur. The family home is in Kongpal Kongkham Leikai (village) at the edge of Imphal city. She grew up in a family which cultivated paddy; women also wove cloth and grew vegetables. Belonging to a working class family, close to nature, with strong cultural roots, local wisdom, and a tradition of respect for women, has been important in shaping her persona, and subsequent politics. Since childhood, she has been connected to material grassroots realities, as well as a bedrock of warm human relationships. This has shaped her perceptions, and the fact that her basic aspirations are articulated in terms of the common good, rather than individualistic goals. Experiencing strong bonds within a wide family, neighbourhood and community, she has tended to develop an inclusive politics. Early in life, she experienced hardship, and developed resilience, as well as trust in human ability to endure, and prevail. Her mother Shakhi Devi was forty-four

² Chungkham Sheelaramani, "Gender Construction in the Meitei Society," *Quarterly Journal 23, Manipuri Women on A New Role*, (February 2007): 34-44. Published by Manipur State Kala Akademi at Imphal; and Narorem Sanjaoba, ed., *Manipur Past and Present—The Ordeals and Heritage of A Civilisation* (New Delhi: Mittal, 1991).

³ Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi, "The Indigenous Meitei Women," *Quarterly Journal 23, Manipuri Women on A New Role*, (February 2007): 1-18. Published by Manipur State Kala Akademi, at Imphal.

years old when she gave birth; she nurtured the growing child with cow's milk, rice gruel, fish and vegetable curries. In 1989, when Sharmila was still in school, her father Nanda Singh, who had worked in the government's Veterinary Department, contracted blood cancer, and passed away.

After completing school, Sharmila joined a course in journalism in the early '90s, began writing articles and poetry, and worked with social organizations like the Blind School for Children, and Universal Youth Development Council. She attended seminars and workshops, coming close to several women's organizations. In 1998 she attended a course in nature cure and yoga. In October 2000, she took up a month-long internship with Human Rights Alert, a human rights organization, to help conduct an 'Independent People's Inquiry into the Impact of AFSPA in Manipur'. Commission members made field visits during 21-26 October, gathering testimonies of victims of human rights violation.⁴

This internship brought Irom Sharmila close to the situation of many victims of violence, providing impetus for her subsequent decision to go on indefinite fast. She took the decision unilaterally, and sought her mother's blessings without disclosing the specific plan, simply saying: "Ima, I am going to do something for the whole nation....." Shakhi Devi gave her blessings, with implicit trust.

By tacit agreement, Shakhi Devi and Sharmila have not met since then. Sharmila explains, "Although she is illiterate, and very simple, she has the courage to let me do my bounden duty.... There is an understanding between us: that she will meet me only after I have fulfilled my mission." Both realize that Shakhi Devi may be unable to bear the sight of her daughter's suffering, and Sharmila in turn may be unable to bear her mother's suffering. Shakhi Devi says, "Sometimes, when I think of her... I feel I will go mad."⁵ For her part, Sharmila says, "When the Armed Forces Special Powers Act is withdrawn, I will eat. I will break my fast by eating rice gruel from my mother's hands."

*

Another woman in her family played a decisive role in shaping Sharmila's consciousness: her paternal grandmother, Irom Tonsija Devi. "Whatever we have learnt, we have learnt from our grandmother," exclaimed Sharmila's brother, Irom Singhjit, one day. "...Sharmila's strength is from our grandmother."⁶ Tonsija Devi (1903-2008) carried memories of people's resistance to imperialism, as fresh as if the events had occurred yesterday. She herself participated in the

⁴ The Inquiry Commission team comprised Justice H. Suresh (retired, Bombay High Court), Colin Gonsalves, Supreme Court advocate and Director of Human Rights Law Network (HRLN), New Delhi, and Preeti Verma, senior lawyer with the same organization.

⁵ Irom Shakhi Devi, Interview, Kongphal Kongkhom Leikei, Imphal, April 2007

⁶ Irom Singhjit, Interview, New Delhi, February 2007

Second Nupilan or Women's War of 1939, a major anti-colonial struggle. She was born into an ordinary working class family living in Shinzamai Bazar, Imphal. Since 1891, Manipur was a princely state under British suzerainty.

I meet Tonsija Devi, aged 104, in April 2007. When I ask her whether she recalls the Second Nupilan, she narrates, "The price of paddy was 25 paise for about 30 kilos. All of a sudden the price rose to 3 or 4 rupees. It became impossible for people to buy rice. Rice was sent out of Manipur, while people were starving. Women streamed in from all sides—all the women of Manipur. I was there. We spent days outside the Durbar, and finally we won. The Maharaja ordered the price of paddy to be brought down. So we could all eat, and live as before." ⁷

Tonsija Devi's account is confirmed by history books, which provide detailed studies of the two Nupilans. Since early childhood, Sharmila was very close to her grandmother. Surely, a line of influence existed, conveying the spirit of resistance, across the generations.

Nupilans (Women's Wars) and other anti-colonial struggles

Ordinary women of Manipur had a right to collectively present grievances to the king. In response to women's demand, a king sometimes granted reprieve to a person sentenced to death⁸—a right to clemency probably unique among the peoples of the world. Women often used their right of appeal to correct state policies.⁹

In 1891, the British sentenced two leaders, Bir Tikendrajit and Thangal General, to death. On 13th August 1891, the day scheduled for the execution, 6000 women gathered at Mapal Kangjeibung, the public grounds in Imphal, and appealed for forgiveness. Although British governors were aware of women's special right to plead for clemency, the two leaders were executed at the gallows.

People were angry at loss of sovereignty, the execution of beloved heroes, and imposition of an alien judicial and administrative system. In 1904, women fought the *First Nupilan*. Government issued an order for Manipuri men to go to Kabow, cut timber and rebuild colonial offices and bungalows, which had been burnt down by anonymous persons. Thousands of women demonstrated in Imphal, demanding withdrawal of this order for forced labour. Women vendors led the

⁷ Irom Tonsija Devi, Interview Kongphal Konghkhom Leikei, Imphal, April 2007; interpreters Irom Manglem Singh and Irom Singhjit

⁸ Manjusri Chaki-Sircar, *Feminism in a Traditional Society*, (New Delhi: Shakti Books, 1984) 26.

⁹ Bimola Devi, 'The Changing Role of Manipuri Women' in *Quarterly Journal*, *ibid*, 19-31.

movement, including Sanajaobi Devi, Leishangthem Kethabi, Dhaballi Devi and Laishram Ningol Jubati Devi. The British tried to quell the agitation, summoning army reinforcements from neighbouring areas, but finally had to withdraw the order.

Meiteis in Imphal valley, and Naga and Kuki-Chin ethnic communities residing in the hill areas of Manipur, rebelled against colonial policies. In 1917–19, Kukis rebelled against forced labour recruitment. The Bazaar Boycott Agitation, 1920–21, was followed by the Water Tax Agitation, 1925–32, and the Zaliangrong Movement. In the mid-1920s, a movement in Tamenglong district mobilised people towards Naga unity, against unjust laws, compulsory portage and exorbitant house tax. Gaidinlieu, a thirteen-year old girl of Ningkhao village, joined the movement in 1928, and took over leadership after the British executed the leader, Jadonang, in 1931. British forces captured her in October 1932 and sentenced her to life imprisonment. She spent most of her life in prison, in the Mizo hills and Meghalaya. After 1947, she spent her last years in exile in Nagaland.¹⁰

The Second Nupilan took place in response to artificial famine, created by the British policy of exporting paddy which, coupled with hoarding and excessive rain in 1939, led to severe shortages. Women petitioned the British Political Agent for a ban on rice export. In December 1939, a women's delegation confronted the President of Manipur State Durbar, T.A. Sharpe, and forced him to send a telegram to the Maharaja, who was out of Manipur. Leaders Chaobiton Devi, Ibemhal Devi, Tongou Devi and others sat inside the Telegraph Office, while thousands stood vigil outside. By evening, 4000 agitators surrounded the Telegraph Office. Policemen and sepoy's attacked the women, about thirty of whom sustained injuries inflicted by batons and bayonets. On 13th December, the Maharaja sent a telegram ordering immediate ban on export of rice, signalling a major victory for the people.

In 1949, Manipur was merged with the Indian union, as a Part 'C' state, creating widespread discontentment. People struggled for recognition as a full-fledged state, while some kept up a demand for self-determination.

¹⁰ When Jawaharlal Nehru visited Shillong in 1937, he met Gaidinlieu in jail and gave her the title 'Rani'. She was imprisoned up to 1947, but even the Indian government did not permit her return to Manipur. She was awarded a pension and kept in Makokchung, Nagaland. Belatedly, in 1972, she was awarded a freedom fighter award, and in 1987 a Padma Bhushan.

Meira Paibis And Anti-Militarisation Struggles: 1980 Onwards

Despite becoming a full-fledged state in 1972, life hardly improved for the people of Manipur. In the 1970s women organized themselves as a force against government policy of liberally licensing liquor vends. They formed 'Nisha Bandh' or anti-alcoholism groups, in different parts of Manipur. Walking in groups at night, they carried torches or lanterns, caught drunken persons, and imposed fines. They raided liquor vends and set fire to alcohol supplies.

From 1980 onwards, these women's groups, dubbed Meira Paibis (literally, women who carry flaming torches) increasingly took up issues related to militarization and military excesses. By this time, insurgency had proliferated. Forced merger with the Indian union in 1949, poverty, unemployment, poor governance and chronic neglect of Manipur by the Centre, drew supporters to the insurgents' side. The state sent in security forces, with a mandate to capture insurgents. Many innocent young men, who had no links with insurgency, were also picked up by security forces, and sometimes arrested and tortured.¹¹ In May 1980, Chief Minister Dorendro Singh announced that due to deteriorating law and order, he was declaring Manipur a Disturbed Area. Simultaneously, AFSPA was promulgated.

On 14 May 1980, women submitted a memorandum to the chief minister demanding removal of the Disturbed Area clause, and revocation of AFSPA. They held a mass meeting at Mapal Kangjeibung, and formed an organisation called Manipur Nupi Kanglup (MNK). MNK organized a rally on 28 May, at which some 10,000 women gathered, defying a ban on mass meetings.

Meira Paibis patrolled at night to safeguard their communities against search operations by security forces. They set up shelters, called Meira Shanglens, in their localities. Over the years, virtually every community in Manipur developed a strong women's front - for instance the Tangkhul Shanao Lung, Naga Mother's Association, Kuki Women's Association, Lamkang Women's Union, Mayan Women's Union, Chothe Women's Union, Naga Women's Union. These groups became well known as active guardians of their communities, and campaigners for women's rights.

¹¹ Ramani Devi, in Gunjan Veda, *Tailoring Peace: The Citizens' Roundtable on Manipur and Beyond*, (Guwahati: North-East Network, 2005), 32-33.

On 11-12 July 2004, Assam Rifles personnel brutally raped and murdered Ms Thangjam Manorama, a young woman of Bamon Kampu.¹² On 15th July, Meira Paibis staged a dramatic protest against this rape.¹³ Twelve elderly activists disrobed in public, outside Kangla Fort, the compound within which Assam Rifles regiments were stationed. The activists carried a long white banner bearing the slogan – *INDIAN ARMY, RAPE US*, and shouted, 'Rape Us, Kill Us, Take Our Flesh'. Meira Paibis explain that often in the past, women have been raped by armed forces in front of family members.¹⁴ Ima Gyaneswari felt that it was a do-or-die situation for Manipuri women. ¹⁵ Loitam Ibetombi Devi explained: "Our humiliation was beyond endurance." Another noted, "We have nothing to do with underground organisations. Our struggle is to protect people caught in the crossfire between militants and security forces..."¹⁶ They risked social stigma: for instance, a literateur commented that he is "sceptical about the moral justifiability of the act".¹⁷ However, most people appreciated their action. Elderly women per se, and elderly women activists especially, are generally held in high regard in Manipur. Elderly women are universally addressed as 'Ima', literally mother. As Seram Rojesh, a young research scholar and activist, commented, "Today Manipur is alive only because of its Imas". Elderly Meira Paibi activists are popularly perceived as the ones who care, nurture and actively protect the people and the land of Manipur. Motherhood is symbolically associated, in this politico-cultural complex, with an autonomous, pro-people activism.

The Imas' nude protest captured headlines, forcing a response from the state. Sriprakash Jaiswal, Union Minister of State for Home, promised to set afoot a high-level review of AFSPA. The Justice Jeevan Reddy Committee was subsequently set up. However, its recommendation – that AFSPA be repealed – has not been implemented.

Through their action, women transformed themselves from total victims to determined survivors. Their 'ritual of inversion' enabled them to dilute the impact of power and even, momentarily, turn power relations upside down.

¹² 'The Merciless Killing of Thangjam Manorama, worldpress.org, 23 July.2004

¹³ The Meira Paibi nude protest against rape by state functionaries has been analysed by the author, in detail in Deepti Priya Mehrotra, *Burning Bright: Irom Sharmila and the Struggle for Peace in Manipur*, (New Delhi: Penguin, 2009), 89-103.

¹⁴ Gunjan Veda, *ibid.* 33-34.

¹⁵ Teresa Rehman, "Who is Ima Gyaneswari?," in *Infochange Agenda: Reporting Conflict*, Issue 14, (2009): 32-33.

¹⁶ Khelen Thokchom, "She Stoops to Conquer," *The Telegraph*, 25 July.2004, cited in Khelena Gurumayum, *The Role of Manipuri Women in Crisis Management during the Extension of Ceasefire between the Government of India and NSCN-IM without Territorial Limits* (New Delhi: WISCOMP, 2007), 40.

¹⁷ Ng. Ibodon, "Manipuri Women Today: A Conversation," *Quarterly Journal*, *ibid.*, 95-104. .

They put the state on the defensive. Through symbolically enacting collective power, it became possible to gain new perspectives and imagine an enduring struggle that would confront and transform abuse.¹⁸ They inverted the usual patriarchal association of dishonour with women's violated bodies. Rejecting the masculinist definition and appropriation of women's bodies, they moved into a different paradigm, wherein the body is understood as a woman's means of expression—of dissent, anger, fearlessness. They converted vulnerability into strength, reminiscent of Sabitri Heisnam's theatrical representation of Draupadi, in Manipuri director H. Kanhailal's play *Draupadi*, in which the protagonist discards all her clothes one by one, screaming out her protest to the men who are her rapists.¹⁹ For this Draupadi, as for the Meira Paibi nude protesters, protest becomes a site for a woman to establish the right to control her body and its symbolic potential, investing her body with her own meanings. The protesters reclaimed their agency and identity as thinking, articulate subjects.

Irom Sharmila: The Power Of One, Related To Many

When we place Irom Sharmila in the context of women's activism in Manipur, we recognize her as one point in a continuum. This point is unique: her struggle is unique. At the same time, it is part of a tradition of struggle, of determined dissent. Her individual self is linked integrally to a collectivity. Her struggle is a lone one, yet it emerges from a context of shared convictions; she enjoys the support of many.

Like the twelve Imas, Irom Sharmila reclaims her body: as a means through which to express her agency, ideas, emotions and values. Asserting her right to deploy her body as she sees fit, she has inverted the norm—of eating. Eating daily meals is so basic to human beings, and such a central ritual of human society, that refusal to do so strikes a blow to the whole system. She is enacting, over nine years now, her very own ritual of inversion: original, dramatic and uncompromising. Through this, she has created her own meanings, her own interpretations, reclaiming her right to self-definition. At the same time, her interpretations are accessible to the wider community, and are intended to be meaningful for humanity at large.

She says, "I am not a spirit. I have a body. It has a metabolism." Any harm her body may incur is, in her view, inconsequential. As she puts it, "I have no other

¹⁸ Lisa Schirch, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2005) has an interesting discussion on the use and importance of symbolic and ritual action by peace-builders.

¹⁹ Trina Nileena Banerjee, "Written on the Body", *infochange news and features*, February 2006, <http://infochangeindia.org/200602165625/Agenda/Claiming-Sexual-Rights-In-India/Written-on-the-body.html>

power. I do not have economic power, or political power. I have only my self.... This is the only way I have to get my voice heard."²⁰

Here is a person exercising her right over her body, and her actions. In fasting without end, she has redefined normality: and communicates her message in no uncertain terms. We understand that this person refuses to be quiescent while injustice and violence rage all around. She speaks out resistance, literally through every pore of her being. She asserts that it is *not* normal for armed, uniformed men, representing a democratic state, to violate citizens with impunity; nor is it normal to be apathetic and look the other way, pretending all is well, when such violence rages in one's homeland.

In judicial custody year after year, she hasn't allowed anybody to make her taste a morsel of food, or indeed a drop of water. She submits to the tough and uncomfortable regime of the plastic tube. When others express concern about the effect on her physical health, she says, "That doesn't matter. We are all mortal." She practices yoga for several hours a day, and walks in the hospital corridor. Exceptionally close to nature, the work with her body is in harmony with natural rhythms, has ensured her survival and indeed, fairly good health (considering the circumstances).

Reclaiming agency through her self-chosen fast, Irom Sharmila transfigures herself "in the domain of collective suffering", telling "a story of suffering in me for the other". As Sukalpa Bhattacharjee points out, the body here plays a multi-dimensional role. Her body in hospital-prison, incarcerated and monitored, is a "social body that now belongs to the domain of every other suffering self in which Sharmila can participate."²¹ Staying alive in an active, performative mode, she has turned her body into a site for "writing her protest", affirming subjectivity and posing a moral threat to statist power.

Section II

Non-violence, Satyagraha and Civil Disobedience

Most protesters fast only for strategic ends, using this method as a tactical tool.²² For others, like Irom Sharmila, fasting is an act of 'philosophical non-violence'. It is a means of non-violent expression which trains one's own self, and aims to

²⁰ Irom Sharmila, Interview, New Delhi, December 2006

²¹ Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, "Gendered Constructions of Identity in Northeast India," *Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 5, Issues II and III, July-Dec (2008) on "Gender Studies in the Northeast," 104-114.

²² Gene Sharp, *There Are Realistic Alternatives*, (Boston: Albert Einstein Institute, 2003) 39-48.

teach the 'opponent', bringing about a change of heart, a conversion in beliefs, convictions and behaviour.

Sharmila often refers to her fast as 'spiritual'. She accepts and adapts to suffering, deprivation and pain. She claims it is not very hard, since she is doing exactly what she has chosen to—her unique task in the world. As she puts it, "...**How shall I explain it, we all come here with a task to do. And we come here alone.**" An involved political actor, her task-in-the-world involves influencing and changing people, society and politics.

She sees herself as a symbol of justice, a rational being representing universal truth. Gandhi's struggle for swaraj, while aiming to establish self-rule, was also a quest for universal truth—a search for the underlying commonality that unites human beings.²³ The underlying rationale behind Gandhi's frequent fasts, which were part of his life-long 'experiments with truth', was an aspiration to control the senses and emotions, rather than be controlled by them; simultaneously, they were meant to have a beneficial impact upon other people, thus vitally affecting society and polity.

Irom Sharmila's fast is of course political, but at the same time is rooted in her spiritual quest. She says, trying to translate into mundane language the deeper mainsprings of her actions, "I have not succeeded so far in my aim. It means that I have to purify myself. God is experimenting with me.... I have to cleanse myself first."²⁴

Gandhi identified certain 'vratas' or vows as integral to a non-violent social order. These include ahimsa (non-violence), satya (truth), asteya (refrain from stealing), brahmacharya (celibacy or restraint), asanagraha (non-accumulation), aswad (control of the palate), abhaya (fearlessness) and sarvadharmasambhava (love for all religions).²⁵ Irom Sharmila is living most of these precepts. In particular, she practices aswad—the use of food as a means of sustenance, not for gratification of the taste buds. She demonstrates abhaya, absence of fear of anything, including physical harm or death.

²³ Thomas Pantham, "Post-Relativism in Emancipatory Thought: Gandhi's Swaraj and Satyagraha," in *The Multiverse of Democracy*, ed. D.L. Sheth and Ashish Nandy (New Delhi: Sage, 1996), 210-229.

²⁴ Irom Sharmila, February 2007, New Delhi.

²⁵ L.M. Bhole, "The Gandhian Model of Nonviolent Social Order", in *Nonviolence: Contemporary Issues and Challenges*, ed. Mahendra Kumar, (New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1994), 273-283.

People sometimes remark that rather than 'languish' in jail, Irom Sharmila should give up her fast, and join the 'active struggle for change'. We recall the Gandhian claim that non-violence is an active force, not passive: active even when we sleep, for it works through the human heart. It is the law of humanity, just as violence is the law of the brute. Non-violence is a weapon of the strong. It implies an ethical choice, balanced against expediency. Most practitioners of non-violence could access other means, including brute force. Yet they consciously reject the option, and strive to attain non-violence, a perfection involving great discipline. As Gandhi put it, "*One person who can express ahimsa in life exercises a force superior to all the forces of brutality.*"²⁶

Irom Sharmila is basically a law-abiding citizen—akin to Gandhi, Thoreau, Martin Luther King or Ung Saan Suu Kyi. Satyagraha, non-cooperation and civil disobedience are based on the logic that if rulers are unjust, citizenry can—and in fact, should—refuse to cooperate. While satyagraha implies resistance to injustice by the force of Truth, non-cooperation is refusal to fit into an unjust system; and civil disobedience is the active and open defiance of unjust state laws.

Civil disobedience comes into play after authorities fail to respond to people's appeals, petitions and memoranda. Involving principled resistance to the wrongdoing of those in power, it is integral to the process of fully establishing and upholding a democracy. So long as practitioners of civil disobedience are non-violent, and willing to pay the penalty when they violate an unjust law, they are abiding by the country's Constitution. Their violation of the law is specific, limited, and deliberately designed to achieve a higher aim: significant improvements in laws, policies and politics of the nation.

Irom Sharmila is a practitioner of non-cooperation and, indeed, civil disobedience, for she is openly breaking one law, even as she protests for the withdrawal of another. In following the dictates of her conscience, she has become an 'outlaw'. While the authorities treat her fast as an infringement of law, she perceives AFSPA to be infringing a higher law.

By disobeying unjust laws, conscientious objectors expose such laws to public scrutiny. Thoreau saw principled resistance as a duty of the righteous citizen: "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also in prison."²⁷

²⁶ M.K. Gandhi, "A Talk on Non-violence," Harijan, (14 March 1936), M.K. Gandhi, *Non-violence in Peace and War*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1942), 154-157.

²⁷ Henry David Thoreau, cited in J.B. Kripalani, "Civil Disobedience," in *Facets of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol I: Non-violence and Satyagraha*, eds. S. Mukherjee and S. Ramaswamy, (New Delhi: Deep and Deep, 1994), 63-73.

Socrates violated the law when he taught young people to think for themselves, and ask questions. The state arrested, jailed, and sentenced him to death. Although associates urged him to escape, he accepted punishment, drinking the cup of hemlock with equanimity. He died, yet his voice was not silenced. In Platonic dialogues, Socrates argues that although he seems to break the law, in reality he is obeying a higher law, that of his conscience.

Aung San Suu Kyi speaks of fearlessness, and the "supremacy of moral force over force based on the might of arms and empire"²⁸. Although Suu Kyi's party won national elections in 1988, the military regime keeps her in isolation, and crushes dissent. Yet in September 2007, Buddhist monks broke the deadly silence and led over 100,000 people in peaceful street protests. The junta cracked down on monks and lay activists, but worldwide, governments spoke out, asking Myanmar to democratize its institutions.

Clearly, non-violence is not ineffective. Nor is it a weapon of the weak: rather, it is a weapon used by "the stoutest hearts".²⁹

Irom Sharmila adds, about the future: "I do have hope. My stand is for the sake of truth, and I believe truth succeeds eventually. God gives me courage. That is why I am still alive through these artificial means...."³⁰

Means and Ends: Vision of a just and peaceful social order

Irom Sharmila's anti-AFSPA stand draws critical attention not only to the need to protect our democratic rights and civil liberties, but also, at the same time, to devise alternative developmental paths - emphasizing dignified livelihoods for all, environmental protection, cultural integrity, and plurality. Underlying is the urge towards transformation in political thinking, policy and approach. She notes, "In Manipur there is no development. There is no industry. Everything is imported. Earlier we had rice in plenty, but now we do not grow enough for our needs. There are no jobs. For any job, a large bribe has to be paid. My campaign is for the right kind of development. The politicians are not thinking of

²⁸ Aung San Suu Kyi, "May We Go Forward in Disciplined Strength," speech delivered on 10 February 1995.

²⁹ M.K. Gandhi, "Theory and Practice of Non-violence," *Young India*, 31.12.1931, in M.K. Gandhi, *Non-violence in Peace and War*, ibid, 148-153.

³⁰ Irom Sharmila interviewed by Kavita Joshi, September 2005. Quoted by Kavita Joshi, "My Fasting is a Means; I Have No Other", in *Infochange India News and Features*, November 2006.

development. They are very corrupt. When I thought of taking this step, it was to change the trend in politics...."³¹

Her stand against AFSPA is also a direct challenge to patriarchal ideology, which normalizes high levels of violence against women. This ideology flows into hyper-masculinist, militaristic mentality, which glorifies practices associated with war and military. When soldiers rape 'the enemy's women', it is valorised as the ultimate victory. Armed forces deployed in the North-East use violence and abuse as weapons of control, symbols of humiliation and threat to local communities.³² In Manipur, use of violence is justified and glorified by the state as well as by several insurgent groups; today there are over thirty underground groups, with armed militias. 'Counter-insurgency' laws like AFSPA have actually resulted in a multiplication of insurgent underground groups, and their increasing adoption of violent methods.

Irom Sharmila's response to the escalating violence is a determined non-violent protest. Rather than take up arms, she is simply taking an unshakeable stand, and through it, helping build up **solidarity**: the power of the powerless.

Nationally and internationally, Irom Sharmila has been hailed as a defender of human rights. The National Alliance of People's Movements, a network of over 200 movement groups in India, has extended support to her cause. In March 2007, the United Nations Committee for Elimination of Racial Discrimination advocated that the "draconian" legislation of 1958 be replaced with "a more humane act". The United Nations Human Rights Committee has noted that AFSPA is incompatible with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by India in 1979. In May 2007, citizens of Gwangju, South Korea, awarded Irom Sharmila the Gwangju Human Rights Award. She used the prize money to set up a foundation for peacebuilding work, called 'Just Peace Foundation'.

At the local level, alongwith Meira Paibis and Apunba Lup, a network of thirty-two civil service organisations, Irom Sharmila is at the centre of people's movements for peace and justice. On 10th December 2008, International Human Rights Day, Manipuri women began a continuous relay hunger strike in Imphal, rallying around the slogan, 'Save Sharmila, Repeal AFSPA', coordinated by 'Sharmila Kanba Lup' (Save Sharmila campaign).

³¹ Irom Sharmila, Interviews, 7 November 2006, New Delhi.

³² Anuradha Chenoy, "Militarisation, Conflict and Women in South Asia," in *Women and War Reader*, ed. Lois Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 101-110.

On 7th March 2009, when Irom Sharmila was released, Meira Paibis and others received her, and an emotional Sharmila said, "I come back to the arms of my mothers, the mothers of Manipur." Elderly Meira Paibi leaders such as Ima Ramani, Ima Mongol, Ima Taruni, Ima Momon and Sitara Devi often refer to Irom Sharmila as their daughter. Sharmila joined protestors at the relay hunger strike; she spoke to them about corruption in the administration, and the need for women to take part in decision making. "She did not sleep for long during the two nights. She spent the time talking to us. Her courage and stamina are beyond our imagination," said P. Sumita Devi, a Meira Paibi leader. On 9th March, police commandos came and re-arrested her.

On 10th March 2009, a delegation submitted a memorandum to the governor demanding that Sharmila's life be saved, AFSPA repealed, and peace and harmony restored in the state. Ima Janaki, Convenor of Sharmila Kanba Lup, announced that along with continuation of the relay hunger strike, their stir would be intensified with street corner meetings, posters and pamphlets. The demand for removal of AFSPA from Manipur was extended to demanding removal of AFSPA from the entire North-East.

Every day 30 to 50 women fast at the site, PDA Complex, Porampat, near JN Hospital where Irom Sharmila is interred. The women come from different places in Manipur—for instance Wangkhei Meihoubam Lampak on 27th September 2009; Khurkhul Apunba Nupi Chaokhat Lup on 1st October; Kwakeithel Leimajam Leikai Nupi Lup on 6th October (301st day of the relay-hunger strike); and Kha-Nongpok Apunba Lup on 4th November.³³ This is an amazing demonstration of public opinion, articulated in united action by thousands of peace-loving citizens. On 4th November 2009, marking the beginning of the tenth year of Irom Sharmila's fast, supporters gathered at the site included writer Mahashweta Devi from West Bengal, lawyer-activist Dayabai from Madhya Pradesh, Father Augustine from Kerala, filmmaker Kavita Joshi from New Delhi and many others. A Festival of Hope, Peace and Justice was organized in Imphal by Just Peace Foundation, 2-6 November, with inter-faith prayers, protest theatre, music, films, photo-exhibiton and public lectures. Literateurs, musicians and the university community joined in, and even religious heads—of faiths including Hindu Vaishnavite, Christian Baptist and Catholic, Muslim and Buddhist—openly voiced their solidarity with Irom Sharmila and the need to withdraw AFSPA.

³³ "Relay hunger strike enters 301st day", *Hueiyen News Service*, October 6, 2009; "Sharmila Stir", *The Sangei Express*, (October 1, 2009); "Hunger Strike", *The Sangei Express*, September 9, 2009; and <http://www.epao.net> during September-November 2009.

Clearly, many people are sensing an urgent need to establish democratic processes in the state of Manipur, and are trying to bring this about through democratic means. Irom Sharmila's fast is motivating others to join in the effort.

Section III

Some Insights and Implications

Sharmila's protest clearly has continuities and discontinuities with earlier, as well as contemporary, forms of women's activism in Manipur. While she is one figure in a wide spectrum of protests, she occupies a unique place. She belongs to no one group, party or organization: yet is respected by many. The cause she has taken up is important to ordinary citizens, democratic and human rights workers, feminists and peace activists. By applying the method of fasting, to attract attention to the cause, she is contributing in a very special way.

She does not talk about being a woman. Being a woman is intrinsic to the way she is, and is important in shaping her being and her politics, but her political and spiritual goals are articulated in terms that transcend gender. She couches her goals in universal terms, seeing herself as a symbol of justice. Her specific personal trajectory including family has influenced and formed her, and her identity is rooted in being Manipuri, yet this in no way detracts from the universal relevance of her vision. Her vision has elements of liberal democratic thought, strands of socialist and radical; she may be said to be continuing, in a sense, the anti-imperialist struggle which remained incomplete in 1947. At the same time, Irom Sharmila is rooted in a specific locale, which is rich in social, cultural and cosmological dimensions, which she is committed to helping preserve.

The impact of her action certainly does have implications for gender. She has built an identity that goes well beyond any ascribed gender roles or stereotypes. She is respected widely, by women and men, for the universality and nature of her protest. This is despite her youth, and unmarried status, which is unusual among Manipuri women activists, who are quintessentially 'Imas'. Initially, innuendos were made by detractors, but these have never gained circulation or prominence. This may pave a way for younger women to enter politics: many see her as a youth icon, and her independence of spirit and decision-making makes

her exemplary. 29-year old Agatha Sangma, Member of Parliament, articulates this, when she acknowledges empathy and deep respect for Irom Sharmila.³⁴

In jail, Irom Sharmila has been growing spiritually: "she is not the same Sharmila who began the fast". The experience has been changing her. She is reading literature from various spiritual traditions, building up inner resources and strength, to cope with her situation.³⁵

Irom Sharmila's indefinite fast is taking forward the theory and practice of philosophical non-violence, and creating space for re-formulating the issues at stake. Her non-violent stance confirms that ignoble means cannot bring about noble ends, and indicates the relevance of non-violence in the contemporary world. Non-violence is, arguably, a necessary accompaniment to any politics aiming at peace, justice, ecological protection, clean governance and people-oriented economic development.

Non-violent practice exerts an ethical force, which inspires others too to work towards radical personal, social and political transformation. Her example urges others to clarify and articulate their visions – and act according to their deepest convictions. It is a tough politics, which accepts that personal suffering may be a necessary concomitant to meaningful social transformation.

³⁴ Agatha Sangma, speaking at book release of *Burning Bright: Irom Sharmila and the Struggle for Peace in Manipur*, ibid, in New Delhi September 5, 2009.

³⁵ Lokendra Arambam, speaking at book release, ibid, New Delhi, September 5, 2009.