

Sunday Special

Poetry Section

Let me live in your heart

By : Parhajt Borah.

A pall of grief darken my soft bosom
 Sprinkling the seeds of Sobing on the cold bank of my heart,
 I often cry at the moonless night
 Where a cold sea sails in my teary eyes.
 I quarrel with anxiety and trepidation
 Which incessantly disturb my childish
 Longings to swing free at the pendulum
 Of lost and found .
 Let me sail the sea of hope to
 Replant my lost faith in your heart.
 Let me breath the air of ecstasy
 To smile at my own shadow.
 Let me sleep in my cosy slumber
 Let frighten my dark dreams
 Which everyday chases me at dead of night.

Fear

By- Dr Nunglekam Premi Devi
 Independent Scholar

I have a fear, a fear of dread darkness;
 So wild and too forbidding, within me;
 'Darkness' instill unauthorized, making me shaky;
 All I feel is nowhere round, I traveled far off;
 Losing ever inch of my bravely confidence,
 I struck loosely nowhere infusing shady phantoms;
 Its mortal dark and, I see things! I cried loudly
 Hang in there! Wait and look for me!
 Mother! Mother! Still all, quite and hush;
 I lost self presence, 'fearing' quieting my breath;
 Concealing all colors, darkness the one rules hallucinating;
 Breathing in and breathing out, as I stand still
 Silence speaks all, merging more wraiths stilly.

Perturbed every single night, Uneasy lies within me;
 Afraid! Collecting 'nura' wasn't welcoming;
 Fear as hell, darkness has eaten me all;
 Stretching out my arm searching nura, here and there;
 I stopped breathing, not an inch I see unclear,
 I see things, many things as I could imagine, marching towards;
 Get me a light; get me a podon! I cried loudly,
 None hears the call, neither attended, I surf along vividly;
 Still continued, searching unsuspected with the unseeing eyes;
 Loosing total control, one arm out and one pulling back;
 I flattered dangers, 'mother' stand by me! I whisper
 Hating 'self' consciousness, I roar within loud out;
 Fear rules, as I stood kneeling reaching out hand.

I have a fear, a fear of dread darkness;
 Ceasing my arm, I jumped in the empty, halting;
 Suspended searching, one and two and three,
 Onto the bamboo stalks, I never did found 'nura';
 What was that? I hold onto, soft and cold creasy,
 Feeling shocked touching out 'toad' breathing underneath;
 I cried of danger and I scream for the light;
 Jumping back and front appealing and pleading;
 Light! Light! As do I beg, Mother watches me over;
 I feel blessed beholding distant podon lights, overwhelming;
 And she bubbles away frothing 'smiling' adorably;
 Assembling my senses, I tried instilling darkness into lights;
 I walk through reoccupying, with lamp in the hand.

One and two and three, I looked around searching;
 Blinking eyes open out, with a lamp in the other hand,
 Oh! There you are! Connecting to abandoning piece;
 Catching and holding firmly, I spaded faster;
 Turning back sooner, overlooking podon in the left,
 I run and rush faster as I could; dashing and smashing;
 With one heap breath, flash! Go away the little light;
 I flipped inside the door, soothing breathing;
 How great! I throw it back in the dark wilderness;
 Lessening 'Fear' that forbidding within me.

Meitei Women in Collectives: Gender, Roles and Potentials

By- Ningthoujam Irina Devi

Introduction:

The solidarity based on informal relationship supported by traditional institutions have tremendous potentials to not only initiate reforms but also show alternative ways of achieving gender sensitive power sharing and governance. These potentials based on solidarity have been at play throughout modern Manipur's history. Manipuri women have been playing significant roles in resisting oppressive regimes that have affected the society. However, the assumptions over their roots and "role playing" ends with the spatial display of "power to resist" and rarely culminate with "power to share" the space with their male counterparts. This is even more apparent in the formal political negotiation and decision-making. This form of solidarity remains just a force that has not necessarily familiarised, equipped or co-terminus with the principles, rights and responsibilities that revolve around a gender sensitized modern democratic vision. This power to resist oppressive regimes does not necessarily translate into the notion of empowerment as understood in the contemporary democratic discourse due to various factors. To bring about gender equality, there is the need for a creative fusion between the "power to resist" and "the discourse on empowerment" vis-à-vis decision-making. This paper is not an attempt at providing solutions but to understand the issues raised above by delving into the current discourse on social capital, development and women's movements and networks in the context of Imphal valley in Manipur. While doing so, I shall briefly foreground the some debates on gender, governance and social capital.

Gender, Governance and Social Capital

The late 20th century showed a shift towards a more people oriented bottom-up approach towards development. Gender entered the discourse of development in the last few decades of the 20th century. The understanding was that economic development is necessary but, not at the cost of the human development. The critics of the top-down conception of governance say that formal institutions have not looked at the vast potential of the traditional and informal institutions. The consistent criticisms of the top-down approach have been largely responsible for the attempts to eliminate sources of oppression, exploitation, and inequality, particularly for women. What has often been termed "people's participation" does not necessarily mean women's participation in the public sphere. Therefore, to empower women and allow their participation in the political sphere vis-à-vis decision making, there is a need to probe into the foundation of the traditional as well as the informal institutions that influence the exercise of power and governance. This becomes all the more important in contemporary times when the definition of governance has been broadened to include the informal institutions, both traditional as well as modern. Social scientists have defined socio-political forms of governing as "forms in which public or private actors do not separately but in conjunction, together, in combination 'tackle social problems, through 'co-arrangements'. This school views governance as a form of *multiorganizationalaction* rather than involving only state institutions. This is also the position taken by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 1997. Thus, one cannot study governance just from the realm of state's hold on its laws and institutions. Here, what has been considered the public domain has to be understood along with the traditional conception of the

individual's and the community's world views that shapes various mechanisms of governance. Socio-cultural norms determine women's sphere of life and the same norms too have an impact on their power of 'functionality' in the public realm. This power makes a difference in their community and highlights their experience of being agents of social transformation. According to Ralph Linton, the 'culture of a society is a way of life of its members, the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from one generation to generation'. The development of culture is a social activity and over the years, it gets institutionalized. This process of institutionalization of the collective capacity or social capital among the Meitei women promotes civic actions and social reforms. They have unique traditions and norms which get reproduced as public goods. By social capital, I refer "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of durable network of more or less institutionalised relationship of mutual acquaintances or recognition". Along with other global experiences on women's collective groups in politics, there has also been a significant space for women's collective actions existing in the state of Manipur too. Tradition based group solidarity has an appealing form of self-expression and is potentially an attractive and effective strategy. Traditional institutions operate through co-operative behavioural norms and values thereby, promoting trust among individuals. This underlines the self-development and voluntary societal problems solving mechanism. According to Bourdieu, relationships and memberships in formal and informal groupings (i.e. family, friends and peer groups, other community organizations) plus the kinds and quality of interactions and social identities constituted through such memberships (e.g. duty-based or voluntary or institutional) add up to potential or real support and access to valued resources (e.g. a safe place to live, a job).

Roots, Roles and Traditional Network

To look at the historical past of the women is the key to understand the present. The Meitei community, which constitutes two-third of the state's population, are settled in the Manipur valley area. Whenever the society has been in trouble or under any threat, the Meitei women have risen to the occasion. They have resisted oppressive political regimes and have organized themselves to launch unprecedented movements. Their political activism have been influenced by "by the dynamics of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and political culture that can only be understood through an embedded analysis that foregrounds local practices and individual perspectives." It is interesting to have a look at how women have been socially and spatially placed in the Meitei society. While dealing with the spatial placements, I shall also try to explain their social significance. Meitei women's life generally revolves around three spatial demarcations, namely, *Keithel* (Market), *Leikai* (residential locality) and *Yum* (home/domestic sphere) and their networks. British colonial writers like T.C. Hodson comments that Hinduism exist in Manipur solely in its esoteric form without its subtle metaphysical doctrine. Sati death, dowry harassment or domestic violence is rare to find in the state history. Traditional norms and other cultural institutionalized structures in Meitei community have given these spaces among the Meitei women. Ethel Grimwood, one of the first British women who had visited Manipur observed that "the

Manipuris do not shut up their women, as is the custom in most parts of India, and they are much more enlightened and intelligent in consequence". Apart from these observations, one aspect of Meitei women's activity has been their contributions to the economy of the state. In Manipur, "omen have a major role in agriculture, animal husbandry, collection of fuel, fetching potable water, managing business, weaving and so on". According to Rizvi and Mukherjee, Meitei women contribute about 50 to 80 per cent towards maintaining their respective families. The most noticeable indicator of this is the activities of the women at the *Ima Keithel* (mothers/women's market). It is here that the "management of internal trade and exchange of the produce of villages" is exclusively done by women. Different women traders sell their products in this market. The market is said to have been founded in 1580AD. In 1886, E.W. Dun referred to the type of freedom enjoyed by the women of Manipur. He observed "all the marketing is done by the women, all the work of buying and selling in public, carrying to and fro of articles to be sold, whilst at home, they are busy employed in weaving and spinning". The Meitei community is closely knit within its own kinship structure along with an ideal collective life. A village/town consists of many *leikai* (residential localities). A *leikai's* territory, though more or less defined, is not determined by strict adherence to legal territorial demarcation. The space of a *leikai* has a structural and behavioural value that can be understood through the Meitei's system of kinship, social norms, ritual and residential pattern. Another aspect of the *leikai* space is the kind of solidarity extended to a physical space for a pseudo kinship structure. All the residents of a *leikai* may not be blood relations yet their relations are governed by the greater kinship norms. Within a *leikai* people live in group of families of same surname or different surnames. Women in these spaces share a collective spirit, reciprocity, and respect among the various age groups. Married women living in the same compound take their turn at domestic chores like *phou suba* (weeding/winning of rice) as *Khulang* (repayment of help or labour exchange). Women work and sing together, forming a repertoire of *Khulang Ishai* (Ishai means songs) in their collective agricultural works. Besides, these women go in group for *Eapal lokpa* (fishing team) in nearby ponds, wetland water bodies and lakes. The women in the kin group or sharing same space in one *leikai* will bear the responsibilities of helping (which may or may not be reciprocal) following the custom of *potyeng* (monetary help) and *potpang* (help in kind/object of use/during rites of passage. Even physical/labour services required for the organization of any religious ceremonies of a *leikai* members like *Ushop* (community feasts), *Shwasti Puja* (birth ritual), *Shradh* (death ritual), etc are provided by different age group of female members in a *leikai*. The women in a *leikai* form and engage themselves in *Marup* (literally means friendship), which also denotes an association of familiar individuals or friends or community members which function for mutual help and benefit guided by norms of solidarity. The concepts of social capital itself underlines that each has knowledge and perceive each other as someone to be trusted. Therefore, individuals join the *marup* association assuming that members will perform their responsibilities without any written rules but on shared understanding and consensus. Anthropologist Manjusri Chaki-Sircar says in Manipur "feminism does not entail a subculture or anti-male attitude but exists as a moral posture to the male, an integral part of the social system". This view has given more emphasis on the dynamics and potential of the

collective as the social capital. The everyday engagement in "teamwork", "working together", "support for each other", "co-operation between everyone", etc gradually help in accumulating social capital among the Meitei women. This social capital is accumulated through 'contacts and group memberships which, through the accumulation of exchanges, obligations and shared identities, provide actual or potential support and access to valued resources. While Michael Fukuyama says virtually all forms of traditional culture-social groups like tribes, clans, village associations, religious sects, etc. are based on shared norms and uses these norms to achieve cooperative ends. **Extended Solidarity: Leikai and Beyond**
 Changing socio-political landscape in Manipur with the advent of British administration and its end in 1947 had a profound influence on the subsequent course of women's networks based on solidarity. May it be the historic *Nupi Lal* (women's agitations) of 1904 and 1939, running of the *Ima Keithel* (mothers'/women's market), activities of the *Meira Paibi* (torch bearing women activists since the 1980s), or the organization of *Nupi Marup* (women's credit rotary group), etc. they are all the resultant impact of the social capital Meitei women have acquired in Manipur's history. Now, the nature of solidarity networks extends beyond the *leikai*. The women had to venture out of their domestic spheres not only for sustaining their families but also to extend solidarity based on the traditional network system mentioned earlier. The *Lallup Kaba* or the system of forced labour was introduced by the Meitei monarch. Under this system, every male member aged between sixteen and sixty were forced to work for ten days in every forty days without remuneration. It the first *Nupi Lal* in 1904, women came out in large numbers to protest against the order of the British administration that Meitei men should rebuild colonial offices destroyed during an attack. The women reacted by saying that it was nothing less than the imposition of forced labour. The agitation against the colonial order was successful and the British were forced to abandon the *Lallup Kaba* system. In the second *Nupi Lal* in 1939, women in the valley again launched another movement against colonial system of exporting rice as it led to food shortage. The immediate response of the women was a demand to halt the transportation of rice to be stored for export in godowns. Around four thousand women marched to the British administration office and demanded that the export of rice, which was the staple food of the Manipuris, be banned. The next day, thousands of women stormed the British political office and threatened to destroy the rice mills. The king and the colonial administration had to concede to the demands of the women. During both the agitations mentioned above launched by Meitei women, the *Ima Keithel* (mothers'/women's market) in the heart of Manipur's capital Imphal which is one of the biggest markets in Asia controlled and run exclusively by women, became the centre of not only economic activities but site for organisation and resistance. The two women's movements provide an excellent example of the collective force of women in Manipur. It gave them a voice over the issues of the society and captured its own political space in public domain. In a way, "the radius of trust" increased from domestic level network to the market level. All groups embodying social capital have a certain radius of trust, that is, the circle of people among whom co-operative norms are operative. (Contd. on Page 3)

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