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Women and cultural identity in Manipur in conflict era

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Abstract

The state of Manipur is a land of cultural ethnicity and diverse religion, caste and creed etc. However, since time immemorial ever since the annexation of kingly Manipur state by the Indian government under the Indian Union, women has been playing an active role in any sphere of social, political and economic spheres. There are around 34 recognised ethnic tribes speaking different ethnic languages following different cultures and traditions along with the major group of Meetei community and Meetei Muslims and some other races. This paper highlights how women have braved the storm and struggles in an era of continuing conflicts. The courage of women in Manipur has tremendous effects on the forefront of any political, social or economic crisis and conflicts having lasting impact in building peace and prosperity.

Keywords: Women, Manipur, cultural identity and conflict

Introduction

Manipur was a princely state under British India since 1892 when India got independence in 1947 and Manipur had not yet merged into the union. Manipur state introduced Manipur State Constitution Act, 1947 with special provisions under section 10(d), 19 and 38 for safeguarding and promoting the rights of tribal people and their land (Ramson, 2020). The cultural identity of the people of the state represents all the facets of differences and specificities, commonalities in the beliefs, customs, behaviors, traditions, practices, art and literature, music, way of life and thoughts of all the ethnic groups representing the feature of varied cultural and multiplicity (Chungkham, 2020).

The local and regional features of Manipur cannot be understood, analyzed and the problems of Manipur cannot be solved by the tools of a general and common theory. Not forgetting the fact that the culture of Manipur is that of a patriarchal system of society with varied ethnic variations in which cultural constitution of female gender subordinates to the male gender, one cannot ignore the political groups based on ethnic lives demanding homelands and rebel organisations based on revolutionary ideals on ethnic lives demanding homelands or sovereignty from the Indian Union.

Having teetered under the yoke of British colonialism from 1891 to 1947, it is the credit of the freedom lovers of Manipur that their collective walk along the path of mainstream nationalism has not tottered in the post-independence era. (Directorate of information, govt. of Manipur, 2021) ^[3]. Indeed its unique handloom and handicraft products receives accolades even in the international arena. Moreover, the art forms and cultural expressions and ramifications distinctly showcase Manipur to the world. Women in every sphere of life played a crucial role in terms of dispute settlements even in times of war and conflicts. Women are the peace maker both within and outside one's family.

Discourse

The socio-political and cultural identity of the state has yet to be recognised, changed and adjusted to the modern influences. The customary practices of the land holding system of the region has yet to be transformed and adjusted in a positive direction with specific measures to protect the native people. Interestingly it is believed that the Brahmanical cultural identity or the Christian cultural identity are deliberately linked with the western cultures. They are regarded as inferior human beings and often fall prey to the victimization of all groups of men. Women are associated with meaning of low, weak, foolish and men are regarded as strong, high, right, intelligent etc. In tribal custom women are symbolized as mist and men are symbolized as rock (Chungkham, 2021) meaning women are the servants and men are

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the masters. All these sorts of multifold victimization of women have been the common sight in the daily life in Manipur which is torn apart in conflict situations. However, in confronting the conflict situations since time immemorial women of Manipur in general has been playing as peace makers in times of continuing conflict crisis. She is the custodian of culture to create an environment of peace in order to bring solutions of the violent conflicts, this has to be preserved even in modern times. Among the Tangkhuls of Manipur they are called the “Pukreilas” (Zimik, 2020) ^[4] and “Nolo” in the Mao ethnic group (Chungkham, 2020). The Meira Paibis of the Meetei community are no exception to this. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act was let to withdrawn from the state of Manipur through the brave and courageous fight against the Indian Army. Such positive aspect of the ancient and present gender roles is not to be cast away but preserved. It is of great pride that we have a cultural heritage of our women as mediators of peace in both hills and valley. In fact, it is the dignity and glory that our women of the market played an immortal role resolving conflicts during fight between clans taking active parts as agents in creating a culture of peace. The extra ordinary courage of the women is told by the various movements of the women organisations of the region. The sense of love and respect for knowledge are rich cultural assets. However, unfortunately there are many women in the state whose contribution have not been well recognised in preserving the cultural identity of the state especially in an era on continuing conflicts. In the present violence-torn situation, women’s sufferings are beyond words. The patriarchal values of looking down on women as commodities are still reinforcing with women falling prey to the many violators. Often time women’s rights have been overlooked due to the social, political and economic upheaval in the state. Under the existing political scenario women’s freedom of movement has drastically disappeared in our society. The tradition which permits freedom of movement in the public places for trading and exercise authority over their earnings has gradually declined. Thus, in a war-torn situation, gender inequality and dehumanizing women still persists. This is the crucial period where a change is the only alternative.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the reinforcement of the patriarchal values is believed to be the continuing conflicts and the consequent economic upheavals. It is worth mentioning that the United Nations Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 has identified gender equality and empowerment of women and girls under the Goal 5 so that discrimination against women and girls of all forms are addressed and removed in the society. It is believed that unless women which comprise half of the world population unless they are treated at par with their male counterparts cannot achieved the Sustainable Development Goals. In fact, we are proud that we have a cultural heritage of our women as mediators of peace both in the hills and valley. The artistic and creative sensibility of the women of Manipur of the state remains unrivalled. Their sense of cleanliness and love for knowledge are rich cultural assets. There has come a time for the custodian of culture to create an environment of peace in order to bring a solution of the violent conflicts. At this cross road where raped, molestation and domestic violence are rampant, the positive aspects of the ancient gender roles need to be preserved and not cast away. Until and unless there is an environment of peace and withdrawal

of Arm Forces Special Powers Act and a call to stop all sorts of violence, no women will be able to hold her head high and walk with freedom.

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