

# Mainland Mediawomen in Marginalised Manipur

## Report of the Seventh Annual Meeting of the NWMI

Imphal, Manipur

5-7 March 2009

The Seventh Annual Meeting of the Network of Women in Media, India was held in Imphal, Manipur, from 5 to 7 March, 2009. The meeting set of to a promising start on the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> at the Kangla Fort, which holds religious, cultural and historic significance for the people of the state. Entering the Kangla fort for the inaugural was a moment of great anticipation for the delegates, most of whom were on their first visit to Manipur. The entrance of the fort is impressive with high gates and thick walls, reminiscent of the Manipur Kingdom and its splendour. The tree-lined paths with sprawling lawns on both sides were tranquil only on the surface, however. The disturbing presence of men in camouflage uniforms reminded us of Manorama and many other Manipuri women who have raped, tortured and murdered by the security forces.

As we reached the hall, the mood changed. It was sunny and bright. Hot coffee and samosas along with a large presence of journalists from Manipur made the welcome truly warm. Chief guests, visitors and organisers all mingled with ease, with the rhythm of human relations setting the pace. The meeting was inaugurated when initial conversations quietened and there was a comfort with which everyone automatically moved into this ancient hall where at one time the king used to hold court. At the simple and short inaugural, the speakers impressed us with their maturity and honesty, talking from the heart.

The **inaugural session** began with a welcome from Ratneshori Goswami, vice president of the All Manipur Working Journalists Union (AMWJU). The three main guests of the session were the chief guest Dr. Chongtham Jamini Devi, Chairperson of the Manipur State Women's Commission, guest of honour Valley Rose Hungyo, publisher-editor of the Tangkhul newspaper, *Aja* and president of the function Irengbam Arun, editor of *Ireibak*.

**Valley Rose Hungyo**, the first and only woman editor-proprietor of a daily newspaper in Manipur, talked about why she had decided to bring out a paper in the Tangkhul dialect. "As a woman and as a journalist I have seen many ups and downs," she said. "I was not trained as a journalist. In 1992 our state was in an unfortunate situation of conflict between two major tribal communities due to which many people were dying. People who did not read either English or Manipuri did not know about these events. As a social worker I felt we had to reach this information to people."

Valley Rose decided that a newspaper in the Tangkhul dialect was required since 80 per cent of Tangkhul Nagas did not read either English or Manipuri, although the latter was the lingua franca of the people of the state. "When I decided to launch a publication, I didn't have a single paisa to invest," she said. "But I felt it was important to start a daily newspaper. We went ahead and, little by little, it gained momentum. From a single sheet paper, it grew to have more pages and from letterpress we moved to computerised printing. The paper is now in its 17<sup>th</sup> year and it has been bilingual for the last six or seven years."

About being a woman journalist and the only woman editor in the state of Manipur, Valley Rose said she faced many challenges. She could not afford to hire a large

staff. As a result, if there was an event that needed to be covered, she usually attended it herself. "Often I am the only woman amongst men," she said. "Being few in number, women journalists have to face many challenges. The more we face, the more adventurous we feel. Society does not look down on us as women journalists. We encourage each other so that we can excel in our service to humanity. This seminar will enhance the spirit of women journalists in Manipur."

**Dr. Chongtham Jamini Devi**, Chairperson of the Manipur State Women's Commission appreciated the fact that so many women had "come from afar to this easternmost corner of India." She recalled that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had described Manipur as the Switzerland of India. "But nowadays things are changing. The state is in turmoil. We need to explore what we can do to bring peace and tranquillity," she said.

Dr Jamini Devi expressed pride in the fact that Manipuri women had done so well in the Olympic Games and had also excelled in the arts, culture and handicrafts. She said women in Manipur make an important contribution to the economy of the state and run the market place. However, she said, violence against women was on the rise, with many rape cases being reported.

**Irengbam Arun**, editor of the Manipuri daily, *Ireibaik*, who also served on the jury for the Anupama Jayaraman Memorial Award this year, said that he felt the Network would certainly have an impact in the state. He said that out of a total of 150-200 journalists in Manipur, only 10 to 20 were women. He felt women journalists were more active and sensitive to issues than men and that they had a missionary zeal towards their work. He hoped that the Network meeting would encourage more young Manipuri women to enter the profession.

With the mood of the meeting one of attempting to build bridges, and train the spotlight on a hitherto marginalised corner of India, it is perhaps fitting to recall the importance of the venue of the inaugural session.

### **Reclaiming Kangla**

Kangla, the capital of Manipur from ancient times down to the year 1891 A.D, is regarded as the holiest of places for Manipuris. It is here that the God-King Pakhangba is believed to have established and ruled the kingdom of Manipur. Many Manipuris still believe that Lord Pakhangba resides under Kangla and rules the Kingdom of Manipur and the Universe. Kangla is believed to have 360 important sacred places.

Kangla was traditionally not only a centre of pilgrimage for all Manipuris, but also the seat of administration for the Kingdom of Manipur until 1891. It was in that year that the British defeated the then king of Manipur in the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, also known as the Khongjom War, and the Assam Rifles occupied the capital, Kangla. That defeat ended the independent status of the Kingdom of Manipur, the last kingdom to be incorporated into British India.

When the British left the Indian sub-continent in 1947, Manipur also regained its independence. The Manipur Constitution Act, 1947 established a democratic form of government with an elected legislature and the Maharaja as the Executive Head. However, in 1949, Maharaja Bodhchandra was summoned to Shillong, capital of the then Indian province of Assam, and on 21 September 1949 he was forced to sign a Treaty of Accession. The Legislative Assembly was dissolved on the integration of Manipur with the Republic of India in October 1949. Manipur was a union territory from 1956, becoming a full-fledged state in 1972. This formality however did not put

an end to disgruntlement with Central rule, and a myriad insurgencies have since torn Manipuri society apart.

### **Journalism in Manipur: A call of duty**

The inaugural session was followed by a lively interaction between NWMI members and members of the All Manipur Working Journalists Union (AMWJU). **Ratneshori Goswami**, Vice President of the AMWJU, said that there had been minimal presence of women in the media over the years. Goswami who was one of the first few women to make a foray into journalism in the state said that the low pay structures, coupled with the lack of “respectability” for women in the media, have dissuaded women from opting for journalism as a career. “In Manipur, journalism is more a call of duty rather than a career,” she said, adding that this is true for both men and women.

**Irengbam Arun** pointed out that the environment of being sandwiched between the security forces and the armed militant groups did not make it easy for anyone in the media to work.

**Rajesh Hijam**, editor of *The Sangai Express* then recalled his own experience of being “gifted” a bomb: a gift-wrapped parcel was left at his office after his newspaper, as well as others in Manipur, refused to publish a long altercation, conducted through press releases, between two different underground groups.

He also said that many of the problems faced by the local media come from the armed insurgent groups. In cases of harassment by the state, he pointed out, they can at least take recourse to legal action. Manipur has at least 38 armed militant groups, of which eight are banned by the Union Home Ministry.

Ratneshori added that cultural and social norms have also contributed towards the lack of encouragement for women to take to journalism. “But just as there is a trend towards increased presence of women in other professions, such as the NGOs sector, film-making, etc, the number of women in journalism is also on the rise.” She said the participation of so many women from different parts of India and the interaction with their Manipuri counterparts during the NWMI meeting will send out the message that there is solidarity among women journalists across the country. Perhaps, she said, this will inspire many others to join the profession.

In response to a question about what could be done by the larger, countrywide community of media professionals regarding issues in Manipur and the North East, Irengbam Arun said the various aspects of the people of the state need to be given more focus. According to him, “Manipur should be covered for its sports, arts and culture – including theatre – and not just for the violence that takes place here.”

Rajesh Hijam added: “The so called North East editions brought out by *The Telegraph* and *Times of India* are circulated back into the region and there is no trickle of news or issues towards other cities or national editions.”

**Chitra Ahanthem**, NWMI member from Manipur, pointed out that news about states in the Northeast other than Assam, is rarely given coverage on television news channels. “They usually have one correspondent based in Guwahati or, at best, a northeast bureau – again located in Guwahati. The correspondents are provided with news content by stringers who are paid only for news that is actually used. In the print media also one hardly sees any opinion pieces written by people from the region.”

NWMI member **Surekha Sule** suggested that there may be a need to develop a national network of regional media through which news from the north eastern states

could be supplied to regional language newspapers in the rest of India, and not just to the English-language media.

### **Recognising young talent**

At a delicious traditional meal, network members savoured a 100 per cent vegetarian spread. Apart from dal and other vegetables, there were popular and uniquely Meitei dishes – *uti* made from green leafy vegetables, rice and cooking soda, *iromba* which is spicy mashed vegetables usually with lots of chilli and fermented fish (no fermented fish used on this occasion), *purple rice* which is eaten mixed with kheer and *pakoras* cooked in a clear *jhul*.

The afternoon session began with the presentation of the Anupama Jayaraman Memorial Award for young women journalists, instituted by the Jayaraman family in memory of Anupama, a promising young journalist who passed away in 2006. The award aims to encourage young women journalists to continue to report on human rights and justice, issues that were close to Anupama's heart. The theme of the Award this year was 'Human Rights and Social Justice.'

**Alifiya Khan** of Mumbai was the winner of this year's Award, the third in the annual series launched in 2007. Alifiya, 24, is senior correspondent with *The Hindustan Times*, Mumbai. The winner was selected by a three-member jury comprising senior journalists R Shankar and Gita Aravamudan from Bangalore and Irengbam Arun from Manipur.

Alifiya's articles on public health services in particular drew the attention of the jury. Her investigative article, "Primary Hell Centres," (<http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/StoryPage.aspx?id=7b4cc2ee-4368-4214-8f7a-8b8020af5a73>) exposed the shocking state of 12 state-run health centres functioning less than 100kms away from Mumbai. She described how ayurvedic doctors with no training in the area did post-mortems, how disposable needles were reused on hapless patients and on how rodents feasted on placentas dumped in rubbish bins. The jury noted that Alifiya had done leg work, visited the health centres and talked to patients and doctors as well as government officials. Her reports were concise, well-researched, well-written and informative. The stories looked at issues from various angles and highlighted the public's lack of access to decent healthcare, the rot within the system and the insensitivity and unaccountability of the authorities.

The award was presented by jury members Gita Aravamudan, a writer and senior journalist based in Bangalore, and Irengbam Arun, editor of the Manipuri daily *Ireibak*. Nirmala Jayaraman, Anupama's mother, thanked the NWMI for making the award a reality. She urged those present to encourage young girls like Alifiya to pursue their passion to tell stories that highlight the struggles and challenges faced by the common people of the country.

The award, which includes a citation, a cash prize of Rs.15,000 and fully-sponsored participation in the annual NWMI meeting held in different places every year, is coordinated by the NWMI, which is an autonomous association committed to democracy and gender justice within the media and society. For further details on the award e.mail [award.aj@gmail.com](mailto:award.aj@gmail.com)

For young and energetic Alifiya, the award was the most encouraging thing that happened to her. She said that after the announcement she was encouraged to follow the lead for two more stories of human rights that she was earlier discouraged

from doing. The fact that her mother was with her to receive the award made it even more special.

Her most embarrassing moment was, however, when the press came to interview her—the press in Manipur gave the national meet saturation coverage. Of course, she was used to interviewing others, but was at a loss for words on the other side of the camera. When the time came for her interview she was so flustered, she tentatively asked the camera person “Am I looking in the right direction?” They gave her a suspicious “Are you really a journalist?” kind of look. It will take a while for her to live down that remark!

The function was attended by over 60 women journalists and others working in or on media, who had travelled across the country at their own expense to attend the annual meeting. Several journalists, writers and human rights activists from Manipur were also present.

### **A Land Under Siege**

Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi, Sahitya Akademi award-winning feminist poet and writer and Vijayalakshmi Brara, Associate Professor, Manipur University provided the social context of Manipur, where many of the participating journalists had travelled for the first time. Their thought-provoking presentations offered many insights, and story ideas to those present.

**Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi**, who has been writing short stories, essays and poems, particularly relating to women, since the late 1970s said she grew up in an era where women and girls had to be protected by family members as there was an accepted norm of men forcibly marrying women. “I grew up scared, but questioned why women should suffer because of the wrong doings committed by men,” said the Sahitya Akademi Award winner. She said that writing poetry was an extension of her self-expression and that the instances of rape by security forces in Manipur had led her to write even more. She later met with other women who were involved in bringing out a Manipuri women’s magazine called *Macha Leima*, which highlighted not only the rich culture and history of Manipur but also focused on the conflict situation, the gender debate and crimes against women. She was associated with the magazine for over 10 years. According to her, the growing visibility of dynamic young women in the Manipuri media was very encouraging. “Their presence has brought in greater focus on issues beyond mere news coverage,” she said. Arambam Ongbi Memchoubi is presently teaching at the CC Higher Secondary School, Imphal.

**Dr. N. Vijayalakshmi Brara**, a faculty member at the Centre for Manipur Studies, Manipur University, who has written extensively on gender issues, highlighted the silence of the media on events happening in the Northeast. Even in terms of news related to ‘terror’ and bomb blasts, she said, there was a shift in the way the subject was discussed. “When 26/11 could be given an iconic date, why is it that the Assam bombings as well as the various killings in the states of Northeast don’t get such symbolic dates? Do we need to strip every time to attract the attention of the national media?” she asked, alluding to the naked protest staged by 12 women in front of the Kangla Fort in 2004.

She pointed out that although women do occupy visible space in most societies in the Northeast, these are rigidly defined and despite the visibility of women in social movements, women are not in decision-making positions even in such spaces.

**Thingnam Anjulika Samom**, co-ordinator of the NWM-Manipur gave the vote of thanks. Narrating how the members of the NWM-Manipur had undertaken the job of

organising the meet without any money or any prior experience in organising such an event, she said that the ready help given by their male colleagues as well as the local journalist union made the event possible. "All we had was a dream, and today after realisation of the dream, we feel that yes, there is a future for women journalists in Manipur."

At the end of the inaugural we walked into a picture-perfect sunset. A beautiful procession led by musicians in white, followed by men in traditional white and women in light saffron sarongs walked quietly. The rear was brought up by a grand carriage, with the king and others from the royal family. We were later informed that it was the funeral procession of the king's mother and only the royal family took part in it. The few hours we spend at Kangla fort made the history and significance of the fort come alive.

Soon we were packed into vehicles of various sizes and shapes to make it back to The Retreat House before the curfew at 5 pm. It was then that we really experienced the scale and aggressiveness of army presence. Men in uniform afoot, rushing in open jeeps, wielding guns and making loud noises, dominated the roads, literally herding people in all directions.

The meeting had to be wound up early on account of the 12-hour curfew (5 pm-5 am) that was in force in Imphal, imposed from 19 Feb 2009 after two days of statewide protests against the murder of three Meitei government employees – Dr Thingnam Kishan, SDO, Kasom Khullen, his driver Rajen Singh and mandal Token Singh by the NSCN-IM. The three deceased were kidnapped along with three other Tangkhul staff of Kishan but the Tangkhul people were released while the three Meitei were killed – an apparent communal act in total defiance of the decade long NSCN-IM and GOI peacetalks. They were found dead on Feb 17, 2009 morning.

The curfew period was being slowly reduced over the weeks. It must be noted that the programme of the entire three-day meeting had to be constantly adjusted to suit the extraordinary circumstances under which it was taking place. Since it was impossible to leave the premises of The Retreat House, the venue of the rest of the meeting, after 5 pm, sessions were held late into the evening. Even then it was not all work and no play for the participants, with impromptu song and dance sessions being held in the courtyard of The Retreat House, taking advantage of the moonlight to get around the power cuts!

The sessions on network issues were held sporadically over the three days to accommodate the curfew which determined when trips during the day could be done. and also when invited speakers could reach the venue. The working sessions were thus scheduled as and when possible, including quite late at night. So the network-related sessions due to be held on 6 March began on the evening of the 5<sup>th</sup>, continued through part of the day on the 6<sup>th</sup> and concluded late at night on the 7<sup>th</sup>.

The full report on the networking sessions, which is being circulated to network members via the national e-group, is a compilation of discussions that took place whenever possible over the three days. Presented below are some excerpts that provide a glimpse of what local networks in different parts of the country have been up to (or not) over the past year, as well as a summary of discussions on a key issue that came up during the interaction:

### **Network news**

In keeping with previous annual meetings, sharing news about the Network formed an important part of the proceedings. Several members felt that since the national

group has been active for seven years the time had now come for the NWMI to seriously consider registration at the national level. Reasons in favour of registration: ease to raise funds and also to increase clout at the local level. Those not in favour felt that registration was not really necessary because the network could work in collaboration with others. Many expressed concern about possible changes in the nature of the NWMI post-registration, suggesting that the network should maintain its informal, collective organisational structure and guard against becoming formal and hierarchical. Indeed, despite functioning as a loose collective – with no formal structure, membership procedure, office-bearers, core or project funds – it has not only survived but gained in strength over the past seven years, with local networks in different parts of the country taking responsibility for organising annual meetings and network members paying their own way to attend the meetings wherever they are held.

Participants of the chapters of the NWMI represented at the Imphal meeting presented reports on the activities of local networks over the past year.

The **Bangalore** group organised discussions on a variety of topics, including communal violence, copyright issues, blogging and nutritious meals for busy working women. It also hosted the Bangalore launch of “Affirming Life and Diversity,” a multi-media production by non-literate, Dalit women film-makers from Andhra Pradesh that brings together rural images and voices on food sovereignty.

The **Pune** group reported on its experience of collaborating with the local union, the Pune Union of Working Journalists (PUWJ). In fact, the Pune chapter, which was even referred to as the women’s wing of the union, used to hold its regular monthly meetings at the Patrakar Sangh. At the sixth annual meeting of NWMI in Pune in 2008, the PUWJ collaborated with the NWM-Pune. However, the relationship between PUWJ and NWM-Pune became strained over the matter of funds. In fact there are now two groups of women journalists in Pune – the NWM-Pune (now functioning independently) and another supporting the Patrakar Sangh. This experience has convinced NWM-Pune members of the value of being an autonomous entity and maintaining a separate identity.

The **Andhra Pradesh** group reported a similar experience with the local journalists union to whom it gave all the money it had raised for the earlier national meeting for administrative purposes (since the NWM group itself had no bank account).

The team from Chittoor working with the **Navodaya** publication also reported on its activities. The magazine produced by this collective of rural Dalit women has a circulation of six lakh in rural Andhra Pradesh. One of the big stories pursued by Navodaya last year was the phenomenon of rural women migrating as domestic workers to Dubai, Kuwait and other Gulf countries. Their investigation revealed that many of these women were abused at their workplaces. One had even suffered an acid attack when she resisted her employer’s sexual advances. The story shocked local people, who contributed money to enable the acid attack victim to return to India. She is now back home undergoing treatment in a local hospital.

The **Imphal** group reported that the last year had been a time of personal struggle for many women journalists in Manipur who have been part of the network. While they were all part of the All Manipur Working Journalists Union, the NWM-Manipur was not affiliated to the union, keeping themselves as well as funds separate. It was also felt that a gap existed between women journalists working in the English-language media and the Manipuri-language media and the challenge was to bring them together in the same forum. The Manipur group shared their plans to start a

publication with women journalists as the main staff with the funds left over from the national meet.

The **Assam** network organised a 'Women and Media' workshop in collaboration with Tezpur University, sponsored by the ICSSR. Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma from the NWMI served as resource people. According to her, the concerned persons at the University were impressed with the network after looking at the NWMI website and decided to collaborate with the network. Several issues were raised by the students of mass communication. For a detailed report, click here [http://nwmindia.org/About\\_us/Centres/North\\_east/tezpur\\_workshop\\_2008.htm](http://nwmindia.org/About_us/Centres/North_east/tezpur_workshop_2008.htm)

The **Kerala** group reported that the network in the state had been more active between 2004 and 07 and had recently been somewhat inactive. Often the meetings are with the Kerala Union of Working Journalists (KUWJ) and there is constant discussion about whether it was necessary to have a separate network for women in the profession.

The **Kolkata** group reported that with perseverance they have become more organised about having regular meetings. The group works as a support group for its members. In May this year, NWM-Kolkata will organise a film festival in association with the International Association of Women in Radio and TV (IAWRT), a Norway-based organisation of women filmmakers. The festival will feature films made by women filmmakers from different parts of Asia. They look forward to more such collaborations.

The **Bhopal** group has made limited progress in terms of forming a network. There are several women journalists across the state of Madhya Pradesh who needed to be contacted.

The **Mumbai** group reported that the local listserv was more commonly used by members to communicate. More than a year ago, the group organised a meeting on the Khairlanji Dalit killings and that brought in a substantial interested audience. The group reported on the challenge of attracting Indian language journalists and broadcast journalists to the group. There is a plan to revive the regular meetings and develop a deeper collaboration with the Press Club for this purpose.

### **Images of Imphal**

The pre-lunch session on Friday, 6 March, featured a talk by senior Manipuri journalist **Thounaojam Tarun Kumar** on the history and complexities of Manipur. "The golden past is now in tatters," he said, "and the body polity is badly riven. Communities that enjoyed cordial, harmonious relationships in our childhood are now not on easy terms, to say the least." He pointed out that even as recently as in 2001, during the two month long road blockade that effectively ensured that nothing other than rice and vegetables was available in the valley, there was no major outbreak of violence. It was only a few years later that the first incident of blood-letting occurred near the border with Myanmar.

According to him, the times today are very challenging, especially from the perspective of newspapers. Yet only newspapers can bring things out and air them in public. "I hope newspapers in Manipur will do that," he said. "That is the only hope." He raised the question of why the rest of the Indian media remain silent in the face of issues such as the recent brutal murder of Dr. Thingnam Kishan and the large number of people – at least 90 since the beginning of 2009 – who are being killed in the conflict in the state.

After lunch a cultural troupe provided glimpses of Manipuri culture through their dances and martial arts show. The dance showcased the beauty and grace of Manipuri dance through the *thougal jagoi* – a dance invoking the gods. This was followed by showcasing the martial culture of the state through the Meitei Thang-Ta performances, with both men and women taking part in the performance. Interestingly, an innovative dramatisation at the end of the show was about how a young girl thwarted barehanded the murderous attempts of a young man intent on "having his way" with her.

Participants then left The Retreat House to visit the fascinating Ima Keithel (Mothers' Market) in the heart of the city so that they could return before the beginning of curfew. This traditional market, housed in temporary sheds (the centuries-old original market has been pulled down and a new multi-storeyed structure is being built for the women) has unending rows of women selling all kinds of things: from jewellery to fish, textiles to flowers, traditional craft to imported Chinese goods, it is a veritable super market. It is a market where only women are the sellers, with all of them getting equal space. There are practically no locks—everything is in the open with a high degree of trust and security in this traditional market space.

Despite the hustle and bustle of the mass of people, a sense of harmony pervades this oasis. There is no fighting, harshness or aggression. Only the guttural wail of the curfew sirens breaks this idyllic scene. Even so, the women remained serene, the very epitome of dignity and courtesy in dealing with the last shoppers. (Click here for a Network member's article on the market and the impact of curfew on the women's livelihoods: <http://infochangeindia.org/200903147656/Human-Rights/Features/Curfews-and-the-women-of-Ima-Keithel.html>).

### **'Counting Insurgents is like counting stars'**

The first session on Saturday, 7 March, provided participants with an overview of the ongoing situation of conflict, which has lasted nearly 60 years. Three speakers actively involved in human rights movements in Manipur, shared their perspectives on different aspects of the problem. They represented the Kuki, Naga and Meitei, the three largest ethnic communities of Manipur, which is home to about 40 ethnic communities. The following is a summary of the presentations.

**Grace Shatsang**, President of the Naga Women's Union, Manipur (NWUM) explained that the NWUM, which was formed in 1994, brings women of all the Naga tribes under one umbrella in an effort to share problems and look for solutions. In the Naga tradition women have always been peacekeepers and peacemakers. Whenever there was a conflict among tribes even at the village level, it is the women who would intervene and stop the fighting. So women have traditionally been involved in peace-building work. Since peace can return to Manipur only if all communities work towards it, the organisation is involved in training women to be facilitators in peace-building efforts.

Historically, Naga women have been involved in decision-making and even now there is a woman chief. Although, the women are on the whole independent, they are still discriminated against in some customary practices.

The Naga struggle for self-determination started in 1914. Many men gave up their lives for the struggle and women took on the role of protectors of the land even though they do not inherit landed property. The women remaining at home during the conflict were troubled from all sides, with many incidents of rape, murder, disappearance and looting of homes. There are many women-headed families, as well as countless widows and orphans. In fact, the NWUM came into being in

response to a rape case of a young woman by security forces.

With the militants seeking shelter with the people and the security forces harassing them for sheltering militants, life is very difficult for women. The government's policy of divide and rule has created more factions within armed groups, generating enmity, mistrust and suspicion and adding to the complexity of the conflict. Women are left practically without rights and often end up serving as human shields.

**Dr Shatkolai Chongloi**, Vice Chairman, Kuki Movement for Human Rights (KUMHUR) provided a historical perspective on the genesis of current conflicts in the Northeastern region. He dwelt on the history of the Kuki people before and after India's independence, including what is known as the Great Kuki Invasion of 1860 against British intrusion into their territory. He talked about the new policy subsequently adopted by the British which led to the division of Kuki lands into three districts that were then distributed among three provinces: Assam, Bengal and what was then Burma. According to him, it is thanks to the war waged by the Kuki people against the British that the tribal people in the Northeast can claim land as their own.

He also described the Kukis' relationships with the Meitei kings as well as the Nagas over the years, pointing out that the problem between the Kukis and the Nagas was the creation of the government. Talking about the Kuki people's view of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, he said, "Before AFSPA is repealed, we want an Act that is more humane, which will safeguard the interests of and extend security and peace to all the people of the Northeast.

He explained that the Kuki Inpi (traditional government), which fought against the British Empire from 1761 to 1919, was revived in June 1993 as a non-communal force that believes in peaceful co-existence and justice for all. According to him, the political solution for the trouble-torn Northeast in general and Manipur in particular cannot be dealt with by isolating a particular indigenous people or on a piece-meal basis, but has to be found collectively and must be rooted in the lives and cultures of people who have been living together from time immemorial.

**Babloo Loithangbam**, of the Human Rights Alert, pointed out that the insurgency in Manipur continues unabated in spite of the unreserved powers given to the state apparatus. Babloo suggested that only an understanding of the history of Manipur would help to understand what is happening in the state. Manipur is like a bowl, with a valley surrounded by nine ranges of hills. The Meiteis inhabit the valley while the hills constitute the ancestral domain of the Nagas, Kukis and other tribes.

Manipur became part of the British Empire in 1891 as an independent country recognised in the Treaty of Yandaboo. From 1891 to 1947, Manipur was under British rule. In 1947, Manipur regained its independence. The Manipur Constitution Act, 1947, established a democratic form of government with an elected legislature and the Maharaja as the executive head of government. In 1949, the king of Manipur was invited to Shillong to deal with the war compensation issue. Here he was kept under house arrest and was forced to sign the Manipur Merger Agreement. The first battalion of the Indian Army reached and occupied Kangla on 12 October 1949 and on the 15<sup>th</sup> Manipur was officially declared a part of India.

Despite public unhappiness about the undemocratic manner in which the merger took place, and despite the fact that only a small armed force was in place to preserve law and order, no violence erupted. Now there are 55,000 soldiers trying to deal with the law and order situation and an average of 2-3 people are killed every day in the state.

Babloo used the 'Human Needs Theory' to explain the situation in Manipur today, stressing the fact that when the basic needs of human beings are not fulfilled they will try to get them through some means or the other. For example, from 1949 to 2008, the economy of the state changed. In the 1950s the primary sector (farming) and secondary sector (a self-sustaining handicraft and handloom industry) created a firm base, although the tertiary sector – and the political space – began to shrink. By 1990, while the primary sector remained more or less stable, the secondary sector dwindled to half and the tertiary sector doubled. The pattern was of a classic colonial system where the productive and creative aspects of a society are systematically destroyed. The economy was crippled and there was no legitimate political space for debate or dissent. While education spread quickly, without economic growth there were no jobs for educated young people. Manipur produces 5000 graduates per year who have to compete for the 50 legitimate jobs available every year.

He also spoke about the way “structural violence” leads to secondary violence, which manifests itself in the form of self-directed violence, especially affecting frustrated youth (drugs, alcohol, etc.), communal violence (with communities blaming each other for the state of affairs without realising that it is the system that is at fault) and violence involving the state (oppression leading to militancy leading to counter-terrorism).

He went on to talk about the AFSPA and its continuance despite the recommendations of the government-appointed Justice Jeevan Reddy Committee, which has been effectively buried (except by *The Hindu*). Talking about the armed groups operating in the state, he said the highest number of insurgent organisations per capita in the world is in Manipur, pegging the number at 1:100,000. The deeper you look the more the number of outfits you come across, he said: “Counting insurgents is like counting stars.” The response to a question in the Legislative Assembly about armed cadres in the state put the number at 12,000.

In his view, unless the armed groups were addressing some of the core human needs of the people they would not have been able to survive in the climate of suppression by the security forces. He talked about the many issues of development that need to be addressed in the state, with many decisions being taken outside Manipur and the public not being able to express their opinions in the current situation of militarisation. The situation, he said, was like a ticking time bomb.

Quoting an ancient folk tale which says that if you tell a story without reaching the end, a wild elephant will chase you in your dream, he said, “We are ready to rewrite the history of Manipur and create a more inclusive India.”

The talk left the mediawomen gathered in Imphal with though-provoking new angles with which to view this corner of India and understand the human rights and political situation, which is much misunderstood in the mainstream media on the 'mainland'.

### **Gender and Conflict**

**Archana Oinam**, State Coordinator for the Population Foundation of India (PFI) spoke about 'HIV and Conflict in Manipur'. She stated that the districts of Chandul, Churachandpur, Senapati and Tamenglong, districts which had been the flashpoints of ethnic clashes in the 90s, showed the highest prevalence of HIV. According to her there is a complex relationship between poverty, conflict, drug use and HIV/AIDS.

For example, there is documented evidence of the involvement of non-state actors in the drug trade in Moreh. Poverty pushes people into drug peddling and eventually even to gun running in order to protect themselves and their source of livelihood. According to her, "Poverty also makes women vulnerable. They are also targeted by both state and non-state armed personnel to be informers, etc." She added that the ethnic conflict led to break down of both the family and the occupational environment, which contributes to women taking up risky work which increases their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS.

Archana, who coordinates a state programme to build the capacity of People Living with HIV/AIDS at the district levels and has been involved in several studies on the issue of drug use and HIV/AIDS in Manipur, also highlighted another aspect of the connection between conflict and the spread of infections. She pointed out that recurrent curfews, bandhs and strikes pose a serious challenge to HIV intervention programmes. "In such situations, access to clean needles and syringes is not possible; as a result the risks of transmission of HIV and other blood-borne viruses, like Hepatitis B and C, are very high."

**Sobita Mangsatabam**, Secretary of Women Action For Development (WAD), an NGO working on gender and violence, provided an overview of the situation vis a vis gender and conflict in Manipur. She pointed out that men in the age group of 18-34 were the prime victims of the escalating violence in Manipur. "When a male member of a family is killed, it is often the wife, mother, sister and children who are most affected. In cases where the man who is killed is the main earning member of a family, the economic catastrophe adds to the emotional trauma faced by the other family members, especially women," she said. Sobita also said that women are increasingly being used by both the state and militant groups as informers, couriers for extortion letters, etc., while the women themselves sometimes take up sex work and drug peddling to feed the family.

Following the presentations, **Thingnam Ongbi Romita**, wife of the late Dr. Thingnam Kishan, spoke to the gathering. "I represent the thousands of women who have been widowed in Manipur due to the present conflict," she said. Her husband, a civil servant with a reputation for integrity, had been abducted after a meeting with the Deputy Commissioner of Ukhrul from the DC office premises and subsequently found brutally bludgeoned to death along with two other members of the office staff in February. The severe torture to which Kishan was subjected left his body almost unrecognisable. It is believed that the assault was carried out by high-ranking members of an underground group (NSCN-IM) that has been engaged in peace talks with the government over the past decade. Even the NSCN-IM has publicly admitted that their cadres were behind the murder. Disclosing that she had been offered – and had refused – an ex-gratia amount of Rs. 10 lakhs as well as a Manipur Civil Service (MCS) post by the Manipur State Government, to compensate for the loss of her husband, Romita said, "I would rather they used the money to search for the killers."

A 23-minute film, "Shadow Lives," conceptualised and directed by **Thingnam Anjulika Samom**, independent journalist and Convener of NWMI Manipur chapter, was also screened as part of the session. Supported by the North East Network, the film follows the lives of women who have lost their husbands in the armed conflict of Manipur – killed by underground armed groups or by the security forces. The film also looks at issues of patriarchy, gender equations, social customs, children's welfare, fake encounters, ex-gratia payments and how the latter can become another oppressive factor for the women to deal with.

**Thongam Gangarani**, 34, wife of the late Thongam Deben Bamon Kampu, was also present in the session. Gangarani, one of the widows featured in Anjulika's film,

is currently living with her parents at Mongsangei Konjeng Leikai, along with her two children. As she was not being looked after properly in her marital home after her blindness at the time of her eldest son's birth, she and her husband were living in a small room attached to one of her uncle's house at the time of her husband's death. Later, after his death, she shifted to her parents' house.

Face to face interactions with women who had directly suffered the consequences of militancy in Manipur was a sober reminder of how much more needs to be done in terms of highlighting the plight of ordinary persons in Manipur.

Immediately after lunch, participants departed for the venue of the relay hunger strike by the Sharmila Kanba Lup (Save Sharmila Campaign) made up of several women activist groups, the Meira Paibis (women torch bearers). NWMI members were privileged to meet these strong and determined Manipuri women human rights activists who had by then been fasting for 88 days in support of Irom Sharmila's nine-year long fast to repeal the draconian AFSPA. Later they witnessed Sharmila's release from custody on 7 March after a three-hour vigil outside the hospital along with the Meira Paibis and representatives of the local media (she was subsequently taken back into custody on charges of attempted suicide). All the participants felt that they had been fortunate to be present at such a moving historical moment that revealed more than words could convey about the situation in Manipur.

For more details read the NWMI statement issued the next day as well as articles on the subject by NWMI members:

[http://www.nwmindia.org/News/Round\\_up/statement\\_learn\\_from\\_northeast.htm](http://www.nwmindia.org/News/Round_up/statement_learn_from_northeast.htm)

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The Seventh Annual Meeting of the NWMI in Imphal was organised by:

1. Thingnam Anjulika Samom, freelance journalist and Co-ordinator, NWM-Manipur.
2. Ngaseppam Liklaileima, Sangai Express and member, NWM-M.
3. Ratneshori Goswami, NWM-M member and vice president of the All Manipur Working Journalists Union (AMWJU).
4. Laishram (o) Irom Ashalata, freelance journalist and member, NWM-M.
5. Chitra Ahanthem, contributor, *Imphal Free Pres* and member, NWM-M.
6. Lena Phanjoubam, reporter, *Imphal Free Press* and member, NWM-M.
7. Khomdram Bedita, reporter, *Imphal Free Press* and member, NWM-M.
8. Salam Kamla, photo journalist, *Hueiyen Lanpao* and member, NWM-M.
9. Asem Babycha, reporter, *Sanaleibak* and member, NWM-M.
10. Kshetrimayum Chitrabhanu, AIR, Imphal

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This report on the 7<sup>th</sup> annual NWMI meeting was put together by a team of volunteers based in different parts of the country (and beyond), comprising Chitra Ahanthem, Anita Cheria, Vasanthi Hariprakash, Ammu Joseph, Sameera Khan, Laxmi Murthy, Teresa Rehman, Thingnam Anjulika Samom and Kalpana Sharma.