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Nava Thakuria reports from India



Imphal, the capital of Northeast Indian state of Manipur remains in media headlines for various insurgency-related issues, but this time the tiny city witnessed a different kind of program that attracted international media attention. Hundreds of activists sat for solidarity fast in support of an Imphal girl for four days starting on September 13. The thirty-crossed Meitei girl Irom Sharmila Chanu has already completed six years of her continuous fast demanding the repeal of Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 from Manipur. The AFSPA, termed as a draconian law in the country, is applicable in Northeast and Jammu & Kashmir only.

The agitators participated in the demonstration following the appeal of National Alliance of People's Movements (an umbrella front for nearly 200 organizations fighting for human rights in India) and Asha Pariwar with the Manipur Forward Youth Front. Representatives from National Identity Protection Committee (NIPCO), All Manipur Student Union (AMSU), All India Human Right Association (AIHRA), All Manipur Kanba Ima Lup (AMKIL), Thangmeiband Khunthokhambi Meira Paibi lup (TKMPL), All Manipur Social Reformation and Development Samaj, All Manipur Tammi Chingmi Apunba Nupi Lup, Salei Apunba Nupi Lamjing, Salei Lup Chingamokh, Mahila Shanti Sena with others joined the solidarity fast programme. The agitators gathered in front of Jawaharlal Nehru Hospital, Imphal, where the fasting 'iron lady' had been kept by the government for nasal feeding. Hundreds of school students also joined the program.

Sharmila, in fact, has changed the face of protest for Manipur in the last few years. The curly-haired, fair complexioned agitator has completed full six years of her non-violent protest with hunger strike on November 2 last year, which she started immediately after the Malom massacre, where the Assam Rifles personnel killed 10 innocent people. The girl from the Meitei community, Sharmila sat on hunger strike demanding the repeal of AAFSPA) from Manipur. And it is now in seventh year and still continues. The Guinness Book of World Records has already recognized Sharmila as the longest surviving fasting individual in the world. According

to the Guinness Book, it is the longest protest on a social cause by a single individual anywhere in the world.

It may be mentioned that, AFSPA that is applied in Northeast since 1958 empowers the security forces to arrest people without warrant, and use excessive force (including shooting or killing, even if the lives of the members of the security force are not at imminent risk). The Act facilitates impunity because no person can initiate legal action against any member of the armed forces for anything done under the Act, without permission of the central government. Manipur was placed under AFSPA in 1980, since then the state witnessed innumerable killings. Located nearly 2400 km away from the national capital of India, the Burma bordering state is home to 30 ethnic groups. However, the land of jewels (as Manipur literary means) nurtures nearly 25 armed outfits, which have been fighting New Delhi with demands ranging from sovereignty to self-determination. New Delhi continues arguing that the security personnel need AFSPA to deal with the situation affectively.

Lastly Sharmila won the 2007 Gwangju Prize for Human Rights. Instituted by South Korea's Th Gwangju Asian Human Rights Folk School in 1980, the award is conferred to someone, who contributes significantly for human rights and social justice. The Burmese democracy icon Aung Saan Suu Kyi is one of many recipients of the internationally acclaimed award.

Born in 1972 to Irom Nanda and Irom Shakhi, Sharmila is the youngest of the 9 children and showed braveness since her childhood. Moreover, despite the struggles, Sharmila keeps alive her creative efforts. She has completed two poetry books in Manipuri language 'Imadi Khongdai Setlaroi' and 'Khunai Kanba Numit' consisting of around 100 poems. She also writes articles in Manipuri language dailies. Her elder brother, Irom Shinghajt, while reiterating that they would not go against her wishes, however, apprehends that Sharmila is already 'half dead'.

Sharmila has been supported by a number of human rights workers and social activists in the Northeast India and abroad. From the Imphal based the Human Rights' Alert to Naga Women Union of Manipur and the Hong Kong based Asian Human Rights Commission to Bangkok based Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development share solidarity with her. Support has been poured from Katmandu based South Asia Forum for Human Rights to London based Institute of Race Relations and Transnational Institute of the Netherlands. The list of supporters is now elongated with the entry of North East Network, Peace Women Across the Globe, Human Rights Law Network, Aman Trust, PEACE, INSAF, SANGAT, ANHAD, KRITI etc.

Dr Sandeep Pandey, the convenor of NAPM, who lead the solidarity fast in Imphal saluted the zeal of Sharmila to continue her 'fast unto death' programme for almost seven years. The Magsaysay Awardee expressed deep anguish that New Delhi had ignored the recommendations of two committees to real the black law. The Justice Jeevan Reddy Commission (2004), which organized public hearings in various parts of Northeast and understandably recommended the government to repeal the AFSPA. Similarly Veerappa Moily Administrative Reforms Committee also favored the same initiative.

On the fourth day of solidarity fast, a group of selected protesters went to meet Sharmila in the hospital after due permission from the authorities. Speaking to this writer from Imphal, Dr Pandey, who accompanied the team informed, "Sharmila became very emotional in the beginning and she said what she was doing was for all living beings. She said that truth will be victorious in the end and that it was God's Will that she had to undergo this fast."

The eminent social scientists Dr Pandey had more points to add, " The incidents of violence and extortions are not really confined to Northeast and J &K. One can have abundant examples of such acts trough out the country (precisely in UP and Bihar). Then why New Delhi is signing enough to impose AFSPA (or any other black laws) in such states of the country as well? It signifies that the government of India is biased against Northeast and J&K in this particular issue."

Posted on 19 Sep 2007 by Root

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