



IROM CHANU SHARMILA: AN IRON LADY OF MANIPUR

DR. KAPOOR SINGH

**Assistant Professor, Department of History
Govt. (P.G.) College for Women, Sector- 14, Panchkula (HR.)**

Abstract

Irom Sharmila Chanu is a youth icon of India. In the Indian Political history the hunger strike option used by Mahatma Gandhi, Jatin Das, Bhagat Singh, etc and After freedom, this method used by many Indians including Potti Sreeramulu and Anna Hazare. She has been fasting for the past 14 years. Sharmila is demanding the repeal of the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 (AFSPA), which gives sweeping and unquestioned powers to the army in the State. According to the local and many other human rights organisations, this act is responsible for human rights violations in the North-East region and they often called it "draconian" powers of the Army. The AFSPA has been in operation in the Manipur since 1980. No legal action can be initiated against the armed forces for misusing the law without prior approval of the union government. Her peaceful protest was completely ignored by government and at no point during the 14 years have they engaged in discussions with her regarding repeal of AFSPA. Even today, it is unfortunate that many people in India generally know about Anna Hazare but they do not know about Irom Sharmila Chanu. They do not know how AFSPA is violating human rights in North East region in India. The Paper tells about the world's longest hunger- Striker Irom Sharmila Chanu, who is protesting for civil rights and justice in Manipur. Irom Sharmila raised the voice continuously against this law. She is currently under judicial custody, being kept alive by being forcibly nose-fed on a solution of vitamins and other nutrients. She says that, *"My fast is on behalf of the people of Manipur. This is not a personal battle - this is symbolic. It is a symbol of truth, love and peace."* In the world's largest and popular democracy, her hunger strike has become longest in history. At present, Irom Sharmila is still behind bars but her struggle against the AFSPA continues unabated. Her resilience has been recognized around the world. Thus, The paper illustrates the epic and heroic political fast of Irom Sharmila Chanu, and also gives a detail about

the circumstances that forced her to take such a drastic step of indefinite fast. The paper throws light on early life and indefinite battle against injustice of a young Manipuri Irom Sharmila Chanu.

Keyword: Iron Lady of Manipur, Irom sharmila, AFSPA, Hunger Strike

Who is Irom Sharmila Chanu?

Irom Sharmila Chanu is an Indian human rights activist, poetess of Manipur. In Manipur, everyone calls her *Mengoubi* (the fair one). She has also been called “the world’s longest hunger striker” for her longest fast. Irom Sharmila was born on 14 March 1972 in Kongpal, near Imphal in Manipur. Young and stoic Irom Sharmila Chanu is the youngest of Sakhi Devi and the late Irom Nanda Singh’s nine children. Very few Indian citizens, especially outside of the North East, may have heard about the unique story of Irom Sharmila Chanu, who uses her body in a non-violent manner as a protest against the widespread violence in Manipur. Sharmila was a quiet, solitary girl with few selected friends. Sharmila’s brother Singhajit shared his memories of his sister’s childhood. She was not a sharp child at school. She studied till class XII, and never went to college. Newspapers and journals have dubbed her ‘The Defiant Lady’, ‘The Iron Lady of Manipur’, ‘Youth icon’, ‘a satyagrahi’ and ‘an Unlikely Outlaw’.

After that, She joined a social work organisation, and later a human rights body. She attended developmental workshops and also wrote poems in Manipuri Meitei dialect. Her articles were mostly poetic jottings, her inner thoughts. She started writing occasionally for the local vernacular daily Huiyen Lanpao, which carried news of conflicts and other happenings within battle-scarred Manipur. Apart from being a political activist, she is also a poet. She constantly worried about the increasing violence in Manipur especially the atrocities against women. During the IPIC investigations, she was particularly shaken by the testimony of a young girl Mercy Kabui, who was raped by the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in front of her father-in-law at Lamden village. Her poem “*Fragrance of Peace*” is quite popular among the youths of Manipur. This was the turning point of her life because at that time she realized firstly the problem of violence against civilians. The shock and turmoil this experience engendered in Sharmila became crucial to her future course of action in November 2000.

The Longest Hunger Strike

She started her epic battle against the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA) since 2, November, 2000, demanding the government of India to withdraw the Act, which she blames for violence in Manipur and other parts of northeast India. The Act gives draconian powers to the security forces and has repeatedly been used with brazen brutality in the Northeast. On 2 November 2000, in Malom, a town in the Imphal Valley of Manipur, ten civilians were allegedly shot and killed by the Assam Rifles, one of the Indian Paramilitary forces operating in the state, while waiting at a bus stop. The next day’s local newspapers published

graphic pictures of the dead bodies. Under such horrible circumstances, Irom Sharmila Chanu, decided to fight against this law. She informed some of her friends about her fast and then went to her mother to ask her permission for the fast. She spoke to her mother. *“Mother was quiet. She didn’t say anything, but then she blessed me.”* On 6, November 2000, Sharmila sat on the veranda of a house in Malom, not far from the site of the massacre. The local press reported Sharmila’s hunger strike and ran pictures of her. Her brother said, *“People were surprised to see a lone young woman on hunger strike protesting against the military. The next morning, he offered her a toothbrush, but she refused, saying she would not even touch water.”* A few hours later, three days after she launched the strike, she was arrested by the police and charged with an “attempt to commit suicide”, which is unlawful under section 309 of the Indian Penal Code, and was later transferred to judicial custody. Doctors tried to give her saline drips and liquid food, but she refused. Two weeks into her fast, the doctors announced that her system was collapsing and she wouldn’t last more than a few days. Doctors talked about force-feeding her liquid diet; several activists and supporters suggested she accept this. A tube is attached to her nose, from where a calculated dose of food is inserted into her stomach forcefully, in order to keep her breathing and her vital organs alive. For 14 years, nothing solid has entered her body. Not a drop of water has touched her lips. She has not combed her hair. She cleans her teeth with dry cotton and her lips with dry spirit so she will not sully her fast.

In 2006, She visited Mahatma Gandhi’s samadhi at Rajghat and later told a journalist *“I want to tell the people of India that if Mahatma Gandhi were alive today, he would have launched a movement against the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act. My appeal to the citizens of the country is to join the campaign against the army act.”* After her tribute to Gandhi, Sharmila and her supporters moved to Jantar Mantar, the “protest street” of New Delhi. Hundreds of students, activists, scholars and journalists arrived in solidarity. Television networks parked their vans nearby; reporters hovered around her. Two days later, the Delhi Police arrested her. In March 2007, Sharmila willingly returned to Manipur to continue her protest. It is notable that her house where her mother and brother stay is only a few metres away from the hospital. For over 14 years, she has stood by her demand, refusing to eat. As eminent writer Mahashweta Devi expresses, *“The 21st century should be known by the dedication and struggle of Irom Sharmila.”* She has spent most of these years alone in jail, in Imphal. Irom Sharmila said, *“It is not a punishment, but my bounden duty.”* She has been awarded with many laurels for her non-violent contribution towards the human rights movement in the North-East region.

Demand of Irom Sharmila

Irom Sharmila is fasting to protest the killing of innocent people by security forces meant to protect them. She is opposing the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), a law promulgated to curb insurgency in the state. People throughout Manipur live in a state of fear. on the one hand they fear insurgents, on the other hand security forces. The AFSPA has received criticism from several sections for alleged concerns about human rights violations in the regions of its enforcement alleged to have happened. A cycle of violence has been set up by these

two groups. A report by the Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis (IDSA) states that It is a fact that the AFSPA confers extraordinary powers which have been allegedly misused by the military, police and other paramilitary personnel to commit gross excesses without any fear of being punished. Thus, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958, (AFSPA), is a direct assault on the mentioned legal interpretation of fundamental rights which constitutes a cardinal principle of Indian jurisprudence. residents believe that the provision for immunity of security forces urge them to act more brutally. It has ignited wide scale public protests, been criticized by various representatives of the United Nations and other international human rights organizations. It is criticized by the Justice Jeewan Reddy Commission, which is appointed by the Indian Govt. Iron Sharmila Chanu is demanding the removal of the Armed (Forces Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) as applicable in the North Eastern India. Having seen the bloodshed and the temporariness of life, Sharmila decided somebody had to take the lead. And she did. She began her fast to try to force the government to take action. Sharmila has one simple demand – remove AFSPA, as it gives the army power without any accountability. Thus, Sharmila is demanding the right of life without fear. It was a peaceful move – but within a few days she had been arrested and charged with attempted suicide. Her courage and determination are extraordinary. Her story has become a glowing reference to peaceful activism, globally. She is a woman of strong will and determination and she is fighting for a good cause.

Dialogue Efforts

Irom Sharmila has been consistently writing letters to the Indian government and international agencies to press for the revoking of AFSPA, which gives the army absolute power. And though her protest is ignored every day in the world's largest democracy, Sharmila is resolute — *“Unless and until they remove the AFSPA, I shall never stop my fasting.”* On the Malom incident, the government of India has not repealed the AFSPA and had not taken any action against army jawans and officers indulging in atrocities. A team of National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) met her for the first time in the security ward of J.N. Hospital in October, 2013. The National Human Rights Commission declared that she was a “Prisoner of Conscience”. Sharmila's 14-year silent protest should not be ignored. Amnesty International said on this issue that, Indian authorities must immediately release Irom Sharmila. At the time of her Delhi visit, Shirin Ebadi, Nobel Laureate and Irani human rights activist, has also supported Sharmila's cause. Repeal of the law has also been recommended by a number of national bodies including the Second Administrative Reforms Commission, Jeevan Reddy Commission.

The Jeevan Reddy Committee had termed it as *“a symbol of oppression, an object of hate and an instrument of discrimination and high handedness.”* In response to the recommendations by the Jeevan Reddy Commission which was set up in 2004 after the Manorama protests, Pranab Mukherjee, then defence minister said that it is impossible to repeal the Act as the military cannot function without these powers. No final decision on the recommendations has so far been taken by the government. On his visit to Assam in 2006, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh assured the people of the North-East, of replacing AFSPA by a more humane law. But the

actual situation broadly highlights the poor progress made, in this regard. It will be unfair to entirely blame the army for the situation in today. A far greater blame lies on the Centre and the respective state governments. In 2011, Irom invited anti-corruption activist Anna Hazare to visit Manipur, and Hazare sent two representatives to meet with her. In October 2011, she received support from Manipur Pradesh All India Trinmool congress and they urged the party chief to support the cause of Irom. The UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Christ of Heyns, on March 30, 2012, also called for the repeal of AFSPA, saying that: *"AFSPA allows the state to over ride rights. Such a law has no role in a democracy and should be scrapped."* But on this issue, the army however has a different view. The former chief of army staff, Gen V K Singh emphasised that the AFSPA, was a "functional requirement" of the army. The Army officers argue that the absence of requisite legal powers to the units and formations would make them incapable of operating in disturbed areas. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 has always been the focus of any discussion of the problems of Northeast India.

International attention

Sharmila was awarded the 2007 Gwangju Prize for Human Rights, which is given to "an outstanding person or group, active in the promotion and advocacy of Peace, Democracy and Human Rights". She shared the award with Lenin Raghuvanshi of People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights, a northeastern Indian human rights organisation. In 2009, she was awarded the first Mayilamma Award of the Mayilamma Foundation "for achievement of her nonviolent struggle in Manipur".

In 2010, she won a lifetime achievement award from the Asian Human Rights Commission. Later that year, she won the Rabindranath Tagore Peace Prize of the Indian Institute of Planning and Management, which came with a cash award of 5,100,000 rupees, and the Sarva Gunah Sampannah "Award for Peace and Harmony" from the Signature Training Centre.

In 2013, Amnesty International declared her a Prisoner of conscience, and said she "is being held solely for a peaceful expression of her beliefs." The influence made by Irom Sharmila is often considered as powerful as the influences by personalities in the past and present.

Recent Work

In October 2016, she launched a political party named Peoples' Resurgence and Justice Alliance to contest two Assembly constituencies of Khurai and Khangabok. Khangabok is the home constituency of Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh. In the 2017 Manipur Legislative Assembly election, the winner in Thoubal, Ibobi Singh, received 18,649 and Sharmila received 90 votes; the fewest of the five candidates.

In 2019, after the death of Gauri Lankesh, Sharmila criticized the NDA government, accusing it of disregarding people's sentiments when making policy decisions. In an interview with The Economic Times, she mentioned that she was no more interested in politics as she already experienced electoral politics and the dirtiness involved in the process. After the MHA tweeted removal of the AFSPA from swathes of the North East the Chief Minister of Manipur called for a day of celebration to which he would invite Irom Sharmila as a guest.

Conclusion

For decades the peoples of the North-East have been sandwiched between the violence prompted by extremist elements and atrocities of the armed forces. AFSPA is a blot on the Indian democracy. In fact, Sharmila is not fasting unto death. Rather, she is fasting unto life, to remove a brutal law that allows the murder of innocent people. In staking a claim to peace as a basic right to all people, she has become a symbol, an icon and an inspiration. She has decided to sacrifice 'normal' life for the sake of a higher cause. Much more, the episode of Irom Sharmila also brings about serious questions about our democracy and how it operates at ground level. The Manipur government should immediately convene the state Assembly on an emergency basis and pass a resolution urging the Centre to repeal AFSPA from the state immediately. This would automatically ensure that the army would be withdrawn from counter-insurgency operations. The struggle is not of Irom Sharmila or of Manipur alone. It is for the entire North East. Merely writing articles or giving condolences won't work, much more needs to be done. We need to be united. We need to tell the Government that we all want it to be repealed. There is no doubt that in insurgency and militancy affected areas, provisions must be made for the protection of the armed forces during operations and as such many provisions of the Act are perfectly valid and essential. But in a democracy, public opinion and perceptions must be taken into account when examining whether a particular act needs to be reviewed or even repealed.

It is not forgetable that she lives with the nagging pain of a tube thrust into her nose. No man or woman in the history of any struggle anywhere in the world has ever gone through such a long, consistent period of hunger fast. Indian Government should understand that being anti-AFSPA is not being anti-Indian. A message must be sent out to the people of disturbed states like Manipur that the government is willing to address, both their real and perceived sense of injustice, by making necessary changes to existing laws. It is the right time for the Indian govt to think about the valuable life of Young Irom Sharmila and also think over the so called insurgency problem in the Manipur and North-East region. But the Indian Government is not trying to negotiate with her. This is against the backdrop of national/international human rights groups, including United Nations, asking the government of India to repeal AFSPA. In the world's biggest democracy, her hunger strike has become longest in history. She is a living legend of non-violence and for this battle defiantly history will remember her. She expressed her desire "to live a normal life". So the government of India should try to look her precious life and to understand this on the basis of humanity and justice. Finally, we hope the suggestions made will be considered by

policy makers with all seriousness and prompt decisions will be taken to restore the credibility of the government of India.

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