

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS:
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: INDIA

**Transcript of Ima Thokchom Ramani Devi
Interviewer: Binota Loitongbam and Esther Chinnu**

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Ima Thokchom Ramani Devi, born in 1930, is currently the General Secretary of All Manipur Women's Reformation and Development Samaj. The Samaj was registered in 1978. There was no office as such. It kept shifting from one place to another. The last office the Samaj occupied was demolished and currently the Samaj is temporarily located in the green room of an amphitheatre in Imphal. The Samaj has taken up several issues like banning of alcohol, rape, individual cases of women, and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. Ima Thokchom Ramani Devi belongs to the Meitei community and has studied only up to the primary level. In her growing up years she learnt to weave, dance and sing. 27th August 1965, which is still observed as the Hunger Marchers' Day, was her first initiation into action to demand rights. She is currently known for the struggles she has waged with her group for the cause of women and for the cause of peace in the region.

Binota Loitongham and **Esther Chinnu** (interviewers) are in charge of the Imphal branch of the North East Network, which is an organisation that networks with people and groups in the North East to bring important issues to the forefront, especially human rights issues being raised by the women's groups.

Ima Thokchom Ramani Devi Transcript

Binota: Ima, tell us where you grew up and also about your parents?

Ima: My mother got married in Loklaobung, Moirangkhom.¹ I was born there. When I was seven to eight months old, my father went to Mau to study; he took a second wife with him. At that time in Moirangkhom there was sparse settlement. Mother, my paternal grandmother and myself stayed together. We couldn't stay there; so my mother took me back to her maternal home in Thongam Leikal where I grew up. My paternal grandmother went to live with her married daughter. When I was seven or eight years old in Thongam Leikai, there was a first time bombing in the Japanese war.² I fled to Thoubal at the first instance of bombing. When we were fleeing during bombing to Thoubal, as I was still a kid, I couldn't walk all the way, my mother at times gave me a ride on her back. We also took rice to eat on the way. We stayed in Thoubal for more than a year. Then, we returned to Thongam Leikai for a while. There was a second bombing and we ran to Wangoi. Then there was no transportation, so we walked. While walking we crossed the Heirangoithong bridge. Heirangoithong was a thatched bridge then. We kept resting and eating rice on the way. We stayed in Wangoi for some years. (...)

Binota: When your father left, how did your mother raise you up, how did you grow up?

Ima: After my father left, I grew up in Thongam Leikai. I was my mother's only child. The school was destroyed in the war. As I was an only child, my mother was concerned that I might fall into the pond, or get hit by cows on the way to school. So I couldn't study, although I wanted to. Thus my mother raised me by weaving clothes. My maternal uncle was the only son, he also had only one daughter. So, my mother used to weave and I used to participate in the community music like *Shumang Leela*³ and *Sanjenba*⁴. I used to sing and also weave. We grew up like that. As young girls, we courted young boys as it was prevalent at that time. The elders advised us not to elope. The young boys agreed to send their elders for asking my hand, but if my parents refuse, we have to elope. I was afraid of elope; I said I cannot elope. I was also not so serious about any of the boys, though used to court them. So, after three years of efforts by the elders to arrange, I got married at this place, Heirangoithong.

Binota: Ima, you said about courting at that time, could you elaborate about the courtship.

Ima: Courting at that time meant, three or four bachelors visiting the girl's home together. They came in a dhoti⁵ and used to remove their chappal⁶ in the front yard. The elders used to announce that guests have come and ask us to spread the mat and we girls used to spread the mat

¹ These are locations within Manipur, which is a small, landlocked state in a mountainous area in the extreme north-east of India, on the border of Myanmar.

² This is a reference to World War II, as experienced in this location.

³ 'Shumang' means 'open courtyard' and 'leela' means play; the literal meaning of Shumang leela is "play of the open courtyard". It has affinity with proscenium theatre in form, however, it is performed in an open courtyard surrounded by spectators on all four sides.

⁴ a traditional Manipuri classical opera ballet for children

⁵ Garment worn by Indian men, wrapped around the lower part of the body.

⁶ Leather sandals.

and offer tobacco when the elders told us to. While we sat, sometimes three or four other boys used to come for courting. Knowing others have come these three boys would leave and the other three would sit down. The boys were welcomed like any other guest to the family and offered tobacco. They came wearing dhoti and chaddar⁷ and left their chappal in the front yard before entering. So that was it. We used to spend time playing *Likkol*, a game between girls and boys. So while playing, when the boys proposed to me and persuaded me to elope, I refused. They were ready to send their elders to ask my elders but in case they refused, they requested me to save their honour, which meant, to elope. But, elopement at that time, as elders told us, involved running and hiding, I was afraid of. So I said I could not elope. Then the elders arranged a match for me with a total stranger. The arrangement took three years. At first there is *mangolkakhatpa*, where the two families get to know each other, then *waroipot*⁸, and then *heijingpot*⁹, only then the marriage took place. It was considered fashionable to carry the bride on an elephant, so the groom's side hired an elephant. My uncle said that one can ride the elephant anytime if one had the money, but one only rides the doli¹⁰ once; so there was some argument. But I was carried on the elephant. They kept the elephant ready at the gate. When I came out in the bridal dress, the heavy border of the dress must have touched the elephant. While kneeling down the elephant roared so loudly that I just ran off holding up my bridal dress. Everyone shouted, 'Stop, stop!' Then I sat on the elephant. Its skin was very hard and scratchy. I sat in front with someone behind me. There used to be a two-rupee coin with a hole in the centre and during the ride from Sinjamei Keithel to Heirangoithong Keithel. I threw the coins all the way. I lived in Heirangoithong Makha in Awang Maibam Leikal locality. (...)

Binota: At what age did you marry, and how was your married life?

Ima I married at the age of 17. After I had two children, my parents were reunited. After my third child my husband got another wife. When he brought the second wife, I wasn't comfortable staying with them. So I asked him to leave the house with the second wife saying, I don't want to see them. He went to stay at his wife's maternal home. Four, of us—my three children and myself—stayed back. I was pregnant with my fourth child then. When my delivery time came, I asked him to stay with me during the delivery and go after the house was clean again. As we stayed with the elders, many things had to be taken into consideration like purity and pollution taboos. (...) So, you see, I faced a lot of hardship during those times when he had the second wife. He went away to stay with the second wife and I stayed with my four children. After the baby was born she was there for around four to five years. She didn't have any children. After that they separated and she got married to another man. She has no children till today. When I got married, my husband's family were doing well, but after my fourth or fifth child—fifth child—we were very poor; it was very difficult. We ate in the morning, skipped the evening meals, or skipped the morning food and ate only in the night etc. Then, during those times... we... I should say this later... we used to starve then. Those were difficult times. Even if we had money, there was no rice available. At night the child cried at the breast as there was no milk, due to starvation. The baby used to cry as it couldn't sleep. So, I had to keep the baby on my

⁷ Shawls worn by men and women in this region.

⁸ The next stage when the groom's family members bring food and the contract is finally sealed.

⁹ Finally the engagement is declared amongst the friends and relatives, and friends and relatives from the boy's side then go to the girl's parents with food, fruits and presents. The girl's parents also invite their friends and relatives.

¹⁰ The bridal carriage.

back and I used to spend the night sitting on the stool, keeping my hands like this. My husband was a little understanding then as the second wife was not anymore with him. (...)

Binota: Ima, can you tell us about the andolan¹¹ on 27 August 1965.

Ima: In the year 1965, rice was very scarce; it was at the time of Moirang Koireng¹². Money was there but there was no rice to buy; many were starved at that time. Rice was so scarce that people ate paddy without seeds after grinding and frying it. Rice was not rationed. We came up to the Chief Minister, Moirang Koireng's bungalow as ration cards were promised. Many students also came up to the bungalow shouting, "We are hungry, give us rice." We first went to the Chief Minister's bungalow, demanding cards. Moirang Koireng went inside the bungalow as many people tried to surround him. We dragged him out of the bungalow; we dragged him out and shouted demanding rice. Then he went to the Governor's place. Those days it was walled with thorns not cemented like today. He told us to go to Kangjeibung and wait saying he'd distribute the cards there and went inside. Hoping to get the cards we sat there with the girl students. But he never came out.

We were enraged. All of us women and the students went and surrounded the governor's bungalow. When we surrounded the bungalow, they went and hid inside. So Promodini, Choubhan and Nabakumar, all of them drove inside the bungalow in the jeep. My seven or eight-month-old baby was on my back. I had nowhere to keep her. They told us that tear gas would be released and that we should remain still and not run in fear. But as I had my baby with me, I was afraid the smell of gas will harm the baby. So, I came out hastily through the northern gate of the governor's bungalow. As I came out and walked a little, I saw a rickshaw; I came back. When I neared the post office area, there was firing, but luckily I wasn't there with my baby. That was when Nabakumar, Choubhan, Pramodini and many died. There was trampling and firing and many got stuck in the thorns, many were injured. Those were hard times. That was the time of Moirang Koireng. That day he came after inaugurating the Kangchup Bridge. He had a long sindoor¹³ on his forehead. I was there in that andolan¹⁴ that day.
(...)

Binota: Ima, can you tell us about the women's movement in the past?

Ima: We observe every year that protest for rice as *Chaklaam Khongchat*, or march by hungry people. Other than that, there was this incident due to rice scarcity called *Nupi Lan*¹⁵ when I was a young girl. They had exported the rice to many different places but we had no rice. There were elders called Shabi, Tungbu and many others... I forget the name of Kasturi's son... the Kasturis said that Manipuris should be given their feet's dust. The Kasturis had sent away the rice in all

¹¹ Political protest or movement

¹² Moirang is a district situated in the north east of India. During World War II, Moirang was the headquarters of The Indian National Army (I.N.A) or Azad Hind Fauj. The INA was an auxiliary force to the Imperial Japanese Army in its southern mainland campaign during the Second World War. Shri Koireng Singh was a member of the INA and was Chief Minister of Manipur.

¹³ Red mark on forehead between the eyes (also called bindi); sign used in Hindu religion indicating the mystic third eye; applied to both men and women. The same mark is also used to indicate married status in women.

¹⁴ Movement or protest.

¹⁵ Women's war; in this case, a protest against rice policies (1939), but Manipuri women engaged in several different "nupi lan" recounted in this interview. See also <http://themanipurpage.tripod.com/culture/women.html>

directions, so there was no rice for the people. The elder women tried to stop the rice export to all directions. There was a struggle, that is the *Nupi Lan* as we know today and we have the memorial complex. We were still young then, so we were not part of that incident but the elders used to tell us—‘Thangjam Mill is destroyed, rice mill is destroyed’ and so on. There was also another incident narrated by the elders, I don’t know, whether it should be before or after... Earlier, Bor Saheb’s house was burnt down. But it wasn’t due to rice scarcity. They couldn’t determine how and where it started, so were not able to accuse and punish anybody. So from one of the Manipuri house, they bought out some hay, sticks and wood and the Bor Saheb forced the men to build the house as a punishment. They were told to get wood from the Kabaw valley to build the house. They began to torture the men. Then the women got angry. They agitated in front of the Nambul river bridge throwing hay, sticks etc. That was a women’s andolan as narrated by the elders, Those are the two women’s wars. After that we came. After many issues, we took up Nishabandhi.

Binota: Ima, tell us how the Nishabandhi¹⁶ movement started and later how it came to be called known as the Meira Paibis?

Ima: Before we actually started Nishabandhi there were many cases. There was a drunkard who came home and killed his wife and threw her in the river at night. We found the body in the morning. In another incident, a man stabbed his wife after drinking. Another drunkard jumped in the water to take bath and died. There was a young girl who became blind after her drunken father stabbed her in the eye with a knife. There were many incidents of stabbing and fighting during *Thabal Chongba*¹⁷ and other festivals. They would drink a quarter but act as if they’ve consumed a full bottle and they seemed to become more wild after seeing us. Then around 1974, we started working against alcoholism. At first there was Mukhra Sana’s prohibition work. Their work was different. We began as alcoholism was still not banned. We started when Indira Gandhi¹⁸ was there. We started working seriously around 1975. We began to form small associations in every locality and started fighting alcoholism from all directions, from Top Khongnangkhang, Noariya Pakhang Lakpa, Langthabal, all the places. Thongju, Kongba and in nearby places. How we caught the culprit was—they used to dig a corner and hide the bottles there, covered with firewood. They filled the water bags with alcohol and put them on the bed under the pillow. They also stored it in water pots pretending that it was drinking water. This was the way we began to catch hold of them. In other places, in the tribal Christian areas also, Nishabandhi work started. We went to Chandel, they dug a long pit, dumped the bottles there and covered it with a wooden plank and a man was sleeping on top of it holding a vitamin syrup bottle pretending to be sick. We made him stand up and found those bottles. We made him empty the bottles. We also found big brewing pots. We were naïve then, so we took them to the Sub Inspector, who gave us Rs.5¹⁹ as reward. In Chandel, we emptied the brewing pots with

¹⁶ It was in 1975 that women in large numbers started anti-liquor movement in urban as well as in rural areas. The women in groups at this stage were known as Nisha Bandhis and their organization as Nisha Bandh Organization.

¹⁷ Thabal Chongba is a popular Manipuri folk dance associated with the festival of Holi. The literal meaning of Thabal is 'moonlight' and Chongba means 'dance', thus 'dancing in the moonlight'. Traditionally conservative Manipuri parents did not allow their daughters to go out and meet any young men without their consent. Thabal Chongba therefore provided the only chance for girls to meet and talk to the boys. In earlier times, this dance was performed in the moonlight accompanied by folk songs.

¹⁸ Former Prime Minister of India.

¹⁹ Five rupees (small unit of currency).

fermented rice. It made the people there angry. Momon was the General Secretary, Choubi was the President and I was the Publicity Secretary, Taruni was the Vice President then. During our fight, as we had thrown away their alcohol, they were angry. Momon and myself went to the SI's office. There were around thirty-four-thirty-five tribals in one room. At first, one of them came out and then two or three came out and suddenly grabbed Momon's hair and pulled her. It was so sudden that Momon fell and they started beating her with sticks. I tried to prevent the blows like this; while preventing I got bruised, my glasses were broken and one of my earrings got lost. Then the OC came out and they arrested fifteen of them. Although they were released we took thirteen of them to the court and we won the case. They were proved wrong. There was also a man, Rabei, from Heirangoithong. We caught him in his house and they accused us of stealing their belongings and a case was filed against us. But we won that also. At first, whenever the police came, the women were afraid of them. Later on we were not afraid. We became wiser and were no longer afraid. Instead of handing over the accused and the things we just destroyed the contents. So we started working earnestly to stop alcoholism. A woman from Top, from Kangla Siphai side, she stopped selling alcohol after we caught her. To enable her to start a small business, Trilokchand, a Marwari²⁰, who helped us a lot, gave her Rs. 500 which was a big amount those days. After Nishagandhi²¹, even the drunkards respected us and said, 'Ima Namaste²².' They sobered up seeing us and became normal; they became gentle. Fighting and violence was reduced... When we used to stop their fights, we used to get badly bruised. We did Nishabandhi the best way we could. Once Momon was not hurt, but I was badly bruised. When I went back home, I didn't take off clothes even for a bath, afraid my family would stop me from going out again. I very much wanted to stop alcoholism as it affected children and women. We used to have a club without walls in my locality. A drunkard came and started kicking the thatch wall. The club secretary reported to the police. The man threatened the club secretary. The police went after him but couldn't catch him. The drunkard threatened saying, 'Eat your favourite food now, because I am going to kill you later. The same day, there was a drama to be held in the community and we were out for Nishabandhi. For four or five days we were on the lookout for him. When all of us were out, this man hit a woman with a hockey stick. She was injured badly. All the women and men began looking for him. We reported to the police and then all of us searched for him in all possible places, under the bed, cupboards... We wondered where he had disappeared; he had just been there. Then we found him on the roof of the house. He didn't come down, till the police pointed a gun at him and took him away. But whenever drunkards are arrested the police don't keep them in the jail. They release them when they become sober. So they are back to drinking again. There were many such cases where we caught and counselled them. Later, in many places, this Nishabandhi action caught up. In Keisamthong, Kakhulong area, there was people's action to ban selling and consumption of alcohol. There was an andolan to destroy the whole locality and fights erupted. Thus we faced a lot of hardship. In 1975 we formed All Manipur Women's Social Reformation Development Samaj in Hoareichandbi. After forming All Manipur, we started all this work I mentioned. Then around 1980, the movement—the Meira Paibi movement²³—came about.

²⁰ A person from the Marwar region of Rajasthan in India.

²¹ Nishagandhi Dance Festival or Nishagandhi Nritya Utsav is held in the month of October and March in the city of Trivandrum. This dance festival is held in Nishagandhi Theatre, in Kanakunnu palace compound.

²² Hello, Ima.

²³ The next phase of the women's movement as a collective force in Manipur was in the beginning of the 1980s. Manipur was declared a disturbed area, and security and para-military forces were deployed. When civilians were affected resulting in the arresting and beating, killings, disappearance of youths, raping of women, sexual

(...)

Binota: Ima, you've told us how women were in action going to different communities for Nishabandhi. You were a housewife looking after your family, how did you get fully involved in Nishabandhi and how was the Samaj formed?

Ima: As a woman I started getting involved in this kind of work. As in the community there were a lot of fights after drinking, I was concerned. I have no fear when I am working for the wellbeing of the people. When All Manipur was formed Choubi was the President Momon was the Secretary, Taruni was the Vice President and I was the Publicity Secretary. Other members were there and we formed committees. In many other places where people didn't know about Nishabandhi and the problem of alcoholism was there, they called upon us. We went there and formed committees. So Nishabandhi started in those places also. At first when we went out for Nishabandhi at night we didn't hold torches. With torch light in one hand and a stick on the other hand, we hid in bushes or roamed around. This way we went to places and formed committees. At first we didn't have an office. First we registered at Nagamapal. We got the registration number in 1977-78. After that we had our first office in a small library in a hall in Nagamapal. We were there for a while. The government destroyed the library for building a bridge. Then we were in Haobam Marak, in the house of one of the advisors. Then we shifted to Keisham Leikai; it was nearby. Many tribals and others from far away places used to come. We had no space to eat food. At night we used to spread out the banana leaves on the road and eat when there were many guests. When that was also not possible, we shifted to our President Pebam Choubi's place. This disturbed the family. The brother of one of the organisers had a small shop in Konung Mamang. It was about to be demolished; we shifted there. Around 1975 we started working seriously. From the early 80s to late 80s we went to many places for Nishabandhi. There were cases of wife-beating, throwing the food at the wife and cases of beating up children and the husband drinking while the family starved. Many people came with cases to All Manipur Women's Social Reformation Development Samaj. With our Secretary and the President leading, we worked earnestly to arrest and ban alcoholism. I told you before, how we went to Chandel and caught the people there. On December 29, 1980, some unknown person had planted a bomb in Maibam Leikai. I wouldn't have known it. That day, on a cold December morning around 3.30, it was still dark. I went cycling to Kwakeithel to our Secretary Momon's place. I had to go to some place with her. Momon was not there. She had stayed the night at the President's place. Then, I went to the President's place to call Momon. I asked them to come with me. Choubi Didi told us to go ahead as she wanted to take bath. We had tea in a hotel. There we heard, in Awang Maibam Leikai, under the Heirangoithong bridge, a bomb had been planted and that combing operation was going on there. I'd just come cycling over that bridge. Had I not come by the edge of the road I might have died. We were worried. We came back home hurriedly. The place was surrounded by army personnel. "Where are you going?" they asked, "We're going home," replied Momon Didi. Momon spoke Hindi well. There we saw many young boys, hands tied like this, lying on either side of the road, on that cold December

abuse of minor boys etc, women initiated a movement to protect the innocent persons, eventually known as "Meira Paibis" (Torch bearers) and their organization as "Meira Paibi Organization". Over time the Meira Paibis became involved in resolving family conflicts, in checking and controlling immoral traffic, and in arresting and handing over the persons who are involved in drug trafficking, etc. Today Meira Paibis are called to solve the conflicts, but they also engage in protest activity as necessary.

morning. We thought they had died in the blast, but they had been picked up by the army. There was an innocent young man in our locality, in no way connected with this. He was preparing for an interview for the SI's post. He'd gone for a morning run on the Canchipur road. After he came back, he took off his wet shoes and he was sweeping his front yard. In the combing operation, all the young men were tied and kept on the roadside and the old men were shepherded into an open ground; only the women were left at home. When the army came to the young man's home, while he was sweeping, they brought a dog. The dog sniffed and found the shoe; it took the shoe to the place where the bomb was found. They took the shoe, brought it back to his place, the smell of the shoe matched with his.

(...)

The dog held on to him like this, then the army caught, blindfolded and took him away to the camp. We could go in there but not come out. I told the General Secretary, "This boy they've taken is innocent, he had no bad name in the locality. If even he can be arrested...there were many others arrested in the locality in the same way, screaming and shouting. We thought they were guilty—they were caught, their hands tied back and hauled inside the truck as if they were sacks of rice. They are also beaten up as if it's the end; their backs will be broken—beaten up as in hell. They are caught and beaten, caught and beaten...but we were there then as part of Nishabandhi, so we couldn't speak out. The boy, Ibomcha, was arrested—that day three of them were arrested— Ibomcha was arrested on charges of planting the bomb. (...)

Since Didi knew Hindi I told her "Ichema, till today we have thought that the army arrested the youth because they were at fault. But in this incident, I know Ibomcha very well and know his innocence. So we must rescue him from the army camp. We were then working as a Nishabandhi group. Wearing old clothes as disguise I came out to mobilise the women in our locality. An army guard standing at my gate with stengun ordered me to go in. I went in and wore very old and tattered clothes. Before the combing operation started I mobilized many women in the locality. After the combing operation started many women came out. We thought we'll go to the army camp to release the boy. By then even the President who lived far away had reached the place. In order to get the boy from the army camp around 100 women gathered. The drunkards mocked at us saying, "When MLAs and ministers are unable to bring them out, what can you women do? You'd better stay with the army." They swore at us this way. We took no notice of the comments. When we decided to go to the army camp, from among 100 women, many made excuses, as they were afraid, that they had to change or go to the toilet. Around 30 to 40 of us remained. And we proceeded to the army camp at Langthabal. It was on December 29, 1980. As we approached the camp, near the hill we shouted, "Our son is innocent; give him back to us." The army personnel seeing us approaching called out "Halt." Only two of us were allowed to enter. So the General Secretary Momon and myself went in. They asked us what it was and we told them, "Our son is innocent; give him back to us." (...) The army personnel told us that they would have a meeting and that we should come after two hours. We moved away from the camp and waited. After two hours, we were called in and the boy was handed over to us. He was not able to walk properly. So we took a bicycle and made him sit on the carrier with some of us supporting him and came home. On reaching home, the boy was unable to function. We asked about how he was treated at the camp. He softly told us that water was poured through his nose till his stomach was full but he hadn't spoken—Ibomcha was married then and had a child—after

that his two feet were stretched out and were ground with a big boulder breaking some of his bones and muscles. So he was unable to walk. After that he stayed at home. Due to the bomb scare, the army came in groups to our locality. They said that some underground people might come and they were going to arrest them. So even if someone was ill, about to deliver or needed a doctor, no boy came out to call for help. We went out in the night with lanterns but as the wind was blowing, it was of little use. Then we soaked pieces of cloth in kerosene, wrapped them around wooden sticks and with that light we went to call the traditional healers for help. It was on 29th December 1980 that for the first time we took Meiras [torches] and went around so that they could differentiate between women and men and not harm us in any way. We could also see the army. So the day Ibomcha was held we took out the Meiras for the first time. The two sons of the men who had mocked us were also among those arrested by the army. One was a driver in the electricity department. Some wires were found in his house. The other was from a poor family, and the mother used to collect old metal scraps and sell them. Two used bullet shells were found among the metal scraps. So these two were first taken to the police then to the court and brought back to the police. So they came to us to release them as the family was unable to do so. We were asked to help in rescuing them. The families feared to be alone. So General Secretary Momon and Choabi stayed for four to five days with the families of the two boys. So even though those men had mocked us they came to us for help. When we went to plead for their release, we were told that one of them had planted the bomb and the other was involved in making the bomb, so they could not be released. As the spot where the bomb was planted was very close to their houses, we answered saying, "If they'd planted the bomb so close to their houses, they would surely be hurt if the bomb exploded. As they'd not even deserted their houses for safety someone else must have planted the bomb." So since we were able to give reasonable explanations, the boys were handed over to us. This was the first time that the Nishabandhi women were able to release three arrested youths. One was from the army camp, the others from the court and police. Since we had begun the Meira Paibi movement with this incident, it spread to many areas and the news of the release spread far and wide. After this we said that no one can arrest any person at random in front of us. If they arrested people without finding out whether they were guilty or not, we protested, followed the army everywhere with Meiras in our hands. The army'd walk on the side of the road while we'd go in the middle of the road with Meiras. They would ask us, "Ma, where are you all going?" We would say, "We are going for patrolling." And whenever they arrested any youth, we would try to intervene and stop them from arresting without ensuring whether he was innocent or guilty. As we started travelling to different areas, we had problems with our travelling expenses. We started selling our personal jewellery and wore artificial ones so that our family would not scold us. We sold our clothes, we even mortgaged the drinking bowls of our husbands, so when they wanted to drink water they would be missing. Anything we could lay our hands on.... Thus we travelled. The first time we held the Meiras on December 29, 1980—the day of the week we forget—so we'd taken the arrest report copy from the police so that it would remain in history. After a year we observed the day as *Pari Kanba* or *Meira Houba* (Rescuing of our sons/Rising of the Meiras) so that it will forever be remembered in history. This year it will be the twenty fourth anniversary of this day. After that many people approached All Manipur when boys were arrested. In running around to help we had no time for ourselves anymore, not even for a bath. At times the boys'd be handed over to us. Like this the Meira Paibis went to different areas and the news of our work spread. Thus we were known as the Peace Keepers of the land. We continued with our work and from the year 1964 till today we have not returned home. When we are asked we say that we try to adjust

between our home and work. Be it day or night, we try to do some work although it may not be economically useful. Due to the nature of our work we own nothing personal anymore. We have utilised our personal jewellery, clothes etc, for the group's expenses. The clothes we are wearing are also mostly given by people who know about us. We are not able to buy any personal things of our own, even this earring is given by someone.

(...)

Binota: Ima, after the formation of Nupi Samaj, what work was taken up by the Nupi Samaj.

Ima: We have done a lot of work. There was Kunjarani from Khurai, she was working in her aunt's house. The man of the house raped her and she hanged herself. When we went there she was still alive. When we were approached and went there she was still alive. She was in the hospital for a long time. She was alive for a very long time. We nabbed the man and handed him over to the police. (...) Property disputes also came to us but we only negotiated between the parties. We tried to negotiate as far as possible. We didn't know the law. We told them not to fight and to settle things peacefully. If they agreed it was fine; otherwise we told them to go to the court. There was the case of a grandmother and grandson in Toubal. The grandmother loved her grandson. But the grandson after drinking heavily, wrung the grandmother's neck thinking it was that of a chicken on a duck. The blood was splattered all over. That was a mad case; we left it as family case. The neck was wrung and flung on the floor. The grandson said he mistook it for a duck. He was so drunk. That was a mad case; we left it as a family case. Later, there was the case of a fight between a husband and wife. The wife came running to us saying she can't live there anymore. When the husband came to take her back, she refused to go saying she was afraid of him. As she refused to go we told the husband to leave. We said, "If you want your wife back, we'll take her to her parents' home. You can get their permission." So we took her to her parents at Khongjom. With the parents' consent they went back together.

Binota: Ima, you told us that you were fond of singing and dancing during your childhood. What kind of songs and dances did you like?

Ima: I participated in Sanjenba, Rasa dance, Holi Pala, Khubak Ishei. After my children grew up, I participated in Moirang Parba. I enjoyed watching Khamba Thoibi. I liked the character of Nongban.²⁴ I really wanted to know whether I'd be good at playing the character of Nongban at that age. I tried it out once and I got the best actor award.

Binota: In performance, which do you like more, Rasleela²⁵ or Khamba Thoibi²⁶?

²⁴ In the Khamba Thoibi dance, Chief Nongban is represented as the fool in the story and is a rival to Khamba. Nongban is the Chief of the Angom clan.

²⁵ The 'Raasleela' is the Cosmic Dance in which featured Krishna and the Gopis.

²⁶ There is a belief that Radha and Krishna were the original authors and creators of Manipuri dance. Uma and Shiva repeated this Rasa-dance in Lasya style in Manipur. After many centuries the same Rasa-dance was performed for the third time by two mortals, Toibi and Khamba. These star-crossed lovers died in tragic circumstances. In the 15th century AD, Khamba, a prince of the *Khumal* Royal family fell in love with Thoibi - a princess of the *Morang* clan. The union would have been politically advantageous for both families but the Moirang chief resisted on purely personal grounds. The result was tragic not only for the young lovers but also for the feuding tribes of Manipur.

Ima: As I have told you, I have played Nongban. In Nupi Pala, I have sung following the lead singer. I participated in the chorus. At times I also sang a solo piece. I couldn't memorise much but I took part. I'm not very good at singing but I've performed all through these years, whatever the trend. If my voice had been good, I'd have been famous. But I am interested in singing, so I just participated. My voice is not good. I just memorise and can sing in tune.

While performing as Nongban we have to stand up. But in Holi Pala²⁷ we can sit and sing with the cymbals.

Ima singing here

*Hey sakhi Radha,
Look how beautiful Shyam is! Come and see...
Hey sakhi Radha,
Come and see Shyam
Peacock feather on Shyam's head,
Green lotus painted on Radha's hand...
Come and see...
This is how it goes*

(...)

Binota: Ima, you have been doing social service for long. How do you manage your role in your family as a mother, as a wife etc.? How do you manage the two?

Ima: I worked day and night. I finished cooking in the morning before the children went to school and then I went outside for people's work, when they were young. I had to come back before them. This way I managed both housework and community work. After my children grew up, I started spending whole nights out for the community; I stayed in the office. It is just like an addiction. When it is necessary I just feel like going out. I want to be in gatherings, in banning alcoholism, Anything that is for the people, I want to be there. People also keep inviting me to attend meetings. Since we have our office here people do invite. I don't stay at home much. Invitations keep coming. I also like to advise the young people I've known from their childhood. Whenever the army does wrong or picks up somebody, we protest. If an innocent boy is picked up we try to stop it. Even if he is guilty we seek his release after a while. Now that I am old my children and grandchildren serve me. So I am not doing much housework. Even if I go back home I have nothing much to do. So long as I am strong and have the time I want to dedicate myself to serving the people. Till today I am serving the people. I am weak now, but I take injections for Rs. 120-130 per month for my strength. If I have pain I take tablets and go out. Till I become very sick and can't get up, I'd want to serve the people Till the end.

(...)

²⁷ *Holi Pala* is a form of dance.

Binota: The women's role in the history of Manipur is known everywhere. But what about the men of Manipur?

Ima: Be it India or elsewhere, men tend to fight with one another, resulting in killings and violence. That is why, women are out to prevent these fights and killings and to stop violence from spreading. (...)

Binota: Ima, you have told us about a young man being picked up by the army in a combat operation. We have the Armed Forces Special Powers Act²⁸ or AFSPA. How've you been working in this context?

Ima: After the AFSPA came, in April 26, 1980, in the very beginning, in Langjing there was an open firing between the army and the insurgents. During the firing, a pregnant woman called Bino who was hiding in the rice store room was killed. While the people were still angry with the killing, the very next day, in the Khwairamband market, a woman selling gold jewellery was carelessly shot by the army with their guns walking inside the market. Women's problem... Many such cases were there. A month later, on 28th May, was a mass agitation. We weren't Meira Paibi but Nishabandhi then. When the women surrounded the army, they got scared. They picked up the people in jeeps and drove them away to distant places. Pyari, a young woman from Keinou fell down from the jeep in Salanthong and died. From then on we started an andolan to repeal the Special Powers Act. We went to the Chief Minister and fought with the army. They drove us to far off places in their jeep and we returned the next day. We struggled in this way. There are also many rape cases by the army. (...) When such rape cases occur and we identify the CRPF culprits from a particular camp they only say enquiry will be done but no action is taken. Rape incidents increase. Pramo from Keirenphabi was raped. Then there was Ahanjaobi from Takyel Khongpal. She was raped before her sick child lying on the bed. They say only in this case the culprits got punished. Take the case of Sanjita from Jiri who was raped while bringing lunch for her father in the field. She came home crying, took poison and committed suicide. Manipuri women are raped by the outsiders, by the CRPF, army, by Manipur Rifle... by Assam Rifles not Manipur Rifle.... They have no respect for the women of Manipur. Though we agitate there is no action from the Government. If the Government took up some action, they would have been afraid but there is no action. Not only this; there are so many rape cases that we go to nooks and corners holding the Meira, holding the torch to maintain peace in Manipur so that there is no violence. We don't allow men to come out as they are caught and killed. If we insist, the men would surely come out. Today the number of men is reducing because they are being killed every day. We have more women and we may end up with no men. The army sent by the Government to Manipur to protect us, which is their job, instead of protecting us, they are raping the women. (...)

²⁸ The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958 (AFSPA) was passed by the Indian Parliament. Under this Act, all security forces were given unrestricted power to carry out their operations, once an area was declared "disturbed." Thus, the AFSPA gave the armed forces wide powers to shoot, arrest and search, all in the name of "aiding civil power." It was first applied to the North Eastern states of Assam and Manipur and was amended in 1972 to extend to all the seven states in the north-eastern region of India.

Binota: Ima, please tell us about the agitation by the women in front of the Kangla, in connection with the Manorama rape case²⁹.

Ima: There were many cases before Manorama. We've been suffering silently and keeping it inside us. It was boiling inside our heart for long. When we heard Manorama was arrested, it was July 11, 2004. She was arrested on 10 July at night and was found dead on 11th July early morning. The arrest memo had her own signature and still she was found dead the next morning. When we heard about it, people from all directions gathered at her place without any mobilisation and an association called Apunba Lup³⁰ was also formed. People were angry and dissatisfied. When we returned from the meeting, we were boiling inside. It was at our previous office that our President Taruni,³¹ myself and others discussed that it was useless continuing like this, we should do something—just take off our clothes. Not many women were there. It's a private meeting. Our President Taruni and myself thought and discussed about it. 50-60 of us were there. Next morning we started from different directions. We were sly as otherwise, the army'd stop us. We planned that small groups would start gathering from all directions. We gave signals with our eyes. That time we felt we were quite a large number, we just went there. And that day, in front of the Kangla³² we women effortlessly poured out all that was pent up within us. It burst out from within us in front of the Kangla and spread all over Manipur. Whatever was boiling within us for so long burst out that day. We didn't know what we were doing. Even I was unconscious about what I was doing. We were crying and shouting totally overwhelmed. What was suppressed for a long time burst out. We don't know what we did in the Manorama incident. (...)

Binota: Which other women organisations are you working with?

Ima: We have been working with all the other organisations. There's Chingmee Tamme, then ours, Macha Leima, Ipko-Nipko and many others, we all get together and work in tandem. (...)

Binota: Ima, we have in Manipur, killings and abductions not just by the army, other groups are also indulging in such acts. What is your opinion?

Ima: It's not just the army. The Manipur Government being in such a state, our children are also killing one another. Instead of doing anything for the welfare of the people the government is letting different communities fight with one another with their divide and rule politics. Killings are happening not only between different groups but within the same community also, both in the valley and the hills. It is not just the army. If the government can negotiate and if it can do some productive work and open some factory to give employment to the youth and not let the youth idle away, then I feel it will make the situation better. Now we have killings everywhere, there is only killing and killing. (...) They felt that with guns, with killing, they can bring out the truth, bring peace, but you can't bring truth nor peace with guns and by killing. If they kill my children

²⁹ The rape and killing of Manorama Devi allegedly by the Assam Rifles personnel sparked widespread protests in Manipur against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA).

³⁰ A group of 32 civil society organizations based in Manipur formed a coalition called the *Apunba Lup* to protest abuses under the AFSPA.

³¹ President of Nupi Samaj.

³² Kangla Palace; traditional seat of past governors of Manipur; occupied by the British till 1947, then the Assam Rifles (a paramilitary Indian group) till 1992; then turned over to state government.

can I be quiet? Now, with children being killed, everyone is fighting with one another, there is hatred in everybody. The government is in a position to bring peace. They should hold talks with the insurgent groups, understand what their demand is. But our State is at fault, for we no work, no productivity. We are bringing in cheap clothes from outside. We have no yarn here, so when a woman works day and night and produces a piece of cloth, her profit is only Rs. 10. She cannot buy even one kilo of rice with it. We cannot live in this condition. (...)

We are not able to live in this place, we have no peace here, but still as the saying goes, like “walking with a stick on a slippery road”, we, the mothers, to set things right, holding our life in one hand, with pain and our chaddar in the other hand, are coming out. Not bothering about food, we are there in the front. But the rich aren’t coming out in the open —only the poor mothers, illiterate and struggling for their livelihood and who are concerned about their children fighting. We are now in a condition where we will become subservient to others.

Binota: Ima, you have been working for the society for many years. You have also gone outside Manipur, to Delhi etc. to meet the Prime Minister and the President. What has been your experience?

Ima: We went to Delhi to meet the Prime Minister. We met Indira Gandhi for prohibition of alcohol; we submitted a memorandum to her. She gave us a form to fill up in which we were asked why we worked as Nishabandhi. We wrote that in our families, our sons and husbands drank neglecting the family. Instead of feeding the family, they rob the family to drink. Manipur was going to ruins because of alcohol, so we asked Indira Gandhi for prohibition in Manipur. During the time of Rajiv Gandhi³³, a drug addict killed a boy called Momocha while snatching his earring. So we went to request for banning of drugs, as we were afraid Manipur will be in ruins due to drugs. When we told him that we have no fare for going back to Manipur, he helped us with Rs. 13, 500. With that we came back home. Then, after the death of Rajiv Gandhi, we went there often. We submitted memorandum to Sonia Gandhi³⁴ to repeal the Special Powers Act. Then, there was the bald one, what was his name, Rao³⁵... Every year we go to request for repealing the Special Powers Act. (...) Every year we go to Jaipur, Andhra Pradesh, Meerut etc. for prohibition meetings when invited. When Momon, Choubi and Indumani were there—were young then—we went to different places along with them—to Delhi, Kolkata. Guwahati, Mumbai. In Mumbai we used to have a branch of the All Manipur Social Reformation Development Samaj. Since we don’t go there now, it has been forgotten. In this way, whatever problems we have in Manipur—problem of killing, alcohol, drug addiction etc,—since they come under the central government we went to Rajiv Gandhi and other Prime Ministers to submit memorandum every year. We have longstanding problems and they don’t seem to be ending. We want peace before we die, but I think death will come before it.

*Heirangkhoini is the fruit we eat,
No other fruit tastes better in the mouth*

³³ Former Prime Minister; assassinated in 1991.

³⁴ Italian wife of Rajiv Gandhi, who therefore did not succeed him as Prime Minister, though she did become the head of the Congress Party.

³⁵ After Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination, P.V. Narasimha Rao was chosen to lead the Congress Party. He was invited to head a subsequent minority government and did so for five years.

*Lotus floweres are blooming in the neighbourhood
And male bees are following.
Come, come my dear, let's go,
There are many jealous people
Walk ahead of me...*

Let us finish here; I am tired.