



Role of Meira Paibi in Women's Empowerment and Social Protection in Manipur

¹Dr. Gurumayum Bijoykumar Sharma, ²Mr. Karam Churanchandra Singh

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Indian Languages and Literary Studies, University of Delhi, Delhi, India.

²Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Indian Languages and Literary Studies, University of Delhi, Delhi, India.

Email: ¹gurumayum.bijoykumar@gmail.com, ²karamchuran2000@gmail.com

Abstract: *The Meira Paibi movement, popularly known as the “Women Torchbearers” of Manipur, represents one of the most significant grassroots women’s movements in Northeast India. Emerging from earlier women-led struggles such as the Nupi Lan (Women’s Wars) and anti-liquor campaigns, the movement has evolved into a powerful civil society institution dedicated to community welfare, human rights protection, and social justice. This article examines the role of Meira Paibi in promoting women’s empowerment and social protection in Manipur. The study argues that Meira Paibi has transformed women from passive participants into active agents of social and political change. The movement has empowered women through collective mobilization, leadership development, political participation, and public engagement. Simultaneously, it has contributed to social protection by addressing issues such as drug abuse, alcoholism, domestic violence, human rights violations, and community security. The article also highlights contemporary challenges confronting the movement, including political polarization, conflict, and criticisms of moral policing. Despite these challenges, Meira Paibi remains a critical institution for grassroots democracy, women’s agency, and community resilience in Manipur.*

Key Words: Meira Paibi; Women’s Empowerment; Social Protection; Manipur; Civil Society.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The history of Manipur is distinguished by the active participation of women in social, economic, and political life. Unlike many regions of South Asia where patriarchal structures have traditionally restricted women’s public engagement, Manipuri women have historically occupied visible and influential positions within society. The institution of the *Ima Keithel* (Mother’s Market), one of the largest all-women markets in Asia, reflects the long-standing economic agency of Manipuri women and their contribution to community governance and social organization (Devi, 2011; Fernandes & Barbora, 2002). This socio-cultural context has facilitated the emergence of powerful women’s movements that have significantly shaped the political trajectory of the state. The participation of Manipuri women in the historic *Nupi Lan* (Women’s Wars) of 1904 and 1939 marked a watershed moment in the history of collective resistance in Northeast India. The first *Nupi Lan* emerged as a response to the British colonial administration’s reimposition of the *Lallup* system, a forced labor practice that imposed severe hardships on local communities (Kumar, 2004). The second *Nupi Lan* of 1939 developed in opposition to colonial economic policies that led to food shortages and widespread social distress. These movements demonstrated women’s capacity for political mobilization and established a tradition of collective action that continues to influence contemporary civil society activism in Manipur (Devi, 2011; Misra, 2000).

The legacy of the *Nupi Lan* movements provided the ideological and organizational foundations for the emergence of the Meira Paibi movement. The term *Meira Paibi* literally translates as “women torchbearers” and refers to groups of women who patrol local communities carrying flaming torches as symbols of vigilance, protection, and resistance (Oinam & Thoidingjam, 2020). Emerging during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the movement initially focused on combating alcoholism and drug abuse, which were increasingly perceived as threats to family welfare, social stability, and community cohesion (Fernandes & Barbora, 2002). Over time, however, the scope of Meira Paibi expanded

significantly. What began as an anti-liquor campaign evolved into a multifaceted social movement engaged in issues ranging from domestic violence, human rights protection, conflict mediation, and youth rehabilitation to political activism and peacebuilding. The movement gradually assumed responsibilities that extended beyond conventional social activism, becoming an influential institution of community governance and informal social protection (Basnet, 2019; Ngangbam, 2024).

The rise of Meira Paibi coincided with increasing political instability, insurgency, militarization, and ethnic tensions in Manipur. During this period, women emerged as crucial actors in maintaining social order and advocating for human rights. Through collective action, community patrols, public demonstrations, and negotiations with state authorities, Meira Paibi members established themselves as defenders of community interests and custodians of social justice (Baruah, 2020). Their activism challenged conventional assumptions regarding gender roles and demonstrated the capacity of women to participate effectively in public decision-making and conflict resolution processes. From a theoretical perspective, the Meira Paibi movement can be understood through the framework of women's empowerment and community-based social protection. Kabeer (1999) conceptualizes empowerment as the process through which individuals gain the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where such abilities were previously constrained. Similarly, Sen (1999) argues that development involves the expansion of human capabilities and freedoms, including the capacity to participate meaningfully in social and political life. The activities of Meira Paibi exemplify these processes by creating opportunities for women to exercise leadership, influence community decisions, and challenge structures of domination.

At the same time, the movement represents an important form of community-based social protection. Social protection traditionally refers to policies and interventions aimed at reducing vulnerability and enhancing human well-being. However, scholars increasingly recognize that community organizations often perform protective functions, particularly in contexts characterized by weak institutions or political instability (Putnam, 1993; UNDP, 2022). Through interventions addressing domestic violence, substance abuse, social disorder, and human rights violations, Meira Paibi has become a critical mechanism for safeguarding community welfare. Furthermore, Meira Paibi can be viewed as a grassroots security institution that promotes human security through collective action and community engagement. Its activities demonstrate how women contribute to peacebuilding, social stability, and conflict transformation in ways that transcend conventional political and military frameworks.

Against this backdrop, this article examines the role of Meira Paibi in promoting women's empowerment and social protection in Manipur. It argues that the movement has transformed women from passive subjects of social regulation into active agents of political participation, community governance, and social change. Simultaneously, it has emerged as an important institution of social protection, addressing a wide range of challenges affecting individual and collective well-being. Through an analysis of its historical evolution, organizational practices, and socio-political contributions, the study highlights the significance of Meira Paibi as a model of grassroots women's activism and community resilience.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MEIRA PAIBI MOVEMENT:

The origins of the Meira Paibi movement are deeply embedded in the historical traditions of women's collective action in Manipur. Women have long played a central role in the economic and social life of the region. Their participation in market activities, agricultural production, and community governance contributed to the development of a distinct socio-cultural environment in which women exercised considerable influence within public spaces (Fernandes & Barbora, 2002). This historical legacy provided fertile ground for the emergence of organized women's movements that challenged both colonial and postcolonial structures of power. The earliest manifestations of organized female resistance in Manipur can be traced to the Nupi Lan movements of 1904 and 1939. These movements represented more than spontaneous protests; they embodied a collective assertion of women's agency against economic exploitation and political domination (Devi, 2011). The success of these mobilizations established a tradition of community activism that continued to inspire subsequent generations of Manipuri women.

The immediate precursor to Meira Paibi was the *Nisha Bandi* movement of the 1970s. During this period, increasing alcohol consumption and drug abuse emerged as major social concerns. Women observed that substance abuse contributed to domestic violence, economic hardship, family disintegration, and social disorder. In response, they organized neighbourhood patrols, public awareness campaigns, and community meetings aimed at curbing these problems (Oinam & Thoidingjam, 2020). The anti-liquor campaigns quickly gained popular support because they addressed issues directly affecting household welfare and community stability. Women frequently raided illegal liquor outlets, pressured local authorities to enforce regulations, and mobilized public opinion against alcohol abuse. These

activities enhanced the visibility of women in public affairs and demonstrated their capacity for collective action (Arambam, 2021).

The transformation from Nisha Bandi to Meira Paibi occurred during a period marked by increasing insurgency, militarization, and political uncertainty in Manipur. As state institutions struggled to address community concerns effectively, women assumed greater responsibility for maintaining social order and protecting vulnerable populations (Baruah, 2020). The practice of conducting torchlight patrols at night became a defining feature of the movement. Carrying burning torches, women patrolled streets, monitored suspicious activities, and intervened in local disputes. These patrols served both practical and symbolic functions. Practically, they contributed to crime prevention and community security. Symbolically, they represented women's determination to defend their communities against social injustice, violence, and insecurity. The torch itself became a powerful symbol of vigilance, resistance, and collective responsibility (Basnet, 2019).

By the 1990s, Meira Paibi had evolved into a highly influential social movement with networks extending across numerous localities in Manipur. Women increasingly engaged in issues beyond substance abuse, including human rights violations, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, domestic violence, and conflict mediation. Their activism reflected an expanded understanding of security that encompassed social welfare, justice, and human dignity. The movement's growing prominence coincided with broader transformations in civil society and democratic participation. Through collective mobilization, women established themselves as influential actors capable of shaping public discourse and influencing policy debates. Their activities challenged conventional gender norms and expanded opportunities for women's participation in governance and community decision-making (Kabeer, 1999; Fraser, 1990).

Consequently, the historical development of Meira Paibi illustrates the dynamic relationship between women's collective action, community resilience, and social transformation. Emerging from local responses to social problems, the movement evolved into a powerful institution of empowerment and protection that continues to shape the socio-political landscape of Manipur today.

3. MEIRA PAIBI AND SOCIAL PROTECTIONS:

COMMUNITY SECURITY AND GRASSROOTS PROTECTION:

One of the most significant contributions of the Meira Paibi movement to Manipuri society lies in its role as a provider of community security and grassroots social protection. In conflict-affected societies where state institutions are often perceived as inadequate, inaccessible, or lacking public trust, community-based mechanisms frequently emerge as alternative structures for maintaining social order and ensuring public safety (Putnam, 1993; UNDP, 2022). In Manipur, Meira Paibi has evolved into such an institution, functioning as a localized system of community surveillance, conflict prevention, and social protection. The practice of conducting torchlight patrols represents one of the most visible manifestations of the movement's commitment to community security. Meira Paibi members regularly patrol neighborhoods during the night, monitor suspicious activities, intervene in local disputes, and collaborate with community leaders to prevent crime and anti-social behavior. These patrols not only serve as practical mechanisms of crime prevention but also symbolize women's collective responsibility for safeguarding the well-being of their communities (Oinam & Thoidingjam, 2020). The significance of these activities becomes particularly evident when examined within the broader context of political instability and prolonged armed conflict in Manipur. For decades, the state has experienced insurgency, militarization, and recurring episodes of ethnic violence, creating conditions of insecurity that affect everyday life (Baruah, 2020). In such circumstances, conventional state-centric approaches to security often fail to address the lived experiences of ordinary citizens.

Moreover, the activities of Meira Paibi constitute an important form of grassroots security governance. Through collective vigilance and community engagement, women provide an alternative model of security grounded in social responsibility, mutual trust, and local knowledge. Recent studies have described the movement as a grassroots security institution that challenges traditional understandings of security by prioritizing human welfare and community resilience over militarized approaches (Chaisingkananont & Saisin, 2026). By fostering networks of trust and cooperation, Meira Paibi strengthens community cohesion and enhances society's capacity to respond collectively to emerging challenges. Consequently, community security becomes not merely a matter of crime prevention but a broader process of strengthening social solidarity and resilience.

ANTI-DRUG AND ANTI-ALCOHOL CAMPAIGNS AS SOCIAL PROTECTION:

The origins of the Meira Paibi movement are closely linked to struggles against alcoholism and drug abuse. During the 1970s and 1980s, increasing alcohol consumption and the proliferation of narcotics emerged as major social concerns in Manipur. Women observed that substance abuse contributed to domestic violence, family breakdown, economic hardship, criminal behavior, and declining social cohesion (Fernandes & Barbora, 2002). In response, they organized collective campaigns aimed at protecting families and communities from these threats. The anti-liquor campaigns undertaken by Meira Paibi represent one of the earliest and most successful examples of grassroots social intervention in the region. Women mobilized community members, organized public demonstrations, raided illegal liquor outlets, and pressured local authorities to enforce regulations governing the production and sale of alcohol (Oinam & Thoidingjam, 2020). Through sustained activism, they succeeded in reducing alcohol consumption in many localities and raising public awareness regarding the social consequences of addiction. The movement later expanded its focus to include drug trafficking and substance abuse. This shift was particularly important given Manipur's geographical location along major narcotics trafficking routes connecting South Asia and Southeast Asia (Nepram, 2005). Drug addiction emerged as a serious social and public health challenge, particularly among young people. Meira Paibi responded by organizing awareness programs, supporting rehabilitation efforts, and collaborating with local communities to identify and address drug-related activities.

These interventions can be understood as important forms of social protection. According to the World Bank (2012), social protection encompasses measures designed to reduce vulnerability and protect individuals from risks that undermine their well-being. Substance abuse generates multiple forms of vulnerability, including health problems, economic insecurity, domestic violence, educational disruption, and social exclusion. By addressing the root causes and consequences of addiction, Meira Paibi contributes significantly to reducing these risks and enhancing community welfare. Moreover, the movement's campaigns highlight the gendered dimensions of social protection. Women often bear the disproportionate burden of addiction-related problems, including domestic violence, financial instability, and caregiving responsibilities. Consequently, efforts to combat substance abuse directly contribute to improving the lives of women and strengthening household resilience (Kabeer, 1999).

HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY:

One of the defining characteristics of Meira Paibi is its commitment to human rights advocacy. Over the past several decades, the movement has consistently challenged arbitrary arrests, custodial violence, enforced disappearances, and alleged human rights violations associated with conflict and militarization in Manipur (Basnet, 2019). The movement gained international recognition following the custodial killing of Thangjam Manorama in July 2004. In response, twelve Meira Paibi women staged a historic nude protest in front of the Kangla Fort headquarters of the Assam Rifles. Holding banners that read "Indian Army Rape Us," the women used their bodies as instruments of political resistance to challenge state violence and demand accountability (Basnet, 2019).

This protest became one of the most powerful symbols of feminist resistance in contemporary South Asia. Scholars have interpreted the demonstration as a form of counterpublic activism that challenged dominant narratives of national security and exposed the gendered consequences of militarization (Fraser, 1990; Basnet, 2019). By transforming personal vulnerability into collective political action, the women created a powerful critique of state power and human rights abuses. The movement's human rights activism reflects broader commitments to justice, dignity, and democratic accountability. Through public protests, awareness campaigns, and engagement with civil society organizations, Meira Paibi has contributed significantly to the promotion of human rights discourse within Manipur and beyond.

CONFLICT MEDIATION AND PEACEBUILDING:

Manipur has experienced prolonged periods of insurgency, ethnic conflict, and political instability. These conflicts have generated significant human suffering, social fragmentation, and economic disruption (Baruah, 2020). In such contexts, peacebuilding requires more than formal political negotiations; it also depends upon grassroots initiatives that promote dialogue, trust, and reconciliation. Meira Paibi has played a critical role in these processes. Women frequently act as mediators between conflicting parties, facilitate negotiations, advocate for nonviolent solutions, and intervene to prevent the escalation of tensions. Their involvement reflects a broader commitment to maintaining social harmony and protecting community welfare. Scholars argue that women often bring distinctive perspectives to conflict resolution by emphasizing cooperation, care, and social relationships rather than coercion and domination (Cockburn, 2007). The activities of Meira Paibi illustrate this approach. Rather than focusing exclusively on political or military dimensions of conflict, the movement emphasizes the everyday consequences of violence for families and communities.

Recent scholarship has therefore described Meira Paibi as an important peacebuilding actor that redefines security through collective care, social responsibility, and community resilience (Chaisingkananont & Saisin, 2026). By prioritizing human well-being and social cohesion, the movement offers an alternative vision of peace rooted in grassroots participation and democratic engagement. In this sense, Meira Paibi represents far more than a women's social movement. It functions as an institution of social protection, a platform for human rights advocacy, a mechanism for conflict mediation, and a model of community-based governance. Its contributions demonstrate how women's collective action can enhance security, promote justice, and strengthen the social foundations of peace in conflict-affected societies.

4. CONCLUSION:

The Meira Paibi movement represents one of the most significant and enduring examples of grassroots women's activism in contemporary India. Emerging from the rich historical legacy of the *Nupi Lan* movements and the anti-liquor campaigns of the 1970s, the movement has evolved into a multifaceted institution that transcends the conventional boundaries of social activism. Over the decades, Meira Paibi has transformed itself into a powerful force for community governance, human rights advocacy, conflict mediation, and social protection, while simultaneously serving as a vehicle for women's empowerment and collective agency in Manipur. This study has demonstrated that the contribution of Meira Paibi to women's empowerment extends far beyond symbolic representation. Through active participation in community affairs, public protests, social campaigns, and peacebuilding initiatives, Manipuri women have acquired political consciousness, leadership skills, organizational capacity, and social legitimacy. The movement has challenged patriarchal structures that traditionally confined women to domestic spaces and has enabled them to emerge as influential actors in public decision-making processes. By creating opportunities for collective action and civic participation, the movement has strengthened women's confidence, enhanced their visibility in public life, and contributed to the broader democratization of social and political spaces. Equally important is the movement's role as a mechanism of community-based social protection. In a region characterized by political instability, armed conflict, ethnic tensions, and institutional limitations, Meira Paibi has emerged as a crucial source of security and support for local communities. Through torchlight patrols, anti-drug and anti-alcohol campaigns, interventions in domestic violence cases, and advocacy against human rights violations, the movement has addressed a wide range of social risks and vulnerabilities. These activities reflect a broader understanding of security that prioritizes human well-being, dignity, and social justice rather than merely the protection of state interests. The movement's engagement with human rights issues further underscores its historical significance. By challenging arbitrary arrests, custodial violence, enforced disappearances, and the excesses of militarization, Meira Paibi has emerged as an important voice for democratic accountability and justice in Manipur. The historic protest following the custodial killing of Thangjam Manorama remains one of the most powerful examples of gendered resistance and feminist activism in South Asia (Basnet, 2019). Such interventions demonstrate how women's collective action can reshape public discourse, challenge structures of power, and create alternative spaces for political participation and dissent.

At the same time, the study recognizes that the movement is not without its limitations and challenges. Criticisms relating to moral policing, informal modes of justice, political polarization, and the persistence of structural gender inequalities reveal the complexities inherent in community-based activism. Moreover, rapid social change, globalization, urbanization, and generational shifts require the movement to continually adapt its strategies and organizational structures. The sustainability of Meira Paibi will depend upon its ability to remain inclusive, democratic, and responsive to emerging social realities while preserving its foundational commitment to community welfare and social justice. In conclusion, Meira Paibi stands as a powerful symbol of women's resilience, agency, and collective strength. Its history demonstrates that women are not merely beneficiaries of development and protection but active producers of social order, peace, and justice. As Manipur continues to navigate complex political, social, and economic transformations, the movement will remain an indispensable institution for promoting human rights, community security, women's empowerment, and social cohesion.

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