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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ZOMI MOTHERS' ASSOCIATION (ZMA) AND EMANCIPATION OF 'VULNERABLE CHILDREN' IN MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

Manipur is a state in the northeastern region of India that has witnessed numerous conflicts where women and children are among the most affected. Innumerable studies show women in Manipur as agents of change but these were mostly the non-tribal women. In light of this context, this paper looks into the roles of tribal women, especially the Zomi women in Churachandpur town in bringing change concerning children. This work is based on primary data collection through a semi-structured interview method. The paper highlights that Zomi Mothers' Association (ZMA) focuses on emancipating children by providing shelter, education of girl children, and psychological support. Hence, women themselves, though largely affected by conflict, are working for the emancipation of another 'vulnerable' social group, i.e. children.

INTRODUCTION

Manipur is one of the eight states in the northeastern region which has a rich history of socio-political conflict between its ethnic communities. It is a state that has witnessed tremendous conflict, since the British time in the late nineteenth century and continues to witness so (May 3, 2023 and continuing). The political conflict that has been happening has affected the condition of the state, its infrastructure, as well as its people, especially women and children. In any conflict environment, women and children have been the most affected in any parts of the world. When talking about women and change in Manipur, women have played tremendous roles since historical times, and women in Manipur are no alien to taking part in social movements. Women mobilized as early as 1904 mobilizing the community to protest against the British. Today, it has become common knowledge to connect Manipur women and change to Meira Paibis and their activities. In the land of *Meira Paibis*, there are other groups of women who have, since the beginning of the twentieth century, been activity taking part in bringing change in the society, especially in the hill regions of Manipur. The tribal women of Manipur and their women's organizations, like Hmar Women's Association (HWA), Kuki Women Union (KWU), Zomi

As far as their (the organizations mentioned above) activities are concerned, these women's organizations have dealt closely with improving the plight of children in this politically and ethnically volatile state of Manipur. As far as literature of the women's movement in Manipur is concerned, the effort of these tribal women has not been recognized or researched much, despite their pivotal role in addressing women and children's issues. As a result, this article aims to highlight this gap by focusing on the functioning of women's organizations in a highly-charged ethnic situation. In this context, this paper focuses on Zomi Mothers' Association (ZMA) and their role, especially in emancipating vulnerable children in Manipur. ZMA, since its inception in the late twentieth century, has been enrolled in addressing vulnerable children and their issues by providing shelter, education, and psychological support like counseling among others. The contribution of this article can be deciphered in the light of the nature of the functioning of women's organizations in a multi-ethnic situation which has witnessed many conflicts credited to its history.

Manipur Women and Children: Manipur is one of the eight states in the northeastern region, sharing a close border with Myanmar. It covers an area of 22, 327 km² and is comprised of sixteen administrative districts.

The people can broadly be distinguished as tribal and non-tribal populations as per the Constitution of India. As per the 2011 Census, Manipur has a population of 28, 55,794; out of this, 58.9% represents the valley population (mainly non-tribal population like the Meiteis) while 41.1% represents the population. The capital city, Imphal is there in the plain area and where all of the state machinery is situated including important educational institutions like Manipur University, Canchipur (9 km from Imphal) the vicinity.

In Manipur, women have been very active in taking part in the public sphere since traditional times. The Meitei history records the establishment of the *Kuchu*, an all-female administrative body, as well as the *Pacha Loishang*, a special court for women to handle their disputes (Kipgen, 2010). Continuing this trend in the early twentieth century, the women led in protesting against the Britishers in the First and Second *Nupilan* of 1904 and 1939 and this trend continues today through *Meira Paibis*, Hmar Women's Association, Tangkhul *Shanao Long* (TSL), Naga Women's Union (Buongpui, 2013). This shows that women in Manipur are not new to issues or raising their voices. Manipur is also a state in the neighbouring area of Myanmar which has witnessed many ethnic conflicts, as well as becoming a place for illegal activities like trafficking (Laishram, 2017; Sharma and Chaudhury, 2016). Children of course are one of the most affected in these processes, through participation in insurgency and trafficking (Devi, 2014). It is the vulnerable children who are trafficked across states and to other countries. The lack of strict regulations in the border area has led to the trading of drugs and hence drugs and alcoholism have affected the youths so much in Manipur (Arya, K., & Kumar, R. R., 2018; TISS, 2019). Due to the porous boundary of Manipur, children are vulnerable to being trafficked. It is the vulnerable children who are trafficked across states and to other countries as well. As a border state between South and South East Asia, Manipur has a unique regional identity that influences every aspect of society, including trafficking, and the hill and valley divide, disparate patterns of development and production, still shapes people's way of life (Niumai, 2016).

Children's education is affected due to unprecedented bandhs imposed due to the political instability which affects the education and career future of the people (Singha, 2013). As a result, many internal migrations are happening from Manipur to metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore, also resulting in the Manipur diaspora. The socio-political context also matters when emancipating vulnerable children concerning their education. Manipur has witnessed various forms of conflict which has tremendous repercussions on its people. Among the most affected in the short term as well as long term includes children. Rebecca D.N. (2008), in her study, mentions that during conflict times, it is children whose studies get affected to the worst extreme. It is the children's education that is largely affected, as due to the unrest, bandhs are imposed which prevent students to take classes, or involve students in protests resulting in missing out on their classes. Also, adolescents are inherently curious and creative, and because of their energy, resilience, vibrancy, and resilience, they have enormous potential to transform society; they are a group that needs proper guidance and advice. In addition, the state's predicament has gotten worse due to a combination of factors, including socioeconomic issues, political unrest, and a relaxation of

community members' social control over teenagers. Children and youths are vulnerable groups as they are easily influenced. They frequently mimic others by abusing alcohol or drugs and joining rebels (Indira, 2014). Children continues to be the most affected even in the ongoing ethnic conflict in Manipur (started on May 3, 2023) where parents have to flee to refugee camps with their babies and small children to escape the atrocities (Mawii, name changed, Personal Communication, November 24, 2023).

Definitions

Children are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. In different socio-political settings like war, children are one of the most vulnerable groups, during the Korean War (1950-53), numerous Korean children lost their parents and were sent to the United States for adoption leading to large-scale Korean children searching for their biological parents (KAIAN, 2023). Likewise, the state of Manipur in India, a conflict-affected state, has witnessed the effect of the social upheaval on children, corroding them of their rights to protection, education, and so on. No doubt, issues faced by children have not gone unnoticed. Looking at the world today, there has been great improvement in the plight of children as compared to the past decades due to the formulation and implementation of many laws and mandates. To safeguard the interests of vulnerable children, the United Nations and many other organizations have looked into their situations. UNICEF continues to look into the needs of children, looking into educational development. Not only the United Nations, but numerous NGOs like those run by Kailash Satyarthi, a Padma Shree awardee, including women's organizations have taken a lead role in this regard.

The term 'Vulnerable Children' is an encompassing term without a tight-knit definition. It is popularly combined with the terms 'Orphan' as OVC, meaning Orphaned and Vulnerable Children. Different countries, organizations, and donor agencies have given varying definitions of OVC. The term 'Orphan' signifies a child under the age of eighteen who has lost one or both parents and is defined as an "orphan." A child who has lost both of their parents is referred to as a "paternal orphan" and a "maternal orphan." A kid who has lost both parents is referred to as a "double orphan" (Kumar and Schofield, 2008). Additionally, "Children who are vulnerable" are defined in several ways like, they typically live in homes with one or more members who have HIV/AIDS, or one of their parents or primary carers who has the virus. So, mostly, children who face a risk of HIV/AIDS exposure and whose development, well-being, or chance of survival are considered vulnerable. Children whose survival, well-being, or development is threatened by HIV/AIDS are referred to as "vulnerable children," according to UNAIDS (UNAIDS, 2004).

Nonetheless, defining vulnerability continues to be challenging. According to World Vision (Skinner, Tshoko, et al., 2006), a non-governmental organization (NGO), children who live in households where one or more members are infected with HIV/AIDS, dying, or have passed away, as well as those where there are individuals too young or too old to care for them, are considered vulnerable in the context of HIV/AIDS. So, in this article, 'vulnerable children' includes all the mentioned factors like paternal and

maternal orphans, and 'vulnerable children' whose parents have died due to HIV/AIDS.

Children and their rights: As far as children and their rights are concerned, it revolves mostly around these subject areas as per the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), a child is someone who is below 18 years of age and has the following rights:

“Their right to association with both parents, human identity as well as the basic needs for physical protection, food, universal state-paid education, health care and criminal laws appropriate for the age and development of the child, equal protection of the child’s civil rights, and freedom from discrimination on the basis of the child’s race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, religion, disability, color, ethnicity, or other characteristics”

In addition, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by United Nations (UNCRC) in 1989 states that “children are not just objects who belong to their parents and for whom decisions are made, or adults in training. Rather, they are human beings and individuals with their own rights... Childhood is separate from adulthood, and lasts until 18; it is a special, protected time, in which children must be allowed to grow, learn, play, develop and flourish with dignity”.

United Nations on Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) in Article 25 (2) and 26 (3) mentions about childhood as, Article 25 (2) states “Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection”. 26 (3) states “Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children”.

Emancipation: Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives the meaning of Emancipate as, to free from restraint, control, or the power of another especially to free from bondage; to release from parental care and responsibility and make sui juris; to free from any controlling influence (such as traditional mores or beliefs). To illustrate further, Emancipation in simple terms means liberation from bondage or oppression of any kind. Tracing the etymology of Emancipation, it is derived from the Latin word *emancipa/amancipation* meaning “the act of liberating a child from parental authority”. When talking about emancipation, it can be understood in different ways, foremost is the legal aspect and the second is sociological. In legal terms, it simply implies treating a child as an adult before becoming an adult or attaining the age of 18 years. It is the treatment of a minor as an adult. This practice is common in countries like the United States, Canada, New Zealand where underage children can be emancipated and be treated as adults. But in India, no such emancipation laws are available. Apart from the legal term of Emancipation, the matter of focus in this paper in the general sense also. Emancipation simply means & an entity’s liberation from control, dependence, restraint, confinement, restriction, repression, slavery or domination (Susen, 2015 as cited in City Research Online, 2015). For children, there could be many social situations that affect their liberation to lead their lives freely as children like socio and political conflict, being brought up in drug exposure, abusive, unstable economic family environment leading to lack of not having access to education. Growing up

in these conditions make children vulnerable and destitute. In this paper, children include all persons below 18 years of age.

Gap in literature

Scholarly works on women and children in conflict situation is not a new phenomenon. Literature on Meitei women (the non-tribal population) in bringing change. In the context of India, literature on women and their role in India during the partition days is also available. Literature on Meitei women (the non-tribal population) in bringing change is available in studies large scale while the role of the women in the hilly region (tribal women) has not been explored much. The efforts of these tribal women have not been recognized or researched much, despite their pivotal role in addressing women and children’s issues.

Furthermore, upon reviewing the literature on vulnerable children, studies have focused on their mental well-being in India in general; focusing on studies in the northeastern region and vulnerable children witnessed a scarcity in research studies. Hence, the present study aims to bring the two factors together, to understand the role of women’s organizations and the emancipation of children. The paper aims to bridge this gap and highlight how women’s organizations are adding to the emancipation of children in this multi-ethnic-conflict-oriented situation which has witnessed many conflicts credited to its history.

METHODOLOGY

The fieldwork is conducted by the author in Churachandpur It is the district headquarters in the Churachandpur district. It is a town which is multi-ethnic and understanding the role of women’s organizations within their specific ethnic group is an important aspect to be studied. The district is inhabited by several tribes, mainly belonging to the Chin-Kuki-Mizo-Zomi group, such as Thadou, Hmar, Paite, Vaiphei and Zou tribes. Apart from these, there are the Gangte, Simte, Mizo, Tedim Chin, and Manipuri Meiteis. The district is inhabited by several tribes, mainly belonging to the Chin-Kuki-Mizo-Zomi group, such as Thadou, Hmar, Paite, Vaiphei and Zou tribes. Apart from these, there are the Gangte, Simte, Mizo, Tedim Chin, and some Manipuri Meiteis (Census India, 2011). Churachandpur is a town which is multi-ethnic and understanding the role of women’s organizations within their specific ethnic group is an important aspect to be studied.

This paper is a part of my PhD project of my fieldwork in 2017. Entry into my field was not difficult as I belong to this region however challenging aspect is that they consider me as their own and expect me to know everything. That was not the case as I have left the district for more than 20 years and I am relearning it. After the interview, I had to keep on pursuing them to tell me in detail which resulted in a bit of irritation from their side. And I had to continuously tell them about my situation. During my fieldwork, I got to understand how ethnicity plays a big role in the attempts of the tribal women there to bring change. There was no proper documentation of their activities and no formal office space; ZMA operates from the residence of one of their leaders. The aim of ZMA is women and child empowerment, however in this paper, I prefer to analyze it through Emancipation.

Zomi Mothers' Association and Emancipation of Children: Findings and Analysis: In the hills district of Churachandpur, Zomi is a tribal community in Manipur composed of nine tribal groups, namely Gangte, Kom, Mate, Paite, Simte, Teddim Chin, Thangkhal Vaiphei and Zou. In 1991, Zomi Mothers' Association (ZMA)¹ was formed on 7 November 1991 under the advice of the Zomi Council, the supreme authoritative body of the Zomi tribes. The aim of the organization is to bring women and children empowerment and it serves as an active agent to cater to the needs of those affected by the 1997-98 conflict between the ethnic groups, Paite and Kuki. In providing services to children for their empowerment, ZMA focused on immense services ranging from philanthropic work to education and counselling as per requirement (discussed in detail below). Today, ZMA continues to play a significant role, also in the ongoing conflict which started in May 2023 by speaking out against alleged rape of a Meitie woman by Zomi mob (Epa, 2023). Their activity encompasses mostly their community members and this is the nature of their functioning.

Children and Shelter: The Zomi society is a close-knit community functioning on community lines. Family plays a big role as well as religion. Most of the communities are not economically well- to do and hence class also is an important factor stratifying the society. At the same time, in the Lailamvillage/ locality, "children were seen to take up drugs and just loitering around here and there. We see that if children are taken care of by each family, then society will also be taken care of" (Joycee, Personal Communication, May 5, 2017). Youths are also prone to being easily influenced and searching for fun and in a state like conflict-prone state Manipur, youths are largely recruited to join the insurgent groups as well as partake in drugs (Indira, 2014). Accordingly, in the year 2000, nine years after its formation, ZMA set up an orphanage center, *Only Grace* for vulnerable children who are without parents, among those include "sick" children who are getting AIDS treatment. In this center, in addition to sheltering them, ZMA focuses on educational needs, arranging tutors for their studies and a paid warden (Elizabeth, Warden, *Only Grace* orphanage center of ZMA, Personal Communication, June 2, 2017). Providing shelter to vulnerable children is a recurring phenomenon across the state in shelter homes. Chingtham (2014) conducted studies on four children's homes in the Imphal-West District of Manipur. Children in these Homes expressed their desire to undergo vocational programmes which would help them to generate an income in their future life. Regarding educational facilities, the majority of the children are sent to Government schools and they expressed their desire to study in private schools as private schools are far better than Government schools. All the Children of Homes are first sent to Government schools. If they are good in their academic performance then they are sent to Private schools. If the children are not doing well in their studies, then they are again sent back to the Government schools. This technique serves as a kind of motivation among the children to do their studies well; food, clothing, and health care are provided by the Homes.

Education of Girl Child: In the Zomi community, gender relations are not much different from those found in the north, south and western parts of the country. Tribal societies are known to have "empowered" women, and "free" gender

relations, meaning there is liberty to freely engage socially with opposite sexes (Dena, 2008). No doubt, there is a certain degree of truth to this, however, as far as the preference for a child is concerned, a boy child is preferred over a girl child as the preference for boy children is mostly because they are regarded as agents to continue the family lineage. This belief is very prominent in the minds of the people, embedded in the structural beliefs. Also, it is the girl child who has to often sacrifice her education in place of her brother, when the family faces financial constraints. When a family is poor it is mostly that a girl child has to sacrifice (either be a school dropout or go to a government school with lesser expense), hence there is a dire need to support girl children. It is a result of this very issue that ZMA looks into the education of girl children specifically in addition to Zomi children's education at large in Churachandpur. As told to me, "ZMA finds shelter for girls who are from economically challenged household." (Joycee, Personal Communication, May 13, 2017).

For the selection of a girl child to study with them, ZMA issues information to Zomi community by submission of forms. Based on this, the selection of a girl child is done. In 2000, ZMA, with the help of one of their leaders, formed ties with Michael John Job Centre (MJC) in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.² Apart from the orphanage center set up by them, ZMA ties with Michael Jon center to enable girl students to study in Tamil Nadu where expenses are paid for by this. Students educated in this school have become self-sufficient today. "Since then, ZMA has been voluntarily taking initiative in taking children to this school to pursue their education at free of cost... Today, girls educated in this school are working as nurses in hospitals, some in major cities of the country like Delhi, Mumbai. One of these girls has requested ZMA to be a part of her family during her marriage (Ching, Personal Communication, May 24, 2017). Other NGOs have also focused on girl child like NGOs namely Rainbow Home in Kolkata, Hyderabad, and Delhi and Door Step School in Pune, Maharashtra by providing residential education to a girl child, through short-term residential care to education to girls connected to living in streets and intervening to enroll every child of 6-7 years in Pune by June 2012 with the campaign "Every Child Counts Campaign (ECCC). Through their efforts, the two organizations expect to make education Acceptable, Available, Accessible, and Adaptable for children who would otherwise have not been accepted to achieve these facilities (Dabir, Anuradha and Satyamurthy, 2015).

Psychological Support: The ZMA, in addition to provision of education and providing shelter to Zomi children, "as per necessity" the leaders provide counselling to family members of the children staying in *Only Grace*. "There was one incident where a young man (in his early 20's) had joined the armed group of the Zomis, known as Zomi Volunteers to take revenge on those people who killed his parents during the Paite-Kuki conflict of 1997-98. When ZMA was informed about this incident, they counseled the young man and he eventually turned his life around. He stopped his association with the armed group and started an auto (three wheelers)

² The founder of this school, P.P. Job is a Christian leader. He and one of the prominent leaders of ZMA, Mr. Maria Vungthang became friends. It is the link created from this friendship that children from Churachandpur were sent to Coimbatore. *MJC: Empowering the Girl Child*, Vision, <http://www.mjc.ac.in/p/the-vision-empowering-girl-child-india.html>, accessed on March 1, 2018.

¹ It is registered in 1991 with the Society Registration Act.

repairing shop from the financial compensation from the state government he received due to his parents' death. Now he is happily married with children" (Neilam, Personal Communication, May 24, 2017). She continues, "This boy (another boy) came to the orphanage as his family could not take care of him. However, when this boy got older (around 14 years) his brother insisted on taking him out of the orphanage to help him earn livelihood. However, ZMA did not comply with this demand; they advised the older brother to wait him to stay in the orphanage until he finishes his class xth School Board Examination, which was only few months away. Finally, the older brother agreed" (Neilam, Personal Communication, May 24, 2017). I found that people who belong to other ethnic groups are referred by these organizations to their respective groups, though in a very few cases, it is taken across cultures (like if there is inter-community marriage, then the community to which the husband belongs, is the one who takes up the issue). Psychological support is a factor highlighted by other studies like Lang et al (2014) and Kaur et al (2018) as an important dimension to be focused by organizations. Quality of health among children of HIV living in institutional home in Bangalore (Lang, Heylen, Perumpil, et al., 2014) found that there is a great need for psychological support of older children (from the 5 to 12 years taken for study). Also, there is a lack of studies done on the psychological health of orphans and vulnerable children and adolescents (OVCA) (Kaur, Vinnakota et al. (2018).

CONCLUSION

In an ethnic and politically afflicted state like Manipur, it is essential to look into the roles of agencies that cater to children's needs, as they are one of the most vulnerable groups. Efforts made by Zomi Mothers' Association (ZMA) to liberate children from social and psychological restrictions mainly through giving shelter, education, psychological support etc. are indeed making an impact in Manipur. Women and children being vulnerable groups continue to go together or need to continue to be together. Women supporting and becoming a voice for other vulnerable groups is an exemplary action that needs to be replicated. Through women's organizations, children's needs are taken care of, their rights are addressed by these organizations. Through their presence in society, women's presence in the public space is maintained, and can continue to make tremendous efforts in formal peacebuilding between communities in Manipur. Yet, given the complexities of the ethnic and political situation in the state, Zomi Mothers' Association (ZMA) still has lots of potential in addressing gender and sexual violence in conflicting situations and so on. By focusing on networking and cooperating with other NGOs and women's organizations, Zomi Mothers' Association (ZMA) can reach their utmost potential, resulting in an empowered society.

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