

A Raging Anger within Us

*Interview with **Binalakshmi Nepram**, Secretary General of [Control Arms Foundation of India](#) and Founder Member of the [Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network](#), taken by Michael Dusche, Visiting Fellow at the [Centre for the Study of Developing Societies \(CSDS\) Delhi](#), on 18 Nov 2013 in view of the upcoming return of Jyoti “Nirbhaya” Pandey’s rape and murder in Delhi on 16 December 2012.*

Michael Dusche: *As a philosopher, I am interested in the cultural circumstances that are conducive to the denigration of women in India. What are the mental circumstances that lead the denial of their right to a certain minimal dignity, which they can’t be deprived of on the basis of “bad behaviour”. As it appears in many court judgments in India, firstly the woman is “character scrutinized” and then “character assassinated”. Thereby, fundamental rights are being taken away on the basis of a common morality. This popular morality is probably the same for much of India independently of religion and across caste. My hunch would be that there is not much difference whether you look at Sikh, Hindu or Muslim communities. But isn’t it very different in the Northeast?*

Binalakshmi Nepram: Actually no. Just yesterday I was a part of the annual [TiINK](#) conference in Goa, which was organised by Tehelka for the third time. I was on a panel on “[naked rage, occupied territories, women, and body as weapon](#)”. We were interviewed by a Goan newspaper, which subsequently published a whole article about how women in Manipur disrobed to challenge the Indian Armed Forces over the rape and extra-judicial killing of a 31 year old woman in 2004 called *Tangjam Manorama Devi*. I had posted this article on Facebook along with my picture. On that picture, I was wearing sleeveless, but with my traditional Sari from Manipur. And one person on my Facebook had the audacity to comment that it is “not in our culture to show off bare arms.” This man supposedly is an educated Mumbai based Manipuri Muslim. A lot of people have the stereotype that the Northeast is much more liberal, but no, Michael, no! It is as patriarchal a structure as the rest of India. If Haryana has *Khap Panchayats*, Manipur has got men’s youth clubs who look at how you should dress, how you should behave yourselves. They police the women all the time. So no, it’s a cliché to think that women in the Northeast are more liberated than in the rest of India. This is a big misnomer! Every step of our movement is watched and debated conforming to patriarchal norms.

Was Manipur a Hindu kingdom before it was brought into the Indian Union?

It was not a Hindu kingdom. Manipuris were never Hindus. We were animists, nature worshipers, but in the 18th century Bengali Vaishnavs came and proselytized. But Vaishnavism never became a majority religion in Manipur. We don’t have idols. We worship the rise of the sun and the moon; we worship the forest, so we are nature worshipers basically. So no, we were never Hindus, in fact, my family never adopted Hinduism. From two-three generations back we have actually defied Hinduism.

But yes, we love their festivals. However, if someone asks me, what is your religion, I say it is humanism.

So caste structure was never introduced into Manipur?

Right, we don't have a caste system. Only, in the past 200 years Brahmin priests migrated to Manipur from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal and other parts of India. They intermarried with local women and inculcated the caste system in their families. So we have one caste in Manipur, the Brahmin priests, and we have made them cooks [laughing], seriously, if you come to Manipur today and you have a feast of two hundred, three hundred people, it will be cooked by a Brahmin priest. They are excellent cooks and that is why they remain. Besides that, caste does not infiltrate any part of our lives.

I am probing into this because I am interested in the gender stereotypes that survive in the cultural imaginary of different parts of India, the ideas of the Manusmriti for example. So the same could not be said of Manipur because the cultural background is different. Thus Manipuri patriarchy, although it is also patriarchy, must be in some ways different from, say, patriarchy in main land India?

Our language is Tibeto-Burman. Manipur was made to be a part of the Indian Union only in 1949. Before that it had its own structure, politics and culture, which was completely different from the rest of India and still is, even today. Manipur belongs to a completely different civilization where there is no caste system. I call Manipur and the Northeast the beginning of Southeast Asia. If we want to understand the Northeast, we have to look east into its connections with Burma, China, Cambodia, even Thailand. Assam has roots in Thailand. Nagaland has roots in Yunnan, China. The Khasis of Meghalaya have roots in the Mon-Khmers.

How would you describe the specificity of the patriarchy that exists traditionally in Manipur?

Even in Manipur men still feel that they own the earth and they own the women there. So women in Manipur, although we have a very strong women's movement, still have to go to the man's house after marriage, property is still inherited by the sons, and the male child is still preferred. In this respect, patriarchy in Manipur is quite similar to the patriarchy that exists in the rest of the world or in India for that matter. Property is passed from the father to the sons even if the law says it can be inherited also by daughters. In politics, women are not seen. We have just three women out of sixty legislators in the present state assembly, out of which one woman is the chief minister's wife. She was the only woman in the previous assembly. Manipur is a place where the women do the cooking, the washing, the rearing, and men usually eat their food. It is also a place where the men eat first, and they have the prime food, and the women huddle together and eat what is left. And it is a place where men take multiple wives, where they think that it is their birth right. They think that if they like any girl, they

can abduct and marry her. This is forcible rape and marriage sanctioned by society, which is pathetic and which we are trying to change. Still it is not easy there being a woman.

In the context of mainland India one often has the impression that rape is strategically used as a means to put women or low caste people or non-Hindu communities into their place. Rape is used as a weapon of warfare. Of course in Manipur this is also the case due to the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and the longstanding confrontation with the army. But apart from that, if you look at the indigenous society, is there a similar deployment of rape as a weapon, say in inter-tribal warfare?

In Manipur we don't have what you see in India where, say, a higher caste rapes a Dalit woman to prove the point that he is still superior. Even among the tribes a certain degree of egalitarianism prevails, so there is no such thing as showing off that one tribe is more powerful than the other by raping their women. Instead, there are two kinds of violence against women going on in Manipur, one inside the homes and one outside. Within the home, the Northeast has the highest rape rate in India and it has the second highest domestic violence rate in India. That is a tragedy. The other kind of violence, which women from Delhi do not face, is the militarised violence, not just by the Indian state, but also by non-state militant groups. Although militarised state actors are more visible, also non-state actors commit acts of crime and violence against women. The conflict started with the merger of the Northeast with the Indian Union in 1949 and it goes on for the last sixty four years. The whole context of the imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act gives any Indian man in the armed forces the right to arrest, to torture, to kill, or even rape a woman. That is something that is not there in other parts of the country ...

... except in Kashmir ...

... yes, but in Kashmir it came only in the 1990s, in the Northeast it is there since 1958, that is for more than fifty years, and the incidence of rape there is much higher. Take the case of a woman called Rose, who in 1974 was about to be engaged to be married, when an army captain raped her. Out of shame she killed herself. We still have a cloth, which is woven in her memory in Manipur. In the 1980s a woman was raped in front of her polio stricken son by four men of the central reserve police. I met the family. It is pathetic. The armed forces that come there share the idea, which is widespread in India that women are asking for it. In the Northeast sometimes women only wear sarong and a dress just reaching over their breasts. And we don't have bathrooms. Women take bath near the streams. So a lot of rapes took place during combing operations and not a single armed force has been punished because the Armed Forces Special Powers Act protects them. That is the whole tragedy of the Northeast. Only if the MOD [Ministry of Defence] says yes can you prosecute a soldier. But till now the MOD has always said that all its soldiers are sacrosanct and that they are guardians of the nation.

And that is where the anger comes from that the women of the Northeast feel, a raging anger within us even today.

I was very impressed with the disrobing of “Manorama’s mothers” in front of the army in protest against the rape and murder of Tangjam Manorama Devi. How could you better express your solidarity with this kind of treatment of a woman? It seems unthinkable for a mainstream Indian woman to do that. I was really very impressed with the act of these Manipuri women.

I spoke to all the thirteen women who did it. After they did it they almost fainted. It is not easy for a woman to disrobe, and more so in front of the public. So it was quite shocking even for them to do it. But they had to do it because of the brutality. A rape happens in India every twenty two minutes. So it was not that rapes didn’t happen before and that rapes didn’t happen after. What triggered this unique protest was the fact that this woman was picked up at midnight by four armed forces personnel without any women among them. Early next morning her body was found with multiple wounds and she had been shot seven times in her private parts to destroy evidence of rape. They had shoved cloth into her private part. It was the sheer brutality of how this girl was treated which made the thirteen Manipuri mothers go up to the headquarters of the armed forces, strip themselves, and challenged the Indian armed forces, “dare come and rape us, we are all Manorama’s mothers.” Even we Manipuri women who did not participate in that particular protest were just stunned at what we saw. And it shook India, and it shook the world, and it is still doing that. In fact, in the anti-Posco movement in Orissa, women took that same step to force the steel giant to move back, so it has inspired some women’s movements across the country to challenge the militant patriarchy we have here in India.

How do you see gender relations in Manipur changing considering the many migrants from the Northeast going and coming from mainland India, even Christian missionaries coming to the Northeast, but also considering media influences, particularly the so-called new media?

Missionaries came more than hundred years back even before the British came. But this was just religion. For example in Nagaland, where Christianity is almost ninety nine percent, there are still no women priests. Even there women are not allowed to inherit their parental property. So patriarchy under Christianity hasn’t changed. Christianity taught us how to read and write English, but it didn’t do anything to gender relations in the Northeast. In New Delhi, because of mall culture, where foreign products are much sought after, women dress differently. But wearing spaghetti tops is not making women more liberated. Still such women are seen as being different. In the Delhi gang rape case people were saying “what was she doing out there at nine thirty in the night.” Even here in Delhi the moment it reaches eight thirty, nine o’clock, if we as women have to go out, we feel a bit worried. Just look around Delhi around nine o’clock, you will not see a single woman walking. In fact the Delhi gang rape made more women stay indoors than outdoors. So whether it is the introduction of Christianity or of western goods, it hasn’t made India different. Indians may use brands to lavish their

ill-gotten wealth, but it hasn't changed their mindset. They say "a woman at ten o'clock at night with spaghetti top is asking for it." If a man wears a lungi with no banian on top, women will not say "we will rape you." For us women's rights are citizen's rights. We are not asking for anything different. Public roads where men walk and drive at two in the morning are also paid by women's tax payer's money. Manipur is worse because of the insurgency situation. There people start worrying if a woman doesn't come back before it gets dark at night. So we get to our house by four thirty in the afternoon. Here in Delhi at least it's eight, eight thirty. This is a pathetic state of affairs. We don't like it and we want to change it.

How do you see the women's movement in India do that?

That's a very important question! The women's movement in India has actually failed. It has failed for the last forty years since it started in the early seventies. It has failed because different women groups are all guided by different political parties and they follow their patriarchal structures. This is what I discovered after I had crashed several of their meetings because I wanted to find out. After thirty, forty years of women's movement why today we are even having these kinds of brutal rapes? A huge amount of money is spent by government as well as non-governmental organisations and international donors to prevent violence against women but violence against women as only increased in the past years. The whole work of violence against women has become like a business. You can print your flashy posters, your nice reports, but this is actually not translated into the ground. After the Delhi gang rape I told women in Delhi, please adopt what the Manipuri women did. From four thirty in the afternoon women in Manipur came out and started patrolling the streets with bamboo sticks and torches. That's how we claimed our night back. So even today, Michael, if you come to Manipur, we have bamboo huts in every locality, women take turns to stay there and they patrol the streets at night. It's a beautiful sight. And this is something that I told the women in Delhi also. Let's do that a bit. If you want to claim back the streets for women we've got to do that. But no, different women's groups receive different funding, they get busy with their different things, and there is no unity. That is the problem here. We also have a ministry of women and child, which is not even of cabinet rank. They are of state rank only. So even the woman minister is not given the utmost authority to decide what she wants. And secondly, the women commissioners across the county are appointed as wives, girlfriends and mistresses of members of political parties, so they are not committed, they are not interested, for them it's just a post that gives them a nice room and a car with a VIP red light on top, but in the end they are useless. As the saying goes, the fish starts rotting from the head. That's why groups like ours have started reclaiming their due from the state. We look at government of India data what funds they promise for women. Now women in groups of thirty to forty are going to their offices and claim those funds. Since the head is totally rotten in India, either you start feeling totally depressed and leave the country or, like some of us who decided to stay in this country, you claim your rights back. But it will take some time. We are women groups from all over the country. We are in touch with women groups

from Andhra Pradesh, from Tamil Nadu, from Kerala, from Delhi. They come to Manipur, we are going there, and we are meeting in Delhi. It's all about synergy.

In the upcoming elections in Delhi a new party is vying to become an alternative to Congress and BJP. What are your views on the Aam Admi Party and its agenda on gender?

The very name Aam Admi means “common *man*”. I have told them, but in this respect they are still as the others. I have met Arvind Kejriwal myself; I have met some of their leaders. Right now they are worried about how to reduce the price for water. Their concerns are very basic, which is all right, but I don't see them having a specific agenda for women. I don't see them as different from other parties. The only good thing about them is the audacity with which they came up. They declared their twenty crores budgeted for the elections, which is another thing that I liked, but at the same time one might question why so much? For their campaign they will need four to five crores. What will be done with the remaining money? They kept quiet. I know they will also do what the other parties will do, give money to the voters. So they are not going to be any different. I want to believe that Yoginder Yadav, whom I also met at the TiNK3 event in Goa last week, and in Kejriwal to do something. At the moment I still believe in them and we wish them all the best. Thank God, at least there is an alternative. What worries us are the highly entrenched Congress and BJP regimes which are actually killers, thugs, or power seekers. I don't know how far they will survive in that.

The 16th of December is coming soon. Is there any commemoration planned for the first annual return of the rape and murder of Nirbhaya?

The court awarded capital punishment to the rapists, with which I do not agree. You punish the crime, not the person. I am against capital punishment. So right now the trial is on in challenging the capital punishment. But that is not a solution. Among India's parliamentarians 27 per cent have a criminal record. They themselves have to be cleansed first. As I said, the fish has to be cleansed from the head. So killing a bunch of these guys from R. K. Puram is not going to cleanse India of rape. In fact, rape happened 88 times more often after the Delhi gang rape than before. So the death punishment has failed to deter. Just the day before, they raped an eighteen months old baby girl. So it is still a disgusting state of affairs in this country. India will take a hundred more years to learn to treat its women with the respect they deserve. It will require a strong grass roots movement. It requires, as you rightly suggested, a continuous reminder of what has happened on 16 December 2012. But at the moment the women's movement is so fractionated that I worry a bit.

They could all do their thing if only there was one forum where they would all come together to show their united strength.

As I said, the problem is the discord among the leaders of different political parties' women's wings. If one women's group is calling for a protest, other groups will boycott it. This is what is really, really sad and very harmful for the women's movement in India. And that is why our group stays aside from any political party and continues to remain neutral. We work for gender justice as well as for other democratic rights.

It continues to perplex me how a democratic country like India can manage its representation abroad to such a degree that all these things are not coming to the fore. There is comparatively little international concern about human rights violations in India. International human rights organisations like Amnesty or environmentalist groups like Greenpeace do not get a foot on the ground here. They have to work almost clandestinely through local affiliates. In conflict zones of Kashmir and the Northeast they are not present. Presumably, this suppression is done in the interest of controlling India's image abroad. How is this possible and who can do this in a democratic country with a free press and a vibrant civil society?

If you do a sociological profile of Indian bureaucrats, even diplomats whom I keep meeting abroad, they are mostly from the Braminical class and they don't want to change the status quo. They say that there is no conflict in India. It is only a law and order problem. They want to paint India as "we are all right". But in fact it is not all right. The people who have come into positions of power in the bureaucracy are mostly from the upper castes and they want to maintain their status quo. Therefore, when it comes to any talk of human rights, any talk of equality in India, any talk about defending rights and justice, they are very, very ... they don't even want me to talk about women in conflict situations. They want me to say "women in difficult circumstances". This is how they cheat. If you look at the Government of India National Action Plan for Women, check the document, you will not see the word "conflict". But they realise they need to work us, so they get in contact with us, but they tell us "please don't use the word "conflict" but "women in difficult circumstances". This is the level of control, trying to deny the existence of conflict in this country and there is violence in India. There is no denying that there are also good bureaucrats in India. There are very sensitive bureaucrats coming up. But they are very few. The majority of them have this British colonial hang-over of the civil servant with a big bungalow and a hundred servants. It's about power, Michael, and they want to maintain this status quo. Bureaucracy in India is still a very colonial system and they want to maintain that, and as a result, why would they want to say "hey, we have conflict here, let's resolve it"? Rather they will send the army, impose the AFSPA and silence us into death or at gun point. But with the world of social media now, they cannot keep us quiet anymore and as a consequence, India is also changing its response towards these situations.

Thank you for the interview!