

Mothers of Manipur



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Minakshi Bujarbaruah 30 January 2016 Updated 4 Feb 12061 views

Maya Angelou in her 1969 autobiography- 'I Know Why the Caged [Bird](#) Sings' had expressed "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you".

From civil [rights](#) histories of oppression to a lesser known part of [India](#)-the northeast, the narrative remains the same. It is the narrative of silencing. In a daring attempt, senior journalist Teresa Rehman through her latest book “The Mothers of [Manipur](#): Twelve Women who Made [History](#)” tries to bring forth one of [India](#)’s most shocking acts of women’s protest, back into public memory. In 2004, 12 mothers or ‘Ima’ in Manipuri, shook the entire nation and the international media when [as](#) a [sign](#) of radical protest and outrage [over](#) the rape and killing of an ‘alleged’ militant Thangjam Manorama, they stripped in the main streets of [Imphal city](#) right opposite the [Assam Rifles](#) headquarters at Kangla fort. Rehman’s book captures not just the intriguing biographies of these 12 women and their act of penultimate sacrifice, but in a refreshing way the book brings out the importance of silenced past and also the grit of the people of contemporary [Manipur](#) in the midst of conflict and tension.

It all started from back when Rehman was a [Principal](#) Correspondent covering Northeast [India](#) for Tehelka News magazine. [Manipur](#) was a [state](#) rife in conflict and violence, and would often be in news. This entailed extensive travel to the [state](#) covering stories from different parts. Reporting on conflict is in any way challenging, and not being from the [state](#) and more so being a woman added on to this woe. From struggling with the language to being careful about the attire, everything was different and difficult for Rehman who reflects back to the days when her bond with [Manipur](#) started, captivating her to write more about the [state](#). In many of her reporting assignments, she happened to meet some of these mothers and there was a constant urge in her to know beyond what was already known of them. She felt their stories needed to be told, with a hint of fresh insight keeping intact the everydayness of their lives, their hopes and aspirations and their sense of purpose. For them, it was the ultimate they could do for their daughters and to shield for their [rights](#).

The 12 mothers who are the protagonists in the book became icons of radical women's protest in contemporary Indian history, for the several ways in which this act challenged embedded patriarchy in Manipuri society. Their slogans like "Indian Army Rape Us, Take our Flesh" shook not just the army but also traditional Meitei patriarchal structures, for these were grandmothers who would otherwise not even dare remove their shawl (enaphi). "Nothing much has changed. And it perturbs them. However, in the midst of all this hopelessness, it is amazing to see what some ordinary Manipuris are doing or experimenting, be it in the field of art, culture, music, theatre", expresses Rehman introspecting on if something has really changed from then and now.

The book weaves a story through stories of these women- although unique in their own ways, yet something captivating that sews it together [as](#) part of our collective memories. These are gripping stories beyond the dominant narrative of conflict and violence, of tales untold, of the mundane and the banal in their everyday lives. The [author](#) expresses, “Anybody who would like to understand the conflict in [Manipur](#) should get out of their comfort zones and ask the uncomfortable questions. And in any kind of a conflict situation, it is the women and children who are the worst affected. Any kind of discourse for facilitating change has to be inclusive of the views of the women of [Manipur](#). And one cannot ignore these fearless 12 Mothers.”

Reporting on conflict also comes with its own share of surprises and challenges. Though it might be equally challenging for a male journalist, there are occasions when it becomes all the more difficult for a woman. Recounting her share of hurdles along the way, Rehman shares that there is this constant [fear](#) of [danger](#) that one has to [deal](#) with. For one story of a fake encounter in [Imphal](#), she was even interrogated by the SIT, the [Judicial](#) Commission and the CBI and she still has to face court summons. But at the same time, being a woman she could empathize with the women whose lives she was documenting. Although it is sad that they had to strip themselves publicly in order to make themselves heard, in order to challenge the dominant, and to reclaim what had been ripped of them, Rehman views this exemplary act will be etched in the contemporary history of [Manipur](#). It is this determination and sense of purpose of these 12 Ima that enthralled the [author](#) and compelled her to pen their stories.

[Manipur](#), a [state](#) that has been home to radical women's protests and movements, has been constantly dealing with the imposition of the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers [Act](#) ([AFSPA](#)), 1958. Human [rights](#) activists have been painstakingly voicing up their angst and appealing for the repeal of the [AFSPA](#). In the midst of these debates and a continuous struggle for human [rights](#), The Mothers of [Manipur](#) comes with a fresh perspective from the ground. Capturing raw, humane and real narratives of these 12 Manipuri mothers who [soon](#) faded away from public memory, Rehman's book throws new insight in a manner never done before. Gripping and hard hitting, the book brilliantly takes the reader from the very mundane to the more subtle nuances of everyday life in contemporary [Manipur](#).

The book can be bought online at:

<http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/distributed/M/bo23681367.html>

<http://www.amazon.in/Mothers-Manipur-Twelve-Women-History/dp/9384757764>

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