

Saga of Irom Sharmila

PRADIP PHANJOUBAM

Burning Bright is the story of an epic non-violent resistance against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958 by a young lady, Irom Sharmila. Her protest fast has entered the 10th year and she is kept alive by forced nose-feeding in a jail ward in Imphal's Jawaharlal Nehru Hospital.

The difficulty in writing detachedly on an issue where the moral question is not only unambiguous, but also extreme, is understandable. In writing about somebody, engaged in an epic non-violent resistance against what is considered an indefensible, antiquated and draconian legislation of British colonial vintage, the AFSPA 1958, few can expect a neutral standpoint. Doing so would virtually amount to

Burning Bright: Irom Sharmila and the Struggle for Peace in Manipur by Deepti Priya Mehrotra (*New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009; pp xv + 219, Rs 275.*)

giving moral equivalence between the victim and the perpetrator, violence and non-violence.

Writing on trauma is universally acknowledged to be difficult, for a lot of the traumatic experiences often remain unclaimed by the victim and indeed are not easily claimable and therefore not easily represented empirically. Objective narratives often cannot fathom subjective anguishes. How can anybody objectively and accurately represent the sense of humiliation and outrage that pushed an ordinary middle class girl to do what anybody

would have thought was humanly impossible. How can anybody define the sense of affiliation to land and community that ethnic communities have, and the unseen, unarticulated trauma caused when these are contemptuously dismissed or violated, without visiting the subjective worlds of these communities? Dominick LaCapra in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* suggests the "middle voice". This is not a balancing act between the objective and subjective. Instead, it is about the objective narrator and the subject of narration-sharing agency, so that the subject is allowed an equal perspective in which the narrator too can become a subject to be interrogated and assessed.

Deepti Priya Mehrotra struggles honestly and succeeds in finding this voice to a great extent. She, thus, becomes Sharmila's fellow traveller, patiently and with devotion gauging the depth of her feelings, the sources of her strength, the power of her non-violent convictions amidst the

inferno that is Manipur today, the strength of her simplicity and honesty of purpose, etc. Apart from an absorbing landmark by landmark account of the 10 years of Sharmila's unyielding struggle (when the book was written it was eight years), the author in a complementary way also gives the reader a sense of the passionate history of resistance in Manipur from the pre-colonial times. This history is portrayed as the womb and incubator of the kind of energy that can fire protests such as Sharmila's.

Often, however, moderation of the subjective vision by objective narrative in the book is inadequate. There is, thus, the tendency of the author to tip too far towards the subjective, often at the risk of appearing like an activist campaigner against the controversial act, totally blind to the logic of the dreadful cycle of violence and counter-violence which has now become a somewhat compelling excuse for the establishment to claim extraordinary circumstances demand extraordinary responses. Give the devil its due, which the author does not. The nation state is built on a foundation of violence, which is why almost as a necessary qualification criterion, every nation state zealously keeps a military even when it does not need one. Bhutan's case dramatically exposes this. This tiny Himalayan state keeps an army although its neighbours are India and China with whom it cannot even dream of fighting a war. Thus, any serious challenge to the nation state would have to be military in nature and the nation state's response too would ultimately expectedly be military. The "wars" in the north-east have shown this. The catch is that the Indian state does not call these "wars" for "war" implies conflict between states, acknowledging in the process that the insurgents are putative states. It also invokes ideas of applicability of the Geneva Conventions and other international arbitrating mechanisms in wars between states.

India, instead, prefers to call insurgencies in the north-east as civil strife. If so, the AFSPA 1958 becomes an extremely draconian and disproportionate weapon. Herein is the ambiguity. Insurgency in the north-east is neither a war nor civil strife, or on the other hand, it is both.

The resultant legal as well as moral complication is yet another dimension of the problem.

The Liberal Sympathy

The liberal sympathy for the campaign against the AFSPA 1958 rests on the premise that insurgencies, which the insurgents themselves call liberation struggles, are civil strife and the use of the military or other "extraordinary" means to fight them, superfluous, draconian, unethical and even illegal. Mehrotra belongs to this liberal camp. Coming out against the AFSPA 1958 is hence about standing up for fellow citizens and little to do with moderating the brutalities of war, as it were. This approach, although well-intentioned, invariably leaves the core issue of the conflict addressed inadequately. It presumes the problem is essentially a development and governance issue, calling for nothing more than bureaucratic interventions. What is ignored in the process is the political nature of these problems, demanding political interventions along with the bureaucratic, with primacy given to the former. Middle voicing the Sharmila story thus needs deeper discussions of the insurgency question. *Burning Bright* falls short on this.

That said, Mehrotra portrays Sharmila quite convincingly not just as a freak phenomenon, but as a product of the passion and angst embedded in Manipur society and how deeply it is humiliated and wounded by the AFSPA 1958. As for instance, the author points out, other than Sharmila's hunger strike odyssey demanding the repeal of the Act, on 15 July 2004 in the wake of the rape and murder of a girl, Thangjam Manorama, in the custody of the Assam Rifles, 12 women staged a naked protest in front of the Kangla Gate in Imphal which was then under the occupation of the Assam Rifles, defying the soldiers to rape them and shocking the entire world. One month later, on 15 August afternoon, as part of the same protest, another young man, Pebam Chittaranjan, immolated himself on the main street of Bishenpur Bazar, about 16 km from Imphal, deserted on the day because of a bandh and a security alert on account of the Independence Day celebration. Mehrotra gets the location

wrong, saying this happened in front of the Kangla Gate. She also gets a few other facts wrong, sometimes out of lazy research and at least once in the eagerness of an activist to malign the adversary of the cause she set out to defend. An example of the first is the caption of a group photograph showing O N Shrivastava, the governor of Manipur for two terms, his wife and a number of Meira Paibis (women activists) which says, "A Meira Paibis delegation – lobbying with government and army top brass". The only man in uniform in the picture standing behind Shrivastava is the governor's civil police aide-de-camp (ADC). An example of the second case is on page 92: While suggesting the government was trying to withhold facts relating to the rape and murder of Manorama, she claimed that the post mortem report on the body of the dead girl was never released to the family or public. The fact is that it was published in at least one local English daily, and subsequently webcast. The report was also tabled before the judicial enquiry into the murder headed by retired justice, C Upendra.

The trouble also seems to be that in doing a tour of events that fit into the theme of her story, the author was left to resort to the journalistic technique of presenting a collage of attributed opinions as representation of facts. Her choice of sources for these opinions obviously was also overwhelmingly the activists. These are, however, minor issues and would probably be overlooked by most readers without much cost to the central theme of the book, except those who have also been very closely following developments in the state.

Pradip Phanjoubam (phanjoubam@gmail.com) is editor of the *Imphal Free Press*.

Economic & Political WEEKLY

available at

Uniquality

83, Janapath, Bapujee Bazar
Bhubaneswar 751 009
Orissa
Ph: 2530064, 2530024