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Taibung Mipanlangi Wamgmada

[Beyond the Web of the Material World]

A Poem by Irom Sharmila

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Note on Manipur:

Manipur is one of the seven northeastern states of India. Politically it has been part of British India since 1891. Manipur was granted Independence by British along with India on 15 August 1947. It was merged into the Indian Union on 15 October 1949. Many still question the legitimacy of the merger agreement.¹

Geographically, of the northeastern states of India fall under Southeast Asia. The ethnicity and culture of the people inhabiting these states exhibit affinity with Southeast Asia. The region shares a border of 1624 kilometers with northwestern Myanmar. Manipur is called India's "Gate way to Southeast Asia" owing to its geo-political location between India and Southeast Asia. It is home to 29 Government recognized Scheduled Tribes and a host of diverse communities. Each community has their own distinct traditions, culture and dialects. The lingua franca of the people living in Manipur is Meitelon, the language spoken by the majority ethnic group Meites. Meiteilon is a Tibeto-Burman language.

Irom Sharmila:

Irom Sharmila is a poet an activist who has been on 'fast-unto-death' since 5 November 2000 against the draconian Arms Forces Special Powers Acts, 1958 (AFSPA). As per provisions of the act a non-commissioned can shoot to kill, search, damage property, use force, arrest on the mere suspicion that someone has committed or was about to commit a cognizable offence. The Act further prohibits any legal or judicial proceedings against army personnel without the sanction of the Central Government. Thereby, endowing an

impunity which makes more than sixty thousand military and paramilitary stationed in Manipur invincible to legal prosecution. There have been numerous cases of human rights violations, rape, murder, extra judicial killings, fake encounters, etc. Till date there has not been a single prosecution till date.

She began her non-violent resistance against the AFSPA after military personnel of the 8th Assam Rifles gunned down 10 innocent civilians waiting for a bus in Malom, Manipur, on 2 November 2000, following a bomb attack on an Assam Rifles convoy by insurgents. Irom Sharmila calls her struggle 'her bounden duty'.

The poem "Beyond the web of the Material world" is a reassertion of her faith in God and her struggle. It can be interpreted as a critique on the "gods," or those that wield authoritative and legislative power, who are responsible for the current social and political predicaments in Manipur. She remains steadfast on her duty to 'fast-unto-death' until the AFSPA is removed from the northeastern states and Kashmir. She was arrested on charges of 'attempt to commit suicide' under Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code and is kept in solitary confinement in the security ward of the JN Hospital in Imphal, Manipur.

Beyond the web of the material world

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Riding the royal boat of winds

I went to the world of the Gods.

Perhaps my Creator wishes to test me

And brought me to his land for that purpose

Impressed and yet, terrified
When my eyes met theirs
The gods in their cloud form
An astonishing avatar!

In the restlessness of the vacuum,
How at ease they appeared.
The memory sends a shiver down my spine.
Untethered to the cunning world,
Where souls congregate
There is no room for the human body
Where are their eyes, and ears?
What about legs and the hands?
I never thought Gods
Would be so different from humans
We have been told there are no differences
And accepted unquestioned

Perhaps, because no one compared us to them,
How and what is going on there?
How can one compare that to the human world?
Where birth or death is unknown
Is there an end to all these startling impossibilities?
I will report all that I know
Unopened eyes can see
Sealed ears can hear
About the human world
And every minute detail about the world's soul.
They are higher beings
They control the infinite space
They have no pride
Highs and lows do not exist.
Unlike our world, there is no greed
Therefore there is neither disheartenment nor dis-
content
And one does not garb all for oneself.
There is neither loss nor gain.
Nor burden in their hearts.

Being idle at all times is their duty.
Their speed is fast as speed can be
There is nothing they cannot accomplish or reach
Their truth is the only truth
Therefore, they scorn falsehood,
And chastise human misdeeds,
They will never pardon us from persecution.

EndNotes

¹ For example, one of the major insurgent groups, United National Liberation Front (UNLF), sees the Indian government as a colonial force and has demanded a plebiscite.