

Manipuris and Sharmila Irom

Perennially throttled by political instability, ethnic violence and endless unanticipated sporadic violent eruptions in the state, it appears that Manipuris have learnt the hard way to cope and negotiate with violence almost on a daily basis. In such an environment, Irom Sharmila, the global non-violent icon, failed to make sense for the majority of Manipuris when she took on the former chief minister in the recent assembly elections.

When Sharmila endured her 16-year long fast in protest against the infamous Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), 1958 and human rights violation committed by the state, she was housed in the hospital with no feasible public support for the cause she felt worthy to sacrifice her life. The iconic non-violent rebel emerged ever stronger to build a future of truth, justice and peace, a cause she found worthy of giving everything through electoral politics which the Manipuris ridiculed.

Sharmila's political party, the Peoples' Resurgence and Justice Alliance (PRJA) was nascent, no doubt, but it emerged out of an extraordinary journey of 16 years—something the Manipuris failed to appreciate. PRJA is identified with the resurgence of estranged youth who for long have been disillusioned by corruption and misgovernance. Under the banner of Youth4Change/Sharmila4Change within a short span it could identify itself with the aspirations and hopes of youth. The young, educated and charismatic leadership of PRJA co-convenor Erendro Leichombam, the Harvard graduate and former World Bank fellow and his team struggled hard to infuse hope, positivity and the possibility of change among a community glued to cynicism, negativity and a fatalistic attitude.

This struggle itself is half a battle won.

The public often conceives of PRJA's political mandate as solely against the AFSPA when its aim is to root out corruption in the state.

Manipur is one of the most resourceful Indian states as nature has abundantly blessed her but remains undeveloped with almost half of its population falling below the poverty line. True, for the unexposed unlettered folk, living from hand to mouth, and concerned with day-to-day livelihood struggle, it could be a luxury to engage in democratic political reforms by actively participating in the process. Though one does not wish to, one can well understand if the same population feels that their poverty and troubles are a series of personal trappings, and remains silent spectators to the dynamics of contemporary political developments. However, when the self-obsessed lettered folk and intelligentsia react in a similar fashion, it reflects on the society. Sharmila may be devoid of muscle and money power. But the irony is, the Manipuri lettered folk and the intelligentsia pretty much like the unlettered folk failed to essentially grasp the symbolic message of her moral courage to fight the mighty powerful three-time chief minister, infamous for his corruption and violence. A triumphant salute to the 90 brave conscientious voters who supported the timeless cherished values that Sharmila sacrificed and stood for!

Being an insider, Sharmila has experienced life being smothered by violence and multitude of lies. Sharmila stood up against these lies as she strongly believes that life cannot be on the basis of multitude of lies but truth. The human world is epitomised by the spirit of people whose values and

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ideals are created in various struggles such as religion, political spaces, etc. Sharmila through her political goal dreamed of creating her ideal of life based on faith, love and dialogical relationship with one another but failed miserably to evoke the conscience of the people of Manipur, already balkanised by ethnic divisive forces of hatred and suspicion.

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