

# Shooting Women and Conflict in Manipur, India

## TALES FROM THE MARGINS

documentary film and presentation by Kavita Joshi

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Manipur, India. 12 women disrobe outside army headquarters, protesting the custodial killing and alleged rape of a woman. For 8 years, a young woman has been on a fast unto death, demanding justice. She is kept under arrest and is forcibly nose-fed by the government. Why are the women of Manipur using their bodies as their last weapon?

Manipur lies in the North-East region on India, on the border with Myanmar. Formerly a large princely kingdom with a rich cultural tradition and history, it was merged with India in 1949. In the 1950s, the region saw the rise of insurgency by armed Naga separatist groups. Over time, other ethnic groups in Manipur also began a separatist campaign against the merging of their state with the Indian union.

The Government of India's response to the insurgencies has been a largely military one. It has deployed a vast number of military personnel in the region, and given them sweeping powers through the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958.

The AFSPA (as it is called in short) is a particularly drastic piece of legislation that has spelt repression in Kashmir and large parts of North-East India for half a century now. Once this law comes into force, it allows anyone in the Indian army (or paramilitary) to shoot, arrest or search without any warrant, destroy a dwelling, and even shoot to kill – on suspicion alone. Further, the AFSPA snatches away an aggrieved citizen's right to seek redress in courts, as no military personnel can be prosecuted without the written consent of the government.

This law has been imposed in Manipur since 1958. However, the AFSPA's record in containing insurgency is dubious, as the number of major, armed insurgent groups in Manipur has only multiplied over time.

The AFSPA dilutes every Indian citizen's inalienable Right to Life, guaranteed by the Indian constitution as well as by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

### WOMEN AND THE AFSPA:

The AFSPA has a devastating impact on the lives of women. In most operations, be they combing, arrests, searches, or interrogation, the armed forces have, under the shelter of the AFSPA, done away with the basic safeguards accorded to all women suspects under Indian law. Arrest by male security personnel, interrogation in army camps and police stations, torture and sexual violation has become routine. At the same time, women find that their access to forests, firewood and natural resources is cut off because of the troubled situation. This affects them more than it does men, because of women's gendered role as homemakers. For those women who are the breadwinners, access to livelihood also becomes much harder, affecting their economic survival.

### SOME INCIDENTS OF VIOLATIONS OF THE RIGHT TO LIFE:

**Heirangoithong massacre: March 14, 1984:** CRPF (paramilitary) personnel attacked by insurgents during a volleyball match. The crowd runs helter-skelter on hearing the firing. CRPF fires at the civilian crowd. 14 spectators dead.

**Operation Blue Bird at Oinam: July 10, 1987:** Assam Rifles post at Oinam village raided and armoury looted by insurgents; 9 AR personnel die. Operation Blue Bird launched. Three month reign of terror by AR in 30 villages there. 14 civilians shot dead by the Assam Rifles. In an infamous incident of the operation, a woman was forced to deliver her child in public view in an open field, as troops jeered.

**Tera Bazar Massacre: March 25, 1993:** Unidentified youth shoot at CRPF personnel at Tera Keithel, Imphal; 2 CRPF men killed. Thereafter, CRPF personnel rush out and fire indiscriminately. 5 civilians killed. Many receive bullet injuries. No enquiry instituted to date.

**RMC Massacre: January 7, 1995:** CRPF personnel attacked by insurgents at the Medical College, Imphal. In retaliation, CRPF shoot dead 9 innocent civilians including a bonafide medical student. The government enquiry commission indicts the paramilitary for needless firing after the insurgents had fled.

**Malom Massacre: November 2, 2000:** Assam Rifles convoy attacked near Malom, Manipur by insurgents. AR shoot at civilians at a nearby bus-stop. 10 civilians dead, including a 65 year old woman. A brutal combing operation follows. **Irom Sharmila's fast-to-death began in the aftermath of this incident.**

**Custodial killing of Thangjam Manorama: 11<sup>th</sup> July 2004:** Manorama Devi picked up late at night by Assam Rifles personnel (all male). Her bullet ridden corpse found a few hours later, covered with gash marks, cuts and bruises. The incident angers 12 Manipuri women into disrobing in public and challenging the army to rape them. Months of unrest follow. Commission of Enquiry set up following public outcry, but its findings are not public to date. Read more:

- Manipur on Fire: <http://www.flonnet.com/fl2118/stories/20040910007400400.htm>
- Insult upon Injury: <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2118/stories/20040910006701000.htm>
- Burdens of the Past: <http://www.flonnet.com/fl2118/stories/20040910006101200.htm>

## ARTICLES AND RESOURCES:

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- **Read the exact text of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958**  
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA200252005>  
Copy-paste this link into browser address bar. A pdf will open. Go to Appendix I, page 25
- **Getting Away With Murder: 50 Years of the AFSPA; by Human Rights Watch**  
An overview of the impact of AFSPA on the whole of North-East India and Kashmir:  
<http://hrw.org/backgrounder/2008/india0808/>
- **Briefing on the AFSPA by Amnesty International**  
A very detailed document, including excellent appendices.  
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA200252005>
- **Critique of the AFSPA by the South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre:**  
Provides a legal analysis of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act  
[http://www.hrdc.net/sahrdc/resources/armed\\_forces.htm#recommendations](http://www.hrdc.net/sahrdc/resources/armed_forces.htm#recommendations)
- **Joint Statement of Women's Groups against AFSPA:**  
An overview of the impact of militarization on women's lives.  
<http://www.sacw.net/Wmov/JointStatement20012005.html>
- **Asian Centre for Human Rights:**  
Provides a background to the situation in Manipur through the "India Human Rights Report":  
2006: <http://www.achrweb.org/reports/india/AR06/manipur.htm>  
2005: <http://achrweb.org/reports/india/AR05/manipur.htm>
- **Article by Combat Law, the Human Rights magazine:**  
Report of a people's enquiry commission into the human rights situation in Manipur as a consequence of AFSPA.  
<http://www.indiatogether.com/combatalaw/vol2/issue1/violations.htm>

## VIDEOS AVAILABLE ONLINE

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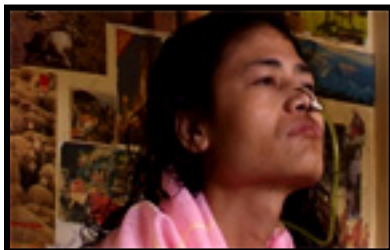
- **Tales from the Margins:** (23 min / 2006 / dir by Kavita Joshi): focuses upon the extraordinary protests by Manipuri women in their fight against AFSPA 1958.
- **My Body My Weapon:** (10 min / 2006 / dir by Kavita Joshi): a short doc on the epic fast of Irom Sharmila, who has not eaten since 8 years in protest against the AFSPA.
- **Manipuri People Protest against AFSPA:** unedited clips of people's protests against AFSPA in 2005, in the aftermath of the custodial killing of Manorama Devi.

All videos are linked from <http://kavitajoshi.blogspot.com> (please see the sidebar on the blog) and are available on YouTube as well. They will soon also be posted on The Hub ([hub.witness.org](http://hub.witness.org))

## MORE ON IROM SHARMILA

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Irom Sharmila has been on a fast to death since November 2000, demanding removal of the AFSPA 1958. For this "crime", she has been arrested by the government and is being forcibly nose fed. Annually, she is released by the courts, continues her fast, and is promptly re-arrested. She is routinely denied access to people, especially her family members.



In 2006, Sharmila moved her protest to Delhi, fasting on the streets of Jantar Mantar. She was detained by the Delhi Police at AIIMS hospital, and elsewhere; was denied access to visitors and the media; and harassed. In March 2007, she returned to Imphal and continued her fast, only to be arrested yet again. She is currently under arrest.

Sharmila was one of the nominees of the 1000 Women for the Nobel; and is the recipient of South Korea's Gwangju Human Rights Award 2006.

- **Text of the full interview of Irom Sharmila, by Kavita Joshi**  
A rare interview with Irom Sharmila, the iron lady of Manipur, who is on a fast-to-death for 8 years now.  
<http://www.countercurrents.org/hr-joshi291106.htm>
- **The Unlikely Outlaw**  
A searing portrait of Irom Sharmila by Shoma Chaudhury in Tehelka magazine  
[http://www.tehelka.com/story\\_main23.asp?filename=Ne120906The\\_unlikely\\_CS.asp&id=1](http://www.tehelka.com/story_main23.asp?filename=Ne120906The_unlikely_CS.asp&id=1)

**Kavita Joshi is an independent filmmaker based in Delhi.**  
For more information on Manipur, AFSPA or her films, please visit <http://kavitajoshi.blogspot.com>