

Gender, Violence, and Conflict in Manipur

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ABSTRACT

Armed conflict and the present political impasse in Manipur are consequences of the contestation between the Indian state with its forces and the insurgency/non-state armed groups over the question of ethno-nationalism/self-determination. These have historical implications based on unresolved political questions emanating from the time of independence. The result being that there has been a growing dominance of militarization over civilian authorities, with simultaneous decline in democratic institutions and the freedom and rights of citizens. This paper tries to look at the increasing rate of violence, and how violence as a medium of communication/expression is being used, particularly against women, by the non-state actors/insurgents conveniently in the conflict ridden state of Manipur. The paper also looks at how the ongoing cycle of violence negatively affects women and men and results in gender-specific disadvantages, particularly for women who are not always recognized or addressed due to gender-blind understandings of conflict.

1. Introduction

Violence against women surrounds us all, whether or not we are aware of it. And since violence against women is so common and widespread in most societies, it is often considered a normal aspect of women's experiences. Violence against women includes physical, sexual, and psychological violence. However, violence against women increases in situations of armed conflict, taking distinctive dimensions and meanings. Women in Manipur find themselves at the receiving end of violence on four fronts — from the state actors, the insurgents/non-state armed actors, men in the society, and a corresponding escalation of violence within their own homes. The article focuses on the violence against women committed by the Non-state armed actors/insurgents. The article also argues that in conflict ridden states, such as Manipur, men are more likely to be killed and physically tortured, while women are more likely to suffer sexual violence, and cultural and societal impositions, which hamper their freedom and their rights due to their gender.

The Indian government denies that there are armed conflicts in India. However, it uses phrases such as 'disturbed areas', 'insurgency infested', 'law and order problems', 'national security' etc. Unfortunately, the Indian state's responses to these insurgent groups have been the perpetual reliance on military methods and enactment of anti-people laws such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958. The beginning of political violence in the Northeast could be traced to the time when the Indian army was deployed to quell the Naga uprising in 1953, which intensified to an armed conflict. Violence has become endemic in Manipur due to the ongoing armed conflict for over six decades. And during this period, violence has spread to all levels of society, including a conjunction of armed violence perpetrated by both the non-state armed actors as well as the Indian state. As a result, not only are civilians killed in the conflict, but their lives are caught between multiple opposing parties, that is, between state and non-state armed

actors, and also between various non-state armed groups based on their ethnic lines.

2. Defining Violence against Women

The United Nations' 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life" (UN, 1993). The United Nations definition is important because its focus is on the responsibility of the state to commit to the human rights of women. It acknowledges violence against women as gender-based. We need to recognize that violence against women is not only personal and private but is an institutionalized violence aided by the state (Levie, 2008). Women's rights activists then participated in the Vienna Conference on Human Rights in 1993, which conformed that "Women's Rights are Human Rights" (United Nations, 2014).

The root cause of gender-based violence is in the heart of the prevailing systems of discrimination that justifies the oppression/subordination of women by men. As recognized by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly 1993, violence against women is historically manifested. The power imbalance between men and women has led to the subordination of women in almost all aspects of life (Vlachovd & Biason, 2005). In July 1993, India ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (hereafter, CEDAW). Yet, it has not ratified the Protocol Optional to CEDAW.

Studies have shown that no one approach adequately explains the phenomenon of violence against women. Berry Levie gives three perspectives to explain what causes violence against women: Individual Perspectives, Socio-cultural perspectives, and Multidimensional Perspectives. Individual perspectives explain violent behavior as learned from one's

environment. According to these theories, individuals learn how to behave from their exposure to and experiences of violence and through socialization processes that take place in families. Boys are most likely to imitate their fathers and girls their mothers, through the socialization processes that take place in families. This process is responsible for the intergenerational transmission of violence, in which violence against women is learned by one generation and the next (Levie, 2008). Social learning has provided a valuable perspective on the complex issue of the influence of exposure to violence in the community and family as well on children/people. This exposure along with other factors, but not by itself- is recognized as to have had a significant impact on the behavior of the people who later use violence. This theory is very much relevant to violence against women in the conflict ridden state of Manipur, where the violence committed by the Indian state forces in the last six decades are learned and reproduced by various non-state armed groups, including the civilians in the society.

Multidimensional Perspectives explanations of violence against women integrate social factors such as class, gender, and culture with individual characteristics such as family history, psychopathology, and alcohol or drug use. These perspectives view violence against women as complex, with individual and social factors combining to cause and perpetuate the problem (Levie, 2008).

Carole Sheffield writes in her essay "Sexual Terrorism" that the cornerstone of patriarchy is to keep the female body under its control. According to her, violence against women so pervades our culture that we have to learn to live with it as though it were natural order of things. It is a system by which males frighten and, by frightening, control and dominate females, and has the same characteristics as any other forms of terrorism (Sheffield)

3. Research Methodology

My field work is concentrated mainly on the four Naga Hill districts of Manipur: Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong, Ukhrul. The field work is based on anecdote, in-depth interviews and participatory observations and personal experiences and testimony of victims/survivors. The secondary sources of data include books, articles, reports, newspapers, magazines, and internet sources.

4. Kinds of Violence Perpetrated by Insurgents/Non-state Actors

A number of insurgent groups in Manipur resort to various kinds of violence, which threatens the lives and security of civilians as well as the Indian armed forces and their families. Some of the kinds of violence perpetrated against women in the state of Manipur are discussed below.

4.1 Use of Bombs

Bombing and bomb attacks by the Non-state armed groups in public places as well as private and public institutions, and on civilians and Indian armed forces has become so common in Manipur. It is now considered by many as one of the most feared phenomena not only among the civil population but also for the Indian Armed forces and state

police. In July 17, 2012, three members of a family, including two women were seriously injured when a bomb exploded at a residential house in Ukhrul at about 8:30 p.m. The victims included Mrs. Sharon (Age 56, name changed), her son (an Assam Rifles personnel), and her daughter-in-law Ruth. The bomb exploded on the tin roof, which increased the impact. The son's right-hand fingers were seriously injured that he could no longer be a rifle man. He was assigned to an administrative task after the incident. As for the mother, the wounds are still clearly visible on her belly, hands, and left leg. According to her, they were very lucky to have survived. Ruth was psychologically affected by the bomb blast. Following the bomb blast, for a few months, she always had this fear that the same people who attacked them might target them again. She also began having sleeping disorder. She narrates, "till date whenever I hear a loud sound.....like a vehicle tyre puncture, children's cricket balls hitting the tin roof of our house when they play, etc..... I get numb, my chest aches, and I experience breathing problem.....life has not been the same as it used to be."

In September 2014, a powerful Improvised Explosive Device (hereafter, IED) exploded at Neetu Glass and Hardware store owned by a Bihari in Ukhrul town. The incident killed two innocent Tangkhul Naga women: Dinah (aged 42), an Ex-president of the Tangkhul Shanao Long (Tangkhul Women's League), and her cousin (aged 25). It also injured the proprietor and a salesman of the store. According to the proprietor (Aged 50) who hails from Bihar, "a few months before, there was a demand for rupees 30 lakh from the store by the Manipur Naga People's Front. How are we supposed to pay such amount to them?" According to the investigating Police Officer, "it was a very powerful explosion and the goods of the shop which include tin, steel and iron nails made the impact even more damaging. Had there been more passerby or customers in the shop, the result would have been devastating. After the attack, the owner again received a demand letter threatening that they will attack again until he pays the amount." As a result, the store owner decided to leave the town, but was persuaded not to leave by the civil society and the locals who decided that they will fight together and not give in to the demands and violent attacks.

Ukhrul district, inhabited by the Tangkhul Nagas, has always been a stronghold of the Naga Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isack Muivah) (hereafter NSCN (IM). insurgent group. The newly formed and minor Naga insurgent groups, such as the Manipur Naga People's Front (MNPF), want to come in and have a share in the collection of taxes and showcase their presence in the District. It is basically a fight for power to control the town and the people. As a result, in the tussle for power and control between various insurgent groups, the civilians have to bear the brunt of such attacks and threats.

Due to eight bomb blast incidents in a span of two months in Ukhrul town, concerned citizens of Tangkhul on Facebook group used the social media platform to organize a Candlelight Vigil on November 26, 2013 as a sign of protest against such cowardly acts. "Our land, and our home, set atop a beautiful serene mountain, is now becoming a home for anti-socialist/anti-social elements. Making their presence felt aloud

with bombs/explosions, instilling insecurity and fear among us. Every rightful citizens and fellow friends, we are innocent and it is time to for us to raise our voices and reclaim our town's tranquility once again. We shall not be intimidated by such cowardly acts but rather join our hands and filter them out from our society," the Tangkhuls on the Facebook Group stated (Epao, Novemeber 15, 2013).

A per South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), from 2000 to 2017, there have been 632 bomb blast incidents in Manipur, killing 169 and injuring 841, and from 2014 to January 2019, there were 250 bomb blast incidents, where 20 civilians were killed and 179 were injured, while 44 security forces were killed and 105 were injured (Satp.org)

4.2 Physical Violence

Physical violence against women, like any other forms of violence, is a common phenomenon in the armed conflict state of Manipur. Physical violence includes acts such as kicking, slapping, punching, beating with stick and objects, etc. According to Ruth (Aged 36, name changed), one evening, she and three other women were chatting in the verandah when suddenly an insurgent hailing from the village came looking for someone who he believed had passed by them. When they replied that they have not seen or were unaware of anyone passing by, the insurgent took firewood lying nearby and began trashing everyone including a 75-year-old grandmother who lives in the house. When she questioned the behavior of the perpetrator, she was kicked in the stomach. In the commotion, her husband who happened to be in the kitchen came out running, but was threatened with dire consequences if he helped her wife or interferes in the matter. The husband could not do anything but look helplessly at her wife who was in deep pain and was out of breath. She questions during an interview, "What is the use of being a man and a husband who cannot even help his wife and mother? I was begging him to help me as I was unable to even breathe, but he just kept staring at me as he was scared of the perpetrator. I can never forget that incident nor forgive the perpetrator for what he did to me and to all of us." The construction of masculinity is that of the ability to exert power over others, particularly by means of the use of force. Thus, men are considered to represent strength and power of the family and community, able to protect not just them but others. And under circumstances, such as this, where he failed to protect women of his family from 'other men', not only is his masculinity questioned, but he is emasculated.

4.3 Sexual Harassment and Molestation with an Attempt to Rape

On December 24, 2013, a teenage girl (Aged 16) was molested with an attempt of rape. Thirteen students (six boys and seven girls) studying in different institutions in Imphal were on their way to their village for Christmas, when they were stopped by three self-proclaimed members of Kangleipak Communist Party (hereafter KCP) militants at about 6:20 p.m. in a deserted place, thereby separating the boys and girls. The three took away their mobile phones and robbed them their Rs 2,500. One of the perpetrators, who identified himself as a colonel of KCP, took the youngest girl from the group to a nearby place and attempted to rape her. According to her, "I was overpowered by the fellow. He got hold of me and threw

me on the ground, and was on top of me. He then tore my shirt and my bra and started molesting and fondling my breast. He then tried to unzip my pants, but since I struggled hard, he could not. He got frustrated and punched me on my face. I continued to struggle but then I knew that that I will not be able to move away from his clutches and knowing that he was becoming more violent I got scared, and that was when I told him that I will remove the pants myself. He believed me and let me get up. The moment I got up I just ran and shouted and screamed for help." Their screams were heard by residents of the nearby village, and they were rescued and the incident was reported to the nearest police station. The three culprits were arrested on the same night by the police, and they were all said to be in the age group of 21--22 years.

During police interrogation it was learned that one of the perpetrators was a former member of the KCP. Reacting to the incident, the KCP's Information and Publicity Head S. Mangal clarified that none of the three individuals have any relation with the outfit, thereby issuing a statement that action will be taken against the three for misusing and maligning the image of the organization (The Sangai Express, December 31, 2012). Such is the predicament of people living in the armed conflict state of Manipur, where a few civilians take advantage of the conflict situation by committing various kinds of crime including violence against women thinking that they can escape by faking identity and affiliation to an insurgent group.

Recounting the incident, Mr. A, a man from the village and also a neighbor of the girl said, "We could do the same to them as well. But only because we are Christians, we forgave. But if it happens again, they will have to see what happens to their women." Such a comment strongly implicates the perception of women's body as a site of battle field for men in the conflict ridden state of Manipur, where sexual violence against women is used as a medium for communication, revenge, and humiliating enemies/rivals.

On December 18, 2013, a Meitei Manipuri actress named Momoko was molested by Lt. Col. Livingstone Anal, a member of the NSCN (IM), at a fund-raising concert in Chandel Town. In her interview with New Delhi Television (hereafter, NDTV) she said, "He was touching me. I warned him. He pulled my hair and threw me to the ground and kicked me repeatedly. He also hit my left eye. There were security personnel also present there, Manipur police, Assam Rifles and army in the audience. But nobody came to help me. They were watching it as if it was a cinema. A Sub-Inspector of Manipur Police also said that there is cease-fire here, so we can't do anything" (NDTV, December 21, 2012). The insurgent also fired at co-performers who tried to help the actress, but they escaped unhurt (India Today, December 22, 2012). This act clearly violates the Clause-1 of the ground rules of the Cease-Fire Agreement signed between the Government of India and the NSCN (IM), which states that "NSCN-IM would also act in a manner as not to cause harassment/damage or loss of property or injury to civilian population (The Naga Republic, October 20, 2017). If the group to which the perpetrator belonged was a responsible one, then the perpetrator should have been punished, but the NSCN (IM) chose to remain quite. This resulted to not only a mass protest from the Meitei civil society organization including

the film fraternity, demanding punishment to the perpetrator under the country's law, but also led to a communal issue where many Nagas in Manipur were attacked by the dominant Meitei community. The issue of violence against women by men was politicized for communal and political gain by men in power rather than trying to understand and tackle the causes of violence against women.

For the first time in the history of Manipur, in January 6 and 16, 2006, the people of Manipur were brought to shock when armed cadres belonging to the United National Liberation Front (hereafter UNLF) and Kangleipak Community Party (hereafter KCP), which belong to the dominant Meitei community, committed mass rape of 21 Hmar tribal girls, some of whom are minors, of Lunthulein and Parbung, two remote villages in Manipur's Charachandpur District. Thousands of Hmars out of fear from further rape and violence were forced to flee to relief camps in neighboring Mizoram state. Both the groups refute the charge point-blank, claiming it as an 'Indian intelligence ploy to defame' them (Chhakchhuak, 2006). Organizations of the Hmar region say that the KCP and UNLF men were just venting out their anger and frustration of the Indian army's operation to flush out the militants from the hills of these tribal people.

According to Malini Bhattacharya, who investigated the matter on behalf of the National Commission for Women, the people from the two villages told her that their villages were too remote to have functioning administrative set-ups, and so militants felt free to heap all sorts of atrocities on them. Since October--November 2005, the atrocities became worse and they could not even cultivate *Jhum* (rotational agriculture) fields. "They even had to feed the militants" (Chhakchhuak, 2006). On January 16, militants of the two groups armed with sophisticated weapons herded the villagers of Lungthulein, and tortured about 400 villagers. The reason for the rape, torture and other forms of violence was believed to be revenge/retribution for being denied adequate 'protection money' and seeking army protection. Sexual violence may also be systematic, carried out by non-state armed groups for the explicit purpose of destabilizing populations and destroying bonds within communities. In these instances rape is often a public act, aimed to maximize fear and a vengeance. The truth is that the incident went largely unreported as the local media is largely controlled by the dominant Meitei community.

Nothing was done since the culprits were the non-state armed groups, and moreover, women organizations, such as the *Meira Paibi* (Literally it means "torch bearer", any adult women could become a part of this grass root organization which fights for social, political and economic issues), which are said to be strong remained silent as they are ashamed, insensitive and not concerned altogether as the heinous crime was committed by armed members of their community towards the minor tribal community. Had the crime been committed by the minor Hmar community on the Meiteis, the outcome would have been devastating for the Hmar tribe. This is the very reason as to why the women's movement in Manipur has been stuck in a patriarchal set-up, where their rights and voices are compromised for communal politics. The incident also further led to the division of the tribals and the non-tribals, and

between the minority and the majority. Women and civilians are very vocal about raising their voices when a crime is committed by the State forces/Indian army, but remain mere spectators when a crime is committed by insurgents. One such example of mass protest in Manipur is the 'Naked Protest' by Meitei Women with banners 'Indian Army Rape Us', 'Kill and Take Our Flesh' in the wake of the rape and murder of Thangjam manorama, a suspected member of PLA.

The non-state armed groups have become so powerful that nobody dares to raise his/hervoice against them, and the fact is people fear for their own lives as the state and its machineries including the police and Indian armed forces have failed to protect its citizens. Living in a situation of conflict, the civilian population, especially the civil society leaders, is bound to interact with both the State forces and insurgents. For example, in 2008, Seram Shanti Devi, a *Meira Paibi* secretary of a joint organization of 12 villages who campaigned against drug abuse, alcoholism, and human right violation by security forces was shot dead in front of her family by members of the People's Liberation Army, on the ground that she was working as an 'informer' for the Indian army.

4.4 Moral and Cultural Policing of Women

In a patriarchal society like Manipur, men's honor is also seen as depending on women's 'purity', reaching dangerous degrees, wherein women who seek to escape this strict code face violence against them. In Manipur, the politics of purity has become a dangerous one for women. Today in Manipur it has become a trend for non-state actors to issue several 'decrees' in a bid to control the normal lives of the civilians and demonstrate their authority. They issue a variety of diktats, including the total ban on screening of Bollywood movies (anything which is from mainland India) in theatres, women wearing mainland Indian dresses such as salwar kameez or saris, and use of drugs, tobacco, etc. Such impositions are mainly seen in the valley dominated by the *Meitei* and *Meitei Pangan* (Muslim) communities. In 2001, the Kanglei Yawol Kunna Lup (Kangjamba) issued a notice directing Manipuri girls and women to not wear saree, salwar, and trousers, and warned that those wearing the 'banned dresses' would be shot (The Hindu, August 30, 2011).

Women are told to wear only *phanek* (The traditional cloth used by women to cover the lower parts of their body). In educational institutions including schools and colleges in the Imphal valley, girls are forced to wear *Meitei Phanek* only, whereas for the boys, there are no cultural regulations. The dress code in the educational institutions is the by-product of the stringent policy imposed by the insurgents on the society. And the patriarchal society in turn manipulated the ideology of the cultural purity and its preservation, thereby imposing it on women. The imposition of *Phanek*, for example, by the Meitei non-state armed groups and Meitei Civil Organizations for women in schools and colleges also violates the rights of other women who are from other minor tribal communities in the state, as well as citizens from other parts of the country. The imposition of *Phanek* on women and girl children becomes not only an imposition on the Meitei women, but also becomes a cultural imposition of the dominant culture on the minorities 'the other'.

In the name of preserving the culture and tradition of the community, they want to impose certain rules by taking control of women's body and rights. Hence, it is important to question why women alone should be considered by the society as a symbol of a community's identity and its preservation, thereby sacrificing their rights of expression and choice. Such kinds of imposition are also seen in the armed conflict state of Kashmir, where extremist militant groups seeking to enforce an Islamic code of behavior have launched other violent attacks on women. In 1993, members of the women's militant organization, Dukhtaran-e-Millat (Daughters of the Nation) issued warnings to women in Srinagar not to come outside without wearing *burqas*, and for defying their orders paints were sprayed on women, wherein four students were hospitalized with eye injuries from the paint (Kumar, 2002). This example clearly shows the role of women as both victims as well as perpetrators in situations of armed conflict.

4.5 Abduction / Forced Recruitment of Girls

Recruitment of child soldiers is rampant in most insurgent groups in Manipur. A child soldier is described as : ...any child, boy or girl, under the age of 18 who is compulsorily, forcibly, or voluntary recruited or otherwise used in hostilities by armed forces, paramilitaries, civil defense units, or other armed groups (Hartain & Priyadarsini, 2012).

On March 10, 2013, a 14-year-old school going Zeliangrong Naga girl named Alice Kamei and another Meitei girl were forcibly recruited from their boarding school by the Revolutionary People's Front/People's Liberation Army (Epao, April 3, 2013). It brought about a strong response and protest on the whole issue of recruitment of children by armed groups. But the RPF/PLA claimed that the two minors have joined the outfit out of their own volition, and hence they are not to be blamed (Epao, April 6, 2013). The issue came to a clear conclusion after the police arrested two women, a school helper and a cook who are 'overground workers' of the insurgent group involved in the kidnapping of the minor school

girls along with an amount of Rs 30,000, which was alleged to have been received from RPF/PLA as payment for recruitment, and they revealed that the minor school girl Alice Kamei did not join the RPF/PLA (Epao, April 6, 2013).

This example clearly shows the diverse roles of women in armed conflict regions, where some women become victims at the hand of women perpetrators, and that women are not just a victims/survivors, wives, mothers, but also members of insurgents serving in various capacities such as combatants, arms smugglers, spies and as perpetrators of violence. But in spite of the known fact that it was a forced/kidnapped recruitment, the RPF/PLA remained adamant not to release the minor. This clearly shows that the RPF/PLA does not follow the international law of child soldier recruitment as against 18 years and below nor do they have respect for basic human rights or moral responsibility. It not only revealed their immaturity and highhandedness, but more importantly undermined their claim to liberate Manipur from the Indian state. The incident also brought about a communal tension between the Meitei and the Nagas in Manipur as Alice belong to the Zeliangrong Naga tribe.

5. Conclusion

An insurgent movement that once enjoyed the spontaneous support of the masses, including women, as a morally just struggle is now perceived by many as corrupt and illegitimate due to continuous human rights violations. And under the circumstances of conflict and violence, women as a group have been easily targeted as they constitute the weaker section in a patriarchal society. Women's rights and freedom are taken away in the name of preserving one's culture and community. And a woman's body has also become a site of everyday battle for various opposing parties. In this everyday conflict situation, social stereotypes, hierarchy, status of women, social taboos and exclusion are given new power and order.

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