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**The Dissertation Committee for Jogendro Singh Kshetrimayum Certifies that this is
the approved version of the following dissertation:**

**Affecting Change: Death, Violence and Protest in Manipur,
Northeastern India.**

Committee:

Kathleen C. Stewart, Supervisor

Kaushik Ghosh

Heather Hindman

Lok Siu

Kim TallBear

Craig Campbell

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Northeastern India.**

by

Jogendro Singh Kshetrimayum, M.S.; M.A.

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

May, 2015

Dedication

To my parents

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Shri Mayanglambam Gourachandra of Peoples' Museum Kakching, for his generosity and kindness, for guiding me and teaching me, and for sharing with me all those wonderful stories, and for his infectious passion for Manipuri culture.

I thank my supervisor, Kathleen Stewart, and Kaushik Ghosh for their kind support and guidance. I am grateful to the other members of my dissertation committee – Lok Siu, Heather Hindman, TallBear and Craig Campbell – for their intellectual insights and making the dissertation better.

During the course of my research and writing my family and relatives in Manipur were extremely kind and generous with me with their stories and resources. I am thankful to Ebai Shubash, Ebai Somendro and Tamo Sunil for their kind help. I am also thankful to Pabung Maiba Achou, Pabung Nilamani, Kshetrimayum Shanta.

I am grateful to Eche Binalaxmi and the Imphal staff of Manipur Women's Gun Survivors' Network for giving me the opportunity to work with them. I am thankful to Eche Mumtaz for letting me tag along. I thank Ima Nganbi for sharing me her story. I am also thankful to Tamo Babloo, Tamo Joykumar, Tamo Singhajit, Eche Sharmila and Onil for sharing their stories about human rights activism in Manipur.

Without the timely help (there were some desperate ones), counsel, and company of my wonderful friends in Austin it would have been a difficult journey for me. Thanks Li, Vova, Will, Ranita, Chang, Rafael, Claudia, Noman, Omer, Beth, Gwen, Heather, Tatha, Raja, Eli and the rest.

I am ever grateful to Nan Luz, Nan Xhiv, Jacinto, Don Miguel, Miguel, Jesse, Fidel, Abraham, and many others in Nebaj for making me feel at home during my time in Guatemala.

I am grateful to International Peace Research Association Foundation for the IPRA Foundation Peace Grant 2013, which supported my research activities in Manipur.

Last, but not the least of all, I would like to thank my wife, Maria Garcia, for bearing with me all these years, with kindness and patience, and for her intellectual insights that have gone into this dissertation.

**Affecting Change: Death, Violence and Protest in Manipur,
Northeastern India.**

Jogendro Singh Kshetrimayum, PhD
The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor: Kathleen C. Stewart

This dissertation explores some of the ways in which precarity takes form in a reeling present. Many social and political analysts have described the contemporary socio-economic and political situation in the Northeastern states of India, marked by a situation of civil war for more than half-a-century, as an “impasse.” With particular focus on Manipur, one of the eight Northeastern states, this dissertation looks at some of the ways in which people live through this “impasse.” Through a series of extraordinary and ordinary scenes, brief encounters, public testimonies, biographical sketches and autobiographical accounts it speaks of the precariousness of life, relationships, rituals and cultural categories even as people suffer and respond to the ongoing “crisis” of law and order, a defining feature of the “impasse.” Inspired by the affective turn in Critical Theory, this dissertation does not see precarity as necessarily traumatizing, thereby keeping the trope of trauma at a critical distance while attending to the lives of people in a situation of low-intensity armed conflict of long duration. It does not claim to provide any final explanation of what is happening in Manipur today rather it offers an innovative way to revisit anew some of the old anthropological questions about people and places undergoing dramatic changes.

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Introduction

We have a “situation” in the North East of India, marked by conditions of civil war for more than half-a-century. Towards the end of the British rule in India, in the 1930s and 1940s, the so called Northeast India¹ saw the resurgence of various armed movements for the formation of sovereign political entities, more or less along ethnic lines. The transfer of power from British Raj to the Dominion of India brought about confusions and controversies about the political destinies of the erstwhile princely states² and many ethnic groups in the Northeast. These armed movements were predominantly motivated, with different degrees of influence in each case, by nationalist, socialist, communist and (in the case of the Naga movement)³ evangelical Christian emancipatory ideologies. In order to contain the situation of insurgency in the Northeast, the Dominion of India, and later the Indian Union, began a process of militarization of Northeast India. In 1958, the Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act⁴ was enacted and enforced as a temporary measure to aid military and paramilitary forces in curbing the situation of insurgency in the region. After more than fifty years the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (aka AFSPA) is still actively enforced in Manipur and the insurgency is not over yet. Evidences of murder, rape, torture, disappearances,

¹ Initially a geopolitical concept comprising the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura and Meghalaya. It is located in the North East of India, completely isolated from the rest of ‘mainland’ India except for a narrow stretch of land sometimes referred to as the ‘chicken neck.’ It is surrounded on all sides by international borders with Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

² Princely states in the region like Assam, Manipur and Tripura existed as independent, sovereign kingdoms before the British conquests in the 19th century.

³ In particular the NSCN (IM); Muivah writes in the manifesto, “... we stand for socialism... we stand for the faith in God and the salvation of mankind in Jesus, the Christ, that is Nagaland for Christ.” (Bertil Lintner. 2012. *The Great Game East: India, China and the Struggle for Asia’s Most Volatile Frontier*. New Delhi: Harper Collins with The India Today Group, p42.)

⁴ The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, was enacted “to enable certain special powers to the members of the armed force in disturbed areas of the State of Assam and the Union Territory of Manipur” with subsequent amendments to the Act. According to the provisions of the Act, the state government has the power to declare parts of the state or the whole of the state to be a “disturbed” area. Once an area is declared “disturbed” certain fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution of India is suspended temporarily, creating a “state of exception.” See, Appendix.

harassment and other kinds of human rights violations by the Armed Forces of India are piling up. AFSPA has been severely criticized for exasperating the situation by creating and promoting an atmosphere of impunity. Mass protests, rallies, hunger strikes, self-immolations, legal petitions etc., have not been successful in making the government repeal the draconian AFSPA.

Theoretical Concerns

After half-a-century of fighting the nature of the armed struggle in the region seems to have changed. For example, many political analysts in Assam feel that the largest armed rebel group of Assam, ULFA (United Liberation Front of Asom) is a “spent force” (Baruah 2005). And, arguably the same could be said of the separatist movement in Manipur. The charismatic leader of the largest underground outfit of Manipur, UNLF (United National Liberation Front), R.K. Megan, was arrested from Bangladesh in 2010. In 2008-2009, the Indian Army conducted a series of intensive military operations, clearing off all the guerilla strongholds from Manipur. The surviving Manipuri guerilla fighters are “cooling their heels” in Burma, near the Indian border. However, coinciding with the apparent ‘decline’ of the armed movement in the region is the emergence of a form of political economy dictated by a complex network of actors involving, army personnel, police officers, local politicians, civil society organizations, student organizations, drug dealers, underground outfits etc.

In public discourse the terms “state actors” and “non-state actors” are being increasingly used to talk about the “situation.” In my experience, people in Manipur are all too aware that terms like “state actors” or “non-state actors” are at best heuristic – the actual experience of the “situation” is far too complex to make such neat distinctions. Nonetheless, because the ongoing conflict between the Indian armed forces and the rebels has had such a tremendous impact on the lives of people in the region that too often the entire “situation” is reduced to issues of “insurgency” and “counter-insurgency.” As political scientist, Sanjib Baruah (2005: 13) points out:

Scholarly as well as policy-focused discussions of Northeast India today are often framed by the question of how to end insurgencies. However, counter-insurgency as an intellectual stance, with room left only for debating with military generals about differences on methods, has produced neither good scholarship nor ethically and morally defensible political positions.

Nonetheless, in Baruah (2005, 2009) the “situation” essentially remains a case of “failed” governance and he calls it “durable disorder”:

Rather than continuing to reinforce a false separation between ‘insurgency’ and the ‘mainstream’ social and political life, I shall bring aspects of the ethnic militias, counter-insurgency operations, state-backed militias, developmentalist practices, and the deformed institutions of democratic governance together and suggest that for analytical purposes they can be seen as constituting a coherent whole that I will call durable disorder. (Baruah 2005: 3)

Thus, he uses terms like “durable disorder” or “impasse” to talk about the “situation” even as he hopes for a future beyond the “disorder” or “impasse.” Baruah (2005) seems hopeful that the Look East Policy could turn out to be a ‘transnational solution’ to the current “situation” in the Northeast.

While considering the stubborn economic and political problems of Northeast India – trapped in the geopolitics of the colonial and post-colonial order – it is possible today to look for transnational solutions. Even if they might seem unrealistic today they could become possible and realistic tomorrow. (Ibid p235)

Interestingly, Cerny (1998, 2000), the political scientist whose concept of “durable disorder” Baruah (2004) has used in his work, seems far less optimistic about a simple “return” to a stable order in the new era of globalization:

Globalization is creating a growing range of complex challenges to the autonomous policy-making capacity, authority and legitimacy of nation- states, while a new security dilemma is challenging the ability of states and of the states system to provide both international and domestic security as a public good. These changes are leading to an unbundling of basic state functions and the growth of uneven, cross-cutting and overlapping levels of governance and quasi governance, the fragmentation of cultural identities and the reconfiguration of social, economic and political spaces. At the same time, systemic pressures for the consolidation of new forms of transnational and international authority are insufficient, resulting in a governance gap. Exit is becoming an increasingly viable option for a growing range of actors and groups, **leading to endemic civil**

and cross-border wars. The result will be not mere chaos, however, but something resembling the ‘durable disorder’ of the Middle Ages. (Cerny 1998:36) [emphasis added]

In this sense, then, the “situation” in the Northeast may be read as already forming a part of this new global ‘durable disorder’ – a result of the destabilizing effects of globalization. The “destabilizing” impact of globalization and ethnic violence is something anthropologists have been concerned with for sometime now. Appadurai (1998) makes the argument that there is an inherent link between the forms of uncertainty – ‘ones diacritic of the era of globalization’ – and the ‘worldwide intensification in ethnocidal violence’; he writes –

In an earlier effort to analyze the link between large-scale identities, the abstraction of large numbers, and the theater of the body, I suggested that global forces are best seen as imploding into localities, deforming their normative climate, recasting their politics, and representing their contingent characters and plots as instances of larger narratives of betrayal and loyalty (Appadurai 1996,149–157)[sic]. In the present context, the idea of implosion might account for actions at the most local of globalized sites—the ethnicized body, which, in already confused and contradictory circumstances, can become the most natural, the most intimate, and thus the most horrifying site for tracking the somatic signs of the enemy within. In ethnocidal violence, what is sought is just that somatic stabilization that globalization—in a variety of ways—inherently makes impossible. (Appadurai 1998:244)

What Cerny (1998, 2000) and Appadurai (1998) are hinting at is a global phenomena, that some see in the post-Cold War period, of rising endemic ethnic violence and “weak” states – which could amount to, as some scholars (Desjarlais and Kleinman 1994) have preferred to called it, the “new world disorder.” They are referring to political and ethnic violence in Rwanda, Bosnia, Liberia, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, India, Colombia and Peru, among others.

What goes on in those places where the state of things is in a “disorder”? One of the central concerns of this dissertation is the “quality” of life in places reeling under a “durable disorder,” Manipur being one of those places. Anthropologists, Kleinman and

Desjarlais (1994:10) fear that “a prolonged intensity of non-repressive violence often leads to a loss of moral bearings at a societal level” to such an extent that the society risks loosing its very “culture”:

A 'culture of violence' appears, in the end, to be a contradiction in terms, for the consequences of the latter rule out the possibility of the former. Any society that relies on disordered violence as a first-tier political order risks the destruction of that moral order and, consequently, the shared customs, epistemologies, and sensibilities that we know as 'culture'. This has happened in Sierra Leone, in Mozambique, and in the refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodia border: there is a general and unconditional breakdown in local sensibilities, mores, and practices. Absent are the conditions for trust, legality, and normality. It is an open question whether the notion of 'culture', as it is commonly defined, fully applies in these situations; and it is an open question if and how the survivors of these environments can recover a sense of normality once the fighting stops. (Ibid., 11)

What Kleinman and Desjarlais (1994) espouse is a fundamental “property” of collective life and human nature – that under certain conditions people just break down and the harm done to the collective or individual body may not be undone. Is not this the same fear and anxiety of the deleterious effects of instability and uncertainty that moves the world to intervene via charity, military, financial investment etc.? Corollary to this fear is the, often unstated, fear that instability in those parts of the world might spill over into mine. And, that instability in one place is a threat to the whole of mankind.

Unfortunately, modes of representational thinking where everything is already part of a known, totalized system leaves the forces of an emergent present (which terms like *globalization*, *neoliberalism*, and *advanced capitalism* etc., are trying to name) “looking like dead effects imposed on an innocent world” (Stewart 2007:1). We cannot see or feel the texture and the density of the “situation.” We cannot get a sense of what makes people tick. What are their dreams, hopes, desires and aspirations? How is the “situation” of precarity lived in those places?

This dissertation offers another way of approaching the “situation,” by attending to the everyday lived experiences, and focusing particularly on people’s desire for the political in the midst of a crisis. Here, I follow the distinction maintained in Berlant’s (2011:226) reading of Rancière (1999), between “politics (the police, the arts of power) and the political (the domain and activity of dissensus on behalf of the parties of no part).” Rancière (1999:28) gives a different name to what is generally seen as “politics”— the ‘set of procedures whereby aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, distribution of roles and places, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution’ etc., - he calls it *the police*. Politics, for Rancière (1999), is something else and, in fact, it is antagonistically opposite to *the police*, he writes:

Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise. (Ibid., 32)

It is in this sense of the term “political” that the dissertation focuses on people’s desire to see changes, or be heard, or make sense of what is going on, in contemporary Manipur. Berlant (2011:227) puts it this way, “Amidst all of the chaos, crisis, and injustice in front of us, the desire for alternative filters that produce the sense – if not the scene – of a more livable and intimate sociality is another name for the desire for the political.” Although the political is always bound up with *the police*, as Rancière (1999:31) reminds us, in academic discourse and popular media, the “situation” of the Northeast, including that of Manipur, is often framed in terms of “law and order,” governance, the relationship between state and society etcetera (Baruah 2005, 2009), that is, in terms of *the police*. Moments of social protest or any form of dissidence are seen only within the framework of *the police*. For example, all forms of protest against the AFSPA are seen as one homogenous act of demand for the repeal of the draconian act.

However, these individual instances of protest are situated in a desire for the political which is not limited to the critique of the Indian nation-state, or to the exposure of the “state of exception” (represented by AFSPA) underlying modern democratic

systems. The kinds of questions I explore here are not in terms of whether people in Manipur want to be part of India, or the kinds of strategic alliances people make to confront violence of the state and such. These are important concerns and the dissertation touches on them tangentially. However, the immediate concern that I seek to address in this dissertation is that of the desire for the political in the midst of chaos, and how this desire is a crucial element in the composition of collective life, or what we call the social.

The dissertation examines social protests and other acts of dissent in Manipur, with particular attention to the forms they took, because they give us a sense of how collective and individual lives have been affected by, and constitutive of, the “situation.” In spite of the prolonged armed conflict and endemic violence, we have not seen, at least in the case of contemporary Manipur, the kind of degradation of “culture” that Kleinman and Desjarlais (1994) anticipate under similar conditions of political instability. Rather, what we see, I argue, is a strong desire for the political which seeks to maintain and reinforce some sort of a “moral order” at the societal level, perhaps, because of an acute awareness of living through a crisis. Perhaps, one way of approaching the “situation” in the Manipur is to think of the reeling present as an “impasse.” Berlant (2011:4) adapts “impasse” as “a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one’s sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event.” This takes us beyond the rhetoric of “law and order.” We begin to hear rumors, gossips, narratives of hope and frustration, and we see scenes that could amount to something or not, all of which in some way register changes in the affective atmosphere.

In exploring individual and collective lives of a reeling present I found what Stewart (2007:1-2) calls the “ordinary affect” to be particularly effective and generative:

Ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences. They're things that happen. They happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency, and in publics and social worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like *something*.

Affect, that pre-individual but not pre-social capacity to affect and be affected (Clough 2007; Maussumi 1998) is one of the key theoretical concepts that I have employed throughout this dissertation. Critical Theory's "turn" to affect (Clough and Halley 2007; Gregg and Seigworth 2010) has had tremendous impact in the way the social field and the human subject are imagined within the social sciences and humanities.

Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability. Indeed, affect is persistent proof of a body's never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world's obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations. (Gregg and Seigworth 2010:1)

The concept of affect then operates in tandem with a concept of the body in which the body can no longer be seen as a passive biological substratum, a *tabula rasa*, upon which cultural meanings are inscribed, or power does its work. In fact, the affective 'turn' in Critical Theory coincides with significant reworking of the body, particularly in the works of many feminist writers (Grosz 1994; Barad 1996, 2007; Alaimo and Heckman 2007) who seek to do away with the binary opposition of body/mind, discourse/material, nature/culture etc., imposed on the body. One of the most influential critiques of these binary oppositions comes from Deleuze (and Guattari) whose biophilosophical concept of "body without organs" (BwO) questions the assumption of organism as static, already-organized whole.

This move away from privileging homeostasis to thinking evolution in terms of information, complexity and open-systems under far-from equilibrium conditions of metastability undoes the opposition between the organism and the environment, as well as the opposition between the organic and the nonorganic. Rather than presuming matter or the nonorganic to be inert, such that form is imposed on it, matter is understood to be in-formational, that is, form arises out of matter's capacity for self-organization out of complexity. (Clough 2007:17)

Instead of the organismic model of the body what we have is a “machinic assemblage”(Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Clough 2007) which “connects and convolutes the disparate in terms of potential fields and virtual elements and crosses techno-ontological thresholds without fidelity to relationships of genus or species” (Clough, 2007:16). While the Deleuzian concept of BwO offers a powerful tool to do away with the binary oppositions of body/mind, nature/culture, material/discourse etc., thereby undermining the hierarchy that such binary oppositions inherently establishes, some feminist writers (Grosz 1994; Spivak 1988) are suspicious that it might end up undermining the significance of identity based politics. Grosz (1994:182) puts it this way, “In short, the relation between “being” (in all its ambiguities and impossibilities) and becoming is obscured; until it becomes clearer what becoming-woman means for those beings who are women, as well as for those beings who are men, the value of their work for women and for feminism remains unclear.” Grosz (1994) argues for the irreducibility of the sexed body in social analysis. The tension that such feminist critiques of Deleuze's BwO provokes is productively employed while examining forms of social protests that are mediated through the female body.

Positionality and Methodology

I grew up in Manipur during the 1980s and 1990s. The situation of Manipur in the 1990s was considered disruptive to school life. So that by the time I passed the Matriculation Exam, most of my friends and classmates were preparing to leave Manipur for higher studies. I went to Chennai, in South India, to complete the two years of Senior Secondary education. Then, in 2000 I moved to Delhi for my undergraduate. At some

point, telling stories about the situation of Manipur became an integral part of my student life outside Manipur. Sometimes I was informing others, those who were not from Manipur, about the “situation” in Manipur. But, often it was about sharing stories with fellow Manipuris – reiterating, reinforcing, re-establishing what we already “knew” was going on in Manipur. Over the years the stories I choose to tell others, and to myself, about Manipur have changed. Certainly I have changed too. However, there was always a desire, in telling stories about Manipur, to change the situation of Manipur, without ever knowing clearly how that change would come about or what form it would take. It was this desire to see change in Manipur that initially launched me into the enterprise of writing this dissertation.

In a way the process of writing this dissertation began long before the actual fieldwork. During the fieldwork as well as during the actual process of writing the dissertation I often referred back to my past experiences and childhood memories. However, the significance of memory in this dissertation is not so much in providing testimonies of past events but rather in making connections in an ongoing present.

As Deleuze (and Guattari) put it: “We write not with childhood memories but through blocs of childhood that are the becoming–child of the present.” This writing block of childhood calls forth experimental writing that is not merely an experiment with a given form, such as experimenting with the ethnographic form.” (Clough, 2007:20).

Thus, this dissertation is not an “autoethnography” in the sense of combining elements of ethnography and autobiography as an innovative approach to research and writing (Ellis 2004; Lancaster 2010; Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011). My life experiences, including that of the fieldwork, do not offer any judgment on the situation of Manipur. The dissertation is an experiment not a judgment. It is an experimental writing in the sense of making connections between disparate scenes, stories, and individual lives.

Connection requires a style of thought that might be called “empiricist” or “pragmatist.” It puts experimentation before ontology, “And” before “Is.” The principle of such a pragmatism is posed in the first sentences of *A Thousand Plateaus*, where Deleuze and Guattari declare that multiplicity, more than a matter of logic, is something one must make or do, and learn by making or doing – *le multiple, il faut le faire*. We must always *make* connections, since they are not already given. (Rajchman 2000:6)

This means making connections between a series of singularities. How else would we attend to the multitude of an unfolding present? This involves staying close to the thought process.

I had to part with the conventional practice of “writing up” a dissertation – where the ethnographer is supposed to simply write up what he/she has already uncovered in the fieldwork. Rather it required me to give myself over to the writing process itself. The writing took place over a long period of time, often interrupted by travels between the field and the school, and it took place in graduate classes at UT, in front of the PCL, in small apartment rooms on Riverside, in Manipur, in Guatemala. The trouble is, as Taussig (1992:11) points out, in figuring out how to write this nervous system that “passes through us and makes us what we are.”

It calls for an understanding of the representation as contiguous with that being represented and not as suspended above and distant from the represented— what Adorno referred to as Hegel's programmatic idea—that knowing is giving oneself over to a phenomenon rather than thinking about it from above. And it calls for a mode of writing no less systematically nervous than the NS [Nervous System] itself—of which, of course, it cannot but be the latest extension, the penultimate version, the one permanently before the last. (Ibid. , 11)

This nervous way of making connections, ever connections, by slowing down the quick jump to representational thinking, became not only the guiding principle of this experimental writing but also the organizing principle of the dissertation. In this dissertation I have assembled a series of scenes, stories, and portraits providing, what Stewart (2007:5) calls, “a contact zone for analysis.” Whenever possible I have made

conjectures and speculations about the “potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things” (Stewart, 2007:3) as they appear on the surface of the ‘contact zone.’ These conjectures and speculations are in no way driven towards finally “knowing” them (after all, they exist only in states of potentialities). Rather, they are directed towards our habitual modes of thinking so that ‘we’ could visit an old scene anew.

Outline of the Chapters

The chapters of the dissertation are laid out more like a map, that is, making connections between the chapters cartographically rather than archaeologically. So that one chapter does not necessarily provide the “explanation” for what happens in another chapter. To invoke Deleuzian terminology, the chapters are “organized” like a *rhizome*. There are some common threads that run through the chapters. Each chapter deals with individual or collective responses to violent death in some form or the other. Some responded by organizing mass protests, some with dramatic acts of defiance, another responded with indefinite hunger strike and yet others joined the rebels.

I begin with death in the first chapter. If death is traumatizing then it is also in the very act of mourning the loss that the possibility of “society” is reimagined. Or, as Klima (2002:285) puts it, “The obligation to continually reform society, as return on the gift of death, is a debt we all share.” It reveals “something about who we are” because, as Butler (2004:22) reminds us, “It is not as if an “I” exists independently over here and then simply loses a “you” over there especially if the attachment to “you” is part of what composes who “I” am.” With such revelatory and reformatory potentials of death in mind I examine certain scenes of, what is called *mishi chadana shiba* or “improper” death that occurred in Manipur between 2000 and 2014. The scenes are drawn from newspaper reports, rumors, stories, encounters and interviews. While most of the “improper” death provoked widespread public outrage and protests some did not. But each death “reveals” something about the “situation” under which Manipur is reeling today.

In Manipur there is a special funeral rite for “improper” deaths. This rite, called *chupsaba*, is performed by the family of the deceased to avoid the recurrence of such “improper” deaths in the family. In chapter 2 I look at *chupsaba* to get a sense of how people deal with misfortune ritually. Instead of thinking of rituals as stable categories I have found the idea of looking at them through a process of “ritualization” (Bell 1992, 1997) helpful and productive.

Although the idea, that rituals provide some sort of an explanation of “how things are,” has been criticized for being too “intellectualist” (Bell, 1997) we shall see in chapter 3 how a group of elderly women reinterpreted the “meaning” of an esoteric ritual of affliction in a dramatic protest. In revisiting this dramatic protest, which happened in 2004, I explore what it might mean to “perform” a protest.

In chapter 4, “A Body in Protest,” the focus is on the epic hunger strike by Irom Sharmila. Irom Sharmila began her hunger strike in the wake of the Malom massacre of 2000, when the Indian Army gunned down many civilians. She has been demanding the repeal of the draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958. Sharmila’s unique protest confronts us, among other things, with the question of “embodiment” vis-à-vis social protest.

In the final chapter, I trace the figure of the *naharol*, or rebel, from childhood memories, stories, rumors, interviews, newspaper reports and encounters. This nameless, faceless figure of the *naharol* has been a key figure both as a product and agent of the “situation” in Manipur. As an agent of change the *naharol* figure has inspired fear, awe, respect, sympathy and disdain in the Manipuri public imagination.

Brief notes on the political history, people and places

This section introduces the social and political milieu in which the ethnographic fieldwork takes place. I begin with the issues and controversies surrounding the question

of sovereignty of Manipur, which is at the heart of the Manipuri separatist movement. Although the separatist movement⁵ continues to exert tremendous impact on the everyday life of Manipur, it is not experienced or felt the same everywhere. My own perspective on the Manipuri separatist movement and the effects of militarization on the everyday lives of the people has been largely shaped by my experience growing up in Kakching (more on this topic in chapter 5 “The Rebel”). In general, the people of Kakching try to distance themselves from the Manipuri separatist movement. There are very few guerilla leaders from Kakching who are in the upper echelons of the rebel organizations. The Indian military and the paramilitary seem to recognize this general attitude of distance that the people of Kakching had taken towards the Manipuri separatist movement. It is widely believed that during routine or random security checks on the road the Army personnel take it easy on people from Kakching. And in my experience so far I have seen it work time and again. Historically, the upper leadership of the Manipuri separatist movement has largely come from the urban areas of Imphal. Here I give a brief social history of Kakching’s problematic relationship with the authorities in Imphal. I also take this opportunity to introduce Abongpa, who has been a constant companion throughout my field research from 2008 to 2014.

Sovereignty and Territory

Manipur is one of the twenty-nine states that comprise, together with seven union territories, the Federal Union of India. Located in the North East of India, it shares borders with Burma to the East, Mizoram to the South, Assam to the West and Nagaland to the North. Since the first century AD (according to *Cheitharol Kumpaba*, also known as *The Royal Chronicle*) until 1891 Manipur existed as a sovereign kingdom under the rule of the Meitei kings. After the defeat in the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891 Manipur became a princely state of the British Raj. In the old days the Meitei kingdom was known

⁵ The activities of the armed rebel organizations are not confined to guerilla warfare; most of the rebel organizations spawn or work closely with civil organizations and student bodies on various issues, ranging from enforcing diktats issued by the organizations to organizing rallies, shut-downs and protests.

by various names (Kabui 1988; Acharyya 1988), viz., *Kangleipak*, *Poirei Meiteileipak*, *Kathe* or *Cassey* (by the Burmese), *Meklee* by the Assamese, *Muggaloo* by the British. At the heights of its power the Meitei influence extended to present day Tripura in the South, Cachar in the West (in present day Assam), Kohima in the North (in present day Nagaland) to the western banks of the Chindwin river ⁶(in present day Burma), in the East. The Burmese ruling dynasties have always been the most powerful adversaries of the Meitei kings. *Cheitharol Kumpaba* recorded at least two major episodes in the history of Manipur when the Burmese forces invaded and ruled over most of Manipur for extended periods. The last of these happened during the early decades of the 19th century. The Burmese rule in Manipur ended after seven years when the combined army of Manipuri, Assamese and British forces defeated the Burmese, and the Treaty of Yandaboo was signed in 1826. This was to become the first Anglo-Burmese War. At the end of the war, Kabaw Valley⁷, the great plain that stretches from the foothills of the Purvanchal hill ranges to the western banks of the Chindwin⁸, was recognized as a territory of Manipur. However, following a series of complicated diplomatic arrangements between the British colonial rulers, and the rulers in Burma and Manipur the area known as the Kabaw Valley was handed over to the Burmese in exchange for an annual payment of 600 *tankha* (or 500 rupees)⁹ to the king of Manipur. The annual payment to the Manipur king discontinued with the formation of new nation-states in India and Burma after independence from the British rule¹⁰. The political boundary between Burma and Manipur continues to be a bone of contention to this day.

⁶ It is known as the Ningthi in Manipur.

⁷ Also known as Samjok Lamyai in Manipur.

⁸ Historically, this stretch of land was divided into three main principalities – Samjok (Thangut), Khumbat and Kale – and they were under the sway of the Burmese and the Manipuri powers at various periods. See, Kabui (1988).

⁹ Historian Prof. Gangmumei Kabui (1988:34) noted that “it probably meant monthly” within brackets. Kabui, Gangmumei.1988. “The Lost Territory of Manipur: Cession of Kabaw Valley” in *Manipur (Past and Present): The Heritage and Ordeal of a Civilization, Vol. 1 (History, Polity and Law)*. Edited by Naorem Sanajaoba. Delhi: Mittal Publications.

¹⁰ Kabui (1988:36): “Upto 1947, when India became independent Manipur continued to get the Kabaw compensation; and the succeeding Dominion Government of India stationed a Dominion Agent in Manipur and paid the compensation.”

The political status of Manipur from 1947 to its complete merger with India in 1949 is mired in confusion and controversy. On the 11th of August 1947, just four days before the declaration of Independence of India, the then Maharaja of Manipur, Maharaj Budhachandra signed the “Stand Still Agreement” with the government of India (Naorem, 2002: 184). Under this agreement, defense, coinage, external affairs and communication were to be administered by the Government of India (*Ibid* p184). While the state continued to be governed by the Manipur State *Durbar*, and subsequently the Interim Council, the popular demand for the formation of a democratic form of government based on universal adult franchise was gaining great momentum in Manipur (Naorem 2002; Naorem 1988). Subsequently, under popular pressure, the general election to the first Manipur State Legislative Assembly was held on June 11, 1948. None of the political parties secured absolute majority in the election. The Manipur State Congress, which favored political merger with India, secured the single largest majority. Although the Manipur State Congress secured the single largest majority they could not form the government. A coalition government, without the Manipur State Congress, was formed on October 18, 1948. At that time there was a lot of pressure to merge with India, both from the Indian leadership and pro-merger political groups within Manipur. In the meantime the position of *Dewan*, appointed by the Dominion of India, in place of the erstwhile “Political Agent” of the British Raj who oversaw the administration of the state, created some confusion about its role under the new administration. On September 15, 1949, Maharajah Budhachandra left for Shillong to settle the issue regarding the office of the *Dewan* (Naorem 2002; Mayengbam 2004). In Shillong, a series of political intrigues ensued (Mayengbam 2004) which culminated into the Maharajah signing the instrument of merger agreement with the Dominion of India on September 21, 1949.

The controversial merger of Manipur into the Indian Union became a pivotal point in the emergence of the separatist movement in Manipur (Ningthouja 2011; Naorem, 1988). The armed rebellion in Manipur, which had begun in 1948 under the

charismatic leadership of Hijam Irabot, picked up momentum in the 1960s and the 1970s with the formation of armed underground organizations viz., the Meitei State Committee, the Revolutionary Government of Manipur (RGM), the United National Liberation Front (UNLF, since 1964), Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA, since, 1978), Peoples' Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK, since 1977) and Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL, since 1994). In 1958 the government of India enacted and imposed the Armed Forces Special Powers (Assam and Manipur) Act on Manipur as a temporary measure to fight insurgency in the region.

Although the Meiteis are the largest ethnic group in Manipur (approximately 60% of the total population), the Meitei settlement areas are concentrated in the valley area. The valley of Manipur constitute only a small portion of the total land area, while the rest of Manipur is hilly. Ethnic communities who have traditionally lived in the hill areas identify themselves as Tribe or Tribal, a re-appropriation of the colonial administrative terminology of the British. Some of the major tribes of Manipur include the Tangkhul, Khongchai, Kabui, Chothe, Maring, Paite, etc. The hill tribes can be distinguished along discrete linguistic lines. Since the languages of the hill tribes are often mutually unintelligible to each other Manipuri or Meiteilon is generally used as the Lingua Franca. While the majority of the Meiteis had become Vaishnavite Hindus by the beginning of the 19th century, most of the hill tribes converted to Christianity with the advent of American Baptist missionaries in Manipur towards the end of the 19th (Rajkumar, 1988). Initially, the missionary work was restricted to the hill areas only.

Before British rule the Meitei king at Imphal always had strategic relationships with the hill communities – forming allies with some while subjugating others (Rajkumar 1988). For the most part, however, the hill communities seemed to have maintained their political autonomy. In spite of the great socio-economic changes that came about under the British administration their political autonomy remained relatively intact. The introduction of house tax and forced recruitment of labor for the war efforts in Europe in

the 1910s sparked revolts in the hill areas. By the 1940s and 1950s we see the rise of ethnic based armed organizations in the hills. The largest and the most powerful armed organization in the hill areas of Manipur is the Naga movement under the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (of the Isaak-Muivah faction) or the NSCN(IM). The main objective of the NSCN(IM) is to form a “Greater Nagaland.” The territorial claim of “Greater Nagaland” includes large tracts of hill areas of Manipur, Arunachal and Burma. The territorial claim made by the Naga movement has often been a source of political strife and ethnic tension in Manipur.

Many of the smaller ethnic based armed groups in Manipur seem to be guided by what Oinam (2008:10) calls, “operational pragmatism” – “Though each of these organizations represents one or another specific ethnic group or section of an ethnic group, it is the pragmatics of bargaining for arms operation and material benefits, more than ethnic nationalism, that have shaped the identities of many of these organizations.” One of such organizations is the valley based Peoples’ United Liberation Front (PULF) which was formed in 1992 to safeguard the religious and ethnic identity of the Meitei Pangals or the Manipuri Muslims. Constituting 7-8% of the total population, the Meitei Pangals have always had tremendous impact on the socio-political and cultural scene of Manipur (Ahmed 2011).

Kakching

Kakching is my hometown. Kakching is now a bustling town of approximately 22, 000 people. It is generally considered the third biggest town in Manipur after Imphal and Churachandpur. It is approximately 40 km away from Imphal, the capital city of Manipur. During the course of my dissertation research I frequently travelled between Imphal and Kakching. There are two main highways that connect the two towns. The bigger and busier of the two is the national highway no. 39 that continues all the way to Moreh, the town on the Burmese border. Before the days of the motor vehicles in Manipur, lots of small traders and students used to walk to Imphal. My maternal

grandmother used to take rice, a small amount at a time, and sell it in Imphal. She told me if she started before sunrise she would get to Imphal by sunset. Now it takes just forty-five minutes to an hour on a motor vehicle.

Kakching was one of the original 15 villages¹¹ declared as *lois* by the first Meitei king, Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (33 – 154 AD) (Singh, 2014). Based on historical records available from British accounts of the late 19th to the early 20th century as well as Manipuri oral and literary sources, Shri Yengkhom Nilachandra Singh, former President of Representatives of Lois, Kakching (ROL) defines *lois* as, “those groups of people who gave tribute to the king, who were associated with a particular industry, who were social outcasts, who occupied the lower rung in the social hierarchy and their descendants ” (Yengkhom, 2014:6). *Cheitharol Kumpaba*, the Royal Chronicle of the Meitei kings regularly mentions the banishing of outlaws and renegades to the *loi* villages. Although the *lois* were treated as social outcasts the industries associated with *loi* villages – silk, pottery, iron work etc. – were indispensable to the Manipuri economy and cultural life. Smelting of iron being the specialized industry of Kakching the tribute was given in the form of “two pieces of iron slab, 6 inches long and 2 inches thick” every month (Shakespeare, 1910: 351).

The Constitution of India has included the *lois* of Manipur in the list of Scheduled Caste (SC) communities, in consideration of the socio-political discriminations they have suffered through the ages. However, it was only in 1992, after a long legal battle, which eventually landed at the Supreme Court of India, that the people of Kakching were able to actually enjoy the benefits guaranteed to the SC communities. Perhaps, because of the long history of social discrimination and exploitation by the authority figures from Imphal, there is still a general skepticism of the leadership in Imphal. This attitude is sometimes reflected in the way people in Kakching do not always comply with the calls for general strikes or *bandhs* initiated by civil societies and NGOs based in Imphal.

¹¹ Yengkhom (2014) identifies 38 Loi villages currently.

Abongpa

I call him, Abongpa or Grandfather, because that is the appropriate form of address in our culture. Although we are not related he is of the age of my grandfather and my parents call him “Khura,” Manipuri for Uncle. Abongpa comes from a family of poor peasants in Kakching. His father, like many small farmers of the time in Kakching, used to supplement their family income by seasonal migrant work in Burma. Abongpa’s father is said to be very fluent in Burmese. And, on his deathbed, he apparently revealed that he had another wife and children in Burma. Abongpa regrets not being able to get in touch with his Burmese stepmother and stepchildren. Although Abongpa did not continue his education beyond high school his interest in the cultural history of Manipur took him to many traditional scholars and to many remote places all over Manipur. In 1981 he founded Peoples’ Museum Kakching, one of the few, privately owned and state recognized, museums in the state. Today, he is a renown scholar in his own right, of archaic Meitei manuscripts and Manipuri cultural history. He has authored and translated dozens of books on topics ranging from medieval Manipuri history to folk medicine. His translation works of archaic texts like *Thawanthaba Hiran* and *Numit Kappa* are regularly featured in the recommended reading lists at the University of Manipur. Although he can read English with some effort he writes exclusively in modern and archaic Manipuri.

I have known him for a long time. From a very young age I have always visited his museum quite regularly. A next-door Uncle used to work with him in his research projects associated with the museum, and this Uncle used to take me along sometimes. However, since 2008 we have worked together in organizing cultural events, museum exhibitions, book releases etc. During the course of my dissertation research, spanning from 2009 to 2014, Abongpa was a constant companion and gave me invaluable access to people and places with great ease. He has been a great mentor and a friend.

Abongpa has definitely been an influential figure in my research work. His energy, in particular, is very infectious. He is constantly working or moving no matter what the situation is. He has overcome many difficulties in life, the latest being the brain stroke he suffered a few years back. One day we ran into an acquaintance of mine who had suffered a stroke. Still recovering from the stroke my acquaintance was walking with the help of a walking stick. He was surprised to see Abongpa so spritely and well. He wanted to know how Abongpa did it. Abongpa replied, “Just climb the damn mountains and you will be alright.” We laughed. But he was only half joking – he did climb the nearby mountains quite regularly. He has the unique ability to laugh at, and make people laugh at, the most difficult life situations.

The Field

Although political histories are helpful in providing a certain framework through which one can look at the situation of armed conflict in Manipur, we cannot get a good sense of what the “situation” feels like on the ground from the political histories alone. In this section I introduce the field as a lived space through the following vignettes.

The Salt Panic

The situation is precarious – things could become edgy and jumpy all of a sudden. One day I was on the way to visit my aunt who lives on the other side of the main bazaar. I saw a familiar face in the bazaar. He owns a provision store in the bazaar. He was in some serious conversation with two other guys. He looked worried. He usually smiles at me but this time we simply nodded, no words exchanged, and I moved on. I overheard some serious tone.

“The senses sharpen on the surfaces of things taking form” (Stewart 2011:448). I had no idea that a curious world was about to implode around me, and engulf me. I heard someone down the road mentioning, “salt.” By the time I got to my aunt’s, the world had imploded. “No salt!” Everyone was freaking out about the sudden shortage of salt.

Everyone was on war footing to buy up all the available salt in the bazaar and the corner stores. Soon, words got around that the price of salt had shot up from ten rupees a bag to hundred a bag. Unbelievable! “No, this can’t be true,” we told each other, my aunt and I. In the meantime her neighbors kept interrupting us with worried faces, and my phone rang. A friend from another town called to tell me to buy some salts for her, just in case she couldn’t get hold of any in her town. I called my mother and talked about the salt situation at home. I asked her to buy some extra for my friend, just in case. We had no idea how the whole thing came about. There was some rumor about a salt factory in Calcutta that came under water, ruining all the salt in its warehouse. My aunt and I agreed that it must be the salt company or the dealer who were spreading the rumor about the sudden shortage of salt. I thought, salt being an essential commodity, the government must have some control over the storage and supply of salt. There was no way salt would be on short supply all of a sudden just because of one company warehouse going under water.

But then, no one knows for sure in Manipur. It was equally probable that salt could become a rare commodity the following day. With all those, economic blockades, *bandhs*, and strikes, commodity supplies are always erratic in Manipur. Some of the economic blockades on the national highways no. 39 and 53, the two lifelines of Manipur, can go on for months at a time. But the blockades and the *bandhs* happen so frequently that people are beginning to wonder if the big businessmen and traders in Imphal were not colluding with leaders of certain organizations, so that they could hike up the price of commodities.

Somehow, my aunt was unfazed and did not look worried at all. Her neighbor came back frantic – there were no more salts available in the corner stores around the neighborhood. On the way back from my aunt’s I saw the long lines in front of provision stores. At the same time a vehicle with a PA system drove by, announcing, “Please **DO NOT** believe the rumors. There is no shortage of salt. Please go back home...” It might

have been the municipality government. Someone later told me it was the party workers of the local MLA¹². The implosion had dissipated by the time I got home. Later that evening we hear government officials condemning the rumor on the radio. People were warned against such preposterous rumors. My father and I agreed that it was ridiculous how it all came about. My mother, however, told me she managed to buy and sell some salt bags during that brief period.

Couple of days later when the topic of the ‘salt panic’ came up Abongpa was outraged, he said, “People forget we used to make our own salt.” For him it was a sign of Manipuri “mentality of dependency.” I had not really put the two together at that time. They still make those salt plates at Thongjao and they are sold in the bazaar. We had visited the salt wells many times before. I had even brought it back to the US as a special treat. It is supposed to have medicinal properties, and it is supposed to be better than the company salt. But when the ‘salt panic’ imploded that day it did not matter what I knew, and there was no guarantee of any possible symbolic meaning. I got sucked in like many others.

From the perspective of ordinary affects, thought is patchy and material. It does not find magical closure or even seek it, perhaps only because it’s too busy just trying to imagine what’s going on. (Stewarts 2007:5)

One of the defining features of the “situation” in Manipur is the *bandh*. *Bandh* is a form of general strike usually organized by civil organizations, local youth clubs, student bodies or other local associations. Depending on the issues involved *bandhs* could be complete or partial. The issues could range from a case of medical negligence by a private clinic to demanding repeal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958. While some *bandhs* are restricted to the highways some others are restricted to the markets only. Some *bandhs* are called for 24 hours while others could last more than a month. For example, on August 1, 2011, the Sadar Hills Districthood Demand Committee

¹² Member of the Legislative Assembly.

(SHDDC) called for an indefinite “economic” blockade along the two National Highways (No. 39 and 53), the only lifelines of Manipur. “Economic” blockade means no vehicles carrying commercial goods, including essential commodities, are allowed to enter Manipur, only vehicles carrying passengers are allowed. The SHDDC were demanding the upgrade of Sadar Hills Area to a full-fledged administrative district, a popular movement that had been gaining momentum for some time. Opposing the demand for the Sadar Hills District, the United Naga Council (UNC), an apex body for Naga organizations in Manipur, began an indefinite counter-blockade from August 21 onwards. The economic blockade remained effective for more than 120 days¹³. The price of essential commodities spiked during those days. Although the months long economic blockade of 2011 was one of the longest in recent years, the constant interruption of “normal” life with *bandhs* and blockades is very common. The state machinery seems helpless in such situations. Long lines of people in front of the banks, ATM machines, gas stations etc., in anticipation of or in the wake of *bandhs* are such common sights in Manipur.



Figure 1. Long lines in front of the gas station in Imphal during the economic blockade of November 2011. Photograph by e-pao.net.

¹³ “2011 witnesses 123 days blockade, 20 days bandh,” *Hueiyen News Service*, December 31, 2011.

It is in moments like the one I depicted in the vignette “The Salt Panic” I cannot help wonder if the edginess and nervousness of the people had something to do with living in constant state of uncertainty and precarity. Where everyone gets swept up in a surge of mass panic against better judgment. However, for some it was a moment of opportunity to make some easy money. Or, is it because we have become too dependent on the outside world, as Abongpa pointed out?

Another point that I wanted to highlight in “The Salt Panic” is the presence of familiar faces, friends and relatives in the field. In a way the familiarity of faces and characters helps in sensing the mood of what was happening and of things taking form. And people are always excited to talk and eager to help out one of their own. But the relationships that I share with those familiar faces, friends, relatives and the place are not always guaranteed just because I was born there. Because I was born there and because they are my friends and relatives there are obligations I need to fulfill. Relationships are maintained and sustained through gestures, visits, and invitations. I have a big family in town¹⁴, spread all across the town and some outside the town. My parents often reminded

¹⁴ My mother is the youngest sister of seven sisters and two brothers. Except for one sister they all live in different localities of Kakching. Among the Meiteis in Manipur, a form of patrilocal and patrilineal system is followed, so that my maternal grandmother lives with my two maternal uncles. All of my maternal aunts have grandchildren and some of them even have great grandchildren. I grew up with many of my cousins and most of them still live in Kakching.

On my father’s side he has one stepbrother, two half-brothers and two half-sisters. My maternal grandmother remarried when my grandfather died. Although they grew up far from each other both my father and his other siblings have always tried hard to maintain a good relationship between the two families. They all live in Kakching and I always make it a point to visit them at least once whenever I go home.

Besides these two families, my father has his own extended family and an adopted family in Imphal. The male relatives of his extended family belong to the same descent group or *sagei*, Kshetrimayum, our surname. The ritual tie to the *sagei* is very significant. During rituals of life events like birth, marriage and death the members of the *sagei* are informed and obligated to participate. Growing up I did not know that the family in Imphal was not related to us through blood or marriage. I learned the story little by little. My paternal grandfather was the only son and when he died unexpectedly at a young age it must have been quite a shock for my great grandparents. One day my great grandmother saw this young bus driver who looked exactly like her own son. She treated him like her own son and he became part of our family. My father calls him “Pabung” (father). His children are younger than my father so they all address my father

me, always (seemingly) nonchalantly trying not to distract me from my “studies,” not to forget this one cousin or that one grandaunt. “Some of them are getting older and they often mention your name,” my mother would tell me. It is always nice to visit them and catch up. And every time I go I would be asked, about the US, about what I was doing there, and if I had a job etc. I often use these visits and conversations to find out more about some of the social issues related to my research, sometimes the topics come up naturally without provocation. Inevitably at some time I often found myself struggling to explain what kind of anthropology I was doing because people in Manipur seem to have set ideas about what doing anthropology entails. The next vignette is about doing anthropology in my town. Instead of the monumental “arrival” that characterized much of the classical ethnographies I had to constantly deal with my “return” after long absences.

Home coming

I had some questions for my old friend but it took me two days to call him.

“Abongpa¹⁵, its me. Are you at home?”

“Finally! I was beginning to wonder. When did you come back?”

“It has been two days. I am coming over there right now.”

I had been away for more than three years. The last time I saw him was in the summer of 2009. I could have walked to his place but I didn’t. It was only fifteen minutes away. Instead, I took a scooter, the new Honda Activa they had bought for mother. I did not want to run into people in the neighborhood. I was not quite ready for the awkward conversations I would have to make with every other person on the street.

“When did you come?”

“The day before.”

“Tachou” (elder brother). My siblings and I call them “Kaka” (uncle) or “Nene” (auntie). During the marriage ceremonies of all the uncles and aunts my father was seated as the eldest brother.

¹⁵ His name is Mayanglambam Gourachandra but I call him Abongpa as a term of endearment and respect. Abongpa literally means “grandfather.” We are not related. The term “Abongpa” is used in keeping with the Manipuri tradition of not addressing an elder by their personal names.

“How is America?”

“Well, you know...”

“Do you have a job now?”

“No, I am still studying.”

“Why does it take so long?”

“Well...”

“When are you getting married?”

“Well...”

It is easier to evade people on the street if you were on a bike or a car. It was not like I didn't enjoy running into people in the neighborhood and catching up. Just that I was not ready, not yet. The first couple of days I always feel raw or naked. The rawness eventually wears off though.

I found him on his desk, working on something. He works in a tight space, in one corner of their living room. The desk is always cluttered with books, loose sheets of papers, pens, and any imaginable stationery items. Right next to the desk, there are always piles of books stacked up high lined along the wall.

“What are you working on?”

He looked up and smiled. He has an easy smile.

“Well, this time we are catching a tiger.”

“Tiger?”

“No ordinary tiger. It is a *Keiren*,¹⁶ the biggest and the bravest of them all.”

He was very pleased with the title of his new book, *Meitrabakki Puwarida Pamba Keiren*¹⁷. It was about tigers in Manipur, when they used to roam freely (in “hordes” he said). He had been busy collecting tiger stories. He is a man of many interests and many talents. He has written books on Meitei rituals and prayers, given radio talks on the

¹⁶ *Kei* is the generic term for tigers, jaguars and leopards. Etymologically speaking *Keiren* is a compound word for *Kei* and *Len*. The suffix *len* signifies the best (the grandest, or the biggest in this case) of its category.

¹⁷ An approximate translation would be “The Great Tiger in the Folktales of Manipur.”

medicinal values of some plant or the other, composed songs and choreographed traditional dance performances. And, he has had a museum¹⁸ since 1981, the year I was born. He is always brimming with ideas – of books to write, of places to visit, of people to meet – always. One never knows what he is going to write about next. The tiger book was sort of inspired by a conversation he had with a forest ranger, he told me. I knew the forest ranger personally; he lived down the street, close to our house.

“I guess it was in a conference somewhere or he read it somewhere, I am not sure. Somehow he found out that the Indian official records said there were no tigers in Manipur. No tigers in Manipur? That’s a laugh! They were hordes of them crawling all over Manipur. Maharaja Buddhachandra shot one in Moirang, it is recorded in the *Cheitharol*¹⁹. Another was captured here in Kakching. What about the story of Thambanu, the girl eaten by a tiger? There are elders still alive who encountered tigers in their youth. The young generation will no longer believe that there were tigers in Manipur.”

He rolls once he gets going. He has such felicity of words that it is always delightful to listen to him. Out came one story after another about tigers, followed by a joke or two about tigers and then a riddle on tigers, on and on.

“ So, what about you? How long are you going to stay this time?”

“ For a while. This is supposed to be my fieldwork.”

“Before I forget... what was your topic again? I keep forgetting every time someone asks me. You should write it down somewhere for me. In English.”

On a piece of paper I found on the desk I wrote “Affecting Change: Death, Violence and Protest in Manipur.” He took the piece of paper and read it out loud, one word at a time. He repeated it again, this time trying to match up with some corresponding Manipuri term, word for word. His mind was racing.

“ You are doing anthropology right? So, you might have to write about death rituals, the cremation and the whole thing. The Meiteis used to perform secondary burials. But things

¹⁸ People’s Museum Kakching.

¹⁹ *Cheitharol Kumpaba*, the royal chronicle of the Meitei kings.

have changed a lot due to Hindu influence. Seems like you will have to cover a lot. We have lots of work to do.”

He had worked with anthropology students and professors from Manipur University and the local college. He had guided them on multiple tours to the remote villages in the hills and valleys of Manipur. He knew the routine – digging old burial grounds, taking pictures of traditional houses, taking pictures of people in “traditional” dresses, recording interviews of village elders, making sketches of baskets and fish-traps made of bamboo and cane, etcetera.

“Well, yes, sort of. But I was also thinking about that woman who was killed in the crossfire in the bazaar, in Imphal. What was her name? She was few months pregnant.”

“Rabina”

“Right! Rabina. She bled to death right in front of her little boy. Apparently she was pregnant at the time. What a tragic death! I was wondering if they ever performed *chupsaba* for her and the unborn baby.”

“That was such a horrible thing. Manipur must be full of wandering spirits from such horrible deaths. All those unquiet spirits, where will they go? You are right, some ritual must be performed otherwise it can’t be good for Manipur. *Chupsaba*? I don’t know. I guess, they must...”

His mind was already racing again. He was mumbling, trying to recall names, names of priests, *maiba*, *maibi* and ritual experts who could enlighten us on the subject. Just then his wife came out of the kitchen and said, “Why don’t you have dinner with us today? Call your mother and tell her you are having dinner here with Abongpa.” I obliged and called my mother. She did not sound too enthusiastic about my dinner plan. Dinner is a big deal at home. That’s the only time all of us get to sit together, eat and catch up about the day. After all it had been only two days since I got back home from the US. Sometimes she could be a bit overbearing about these things, but it was not so bad.

“Well, don’t be late,” she said in the end.

Chapter One: “Improper” Death

There is a popular notion of a “proper” way to go – in bed, without sickness and pain, surrounded by one’s family, in old age²⁰. And every once in a while such a death does seem to occur. And when it does people would often comment, “Mapok fei!” What a good life! Generally it is considered a matter of fate. However, the commentary²¹ is sometimes followed by an inference to one’s good karma in life, in this one or the previous. “He must have done something good in this life or the last.” There is a cultural injunction against touching one’s elders with one’s feet. “*Laibak katlu*²² otherwise you are going to shake horribly in your deathbed,” the adults warn the children. I am not sure if small children are really horrified by “the idea of shaking horribly in deathbed,” but it seems to work as a cultural practice. I grew up hearing it all the time and I don’t remember being especially horrified by it. Rather it always made me think of my great grandfather’s friend who used to visit us regularly. His whole body would shake uncontrollably all the time. It did not make me horrified though, only curious. *Laibak katpa* is one of those quintessential Manipuri gestures that most Manipuri meiteis pick up by their adulthood. Do the children or the adults who keep repeating, “*laibak katlu*, otherwise you are going to shake horribly on your deathbed” really believe in what they are saying? I doubt if they ever do. Most probably, like the gesture of *laibak katpa*, it is

²⁰ Although as a popular idea this notion of a ‘proper’ death is defined in general terms it might be productive to compare it with similar notions of ‘good’ death expounded in Hindu eschatology, especially given the influence Hinduism has had on Manipuri cultural practices:

Again, for the pious Hindu the ‘good’ death is that of the man who, having fulfilled his duties on this earth, renounces his body by dying at the right place and the right time, and by making of it a sacrifice to the gods. ‘Bad’ death, by contrast, is the death of the person who is caught short, his body still full of excrement, and his duties unfinished. It is the death of one whose youthfulness belies the likelihood of a conscious and voluntary renunciation of life. (Bloch and Parry 1982:16)

²¹ Such commentaries are generally made by individuals beyond a certain age – more or less people in their 50s or older.

²² It is a gesture of apology and respect that Manipuris practice. *Laibak Katpa* could be translated as “touching the forehead,” because the word *laibak* means forehead and the gesture involves touching one’s forehead with one’s right hand immediately after touching the person one had offended by kicking (intentionally or unintentionally). The gesture is also used when entering a temple or holy grounds.

something one picks up along the way. It is one of those things that people say when a child misbehaves or acts out. Nevertheless this belief seems to work without anyone having to believe in the first person. In Lacanian psychoanalytical terms such a belief is considered a “fundamental and constitutive feature of the symbolic order” (Zizek, “The Interpassive Subject”)²³:

There are some beliefs, the most fundamental ones, which are from the very outset "decentered," beliefs of the Other; the phenomenon of the "subject supposed to believe," is thus universal and structurally necessary. From the very outset, the speaking subject displaces his belief onto the big Other qua the order of pure semblance, so that the subject never "really believed in it"; from the very beginning, the subject refers to some decentered other to whom he imputes this belief. All concrete versions of this "subject supposed to believe" (from small children for whose sake parents pretend to believe in Santa Claus, to the "ordinary working people" for whose sake Communist intellectuals pretend to believe in Socialism) are stand-ins for the big Other.

It would seem that although there is some general agreement about the ‘proper’ way to leave this world there is no consensus about whether that ideal situation could be attained through some kind of intervention or regulation (in the forms of moral conduct or body techniques) in our lives. These concerns, however, are not always hanging over everyone’s head during the day-to-day affairs of everyday life. Usually they are out there dissipated and circulated in stories, jokes and habitual gestures. But, every now and then when a relative or a friend passes away, they somehow gather together, condensed into a dark cloud, looming over, looking threatening. They happen, and like *ordinary affects* they “catch people up in something that feels like *something*.”²⁴ Some of us tell ourselves in telling others, “Sibadi tamba ngamdey” (Death is unpredictable!), hoping to break the awkward silence so that we can move on.

²³ From Slavoj Zizek’s “The Interpassive Subject,” web posted on <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/the-interpassive-subject/#> (last accessed February 21, 2014)

²⁴ Stewart (2007:2). On the same page Stewart writes, “Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they’re also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of.”

In actual experience most deaths are not ‘proper.’ In fact, some deaths are so sudden and violent that they might seem “unnatural,” (as if they were not “meant” to be). Manipuris talk about these kinds of deaths in terms of *misi chadana siba*, or *jugot chadana siba*. It is hard to exactly define or give an exhaustive list of deaths that the terms would cover. Most people would simply describe *misi-chadana siba* in terms of “death by drowning, death by falling from the tree” etc. When pressed further the list could extend to – death in a car crash, death caused by natural calamities, or death by murder etc. What about death during childbirth or by suicide? How about death in battlefield? The answers to these questions become more and more ambiguous. The key concept of the expression “misi chadana siba” or “jugot chadana siba” is in the qualifying terms “misi **chadana**” and “jugot **chadana**.” *Siba* is “to die.” The qualifying terms “misi chadana” and “jugot chadana” signify inappropriateness or lack of propriety²⁵. Perhaps, we could call these deaths “improper.” There is one ritual that is invariably associated with “improper” death, the ritual of *chupsaba*, so much so that it could be considered the ritual marker of “improper” death. The Late Pandit Ningthoukhonjam Khelchandra (1969, 2012), eminent scholar of archaic Manipuri literature, defines *chupsaba* as a propitiation rite²⁶ to prevent the recurrence/repetition of “improper” death. Interestingly, Ningthoukhongjam (1969) points out that *chupsaba* is also performed for those kinds of misfortunes that are akin to death²⁷. I will go further into the details of *chupsaba* in Chapter 3. For the current chapter the focus is on the idea of “improper” death, (examining *chupsaba* only insofar as it “marks” a death as “improper”). The main concern of *chupsaba* is the spirit of the deceased (see Chapter 3), immaterial of the immediate cause (drowning, falling, bullets or poison) of the death, and it is designed to prevent the accursed spirit to reenter the concerned patrilineal clan. This would imply

²⁵ If an object is found in the wrong place it is “mafam chadana”; if someone cracks a joke in the wrong moment it is “matang chadana”; if a fruit tree blooms out of season it is “matam chadana.”

²⁶ The term used is “teksin hanjindanaba thouni” (Ningthoukhongjam2012).

²⁷ Ningthoukhongjam (1969) used the term *si-baga manaba choppa nungba* (death/equivalent/shame).

that those who died “improper” deaths were accursed souls to begin with, thereby holding only the spiritual world accountable. However, we shall see that “improper” death breaks down the supposed barrier between the spiritual and the political in its search for accountability. I have assembled here certain scenes of death from contemporary Manipur, attending to the “improper” in each scene.

The Malom Massacre

It was one late afternoon, just past 3 pm, on the 2nd of November 2000. A three-vehicle convoy of the 8th Assam Rifles was coming down the Imphal-Tiddim road towards Imphal. As the convoy passed by the waiting shed at Malom Makha Leikai Boro Makhong a powerful bomb exploded barely missing the convoy. The convoy screeched to a halt and the army personnel jumped off the vehicles spraying bullets in every direction. According to the statements by the Assam Rifles they heard shots being fired at them as the bomb exploded. People in the vicinity were ducking for cover or running away when they heard the bomb explode. The army personnel open fired in the directions of the people running away. By the end of the melee 10 bodies lay dead – 8 of those were people waiting to catch a bus towards Imphal. The Assam Rifles cordoned off the whole area and a search operation, “combing operation,” ensued. People were pulled out of their houses and frisked. Some were beaten. In the meantime the state police was not allowed to intervene. The army occupied the area till late midnight.

The initial report of the Assam Rifles stated that they were retaliating to the attack by the insurgents. They claimed to have killed the two insurgents who were fleeing the scene on a scooter, and supposedly recovered one M-16 rifle and one AK-47 magazine from the site. They also found one 150 meters long wire that was probably used to detonate the IED.

Family members and relatives of those who were killed have been claiming that they were all innocent victims. Irom Sharmila Chanu launched her epic hungerstrike in

the aftermath of this massacre. In a recent ruling by the High Court of Manipur, on the 5th of December 2014, the court did not find any evidence of “encounter” after the initial bomb blast, and ordered the government of Manipur and the Assam Rifles to pay an ex-gratia of Rs. 5 lakh to each of the victims within four months.

What happened at Malom in 2000 is a familiar scene in Manipur. The rebels ambush an army convoy or a patrol and flee. The army retaliates with indiscriminate firing, the area is cordoned off and “combing operation” ensues. People in the area are ordered out of their homes, men and women in separate files. Lots of frisking and beating happen to the young men. “Strike and retreat,” a conventional tactic of the “unconventional” guerilla warfare. The scene was so common in Kakching in the 1990s that a joke began to circulate. The origin of such jokes necessarily remain mysterious, as Zizek (2014:1) puts it,

Jokes are originally “told,” they are always-already “heard” (recall the proverbial “Did you hear that joke about ...?”). Therein resides their mystery: they are idiosyncratic, they stand for the unique creativity of language, but are nonetheless “collective,” anonymous, authorless, all of a sudden here out of nowhere.

This is the “human barometer” joke:

Those who got a good beating or two from the soldiers during the “combing operation” became sensitive, apparently, to sudden change in atmospheric pressure. Whenever the dark clouds gather up in the horizon, their bodies writhe in pain.

The ‘human barometers’ joke – brutal, yet funny. We all laughed at the thought of the morbid and seemingly incongruous connection between the writhing bodies and the change in atmospheric pressure.

Cease-fire

On the 18th of June 2001, 13 protesters were killed in police firing. The protesters were part of a mass agitation that suddenly erupted all over Manipur as a reaction against

the extension of “cease-fire” between the Government of India and the proscribed National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) of the Isaac-Muivah (IM) faction to all Naga inhabited areas “without territorial limits.”²⁸ It was one of the biggest mass agitations Manipur had ever witnessed in recent history. The mass agitation raged on for nearly a month and a half until, finally, the Government of India decided to roll back the agreement on July 27 restoring the *status quo ante*. When the agitations finally settled 18 protesters had lost their lives. Among those killed were boys as young as 15 years of age.

The original 13 victims were cremated in Kekrupat, on the 20th of June 2001. 13 separate pyres were made and the funeral rites were conducted. The ceremony was conducted under tight security; no press was allowed to cover it. Only ten family members of each victim were allowed to participate, along with some leaders of All Manipur Student’s Union (AMSU) and All Manipur United Club Organization (AMUCO). A local newspaper reported people’s resentment of this restriction:

It is an established custom of the Meiteis that when a person dies, all the relatives, neighbours and well wishers mourn his/her death and would take part in the funeral.

But the decision of the authority to perform the funeral rites of the thirteen persons where only 10 members of each of the aggrieved families were permitted shows lack of concern of the part of the authority for the custom of the society, observers criticized.²⁹

The Meitei funeral rite, like in many cultures, is a very public affair. Conventionally, neighbors, the extended family members, friends, and the members of the *sagei* (the patrilineal descent group) are all present for the funeral rite. The ceremony begins at the residence of the deceased, where everyone is gathered and the body of the deceased is placed in the top right corner of the courtyard (called “Khangenfam” in

²⁸ The agreement, also known as the Bangkok Agreement, was signed on June 14, 2001. The demand for a “Greater Nagaland” by NSCN (IM) includes almost all the hill areas of Manipur. The extension of ceasefire between NSCN (IM) and the Government of India “without territorial limits” was seen by Manipuris as a significant threat to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Manipur.

²⁹ *Matamgi Yakairol*, June 21, 2001. <http://e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=1..210601.jun01>

Manipuri, see the illustration in chapter 2). At a time indicated by the ritual expert conducting the ceremony a mass procession begins and the body of the deceased is carried on a bier by male relatives. Since the cremation grounds are always located on the outskirts of the town or village the procession goes through the streets and people come out to watch as it goes by. Each *sagei* has a designated cremation ground or *mang*. Once the procession arrives at the designated *mang*, the deceased body is cremated in an open pyre and people bid their final goodbye.

As the newspaper reported the restriction to just 10 family members to participate in the funeral rite was a significant departure from the norm. Given the sensitivity of the issue involved at that time the police were obviously concerned that the funeral rites of the victims could get out of hand. But the restriction of participants was not the only significant departure from the 'established custom.' The custom is to cremate on the common cremation grounds of the deceased's *sagei* (the patrilineal descent group). In case of a married woman the cremation is performed on the *mang* or cremation ground of her husband's *sagei*. Hence the saying, "Nupina mamang ani suheitey."³⁰ Among those cremated at Kekrupat was a 50 years old woman, Laishram Ongbi Tamphasana. The ritual significance of cremating in a common ground is that the soul has finally become part of the *sagei* ancestry.

In any other circumstances the death of the 13 would have been considered "improper." However, because their death occurred during a mass protest against something that threatened the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Manipur they were considered martyrs. Not only did the funeral rites of the 13 significantly change under the extraordinary circumstances, the cremation ground of the 13 has been developed into a memorial complex, where hundreds of people come every year to mark the anniversary of the sacrifices made by the martyrs.

³⁰ The saying may be translated as, "A woman ought not have two cremation grounds." The saying is often used as a social injunction against women getting married more than once.

Manorama

The custodial killing of Thangjam Manorama, a 32-year old woman from Bamon Kampu in 2004 sparked a chain of events, public outcries and protests across Manipur, consequently leading to the partial removal of AFSPA³¹ from the Imphal municipal areas and the handing over of the historical Kangla³² palace complex to the people of Manipur. The eyewitness accounts of Manorama's arrest, from her residence, by an army patrol of the 17th Assam Rifles in the night of July 10, 2004 were widely reported in local newspapers. However, the accounts reported in the local newspapers were fragmentary and inconsistent. The 2008 report³³ by Human Rights Watch, Imphal gives a clearer picture of what went down the night of July 10, 2004.

Manorama's home was set back from the main road leading to Imphal, the state capital. There is a narrow passage that provides access to the house. The family compound has two cottages, one where Manorama stayed with her mother and younger brother, and another occupied by a married brother and his family. There is a common courtyard.

According to her younger brother, Dolendro Singh, several personnel from the 17th Assam Rifles entered their home from the main road. No explanation was provided as they rushed in. They began searching the house. Manorama's elderly mother, Thangjam Khumanleimai Devi, was awake. One soldier pointed his gun at her and asked for Manorama. Meanwhile, Manorama had woken up and came out of her room. The men began to drag Manorama out of the house. When her brothers tried to stop the soldiers, they were beaten up. Manorama's mother, brothers, and other relatives were told to wait in the courtyard at the back of the house while she was taken to the front. Her relatives claim that the soldiers interrogated Manorama and tortured her. "We heard her cries," said Dolendro Singh. "They were torturing my sister."

At around 3:30 a.m. soldiers came into the courtyard and informed the family that Manorama was being taken into custody. Havildar Suresh Kumar of the 17th

³¹ Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958.

³² The Kangla Palace complex is the ancient site of Manipuri sovereignty. After the defeat of Manipur in the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891 British forces occupied it till 1947. Then the Indian Army occupied Kangla from 1949 till 2004. Since 1986, there had been various unsuccessful attempts by the Manipur state government to remove Assam Rifles from Kangla (Parratt 2005: 161). At the time of the Manorama incident the 17th Assam Rifles was stationed at Kangla.

³³ "*These fellows must be eliminated*": *Relentless Violence and Impunity in Manipur*, Human Rights Watch, 2008.

Assam Rifles (Army number 123355) signed an arrest memo. Rifleman T. Lotha (Army number 123916) and Rifleman Ajit Singh (Army no. 173491) signed as witnesses.

Her family was told that she would be handed over to the nearby Irilbung police station the following morning. Early morning the following day her family and people from her neighborhood were getting ready to go to the police station when they received news about a body lying by the Keirao-Wangkhem road near Ngariyan Mapao Maring village. They went there only to find out that it was Manorama's dead body. The lower half of her body was riddled with bullets.

The Assam Rifles identifies Manorama as "PLA No. 1262 Corporal Manorama Devi alias Henthoi," an expert in Improvised Explosive Device (IEDs) and informer of People's Liberation Army (PLA) a proscribed armed group³⁴. In a writ petition to the Guahati High Court the Assam Rifles stated that after taking Manorama into custody they had intended to hand her over to the police station. However Manorama, according to the Assam Rifles, claimed that one of her militant colleagues, a woman called SS Lt. Ruby, had AK47 assault rifles and that information led to an attempt to recover the weapon. After misleading the security team for two hours Manorama finally tried to escape.

The apprehended cadre requested to allow her to ease herself. Thereupon, vehicle was stopped and the party with whom she had been travelling, took position at about 30-35 meters away from her to allow her privacy to ease herself. It was approximately 5:30 AM. That all of sudden the arrested lady cadre started to flee through a gap in the nearby hedge. That the guard commander happened to see her attempting to flee and shouted for her to stop and fired a short burst in the air to warn her. That instinctively other members of the guard party fired towards her legs. That as a result she suffered bullet injuries resulting in her death. (ibid., 5)

However, the 2008 report by Human Rights Watch pointed out that even if the account were accurate the Assam Rifles acted in violation of Indian law, by failing to follow the proper protocol of involving a lady constable during the time of arrest, about

³⁴ *"These fellows must be eliminated": Relentless Violence and Impunity in Manipur*, Human Rights Watch, 2008.

which Justice D. Biswas made an emphatic note in the final verdict. Further, an enquiry commission set up by the government of Manipur found lots of inconsistencies in the accounts provided by the Assam Rifles³⁵. Another report from the Central Forensic Science Laboratory found semen stains on Manorama's skirt.

People in Manipur were outraged by the brutal murder of Thangjam Manorama. The incident was followed by many months of public outcry and protests. In one dramatic act of protest 12 elderly women stood naked in front of the Kangla gate daring the Assam Rifles to come out and rape them. One of the protesters recalls the tragedy of Manorama, thus,

I don't know, people say that Manorama was a *naharol* once. But, it is said that she was in bailout. Well then, she is a bailout, and a woman... Then why would they arrest her, from her house in the middle of the night, and without involving any female security personnel? They arrested her and took her away. Fine! They could have at least kept her with respect. We would have respected the soldiers; we would think of them as our own children. On the contrary, they dragged her out of her house, tortured her, played with her in whatever manner they wanted, raped her, murdered her by shooting at her private parts, and then stuffed cloth into it. [Pounding her chest with her fist] I preferred to die rather than continued living like that in Manipur. ³⁶

Manorama's family refused to take back her body until those guilty of this horrible crime were punished and the AFSPA was removed from Manipur. A group of Ministers and MLAs visited the bereaved family and tried to persuade them to take back the body. Manorama's family stood by their demand³⁷. On July 24, 2004 the government of Manipur finally order the police department to cremate the body. Manorama's family did not perform any funeral rites for the following four years, mourning and demanding justice for her murder. Manorama's death had become a public issue – a People Action

³⁵ The legitimacy of setting up the commission, led by retired district and session judge C. Upendra Singh, was challenged by the Assam Rifles at the Supreme Court. On December 18, 2014 the Supreme Court ruled that the Central government should pay a compensation of Rs. 10 lakh to the mother of Manorama.

³⁶ She worked as a community mobiliser in the NGO I was volunteering for in 2013. The interview was recorded in Imphal in 2013.

³⁷ "The Family still refuse to take back body," *The Sangai Express*, July 23, 2004.

Committee Against the Brutal Killing of Thanjam Manorama was formed to fight for justice. Subsequently, following the public outcries and protests an apex body, called Apunba Lup, of 32 civil society organizations in Manipur was formed to work for the removal of AFSPA from Manipur. In 2013 I talked to the secretary of the People Action Committee at his residence, who told me that Apunba Lup³⁸ was formed in the courtyard of his residence. Regarding Manorama's final rites he told me that it was finally performed on July 11, 2008. According to one newspaper report, the People Action Committee and Apunba Lup decided to solemnize the final rites considering the suffering of her family, especially Manorama's aged mother³⁹. As per tradition a log of the *pangong* tree (*Butea Monosperma*) was used in place of her body for the funeral ceremony. In the absence of the actual body of the deceased *pangong* tree is considered an appropriate surrogate.

The Exposé

On July 23, 2009, around 10 in the morning, a shoot-out broke out in the middle of the busy Khwairamban bazaar. A young woman was killed in the crossfire and several others were injured. That same day, in the morning session of the State Assembly the Chief Minister, Shri O. Ibobi briefed the House about the incident⁴⁰. The Chief Minister read out the statement prepared by the police titled 'Brief note on the incident of indiscriminate firing by unknown armed person at BT Road.'⁴¹

The Imphal West district police commandos came across a man in suspicious manner while conducting frisking at Samu Makhong that morning. When the police tried to stop him he started shooting at the police and ran towards the BT road. The gunman kept shooting indiscriminately in the crowd as he attempted to escape the police pursuit, killing the young woman and injuring several others in the process. He, then, hid inside a

³⁸ On November 1, 2004 a delegation of Apunba Lup had a meeting with the then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh.

³⁹ "Manorama's last rites performed," *The Sangai Express*, July 12, 2008.

⁴⁰ "Whether UGs rule or govt rules, a showdown is necessary: CM," *Hueiyen News Service*, July 24, 2009.

⁴¹ "CM details BT road incident in Assembly," *The Sangai Express*, July 24, 2009.

pharmacy, near the Gambhir Singh Shopping Complex, and kept firing at the police. The gunman was eventually killed in the retaliatory fire from the police commandos. The police recovered one 9mm pistol, three live rounds and a magazine from the slain gunman. The driving license recovered from the body of the gunman identified him as one Chungkham Sanjit Meitei, son of Ch Khelsan of Khurai Kongpal Sajor Leikai. Various members of the House, including the Chief Minister expressed their concern for the rising “culture” of violence in Manipur. Later, the House unanimously decided to condemn the incident. On further investigation the police found out that Chungkham Sanjit Meitei was a member of the proscribed PLA:

He was arrested twice earlier and booked under NSA on July 19, 2007. At the time of his first arrest in 2000, he was holding the rank of corporal in the PLA under army number 2338.⁴²

In the aftermath of the shooting various women organizations – Khwairamband Keithel Phambi Apunba Ima Lup, All Manipur Roadside Vendors' Welfare Association, Khwai Central Ima Market and the Manipur Keithel Nupi Marup – called a 24-hour statewide *bandh* beginning from midnight of July 23 to register protest against the indiscriminate firing at crowded market-place in Imphal today and to denounce the detention of Ima L Mema and Ima Jano Begum, two leaders of the vendors, by the police⁴³. The protest was soon joined by other civil organizations, condemning both the police and the insurgent groups for carrying out such shoot-outs in the public place⁴⁴.

RPF denied, in a public statement released to the press on July 25, 2009, that the BT road shooting had nothing to do with the PLA⁴⁵. In the press release, GM Changjou, Chief of Department of Publicity, RPF claimed that it was a clear case of fake encounter staged by the police commandos and recounted what actually went down that day.

⁴² “CM details BT road incident in Assembly,” *The Sangai Express*, July 24, 2009.

⁴³ “Market women bodies call 24 hr bandh today,” *Hueiyen News Service*, July 24, 2009.

⁴⁴ “Market 'shootout' condemned,” *Hueiyen News Service*, July 25, 2009.

⁴⁵ “Commandos caused market casualties: RPF,” *Hueiyen News Service*, July 25, 2009.

According to the press release the incident happened when a team of police commando tried to arrest a youth by ‘whisking out a gun’ around 10:30 at Samu Makhong. The youth ‘jerk off’ the gun and ran away. The police commandos chased him and opened fire after him. It was the stray bullets of the police commandos that hit the young pregnant woman killing her and other five persons injuring them. Changjou pointed out the possibility that the deceased Chungkham Sanjit might not be the same person the police commandos were chasing after. He confirmed that Chungkham Sanjit was a former PLA but he had retired since 2006 due to illness.

It was an attempt to cover up the guilt of the police commandos and blame the revolutionaries thinking that the people will not realise the truth and will simply believe what the police say, the RPF contended.

People know the truth, but fearing that one may become victim of the present day fake encounters, they are not opening their mouth, the press release pointed out. (*Hueiyen News Service*, July 25, 2009)

There were rumors that military and the paramilitary of the Indian Armed forces, including the Manipur Police Commandos, regularly killed “suspected” militants in custody and staged them as if they were killed in encounters. The term “fake encounter” was in popular usage long before its appearance in official discourse. It was rumored that they did it for money, promotion or as political favors. As an elderly woman activist put it⁴⁶:

Such is the situation with a bailout. The government is telling them to give up their arms and lead a normal life, and have a conversation. The ones who are leading a normal life, who are in bailout, who has no more connections with the *naharol*, even the one I know of, they are being re-arrested again and again, for their [the security forces] fiesta, for their promotions, for their gallantry awards... Which *naharol* will come out to lead a normal life in a situation like that?

In the early 2000s there were rumors of innocent man being “encountered” by police commandos just because he happened to be carrying as little as 5,000 to 10,000

⁴⁶ She is a veteran *meira paibi* activist and this interview was recorded in Imphal in 2013. She worked as a community mobilizer in the NGO I was volunteering for at that time.

rupees in cash at the time of random security checks on the road. The rumor was that there were so much corruption and bribery in the recruitment process of Manipuri police that the police personnel had resorted to such nefarious tactics to recover the money they paid for their posts. There were other rumors of surrendered militants being used to extort money in the name of their former insurgent parties.

There was enough public suspicion around the BT road shooting that very soon various civil organizations started demanding immediate judicial enquiry of the incident⁴⁷. A week later after the incident, on August 1, 2009, *Tehelka*⁴⁸, a national news magazine based in Delhi, published a series of photos clearly disproving the claim that the slain militant was killed during the shootout. In the series of photos we can clearly see that Chongkham Sanjit is unarmed and definitely not trying to run away. He is seen surrounded by the Manipur Police commandos who are taking him inside a pharmacy. The last photo shows the dead body of Sanjit being brought out of the pharmacy. And, it so turned out that Sanjit was a former militant but not the one the police commandos were after as mentioned in their initial report. Sanjit had been arrested and freed in 2000. Then, in 2007, one year after his retirement from the proscribed PLA on health grounds, Sanjit was detained under NSA⁴⁹. A year later he was released on parole. Since then he had been working as an attendant in a private hospital. That day when the shout-out happened he had gone to pick up some medicine for his ailing father from a pharmacy.

The Death of a Social Worker

It was around 10 pm and Krishnadas was trying to put his two years old daughter to sleep. Suddenly 5 to 6 armed men barged into the house and dragged Krishnadas away. They ignored the pleading cries of his wife. His father-in-law was also present in the house at the time. It was the night of the 10th of June 2009. The following day the

⁴⁷ "Protest sittings demand Judicial probe," *The Sangai Express*, July 29, 2009.

⁴⁸ "Tehelka exposes fake encounter," *Hueiyen News Service*, August 2, 2009; Teresa Rehman in "Murder in Plain Sight," *Tehelka*, Vol 6, Issue 31, Dated August 1-8, 2009.

⁴⁹ National Security Act.

unknown abductors of Krishnadas demanded a ransom of two crore rupees. Two crores is a large sum of money, something unheard of as a reasonable demand for ransom. The negotiation about the amount went on for a while over the phone. Finally the abductors came down to Rs. 25 lakhs. Under the instruction of the abductors an amount of Rs. 25 lakhs in cash was handed over to one Ashalata, a woman from Sagolband, Imphal in the evening of the 11th of June. Despite having paid the agreed amount of ransom money Krishnadas was never released. The murdered body of Yengkhom Krishnadas Singh was found the next morning in a hillock in Lilong. His body bore deep marks of severe injuries. Many believed that he was probably tortured before he was killed. The brutal killing of Yengkhom Krishnadas Singh sparked widespread public outrage in Kakching. The “Joint Action Committee (JAC) against the brutal killing of Y. Krishnadas Singh” was immediately formed and it staged protests, demanding justice for the murder of Krishnadas. Highways were blocked in protest. The JAC and the family of Krishnadas refused to claim his dead body, which was being kept in the morgue of Regional Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS), Imphal. They demanded an assurance from the government of Manipur that justice would be done quickly. On the 15th of June, the Chief Minister of Manipur, Shri O. Ibobi convinced the JAC and the family of Krishnadas that swift action would be taken. Subsequently, the family agreed to claim the dead body from the morgue. More than ten thousand people from Kakching and the surrounding towns went in hundreds of buses, cars and other vehicles to claim his body from the RIMS morgue in Imphal. My cousin’s wife who also went said, “I had never seen such a crowd in my entire life.” Incidentally she was one of those who hung out with him the day he was abducted from his house.

“You know, that very day when he was abducted, I was in a car with him and his wife. He was driving his wife around town, he was showing her the local college where he went for his undergraduate and such.”

A separate JAC was formed in Delhi to demand justice for the brutal murder of Y. Krishnadas Singh. The JAC organized various meetings and sit-in protests in Delhi. I

participated in some of the meetings and vigils organized in the North campus of Delhi University. There was one in the Buddha garden, overlooking the office of the Vice Chancellor of the University of Delhi. Someone had sent a photo of Mr. Krishnadas for the occasion. There were some 40 to 50 Manipuri students who came to pay respect to the deceased. Incense sticks were burnt. We offered flower to the photo and observed a moment of silence. Later [the guy who wrote the article on him] talked about him, described him as a social worker and leader of the dalits.

The JAC even submitted a memorandum to the President of India. It has been more than five years since the brutal murder of Y. Krishnadas Singh and the case remains open. His case remains a sensitive topic for many in my town even today. In 2013, as soon as I started asking questions around town about him one of my aunts (mother's elder sister) came by to caution me. It could be that my aunt was simply concerned about my safety given how sensitive the topic of Krishnadas' murder still was. But my aunt also happened to be an active supporter of the current MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly)⁵⁰. There was already some tension between the supporters of Mr. Krishnadas and the local MLA even before his death. When Krishnadas was found murdered the situation got worse. Some of the supporters of Mr. Krishnadas even went so far as to accuse the MLA of his involvement in the abduction and murder of Krishnadas, which the MLA and his supporters vehemently denied.

Prior to 2008 most people in Kakching had not heard of Yengkhom Krishnadas. Although he was born in Kakching he had married someone from Imphal and had taken up residence with his in-laws in Imphal. However, during a short period between 2008 and 2009 Krishnadas became such a popular figure in Kakching. In that one year from 2008 to 2009 he built public waiting sheds, renovated and added new structures to the temples of sylvan deities, and he actively got involved in developmental projects with many local organizations in Kakching and the neighboring towns. There were rumors at

⁵⁰ One of the 60 elected members of the Manipur State Legislative Assembly.

the time that he might be preparing to run for the office of the MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly). The election for the new MLA to the Manipur Constituent Assembly was coming up in 2012. “There was such a big craze for him in those days,” Abongpa recalled. “Something must be wrong with the people though, nobody seemed to care about how he was doing all those. Where did the money come from? Nobody seems to care as long as somebody is willing to donate money,” Abongpa added.

Yengkhom Krishnadas came from a very poor family and he had had to struggle his entire life. One of my cousin sisters’ husbands knew him quite well. In the Manipuri tradition of nomenclature the word for cousin sister is the same as sister and by extension her husband is my brother-in-law or ebai. So, this ebai knew him quite well and spent a lot of time chauffeuring him around whenever Krishnadas came to town. Right after he graduated from Kha Manipur College, the local college in Kakching, Krishnadas moved to Imphal to pursue a Master’s degree in Computer Applications. He gave private tuition to high school students to support his own education at Manipur University. Apparently, he was still giving private tuition, as the only source of income, even after he got married. Then at some point he became a contractor for construction projects. According to ebai he might have had some help to become a contractor, possibly his old friends from his days at Manipur University⁵¹. When ebai met him in 2008, he had not been a contractor for long. He might have started working as a contractor only in 2003 or 2004 by ebai’s rough estimate. According to ebai, Krishnadas did not have much money. He did put in some money out of his own pocket for some of those constructions he did for the public but they were all part of developmental schemes by the government. Somehow to most

⁵¹ Becoming a professional contractor in contemporary Manipur is a very complex affair. Most of the construction projects are implemented through government schemes and without the right network (among the department officials, politicians and guerilla leaders) and/or considerable wealth it is almost impossible to get any contract. Student politics at Manipur University is known for having close ties with Manipuri insurgent groups. On March 6, 2009 Joint Administrative Council (JAC) of All Manipur Contractors and Suppliers Association was formed, it is comprised of the Manipur Hills and Plain Contractors' Association, All Manipur Public Works Department Contractors' Association, All Tribal Contractors' Association, IFCD Contractors' Association, All Manipur Electricity Department Contractors' Association, PHED Contractors' Association and the Manipur University Contractors' Association.

people that did not matter; whether it was from his own pocket or the government's the important thing was that he was getting things done. Ebai remembered how scores of people would come by to talk to him, so discuss matters, to seek council. To Ebai, Krishnadas was a genuine and honest man who sincerely wanted to do something for Kakching and its people.

It is hard to get a clear picture on the construction works he did for the public. If these constructions were made under any government scheme there were no placards saying so. Let's take his biggest construction work that he supposedly donated to the people of Kakching – the additional roofed structure on the holy grounds of Ibudhou Khamlangba, the chief deity of Kakching. Abongpa saw him when the construction was going on. Abongpa recalled him saying, "Uncle, this one I don't want anyone contributing even a single brick. I shall do it all by myself." And the placard engraved on the wall of the building of the deity also says, "Donated by Shri Yengkhom Krishnadas Singh." However, when I asked a local contractor who might have some idea about the project I was told that the construction must have been a project of Manipur Development Society, a government of Manipur undertaking. And when I pointed out the placard he recalled some public discussion about it and that they eventually decided to put the placard, after he died, as a sign of respect. Same thing with the waiting shed he built near the Narsingh temple; the placard simply said that it was donated by Shri Yengkhom Krishnadas Singh. Manipur Developmental Society does have lots of schemes for the construction of various social-infrastructures such as waiting-sheds, market places, community halls, irrigation tanks etc. However, I was unable to confirm if any of the constructions Krishnadas did in Kakching were indeed funded through government funds⁵².

⁵² Official reports of projects funded through the government of Manipur since 2007 onwards are available online at planningmanipur.gov.in and the constructions claimed to have been done by Mr. Krishnadas does not show up in these reports.

After his death the situation became very ugly and tense between the JAC and the MLA – with allegations being thrown back and forth between the two camps. The then secretary of Yengkhom Krishnadas Ningsing Lup (the organization formed to replace the original JAC), M. Shyamkumar Singh wrote to local newspapers accusing the MLA, Y. Surchandra Singh, of embezzlement of public funds. Supporters of the MLA responded with counter allegations and demanded a public apology from Mr. Shyamkumar.

As for the criminal case of the abduction and murder of Y Krishnadas Singh a First Information Report (FIR) was filed and some suspects were subsequently arrested⁵³. One of the cell phones used in the extortion and murder of Krishnadas was traced to inmate Nando in the Sajiwa Central Jail. Nando was doing his time for the extortion and murder case of a little girl in 2003. At that time the police accused Nando of being the mastermind behind the extortion and murder of Y Krishnadas Singh. However, the ransom money was never recovered. A lot of people in Kakching were not quite convinced by the theory of the police. In a more recent development of the case one Md. Amir Ahmad alias Amir Khan alias Khan alias Samir Rahman alias Phajaba alias MM. Sheikh Amar, an accused in the case was arrested on the August 22, 2013. During police interrogation he revealed the name of a Major of the Indian Army who was directly involved in the case. According to the affidavit filed to the Chief Judicial Magistrate, Imphal West, by the Investigating Officer (IO), as reported by *Hueiyen Lanpao* on September 4, 2013,⁵⁴

Amir Ahmed himself admitted to have directly been involved in the abduction of Yengkhom Krishnadas from his father-in-law Keisham Gopal's residence at Thangmeiband Khomdram Selungba Leikai. He further said that one PULF cadre namely Elangbam Amu alias Omorjit alias Somajit alias Kargil (22) of Khangabok Lamlong Bazar, after coming out from the jail as an NSA detainee, came to search for him (Amir Ahmed).

⁵³ On July 13, 2009, the murder case of Y. Krishnadas Singh was brought up by the then MLA Y. Surchandra Singh in the Manipur Legislative Assembly. The status of the case at that point was given (by the Home Minister) and recorded.

⁵⁴ Source: www.hueiyenlanpao.com

Amir also disclosed that Elangbam Amu went to the AR Post at Chingmeirong on June 7/8, 2009 for an important task entrusted to him over phone by KCP Nando. He (Amir) along with another person went to the AR Post on June 9, 2009 and talked with Amu over the phone.

On the same day, they met Major D Sriramkumar at the Chingmeirong Post. The Major instructed them to abduct Krishnadas and bring him to the post.

On June 10, 2009, they went to Thangal Bazar in white coloured Maruti van at around 9 am to abduct Krishnadas. However, the plan failed. Later, they succeeded in abducting Krishnadas from his father-in-law's residence at around 9 pm in the van which was driven by Jackson alias Naobicha alias Wanglen Khuman alias Pamel. Major D Sriramkumar gave security cover to the team in his official gypsy.

Amir held a Rambo knife while the other person possessed a pistol at the time of abducting Krishnadas. Krishnadas was shot at his knee by the other person and brought him to the AR Post.

The Major told them to keep Krishnadas in an isolated house at Lilong, the affidavit said.

In August 2009, Major D Sreeram Kumar, then with the 39th Assam Rifles (AR) unit at Chingmeirong, Manipur, was awarded the Ashoka Chakra, the highest peacetime gallantry medal "for being responsible for a "palpable decrease in insurgency activities" and bringing "succour to the people and ensuring their safety.""⁵⁵ Major D Sreeram Kumar's name also came up in a separate, unrelated case of "fake encounter" of cousins Gobind and Nobo Meitei on April 4, 2009⁵⁶. According to the news report by *The Indian Express* the Army did not comment on the theme and sources told the reporters that the award was given based on a different case of encounter where four hardcore terrorists were eliminated on October 23, 2008. As *Hueiyen News Service* points out –

However, in the official statement released in connection with awarding Ashok Chakra to him, it was clearly mentioned killing of 12 UG cadres, arrest of another 23 cadres and recovery of 12 arms during counter insurgency operations carried out by Major Sreeram as his achievements.

⁵⁵ "Ashoka Chakra awardee led fake encounter in Manipur, says SC panel" in *The Indian Express*, September 15, 2013.

⁵⁶ The alleged case of "fake encounter" was confirmed by a judicial commission, appointed by the Supreme Court.

In addition to this, his great role during the "Operation Hifazad" carried out by 39 Assam Rifles in 2008 to drive out insurgents from the soil of Manipur was highlighted.⁵⁷

And according to the same report by *Hueiyen News Service* Major Sreeram Kumar is currently posted at Army War College, Mhow in Madhya Pradesh. On September 21, 2013 the Yengkhom Krishnadas Ningsing Lup organized a mass sit-in-protest at Kakching demanding the arrest of Major Sreeram Kumar. The attending crowd at the sit-in was not as large as the ones a couple of years before.

The rickshaw driver

Md. Kora – Muhammad Kora – was his name. And like most rickshaw drivers in Manipur he was a Manipuri muslim, or *pangal*⁵⁸ in the local parlance. He was originally from Mayang Imphal, as we learned from newspaper reports, and had moved to Imphal City with his wife and son, perhaps with the hope of eking out a living. That morning, the 30th of November 2011, couple of guys had paid him twenty rupees to deliver a package inside the Manipur Sangai Festival⁵⁹ compound. He took the money and was on his way to deliver it when the package exploded, within a few yards of the main gate to the Sangai Festival compound. It was a powerful explosion; the rickshaw was gone, Md. Kora's legs were completely severed and four others in the vicinity were injured. One local newspaper reported that both of his legs were recovered several meters away from the site of the blast. Md. Kora did not die right away. Some saw him trying to keep his torso in the upright position with the help of the mangled handle of what used to be the rickshaw. One of the photos in the local newspapers showed him answering to the

⁵⁷Source: <http://e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=25..110913.sep13>

⁵⁸ Although this might be changing, now we see rickshaw drivers who are not pangal. The popular theory is that the term 'pangal' comes from Bengal or Bangla, a reference to their historical point of origin. In recent years there has been reports of illegal immigration of muslims into Manipur from Bangladesh and Burma, who are to be considered separately from the pangals.

⁵⁹ Formerly Tourism Festival was renamed "Manipur Sangai Festival" since 2010 is a tourism festival organized by the Tourism Department, Government of Manipur, from 21st to the 30th of November every year, to "promote Manipur as a world class tourism destination." See sangaifestival.gov.in

inquiries of a police officer. Speaking to the press, DIG (Deputy Inspector General) Clay Khongsai of Manipur Police said, "From what the cart driver said, before he passed away, we may deduce that the KCP (MC) was ninety nine percent behind the attack."

Three days before the incident the MC faction of the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) had called for a seventy-two hours *bandh* all over Manipur as a protest against the killing of one of its comrades in an alleged encounter with the security forces. KCP(MC) denied the claim that their fallen comrade was killed in an actual encounter, implying that the alleged encounter was faked. Some newspapers reported that in the preceding days some of those setting up stalls inside the Manipur Sangai Festival compound had received threats from KCP(MC). The police later commented that the package Md. Kora was carrying might have been a remote controlled IED. Md. Kora bled to death on the way to Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences (JNIMS). The blast was condemned many social organizations in Manipur, including the All Manipur Rickshaw Drivers and Pullers' Welfare Association (AMRDPWA) and Maoist Communist Party, Manipur. No one, including the KCP (MC), claimed responsibility for the bomb blast.

"Is killing of rickshaw driver and causing injuries to other civilian the goal of taking up arms?" Basanta [President of AMRDPWA] asked, and demanded the group responsible to come out with a public apology at once.

Otherwise, the Association would consider the group responsible for the blast as anti-people, he added.⁶⁰

The bomb blast was seen as a serious lapse of the security system given that the then Prime Minister of India and Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, the chairperson of the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) were scheduled to visit Manipur two days after. The explosion occurred just a few hundred meters away from the newly constructed City Convention Center, which was to be inaugurated by the Prime Minister on the 3rd of

⁶⁰ "Rickshaw drivers condemn killing colleague in blast," *Hueiyen News Service*, December 1, 2011.

December. I first saw the images on e-pao.net; I was still in Austin at the time. I talked to my father over the phone about the bomb blast. What struck him most was the fact that Md. Kora was alive for so long and talked calmly to the police even after he had been completely blown off down the waist. He saw the entire coverage on the local TV.

Migrant Workers

A powerful grenade exploded inside a makeshift shelter, built over the Naga Nullah⁶¹ for the construction workers, killing 9 and injuring several others. The 9 killed and most of those injured were later identified as migrant laborers employed by Simplex Project Limited, Kolkata for the construction of the embankment and laying concrete slabs over the Naga Nullah⁶² at Khuyathong. The bomb blast created a mass panic among migrant workers across the state. A temporary asylum was set up at Dharamsala, Imphal for some 160 migrant workers. Many condemned the Nagamapal bomb blast and no organization claimed responsibility for the bomb blast. Earlier on the same the day, around 10:30 am, there was another bomb explosion in the outskirts of Imphal, in Khurai Laishram Leikai and a civilian was injured. Claiming responsibility of the bomb blast at Khurai, Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) clarified via *The Sangai Express* that the special warfare group of People's Liberation Army (PLA)⁶³ carried out the explosion targeting Assam Rifle personnel.

Saying that today's bomb attack was carried out targeting a team of Assam Rifles, the outfit conveyed sincere regret for the casualty suffered by a civilian. In all the battles fought by the PLA, the PLA was victorious because of people's faith and assistance provided to the party. It further sought people's continued support and assistance to the party's liberation movement. (*The Sangai Express*, September 13, 2013)

⁶¹ A major drain that runs through the heart of Imphal City.

⁶² "Twin blasts rock Imphal: At least 9 killed in Nagamapal blast," *The Sangai Express*, September 13, 2013.

⁶³ The armed wing of RPF.

However, in the case of the Nagamapal bomb blast that killed 9 migrant workers no organization claimed responsibility for the act. In fact, a few days after the incident the Coordination Committee (CorCom) of KCP, KYKL, PREPARK, PREPARK (Pro), RPF and UNLF came out with a public statement denying any involvement with the explosion at Nagamapal. The statement also pointed out the possibility of “Indian agents” carrying out the explosion to put the blame on the insurgent groups. In the statement, CorCom, however, reiterated its position on the non-locals and expressed concerns over the ‘mass influx of migrant workers’ in Manipur⁶⁴. Given their “anti non-local” position they did not want to be seen as being responsible for the death of the 9 migrant workers. A few days after the Nagampal bomb blast I learned from someone in Imphal who was working on behalf of the 9 killed and others injured to get them ex gratia from the government that none of the human rights organizations came forward to help.

The quintessential “non-local” figure is that of the *Mayang* (the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably). Although the term *Mayang* was historically used to refer to people from the Cachar area (in Assam) in the current usage it functions as an ethnic marker, characterizing a certain phenotype – dark skin, sharp facial features, facial hair etcetera – the “stereotypical Indian.”⁶⁵ In the modern Meitei nationalist imaginary the *Mayang* is not just the ultimate outsider but also the cultural “other.”⁶⁶ He comes from West Bengal, Bangladesh, Bihar, Utter Pradesh and other parts of mainland India. His presence is a threat to the economic interest, culture, identity and sovereignty of the Meiteis. Many of the insurgent groups had violently attacked *Mayangs* and given

⁶⁴ “CorCom denies hand in Nagamapal blast,” *The Sangai Express*, September 19, 2013.

⁶⁵ Although there are significant numbers of Nepali immigrants in Manipur they would not be referred to as “Mayang,” possibly because of the “mongoloid” features of the Nepalis.

⁶⁶ The Meitei nationalists are always stressing the Meitei proximity with the East.

ultimatums to leave Manipur⁶⁷. However, local people have always come out to protest violent killing of *Mayangs*, particularly the migrant workers⁶⁸.

In 2014 I talked to a *Mayang* barber at Kakching bazaar. He was from Bihar. He spoke fluently in Manipuri. Although his father was killed in 2009 by the rebels he continued to work in Kakching. He felt safe in Kakching he said. He had been approached to work in other towns but he never went. He worked with a younger colleague who did not speak much Manipuri. He had been in Manipur only for seven months. When I asked him why they had to come all the way to Manipur to work they said the situation in Bihar was not good for barbers. There are too many of hair salons there and many are well established because of their connections with the local politicians. Things seemed to be working out for them in Kakching. There were no troubles except that they had to pay hundred rupees a month to FRIENDS.

The recent anxiety of the *Mayang* intrusion has also been heightened by the dramatic demographic shifts in nearby Tripura and Assam in the last few decades.

“Migrants outnumber Meeteis; ILP demand to gain momentum
Sets July 11 deadline”⁶⁹

Imphal, June 27 2012: The population of Non-Manipuris in Manipur has reached 7,40,488, which is much higher than the population of indigenous Meeteis excluding the Schedule Caste by 13,103 heads, according to the census report of 2011.

Alarmed over the tremendous increase in the population of non-Manipuris (*Mayangs*), Federation of Regional Indigenous Society (FREINDS) has threatened to take resort to various sorts of intense agitations including bandhs, blockades and hunger strikes on a continuous basis if no definite decision for

⁶⁷ “Militant attacks on non-locals in Manipur since 2001” compiled from newspaper reports by South Asia Terrorism Portal and Institute for Conflict Management. Accessed September 3, 2014.
http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/manipur/data_sheets/militentattack.htm

⁶⁸ “Migrants at relief camps; No food provision for victims,” *The Sangai Express*, March 21, 2008.

⁶⁹ Source: *Huiyen News Service*

reintroduction of Inner Line Permit (ILP) system is not taken in the ongoing state Assembly session by July 11.

Apart from the problematic conflation of “Non-Manipuri” with *Mayang*⁷⁰ and the questionable definition of “indigenous Meetei”⁷¹ the claims made by FRIENDS in the newspaper article are full of inconsistencies. For example, in the same article FRIENDS claims –

There are at present 7,40,488 non-Manipuris in accordance to the 2011 census report. Tribals population has been recorded at 6,70,00 and that of the Meeteis at 7,51,208.

In actuality, the 2011 Census records the population of Scheduled Tribe at 9,02,740 and that of Scheduled Caste at 97, 042⁷². However, the lack of consistency or clarity in the claims made by FRIENDS did not make their message less affective. The demand for the implementation of Inner Line Permit System (ILP) did pick up momentum with the subsequent formation of committees like the Joint Committee on Inner Lines Permit System (JCILPS)⁷³ and support by other organizations.

Abongpa and I sit down for breakfast in a restaurant in Imphal. Like many other restaurants in the area it looked like a *Mayang* establishment. The guy attending us did not speak Manipuri but the guy behind the counter did. Unlike me Abongpa does not speak Hindi. The other Manipuri customers seem to be managing fine in Hindi. In the end everything turned out fine and we had our *parantha* and *chai*. But I could not help

⁷⁰ How is “non-Manipuri” defined? There are “non-Manipuris,” including Nepalis who have been living in Manipur for many generations. Many of them speak Manipuri. They should be distinguished from the migrant workers who came post-1947.

⁷¹ It is not clear if “Meetei” is being treated as a “racial” or an “ethnic” category here. The exclusion of Schedule Caste in defining “indigenous Meetei” is inconsistent with historical facts as well as with the modern usage of the term “Meitei” or “Meetei.” Most of the Scheduled Caste communities in Manipur are known to be the original inhabitants of Manipur, who were already there when the Meeteis entered Manipur. With the rise of the Meitei power the earlier principalities were eventually subjugated by the Meeteis and many of them became *Lois*. In this sense, then, Scheduled Caste communities of Manipur are arguably more “indigenous” than the meiteis.

⁷² Manipur Census 2011.

⁷³ Formed on July 05, 2012 to strengthen the ILPS movement initiated by FRIENDS.

feeling a tinge of annoyance and alarm at the fact that I had to resort to Hindi in order to have breakfast in a restaurant in Imphal.

A case of suicide

A young woman had committed suicide. I felt sorry for the girl and her family but I also thought about whether they were going to perform *chupsaba*⁷⁴ for her. I could see it first hand and observe. What a horrible thing to see opportunity in such a tragedy. But I could not help wondering about the possibility either.

“Do you know her family?” I asked Abongpa.

“Not really but I know her maternal uncle. He lives down the street. Let’s go see if he is around.”

Abongpa knew the uncle from their fishing trips in the mountains. He had told me those fishing stories so many times. Way up in the mountains, far away, close to the Burmese border there are creeks so deep and dark that you could barely see three feet in front of you. Over there the forest is so dense that you could see only a tiny sliver of the sky where the overarching branches of the tall trees meet along the creek. But the fish! You could catch them by the buckets. Fishes so beautiful and transparent (like a glass, he said). Mostly they used dynamites to stun the fishes and literally scoop them up by the buckets. The maternal uncle of the young woman who had committed suicide was a logger. He knew his way around the deep mountains and that he was good with dynamites, Abongpa told me. Fortunately the uncle was home and he had just woken up from an afternoon nap. He told us briefly about what had happened with the young woman and how distraught her family was. But he was not sure if they were going to perform any *chupsaba* for her though, there were some complications. A young man was involved in the case, it turned out. They were in a relationship and the young man decided to break up. The young woman was very upset about it, and she took poison.

⁷⁴ A ritual associated with ‘improper’ death (*mishi-chadana shiba* in Manipuri). This ritual is practiced among the Manipuri meiteis.

Then they recovered some text messages from her cellphone that could indict the young man.

“So even if they decided to do *chupsaba* it wouldn't be for a while,” the uncle informed us.

Suicide over a bad relationship is not unheard of in Manipur, especially among the young. According to the report on suicides, by the National Crime Report Bureau, 61% of the total suicides in 2012 were committed by those in the age group of 15-29 and 17% of the total suicide was caused due to “love affairs.” Such statistical account, for whatever its worth, does not tell much, aside from the fact that love affairs could be fatal, about the complications of love affairs in Manipur. It is almost a truism to say that love affairs can be fatal; there is nothing peculiar about that in itself. In the case of Manipur, “love affairs” are often talked about in two senses – *koina-samnaba* and *mari leinaba*. The term *mari leinaba* literally means ‘having a relationship,’ and it is often a polite way of referring to illicit affairs. Although the term is not restricted exclusively to describing illicit affairs, *mari leinaba* suggests physical relationship.

In the past the guerillas or local vigilante groups often intervened in cases of extra marital affairs or love affairs. In the case of love affairs the couple is forced to marry right away otherwise there is what is called ‘*izzat dabi*,’ a form of “compensation of honor” for the woman or girl involved. Most people seem to have agreed that one lakh rupees is a fair compensation. No one has any clue how, where and when these traditions began. That very summer there was the peculiar case of a guy who had to marry three women on the same day. The guy stuck with only one in the end, I was told, and paid off the other two.

Days went by and I had stopped thinking about the young woman who committed suicide. We were busy meeting people, visiting places and collecting tiger stories. One late afternoon Abongpa came with the news. They were going to do *chupsaba* for the girl

after all. It did not take us long to find out who the priest was, the one who had been contacted to perform the ceremony. We quickly hopped onto our bicycles and went to the priest's house. The priest was not home and we had to wait for a good while. It was dark by the time the priest came home. The priest knew Abongpa and my family. It is a small town – there is no need for IDs, your parents' names, sometimes your grandparents' names, are sufficient. The new Google glasses seem awkward and primitive compare to the amount of information that one input can generate in a small town like mine. The priest said he was ok if we wanted to hang out during the ceremony but we might have to talk to the girl's family too. We thanked him and left. There was no easy way to talk to the grieving family about us participating in the ceremony. I was no longer sure it was a good idea. It felt too intrusive. But Abongpa, he does not give up easy. It was no longer just about helping me out in my research but that his own interest had been piqued. He wanted to video record the whole thing but I disagreed. A small audio recorder should be enough I thought. We went back and forth about how we were going to document it. In the end we decided that just observing and being part of the ceremony was good enough. That is, if the family agreed at all. We had not still figured out a proper way to approach the girl's family. Eventually, we convinced ourselves that the maternal uncle, the one who was good with dynamite, was close enough of a family.

“We should be fine. We just have to show up in white dhoti and kurta (the traditional ceremonial dress for funerals), you stay close with the priest and I will stick with the uncle. We will be fine.”

Well, it sounded like a good plan. Besides, he might have worked in similar situations before, I thought. He must know what he was talking about. He is the expert on Manipuri cultural practices after all. As the day of the ceremony drew closer we finally went to talk to the maternal uncle. Turned out he was not even aware of any ceremony if there was going to be one. Something was amiss. Surely the maternal uncle must have been informed if they were going to do the ceremony the following day. So we went looking for the priest. “Oh yeah, somebody came yesterday to call it off. I don't understand what is going on. I had been preparing for the ceremony, you know.

Chupsaba is not easy; it requires a lot of stuff – dozens of earthen pots of different shapes and sizes, ten different types of herbs, a rooster and a dove. I mean there are so many little little things, and they add up. It is not like I am making it up, it is in the book. Anyway, they say they are not doing it anymore. What can I say? I am not going to go after them trying to convince them. It does not look nice.”

That was that. There was not going to be any chupsaba. May be I was a bit relieved? I was not quite comfortable with the idea of randomly showing up at some stranger’s funeral rites, even for the sake of anthropology. Abongpa was disappointed.

“Well, that’s too bad. But if they ever change their mind or if some other opportunity comes up please let us know.”

“Sure, sure.”

It never happened. Abongpa was bitter. Back in the day it was not like you had a choice, he told me. For a death by suicide it was compulsory. Otherwise another terrible death will recur in the family. I don’t think he truly believes in it but that’s what they say. One day we ran into the maternal uncle, it might have been a month after the young woman’s suicide.

“So what happened? Why didn’t they do the ceremony?” Abongpa asked him.

“Well they did, about a week ago. But not with the same priest, someone else did the ceremony. It was brief and quick. The family wanted to do a proper one but they could not afford it.”

Death of a cousin

They found his dead body one cold morning, somewhere by the side of the road between Lamkhai and Korao Pokpi, on the national highway no. 39. It is the same highway that leads all the way to Burma, the same highway that brings in the notorious *Number 4* and other drugs. I knew him well as a kid; we grew up together being from the same neighborhood. I always followed him around, he being the older one. I used the honorific ‘da’ (for elder brother) before his name. As a kid he had admirable skills at

kung fu (kata) moves. He was tough as nail. And when we used to venture into the woods in the outskirts of the town he was always very resourceful with his slingshots. By the time I went to high school we had drifted apart. Every once in a while I would run into him on the road and we would simply nod at each other. And as I moved to Chennai and Delhi for higher education I saw him less and less. Many years later, during one of my summer visits home my parents told me he has passed away. It was drug overdosed. They had known about his drug addiction for a while. There was no *chupsaba*⁷⁵, no protest. Everything was done quiet and discrete.

Drug addiction is rampant in Manipur. High rates of unemployment and proximity to the Golden Triangle have been identified as major factors for the high rate of drug addiction and HIV epidemic in the Northeast of India (“HIV-AIDS situation in North Eastern States”; Sarkar, Panda, Das, Sarkar 1997). On February 24, 2013 a lieutenant colonel of the Indian Army was caught with a large amount of drug worth Rs. 24 crores (approximately 3.8 million USD)⁷⁶. His convoy was travelling on the national highway 39 towards the border town of Moreh.

*Public Health and Testimonies of Death*⁷⁷

Pamei Ashang, Tamenglong District⁷⁸:

My late wife was an educated woman and a lovely mother. She got pregnant and we came to Imphal for checkup. The doctor assured that everything was fine and that they could do the delivery in Tamenglong. It was two weeks before the delivery. So we went back. On the 10th of March 2011 we admitted her to the Tamenglong District Hospital. The baby was delivered right away and it was brought out. When I inquired about the health of the mother they assured me that

⁷⁵ The *chupsaba* ceremony was performed only when a second “improper” death occurred in our *sagei*.

⁷⁶ “Army officer, five others held with drugs worth Rs. 24 cr in Manipur,” *The Times of India*, February 25, 2013.

⁷⁷ On the 25th of June 2014, Human Rights Initiative, Manipur, in collaboration with Women Action for Development, Imphal, organized a public hearing on “Peoples’ Right to Health and Medical Ethics in Manipur.” The event was held in the conference hall of Manipur Press Club, Imphal. There were five testimonies presented by the victims two of which are presented here.

⁷⁸ Tamenglong is one of the remote hill districts of Manipur. The speech was delivered in English.

she was doing fine. But they kept her in the labor room for more than two three hours. I got worried and asked the guard why they were keeping her so long. The guard told me that the doctor was doing something and we had to wait. After waiting patiently for three hours it was declared that she was no more. We never expected that to happen. When I asked the doctor what was wrong with her. The doctor said, “over bleeding.” I somehow accepted that as my fate, as God’s plan. But then after one or two years I found out that it was not just my wife and that couple of mothers had died in similar circumstances. I suspect the doctor who attended my late wife was not well trained. I know him personally and I respect him. But he is not trained for delivery; he is not a gynecologist. I was not told at the time that it was his first or second operation. The same doctor operated on another women this year and she is also no more. If the concerned authorities do not look into what is happening over there, the precious lives of many mothers are in grave danger. Right now there are no trained gynecologist in the Tamenglong District Hospital. May be some gynecologist visited once or twice a year but we don’t have specialized doctors. If such is the condition in the Tamenglong District Hospital, let me recount the plight of the Primary Health Center in Tousem, where I come from. There is hardly any doctor or nurses. Whenever we went for some help the nurse would prescribe some medicine. Whether she is qualified to do that or not, we don’t know. I request the members of the jury to please do something for my district, for my people. Otherwise the precious lives of mother would be lost.

Keithelakpam Chandrika Devi, Tera Lukram Leirak, Imphal⁷⁹:

When people like us, people with no money and no connection, go to RIMS⁸⁰ we are not treated very nicely by the doctors and nurses. On the 20th of November my daughter-in-law passed away. In the months leading up to the fateful day they took great care, there were regular checkups. She herself was a nurse trained in Andra Pradesh. She had worked as a nurse in Delhi. She came to Manipur for her brother’s wedding and she had to do the delivery here. And she died during delivery [begins to cry]. I had decided never to set foot at RIMS as long as I am alive. There is no help for poor people like us. It has become a slaughterhouse where people go to die. The doctors are only interested in making money through private practices, so much so that they are never around in the public hospitals. Never go to RIMS, you are better off in private hospitals. More people are going to die there. That’s all I wanted to tell the people. If I were to talk about what happened to my daughter-in-law, I would need at least an hour. The doctor who had been attending her never showed up in the last hours. We kept calling the doctor. Finally some PG student did it and it went wrong. I am warning you

⁷⁹ The speech was delivered in Manipuri.

⁸⁰ Regional Institute of Medical Sciences, one of the premiere public medical institutions in Manipur.

people. Let my daughter-in-law be the last one at RIMS. When poor people from the rural areas come to RIMS they will be definitely treated differently because their dress, lack of money and such. Have they forgotten the value of their salary? Haven't they joined the profession to serve the people? Didn't they work hard to become doctors so that they could serve the public? They only think about the money. Where did that money come from? It came from our sweat; working in the fields, just to give it to them. The government is deaf for the poor.

There have been so many newspaper reports of deaths due to negligence on the part of the medical practitioners. The outraged family or the community sometimes takes matters into their own hands –

“Rampage at private hospital”

Imphal, January 08 2014: Locals of Top Khongnangmakhong under Porompat Police Station stormed at Advance Speciality Hospital and Research Centre, a private health care centre located at Palace Compound here following the death of a man at the hospital today.

...

The doctor, who attended the deceased H... , has been identified as one Dr. ... He is said to be working at JNIMS, Porompat as well.

The irate locals broke several window panes and also destroyed a television set inside the hospital...

(Source: *Hueiyen News Service*)

Or,

“JNIMS stormed”

Imphal, May 11 2013: Blaming negligence of a doctor for the death of a patient, enraged mob today stormed JNIMS hospital demanding fitting action against the erring doctor.

However, no untoward incident has been reported following a pre-emptive measure taken up by Porompat police and Imphal East police commandos...

(Source: *The Sangai Express*)

While the public health care system has been deteriorating on the one hand, there has been a big push, particularly in collaboration with the private healthcare sector, to make Manipur an attractive destination for “medical tourism.” Here is an excerpt from the official document of the Manipur Tourism Policy 2014, issued by the Department of Tourism, Government of Manipur:

Patients prefer to travel for treatment for various reasons viz., inaccessibility to good medical facilities and hospitals, long waiting time to undergo a surgery/treatment, leisure, vacation or convenient element during travel, etc. and diasporas seeking treatment back in their native land. The healthcare system of a land should essentially fulfill criteria like *better nursing facilities, faster personalized services, cutting edge technology and lower cost of treatment to cater to the visiting patient-tourists.*

Manipur today has the requisite medical expertise, equipments and professionals to fulfill these criteria. Immediate demand for medical tourism can be seen from neighbouring States like Mizoram and Nagaland, and also from neighbouring countries with underdeveloped facilities like Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam.

(Manipur Tourism Policy, 2014: 21)

There is a lot of excitement and expectation around the gradual opening up of the Indo-Myanmar border in recent years. The hope is that the “Look East Policy” with proper implementation would result into better infrastructure in the Northeast region and free flow of goods and people across the Indo-Myanmar border. Under those conditions Manipur would prosper as a “hot” destination of “medical tourism,” tapping into the South East Asian market, beginning with Myanmar. There have already been some newspaper reports of patients from Myanmar being treated in the clinics and hospitals in Imphal. A team of MBA students from Myanmar visited Imphal to study the hugely successful, privately owned, Shija Hospital and Research Institute. On December 24, 2013 the team of Shija Eye Care Foundation was flagged off to Monywa, Myanmar for

an eye camp⁸¹. Ironically, however, Thomas, a social worker from Moreh, the last Indian town near the Burmese border, told a different story⁸²:

In certain emergency cases, during the last stages of labor and such people of Moreh rush to the Tamu hospital, on the other side of the Indo-Myanmar border. Such a shame! On the other hand the government of Manipur is trying to project a different image by bringing in patients from the Burmese side to Imphal, to Shija hospital. But the inhabitants of Moreh go over to the Burmese side for treatment. Even my own wife, for the last delivery we went to Tamu hospital. And we came home successfully.

Conclusion

Something is happening. The scenes register changes in the affective atmosphere, where the pre-existing forms of doing things, or of making sense, are in moments of readjustment. One's neighborhood is no longer a guarantee for safety and security from outsiders. The doors are to be locked, reinforced with iron gates if need be. There are new breeds of politicians. "Insurgent" bodies being traded for money, medals and promotions. While many die young, of love, honor and drugs. We can almost sense the emergence of a "new normal." A woman lamenting the loss of her daughter-in-law asks,

Haven't they joined the profession to serve the people? Didn't they work hard to become doctors so that they could serve the public? They only think about the money.

Questions that are quickly losing sense in the emerging "new normal." And in the midst of this chaos, where this "new normal" is taking shape, the collective desire for the political is often registered in the form lamenting the lost of propriety.

⁸¹ "MISSION MYANMAR FOR SIGHT, 26th DECEMBER 2013, Monywa"

<http://shijahospitals.com/front-posts/mission-myanmar-for-sight-26th-december-2013monywa-2/>

⁸² I met Thomas at the public hearing on "People's Right to Health and Medical Ethics" organized at Press Club Imphal. Although he gave his speech in English he was fluent in Manipuri. He is of Tamil origin but he was born in Moreh and grew up in the border town. There has always been a significant Tamil expatriate population in Moreh. He had been working on public health issues for 9 years.

Chapter Two: Rite of Affliction

In this chapter I examine the ritual of *chupsaba*, which was performed at least in two of the “improper” deaths described in chapter 1. The ritual of *chupsaba* is performed to prevent the recurrence of “improper” death in the family and as such it may be classified as a rite of affliction. Following the works of Victor Turner, Bell (1997:115) describes it thus – “rites of affliction seeks to mitigate the influences of the spirits thought to be afflicting human beings with misfortune.” Attempts to influence the spirits in order to alleviate human sufferings do not always remain simply at the level of ritual practices. As we shall see more explicitly in chapter 3 how ritual meanings get translated into powerful political acts of affecting change. However, in this chapter the focus is on the ritual of *chupsaba*, mainly exploring its cultural significance and the “internal” logic of the ritual. In failing to “document” the ritual *in situ* it sort of became a documentation of how belief works in certain ways. What I want to reiterate in this chapter is the point that the spiritual problems that rituals seek to address are also social ones, so that in practice the spiritual, the material, the political and the social do not exist in separate realms.

Chupsaba

The earliest recorded account of *chupsaba* is found in the *Cheitharol Kumpaba*, the court chronicle of the Meitei kings. In the course of dredging the rivers in the valley of Manipur, Taothingmang (264 CE) and his elder brother Ngangoi Yoimongba came upon a place in the southern corner of the valley.

When they arrived in the village of Lokkha Haokha in the southern region, the people in that region asked as to the purpose of the two brothers’ visit. The brothers were told that in their land Kakyen, which overpowers men, had been carrying men off, and because of that, no one was able to move about or go out in the open. And after the people had warned them that the Kakyen might catch

them, the two royal brothers set up a trap and caught the Kakyen and killed it. (Parratt 2005:25)

The story of the royal brothers overcoming Kakyen Meengamba, the mythical bird, is recounted in *Tutenglon*⁸³, which is recited during *chupsaba*. Although it is not mentioned in Parratt's (2005) translation of the *Cheitharol Kumpaba*, the modern Manipuri translation by Lairenmayum Ibungohal Singh and Ningthoukhongjam Khelchandra Singh (1966) mentions the performance of *chupsaba* for the elder brother Ngangoi Yoimonbga had been carried away by the Kakyen before it was killed. As an expert in archaic Meitei texts and manuscripts Abongpa maintained that Ngangoi Yoimongba could not become the king because the mythical bird had carried him away, an ominous sign, thereby making way for his younger brother Taothingmang to become the king. Thus it would seem that *chupsaba* was not confined to "improper" deaths. It was and continues to be performed for all kinds of misfortunes that befell a family (Ningthoukhongjam 1969, 2012).

So far I cannot confirm if there is any written account describing the details of *chupsaba* in the early days. There is no guarantee that the actual practice of *chupsaba* has continued in the same form for hundreds of years. In fact it would seem that there are different versions of *chupsaba* being practiced in Manipur today. For example, in the case of the young woman who committed suicide in 2013 (Chapter 1) the *chupsaba* performed was a shortened version of the more 'proper' form. I talked to the priest who was initially approached for the ritual (who proposed a 'proper' *chupsaba*, requiring more items) and the one (he is not a priest) who performed *chupsaba* for the young woman in the end. While the priest maintained that the items required are essential and referred to the books where they are enlisted. But the ritual expert who performed the *chupsaba* said that it could be done in a simple version. When we talked to another priest

⁸³ An archaic Meitei manuscript that deals with the dredging of rivers in the valley.

in Thongjao the priest pointed out differences in the way *chupsaba* is done in their tradition and in Kakching.

From my enquiries with friends, priests and ritual experts in Imphal, Moirang, Thongjao, Wangu, Kakching, Kampang and Yairipok the impression I got was that *chupsaba* is much less prevalent today than it used to be. Among the Meitei muslims the practice of *chupsaba* seems to be non-existent (I cannot confirm or deny if it was ever practiced by the Meitei muslims at some point). In some hill communities (I am not sure about Meitei Christians) the practice might have lingered in places where people have not converted to Christianity. Among the Meitei there are two systems of rituals coexisting in different configurations. Many Meitei Hindus considered the Hindu funeral rite of *shrada* or *sorat* as sufficient without requiring a separate *chupsaba* even in the case of “improper” deaths. This, however, struck Abongpa as slightly unusual. “It never used to be the case,” he would say. In the case of “improper” death it was never an optional, it was compulsory to perform *chupsaba*. He also said that *chupsaba* was the proper funeral rite before *shrada* replaced it.

I have not witnessed the actual performance of *chupsaba* so far. The ritual is secretive in the sense that people prefer to keep it within the family. There are other rituals that are public and more inclusive in nature. In 2013 when a young girl committed suicide (chapter 1 “A case of suicide”) Abongpa and I hoped for an opportunity to participate (by tagging along with the priest) which did not work out. After that, another opportunity came up with Oja Kerani from Imphal. A few days later his son called up and cancelled it. Another Meitei priest from Thongjao mentioned a video recording they did of one *chupsaba*. The file was on a laptop being used by the grandson who was studying in Imphal. On the second visit we were told they could not find the file. After a while we started considering doing our own *chupsaba*. I can’t remember exactly who came up with the idea but it got us excited. That way, we thought, we could document it step by step. It would be a valuable addition to his museum collection and I would have the opportunity

to learn the intimate details of the ritual. We went to the priest, the one who was originally approached in the case of the girl who committed suicide (chapter 1). The priest seemed unsure initially, but our enthusiasm convinced him in the end.

“It is going to be something for posterity. We are going to do it as it was done in the old days and film it. Otherwise, we are losing it; we are forgetting things. It needs to be done for future generation,” Abongpa told him.

“That is a good idea. I don’t know much. Whatever I know I learnt it by following my late guru, by watching and doing what he told me to do, and by reading. The mantras, I learnt them by heart from the books. I mean I can recite them but I don’t know much about their inner meanings and such. That you might know better than me.”

“Well, you are being too kind. I know nothing. Please show us how it is done. It is important to document it you know.”

The priest agreed and enumerated the list of articles we would need for the ceremony. I wrote down the list. We thanked him and told him we would get back to him about the location and the date.

Abongpa wanted the location of the ceremony to be just right. “It certainly cannot be filmed in one of these modern houses,” he said. We went scouting for a traditional house – with the thatched roof, mud walls, courtyard and the sangoi. Only a few of such houses are left in Kakching. There is one particular house where they shot a documentary on traditional genres of singing. It was way back in 2009, we were helping a team of filmmakers from Imphal who were doing a documentary film of traditional songs. That house was still intact. They were family friends. But we could not bring ourselves to approach them because of the meanings attached to chupsaba. Everyone in their neighborhood were going to witness it and they would talk. So we decided to find some house far away from the town. Some of the farm houses are built in the traditional style. In the meantime I talked to my parents about our plan. I gave the list of articles needed for the ceremony to my mother. My father was less enthusiastic. Something seemed to be

bothering him, but he would not spell it out. He kept saying, “well it is a good thing right?” I was not sure if he was asking or reaffirming. “I mean chupsaba is so that the bad thing does not recur in the family. So it is a good thing,” he would often comment. I myself was not quite sure about the whole set up. After the initial excitement I was beginning to have doubts about our plan. Besides, the priest had asked in whose name it was to be. The priest needed to address the malignant spirit by name, so that it shall not return to the family. Sensing my uneasiness, Abongpa told me one day, “They play dead in the films all the time. Nothing bad happens there. We can use some random name.” I talked to mother about the dilemma I was having. For some reason, unlike my father, mother was very open about the whole idea. She was very eager to help. She had already bought some of the articles (a dozen earthen pots of different sizes) listed. I wonder what she actually thought about the idea of staging and filming chupsaba. There was no objection from my father but I would sense an apprehension in him but not in my mother. She brought up the story of my grandfather. My father’s father was a mysterious figure. I learnt about him bit by bit, in different episodes of my childhood. I still don’t have a clear picture of who he was. I knew he had died young, when my father was only few months old or something. Before that he had disappeared for more than 5 years or so. One day I found his driver’s license inside the old cupboard. My grandaunt told me stories about the day he came back, the handsome figure in black suits. But they never told me how he died. My mother learnt from somewhere that he committed suicide. She was not sure if my father was aware of that. May be, just may be we could use his name for the chupsaba. I hadn’t told Abongpa about my grandfather. We went to have a look at our farmhouse. My father has a piece of land far out in the outskirts of the town. It is on a historic site. The ‘farmhouse’ was not in its best shape but with little readjustments it would work.

“This looks fine. This should work. We just need to clear the grounds around it,” he said. We started clearing the weeds and shrubs around the shack. May be because it

was so overgrown with tall grasses, or may be because he was in the middle of finishing his book on tigers Abongpa started telling tiger stories as we cleared the area.

My mother called me on the phone, “Where are you guys?”

“Here in the land out here. We were clearing the grounds.”

“About that thing we talked about the other day. Don’t mention it yet to him. I have been thinking... I am feeling uneasy about it. Maybe we shouldn’t use his name.”

“That’s how I was feeling about it too. Fine then. We won’t.”

In the end we did not do the *chupsaba*, instead we went to the priest and he described the details step by step.

The Layout

Chupsaba is performed at the natal place. For example, in the case of Krishnadas (Chapter 1) even though he had been residing in Imphal, in the house of his in-laws, for many years the *chupsaba* was performed in the house (at Kakching) where he was born. The natal home is also marked ritually with the burial of the umbilical cord within the compounds of the house. In order to get a clear picture of how *chupsaba* is performed it is important to have some idea about the traditional layout of Meitei houses and residential plots. Even though my description is based on the layouts as seen in Kakching most of the key features of the layout can be identified in almost all residential settlements Manipur valley, including the households of Manipuri muslims. In highly urbanized areas of Imphal and other big towns these features may not be visible any more. However, the terms associated with the key features of the layout viz., *sumang*, *sangoi*, *konthong* etc., would still make sense even to those who live in the highly urbanized areas.

Usually, each residential plot is rectangular in shape, the length along the East-West direction being usually longer than its breath. The gate or *konthong* is on the eastern edge of the plot, the gate opens onto the street. Once inside the gate the first key feature one comes across is *sangoi*, a roofed structure enclosing the courtyard or *sumang*. The *sangoi* is built on the eastern edge of the courtyard, parallel to the street. Except for the side

facing the courtyard or *sumang* all the remaining sides of the *sangoi* are usually walled (see figure 2). The *sangoi* is a very useful place. Because it is roofed and open it becomes an ideal place for drying cloths, grains, crops, chili, fishes, fermented soya beans etc., during rain. People often convert one corner of the *sangoi* into a granary. For any kind of big gathering of people in the house, as in the case of ceremonies associated with birth, marriage, death etc., the *sangoi* provides a spacious seating area.



Figure 2. A typical courtyard or *sumang* with the *sangoi* in the front. Notice the basil plant or *tulsi* in the middle of the courtyard. Photograph by Kshetrimayum Jiteswar Singh.

Next comes *sumang*, the courtyard (see figure 2). At the centre of the *sumang* is the *tulsi*⁸⁴ plant. In some households the *tulsi* plant is located towards the eastern edge of the courtyard, away from the centre. The front door of the main house opens into the *sumang*, facing to the East. The house is usually in the “J” shape – the longer end pointing towards the East and the shorter end towards the North. The sleeping area is located in the longer end, where beds are usually placed in the East – West direction. People sleep with head oriented towards the east and feet towards the west. Sleeping with the feet pointing towards the south or south west is generally avoided because of the belief that our ancestral spirits reside in the South West corner of the house. The shrines of *Sanamahi* and *Leimaren* (the household deities) are kept in the South West corner of the house⁸⁵. The short end of the “J” shape is where the kitchen is located.

To the West of the house a significant portion of the plot is left as a kitchen garden. At the end of the kitchen garden there is usually a small pond. Ten to twenty paces further down from the western edge of the pond the traditional outhouse can be located. From where the outhouse is located to the rest of the plot are usually covered with bamboo grove. The western end of the homestead is marked by the ditch, part of the public drainage system.

The illustration (in figure 3) depicts the front portion of the house including the courtyard. This is where the ritual of *chupsaba* is performed. The southern half of the *sumang* is called *khangenpham* and the northern half is called *naktha*. During the funeral rites the corpse of the deceased is placed in the *khangenpham*⁸⁶. The entire ritual of *chupsaba* takes place in the *naktha*. In the *naktha* there are ten sites relevant to *chupsaba* and they have been marked with the Hindu-Arabic numerals in the diagram (Figure 3).

⁸⁴ A type of basil plant considered sacred by the Hindus.

⁸⁵ In my house, *Ganga jal*, water from the Ganges collected at Rishikesh, stored in a jug is placed in this area.

⁸⁶ The funeral wake used to be observed in this area.

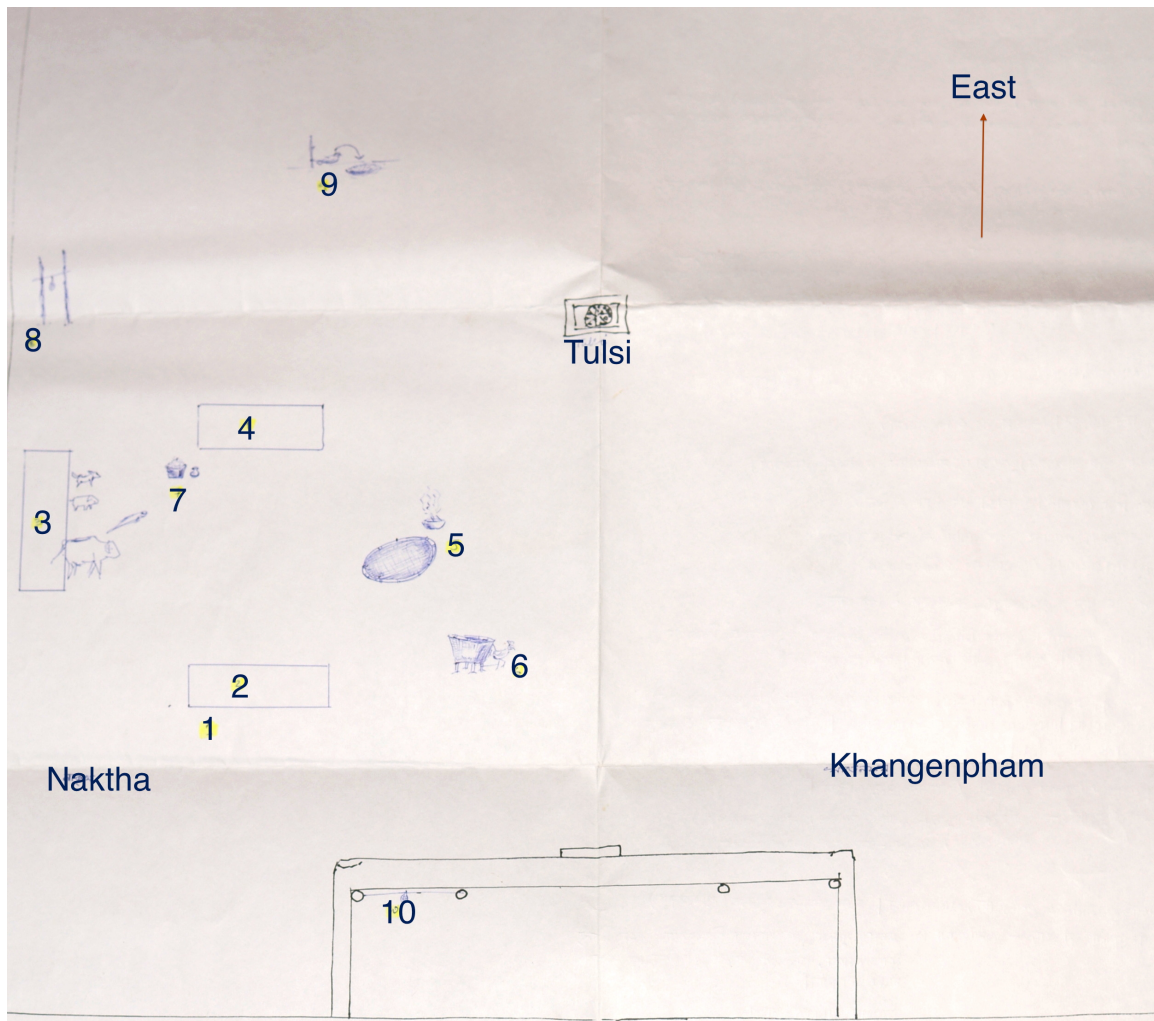


Figure 3. Diagram depicting the important sites in the courtyard for the *chupsaba* ritual.

The following describes the important sites depicted in figure 3:

1. This is where the *piba*⁸⁷ seats. He seats on a *laphut* (a type of mesh) of three *payaa* (thin strips of bamboo).
2. A *phaklong* (mat) made of *yentou* is laid here which is covered with a piece of white cloth⁸⁸. The following ritual items are placed on top of this white cloth – one *laphut*

⁸⁷ *Piba* is the ritual head of the patrilineal clan. The position of the *piba* is usually inherited from the father to the eldest son.

⁸⁸ The dimension of the cloth is described as *marak taiba*, a traditional way of measuring length.

made of seven *payaa*; rice grains are placed in portions of 7, 9 and 3; three *chengphu*⁸⁹; three fruits that have fragrance; three *langthrei*⁹⁰; three bananas.

3. This is the seat for the seven *thayanglon*⁹¹. The following ritual items are placed here – one *laphut* made of seven *payaa*; equal portions of rice on seven spots; seven small earthen pots; *yensang-napi*, *thum-morok*, *ngakha-khajing*, *sinju* (green salad) made of tender leaves of *heimang* (each divided into seven equal portions for each of the seven *thayanglon*); seven *laphoi laphang*⁹²; seven whole areca nuts (also called betel nut); one clay cow/bull, one clay pig, one clay dog.
4. This is the seat for the five *maibaron* (deities). The following ritual items are placed here – one *laphut* made of five *payaa*; five equal portions of rice in five spots; five areca nuts; three *langthrei*.
5. Maintain fire in a *kambi*. Pieces of firewood ritually associated with the *sagei* or clan must be included in the fire. A *yangkok*⁹³ is placed near it.
6. On top of four poles driven into the ground a special basket called *pheiroi mangdaaruk* is placed. A rooster, big enough to start crowing, is tied to one of these poles⁹⁴. *Pheiroi mangdaaruk* consists of a basket (made of bamboo and cane) containing rice grains inside, where two sets of an egg and a piece of *shen* (a type of bell metal) have been placed at two opposite corners, and a black piece of cloth covering the basket.
7. Here, one *chengphu* and one *foudang* (certain amount of unhusked rice) are placed.
8. Here, *yenbon-thumbon*⁹⁵ is hung from a stick of soft reed (*shingnang* in Manipuri).

⁸⁹ Traditionally *chengphu* is the earthen pot where rice is store.

⁹⁰ The tender tips of the plant, *Eupatorium cannabinum*.

⁹¹ The seven *thayanglon* are the seven lai responsible for causing bad things in life.

⁹² Tiers or hands of banana. A tier with odd number of bananas is referred to as *chang thokpa*, whereas the tier with even number of bananas is referred to as *shi thokpa*. This is derived from a system of counting where the number of items in a given set is defined in terms of *chang* (literal meaning is “alive”) or *shi* (literal meaning is “dead”). In this counting system the items are counted alternatively as *chang* or *shi* – the first one is always *chang* and the next is *shi*, and then *chang* so on.

⁹³ A circular winnow made of bamboo and cane.

⁹⁴ It is mentioned in the *Numit Kappa* that the sun, which had been in hiding, finally emerged with the crowing of a rooster.

⁹⁵ A ritual object, designed like a ovular shaped bird nest, made out of an intricate mesh of bamboo stripes.

9. At this spot a small pit is dug out. Inside this pit a live pigeon is kept.
10. Another *yenbon-thumbon* is hung from a soft reed between the two pillars on the *naktha* of the house.

The entire ritual of chupsaba may be divided into twenty-one steps or phases. The sequence of the steps is as follows:

1. *Igouba* also called *hiri chingba* – conjuring the spirit of the departed⁹⁶. This is done by the *maiba*.
2. Cleaning by fire (at spot “5” in figure 3) upon return from *igouba*.
3. Offerings by the priest at spots “2”, “3” and “4” (see Figure 3).
4. Sacrifice of *ngamu*⁹⁷ – the *piba* decapitates a live *ngamu* in front of spot “3” and smear the blood from the *ngamu* on to the clay models of cow, pig and dog at spot 3. The sacrificial offering is for the seven *thayanglon*.
5. *Anum-aha kokpa* – a cleansing rite. The *maiba* recites the following *laison*⁹⁸ – *Iru Laison, Yumsung Laison, Pongthouron, Khunthoklon and Maibaron*.
6. The *piba* gets up from his seat (spot “1” in figure 3) and walks over to the pit at spot 9. Cleanse his mouth with water and spit the water on the pigeon being kept in the pit⁹⁹. He repeats the cleansing of his mouth in this manner for three times after which he goes to spot “5” and places one *lanthrei* and one *shen* on top of the *yangkok*. Then he returns to his designated seat at spot “1.”
7. The *maiba* recites *iru laison, apoklon and maibaron*.
8. The *piba* repeats the cleansing process described at step 6.
9. The *maiba* recites *iru laison, tutenglon, maibaron*.

⁹⁶ The spirits are believed to reside in water bodies. Therefore this conjuring is done in ponds, rivers or other water bodies in the vicinity. An earthen pitcher called *nahai chafu* is used to call the spirit. In the case of a deceased man the conjuring is done nine times, for a woman it is done seven times. By the end of the *igouba* the spirit resides in the earthen pitcher.

⁹⁷ A type of small fresh water fish commonly found in Manipur.

⁹⁸ Incantation, usually in the form of reciting mythical stories or sacred texts.

⁹⁹ According to Maiba Achou it was customary for the *nigol mawa* (affinal male member of the family) to give the water for cleansing to the *piba* but this custom is no more enforced.

10. The *piba* repeats the same cleansing process as described in step 6.
11. The *maiba* recites *iru liaison, pongning, maibaron*.
12. The *piba* repeats the same cleansing process described in step 6.
13. The *maiba* recites *iru liaison, numit kappa, maibaron*.
14. The *piba* repeats the same cleansing process described in step 6. This time, the *piba* is followed by the rest of the family members.
15. *Yum sengba* – cleansing the house. *Ningol mawa* (an affinal male relative) gets up on the rooftop of the house. Standing on the front portion of the roof the ningol mawa pours water down which is collected by the *maiba* on the ground. The *maiba* recites *iru liaison* while collecting the water in a pot.
16. The *maiba* recites *yumseng liaison* and cleanses the house. *Sengdok haidokpa* – cleansing by sprinkling holy water around and about the house. The holy water is sprinkled by means of a bundle of leaves and branches of different trees and herbs. The trees and herbs used for this purpose are *tairen-punfai, napi-singbi, napu-nasen, nakhai-natang, uukhok-wakhok* ...
17. The *maiba* recites *khoiju lamok* and *ahonglon*. At this point the *mungnaba* or *yenhennaba*¹⁰⁰ is adopted. The *maiba* will ask, “The previous *mungnaba, meipokpi tingkhang*¹⁰¹, is old and jaded. From this day, you, *kabo tingkhang*, will replace it. Is it acceptable to everyone?” And, everyone replies, “Yes, yes!”
18. The *maiba* recites *chupsaron*.
19. The *piba* will cut the reeds that are being used to hand the *yembon-thumbon*.
20. The *maiba* takes the following ritual items – a brunt pea, a shard of earthenware, *nungthi*, an egg – and buries them on the other side of the street. As he buries them he says, “Burnt pea, shard, *nungthi* and egg, until the day you germinate let no such misfortune ever befall again upon this *sagei*.”

¹⁰⁰ Consumption of this *yenhennaba* is any member of the family, intentionally or unintentionally, is supposed to make the person sick.

¹⁰¹ *Opuntia stricta*.

21. The *piba* hands over the *yembon-thumbon* to the *maiba*. The *maiba* and the *piba* stand next to each other (back to back) facing opposite directions as the *piba* gives the *yembon-thumbon* to the *maiba*. As he gives the *piba* says, “**Nacha khutte**k.” And the *maiba* replies, “**Namou kati**” as he accepts.

The literal meaning of “*nacha khutte*k” is “to break your son’s hands” or “your son with broken hands.” “*Namou katti*” would transliterate into “your daughter-in-law scissors.” Neither the ritual expert nor Abongpa had any idea about the meaning of the saying “**nacha khutte**k **namou kati**.” When I asked the grandmother next door she remembered this little game they used to play as kids. The game usually occurs in a specific situation. Say there is a group of children playing and one of them is nibbling on a sweet or a snack without intending to share with the rest of the children. If one of them insisted and she wanted to share with that one particular playmate then they would turn their backs against each other sharing the sweets with their hands on the back. The one giving the sweets would whisper “*Nacha khutte*k” and the other receiving the sweets would say “*namou katti*.” A little game on what Bourdieu (1977) would call “misrecognition.”

Misfortune and A Theory of Causality

Scholars of ritual studies would probably classify the ritual of *chupsaba* as one of the “rites of affliction” – *rites of affliction seek to mitigate the influence of spirits thought to be afflicting human beings with misfortunes* (Bell 1997: 115). Sacrifices are made (see, step 4 above) to appease the malevolent spirits (the seven *thayanglon* at spot “3” in Figure 3) responsible for the misfortune. If sacrifice is read as a form of gift offering then the malevolent spirits are obliged to offer something in return. What they might be giving back in return is a “promise” that they will not trouble the *sagei* or the clan anymore. It is something to note here that what the ritual of *chupsaba* seeks to get rid of is the affliction of the *sagei* not the larger community or human beings in a universal sense; it is very explicit in the ritual of its specificity to the exogamous clan. Another interesting feature

of the ritual is the fact that the misfortune is “rid of” by appeasing (or, by obliging them into a contract/promise) the malevolent spirits, those believed to be responsible for the misfortune, and not by attempting to be rid of the malevolent spirits as the root cause of the misfortune. So that if and when another misfortune recurs within the *sagei*, the ritual of *chupsaba* is simply performed again and the totemic plant, or *yenhennaba*, is replaced by saying, “The previous *mungnaba*¹⁰², *meipokpi tingkhang*, is old and jaded. From this day, you, *kabo tingkhang*, will replace it. Is it acceptable to everyone?” And, everyone replies, “Yes, yes!” (Step 17 of the ritual procedure)

The shrine of the *sagei apokpa* embodies the idea that the forces of fortune and misfortune are inseparable. For example, the most fundamental feature of the shrine for the *sagei apokpa*, the progenitorial deity, is that a shrine of the *soiren* must be placed next to it. It is not very clear if *soiren* is treated as a deity or not. Normally the term *lai* is associated with the deities e.g., *Umang lai* for sylvan deity or *apokpa lai* for the progenitorial deity, but not with *soiren*. The term *soiren* shares etymological proximities with *soiba/asoiba* (mistake or defect) and *soinaiba* (disabled body). The term “soiren” itself is also used as a curse word. There are specific occasions on which offerings are made to the *soiren*¹⁰³. For example, any occurrence of deformed fruits or vegetables in the kitchen garden could be read (by the Maiba or Maibi, the ritual experts) as a sign, to propitiate the *soiren*¹⁰⁴. Thus, forms of aberration in nature or social life seem to be attributed to the *soiren*. The *sagei apokpa*, the progenitor of the clan, the guarantor of safety, security, order and prosperity, resides side by side with *soiren*, the one responsible for insecurity, disorder and aberrations.

¹⁰² Same as *yenhennaba*.

¹⁰³ Offerings to the *soiren* have to have defects of some sort – if it is a mango then it has to be a bad mango, half rotten or spoiled.

¹⁰⁴ According to Abongpa this used to be one of the most common scenarios in which the propitiation of the *soiren* occurred. Nowadays, such propitiation rites are not as common as used to be.

In a similar parallelism Durkheim arrives at a conclusion that social evils, exemplified by criminality, suicide etc., are the necessary conditions for social organization, in his seminal work, *Suicide* (originally published in French in 1897):

Now there is no society known where a more or less developed criminality is not found under different forms. No people exists whose morality is not daily infringed upon. We must therefore call crime necessary and declare that it cannot be non-existent, that the fundamental conditions of social organization, as they are understood, logically imply it. (Durkheim, 2002:329)

If social evils are necessary conditions of society itself then why do anything about them? Why protest? Why bother performing rites of propitiations? On the one hand, Durkheim recognizes that,

If suicide springs from the same causes on which culture depends, we cannot diminish one without reducing the other; for the only means of combatting it effectively is to attack its causes. (Ibid., 335, footnote 7)

However, at the same time he was disturbed by the alarming rate of suicide in Europe in his time. He was not convinced that “progress,” exemplified by Europe (from antiquity till the 18th century), would be “the necessary cause of so much bloodshed” (Ibid., 335). In the end Durkheim “saves” the “progress” of Europe by pathologizing suicide:

It is then very possible and even probable that the rising tide of suicide originates in a pathological state just now accompanying the march of civilization without being its necessary condition.

The rapidity of the growth of suicides really permits no other hypothesis. Actually, in less than fifty years, they have tripled, quadrupled, and even quintupled, depending on the country. On the other hand, we know their connection with the most ineradicable element in the constitution of societies, since they express the mood of societies, and since the mood of peoples, like that of individuals, reflects the state of the most fundamental part of the organism. (Ibid., 336)

One of the implications of his conclusion is that there is an “optimal” or “healthy” level of suicide for each population, and the idea is to keep the suicide rate at that “optimal” level by intervening at various levels of the population – an exemplary project characterizing what Foucault calls, a new “governmentality.” However, it is not very clear how exactly are we going to determine this “optimal level”? Durkheim’s own conclusion is based on gut feeling, he writes, “without even knowing exactly of what they consist, we may begin by affirming that they result not from a regular evolution but from a morbid disturbance...”

Durkheim saw society as an organism, perhaps that was the reason why a “pathological” state had to be inserted, albeit reluctantly, to make the model work. Unfortunately, any “return to the state of the whole,” as Klima (2002: 287) says, “whether social or individual organism – the whole before the lesion, can never happen because such integral states themselves never were there to begin with.” The world may be ‘formless and screaming’, as Klima (2002:288) puts it poetically, but the call for the return, not necessarily to a “state of whole”, but to a more habitable or livable “quasi-equilibrium” state, never ceases to return from time to time. When young Rabina was killed in the crossfire (“The Expose” in chapter 1) the public ire was not directed so much against the use of violent means (either by the state or the rebels) but against the fact that they picked such a crowded place for their shoot-out.

So then, when do we know that a limit has been crossed? Sometimes it is a matter of reading signs by expert eyes, like the ritual specialists or the sociologists, and sometimes it is just a matter of gut feeling. We just know it – it is in the ‘mood of the peoples.’ In the preceding chapter we could sense something that could only be described, perhaps, as a “mood of the people” in almost all the public outcries and protests associated with the “improper” deaths. The protests do not just demand justice for the victims, but make calls for some kind of a return to “normal” state (even though that “normal” is not always well defined).



Figure 4. A typical scene of sit-in-protest in Manipur. Photograph by Jogendro Kshetrimayum.

It may not be a matter of mere coincidence, or pure strategy, that these protests often take the form of ritual mourning. Sit-in protests in Manipur, especially the ones associated with violent death, constitute a genre of cultural practice. The protesters always come dressed in white, the color of mourning. The ceremonial light, *aarti*, is always present. Incense sticks are burnt as offering. Sometimes flowers are placed as offerings. Solemn silence is usually maintained throughout the protest. The “ritualization” indicates that the protest is occurring in the presence of a divine witness.

As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane,' and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors. (Bell 1992:74)

We shall see in the next chapter how the protest can suddenly turn against the divine witness, and that, propitiation is not the only means of removing an affliction.

Chapter Three: Naked Fury: Scolding of the gods

Propitiation is not the only means of influencing the gods. Every once in a while, in times of desperation, when nothing else seems to work, people's ire is turned against the gods. In this chapter I examine the naked protest by twelve elderly women in front of the Kangla Fort¹⁰⁵ in 2004. There have been many public protests against the brutality of the Indian Armed Forces, and particularly for the repeal of the draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA), which guarantees legal impunity to the personnel of the Armed Forces. However, the dramatic protest in front of the Kangla Fort was unprecedented in the history of public protests in Manipur. Because of the novelty and intensity of the protest it provoked strong emotion, expectations and aspirations in Manipur. It is not easy to describe why it took the particular form that it did. While the protesters refer to an esoteric "rain ritual," or rather to the myth of the ritual, as their inspiration, some scholars, journalists and artists celebrated it as the prophetic fulfillment of Heisnam Kanheilal's 2000 theatrical production, *Draupadi*. The chapter attends to this discursive dissonance while exploring the question of "performing protest."

¹⁰⁵ The Kangla Fort is the historical site of Manipuri sovereignty. At the end of the 1891 Anglo-Manipur war, it was under the occupying forces of the British Empire until 1947 when India got its independence. From 1947 till 2004, when the protest happened, it was being occupied by the Assam Rifles of the Indian Army. The protest subsequently led to the removal of Assam Rifles from the complex and the historical site was handed over to the people of Manipur. However, the protest did not lead to the repeal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 aka AFSPA.

The Kangla protest

“Women give vent to naked fury in front of 17 AR at Kangla”¹⁰⁶

Imphal, July 15: Scripting a sort of a history not only in the State but perhaps in the entire country, a number of women folk, bared all in front of the Western Gate of Kangla this morning, where the 9 Sector Assam Rifles and 17 AR are housed, to lodge their protest against the killing of Thangjam Manorama.

The novel protest, the first of its kind in Manipur, came after the 48 hours general strike called by various voluntary organizations expired today at 12 am.



Figure 5. A scene from the Kangla protest on July 15, 2004. Photograph by e-pao.net.

When this happened I was in Delhi. That was my first year of the two years Masters program in Anthropology at the University of Delhi. At that time I shared the shock and disbelief with fellow Manipuris in Delhi. Note the phrases, “scripting a sort of history” and “the novel protest” in the excerpt. When I saw the pictures of the protest for the first time, that was what struck me most, the novelty of the protest. It was unprecedented, at least for Manipur in recent memory. It was so new and seemed so

¹⁰⁶ News excerpt from *The Sangai Express*, July 15, 2004.

radical that there was no immediate cultural referent available, except to repeatedly mutter that it was something new.

Mythology of a Protest

I came to know about the alleged link between the Kangla protest of 2004 and the Heisnam Kanheilal's play, *Draupadi* (which was performed in 2000 for the first time) in an academic article by Misri (2011). In the article titled, " "Are you a man?": Performing Naked Protest in India," Misri insists that, "this performance and the public reviews it prompted in Manipur are beyond doubt a flash point in the cultural imaginary that precipitated the Meitei women's protest in 2004" (Ibid., 611).

My immediate reaction to this claim was that of suspicion and doubt. As a Manipuri I cannot help wondering about the "public" Misri is referring to here, and the nature of the relationship *that* "public" has with the women who participated in the Kangla Protest. It is important to recognize that in India, which is also the case in Manipur, theatre occurs at two different registers – theatre as *folk/rural* or, as *modern/urban*.

The city theatre today is not a natural development of the traditional or folk theatre in the urban setting as it should have been. It is rather a new theatre having its base on Western theatre ..., whereas the traditional village theatre has retained most of its indigenous characteristics. (Sircar 1978:1-2)

Although theatrical elements flow between the two traditions (Hansen 1983) their respective audiences constitute, more or less, mutually exclusive *publics* (Warner 2002). Warner (2002) points out that the two conventional notions in which the term "public" is generally used – public as *the* public and, public in the sense of a concrete audience – are both inextricably linked with "a third sense of *public*: the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation" (Ibid., 50).

A good example of folk theatre in Manipur would be *shumang lila*,¹⁰⁷ which has such a large following that it's audience is often identified with *the* public – the masses. On the other hand the public of modern theatre in Manipur is limited to an exclusive group of enthusiasts, artists, art critics, and writers. Perhaps another major difference is that art critics are expected to comment, or give reviews about each production of modern theatre. The circulation of these commentaries and reviews through local journals and newspapers constitutes *a public*, which is significantly different from the 'public at large' identified with the audience of *shumang lila*. Misri (2011) cites two main sources in analyzing the play's apparent connection with the Kangla Protest— a documentary film by Amar Kanwar, *Lightning Testimonies* (2007) and a newspaper report of the Kangla Protest. Interestingly, in any of the sources cited or in Misri (2011) we do not hear the voices of the women, who participated in the protest, claiming any connection between Heisnam Kanheilal's play *Draupadi* and their protest. Rather, the claim was made 'on their behalf' by journalists, art critics and admirers of Heisnam Kanheilal. In the absence of any concrete claims made by the participants of the Kangla Protest themselves, the connection drawn between the performance of *Draupadi* (2000) and the Kangla Protest (2004) seems too hurried and too farfetched.

In 2013 I had the opportunity to interview one of the twelve women who participated in the 2004 Kangla protest and she denied any connection with any play. According to her they heard about the play much later. Instead she referred to an esoteric "rain ritual" as the source of inspiration for the protest.

Draupadi, the Play

Heisnam Kanheilal's *Draupadi* (2000) was a stage adaptation of the Bengali short

¹⁰⁷ A special note must be made here of *shumang lila* as one of the most popular and secular forms of folk theatre. It is a touring theatre performed by an exclusively male or exclusively female troupe of artistes. Unlike the proscenium theatre it is usually performed on a makeshift stage, often quickly assembled in the middle of an open ground. The audience sits on the ground, around the stage.

story “Draupadi” by Mahasweta Devi¹⁰⁸. The story is set against the backdrop of the Naxalite movement, a major peasant rebellion that began in the late 1960s in the Naxalbari region of West Bengal. The crucial scene of the play revolves around the main protagonist of the play, Draupadi or Dopdi. Dopdi, as one of the rebel leaders, is a prime target for the Special Forces of the Indian Army who is out to crush the rebellion. Dopdi is eventually apprehended and raped by the soldiers of the Special Forces in the course of interrogation. In the final scene, in an act of defiance, Dopdi refuses to be cowed down by her ‘humiliation’, refuses to clothe her ‘violated’ body and confronts Senanayak, the officer in charge.

Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, “There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counterme-- come on, counterme-?”

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (Spivak 1981: 402)

¹⁰⁸ The short story has been translated into English by Spivak Chakravarty (1981). The short story, “Draupadi” is a rewriting of the disrobing of Draupadi episode in the Indian epic, *The Mahabharata*. The disrobing of Draupadi in the royal court of the blind king, Dhristarashtra, is one of those popular episodes of the Mahabharata that almost everyone in South Asia has heard of. Most Manipuris are familiar with the story of Draupadi. The royal cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, were playing a game of dice. The Pandava brothers lost all their properties in the game, including their own persons. They had nothing left to stake. With the help of the evil maternal uncle of the Kauravas, the Pandavas were forced to use Draupadi, the polyandrous wife of the five Pandava brothers, as their final stake. They lost her too. Duryodhana, the eldest brother of the Kauravas then told his second brother, Dushasana, to bring Draupadi to the court and disrobe her. Dushasana dragged Draupadi by her hairs to the court and began to disrobe her in front of everyone. No one intervened. Draupadi prayed to Lord Krishna for help. Lord Krishna saved Draupadi's honor by making her sari miraculously endless, so that no matter how much Dushasana pulled on her sari Draupadi could not be disrobed.

In the stage production of the play, *Draupadi* (2000) the final scene, of a nude Dopdi confronting the officer, was enacted by the veteran stage actress Heisnam Sabitri. Incidentally, Heisnam Sabitri is also the wife of Heisnam Kanheilal, the director of the play. According to a local theatre artist and activist, who wishes to remain anonymous, director Kanheilal had a difficult time convincing his wife to do the act on stage. In its premiere show at the Jawaharlal Nehru (JN) Dance Academy, Imphal, where my anonymous source was also present, the final act involving a nude Sabitri provoked sharp criticism and protest from the audience. It is said that director Heisnam Kanheilal was forced to apologize to the audience. Regardless of what might have happened in the premiere of the play it is next to impossible to imagine such nude acts in *shumang lila*. I wonder how much of the controversy provoked by the play in 2000 had any impact on any ‘cultural imaginary’ conceivable in Manipur, much less inspire anybody to emulate it in a social protest. On the contrary, it seems to me that the play as well as its director Heisam Kanheilal enjoyed renewed interest in the public only after the Kangla Protest. That is, only after the connection, between the play and the protest, was suggested retrospectively by journalists, friends and admirers of Heisnam Kanheilal.

There is a certain parallelism in the way Dopdi and the Meitei women, through their naked protests, refute and, perhaps resignify the gendered script of shame in the context of rape and state violence. However, as Misri (2011) points out, there is a crucial difference in the way this refutation and resignification is articulated in the two instances:

... the question, “Are you a man?” is a taunt that derides the failure of the norm and in so doing upholds it. The ideal of masculinist protection remains. This is the logic that the Meitei women’s protest usefully sidesteps by framing itself as a challenge rather than a taunt: the women are unashamedly naked in spite of the presence of men. By resisting the draw of symbolic castration as a counter to masculinist state power, the women effectively sever the causal relation between the male gaze and the interpellative effect of female shame, which literally adds insult to the injury of rape. If there is an unmaning here, it is directed at the masculinism of state violence, not the manliness of men. (Misri 2011:621)

The argument is that in the case of Draupadi of *Mahabharata* or that of the tribal Dopdi of Mahasweta's short story there is an appeal to the patriarchal order, to the set of cultural narratives and practices, that scripted women's bodies as 'penetrable' or 'violable' in the first place (Misri 2011:622; Marcus 1992: 387). The logic of the Meitei women's naked protest, Misri argues, avoids falling into a similar trap. Perhaps, therein lies the novelty of the Kangla protest. If the logic of this protest marks such a radical departure from the script of Draupadi or Dopdi, as Misri argues it does, it only reaffirms my suspicion and the protesters' claim that it had nothing to do with Sabitri's enactment of Draupadi on stage.

Scolding the Gods

In 2013 I was working as an intern for the Manipuri Women Gun Survivor's Network (MWGSN), an Imphal based Non Governmental Organization (NGO). I worked mainly in the office in Imphal. Perhaps, the key component of the organization was the *community mobilizers*¹⁰⁹, those who were mainly responsible for coordinating surveys and implementation of projects in the target communities of MWGSN. One of the community mobilizers was Ima¹¹⁰ Nganbi, she was in charge of Bishnupur District. Incidentally, Ima Nganbi was one of the participants in the Kangla protest of 2004. In the three months or so that I was working for the NGO I saw Ima Nganbi quite often in the office, and we participated together in one workshop on human rights, organized by the MWGSN. From her stories and the stories others told me about her, it was evident that Ima Nganbi had been actively involved in various social issues for a long time. She often made references to her experiences of going to jail because of her involvement in one political agitation or the other.

¹⁰⁹ The term is used in the organization.

¹¹⁰ "Ima" is the venerable term of address for a Manipuri woman who is of one's mother's age or older. It literally means mother.

Unfortunately her visits to the office during my time were often very brief, so we never got to talk in detail about her life and her involvement in the Kangla Protest. Finally, towards the end of my internship the opportunity came up. MWGSN was organizing an event at the Deluxe Hotel, Imphal. She told me she had to leave early that day. But before she left she agreed to tell her story about the Kangla protest, on record. So we snuck out of the meeting and went to the rooftop of the hotel. I started by asking how the idea of doing the naked protest came about, if it was planned or if it was the idea of any particular person. What followed was a long impassioned speech:

The idea was already there in Manipur. I mean, we have *traditional feminism*¹¹¹ in Manipur. We are different from other *jati*¹¹². We have our own traditional strength, our own *traditional feminism*, and *inborn qualities*. Right?

Long time ago, in the schools or in the stories we heard that when the suffering of the Manipuri women hit rock bottom they would *challenge* the perpetrator with their bare bodies. Well, people who do not understand our *history* say whatever they want to say.

In our *history*, since times immemorial [Manipuri] women have always had a high [ideal] of challenging. We [Manipuri women] have this conviction, especially for the cause of truth, to defeat anyone who dare *challenges* us [Manipuri women]... So, in the olden days, in the times of the kings, I have written down the name of the king somewhere... there was a severe drought, people were dying and people were left without any recourse. At that point women in each locality would come out and, standing naked on the edge of their local *pukhris*¹¹³, scolded *Shoraren*, the sky god, pounding the *shuk*¹¹⁴, and then the *shuk* would be thrown into the

¹¹¹ I have noticed her using this term “traditional feminism” in earlier occasions. I am not sure what she means when she is using the term, so I have left them italicized. In this excerpt I have italicized the other English words that she used. Although they need further analytical elaboration, they are indicative of her interaction with certain ‘Western’ secular-liberal narratives.

¹¹² In South Asia, *jati* could mean different things depending on the context. It could mean caste, ethnic group, race or species etc. [reference]. Here, an appropriate reading of her usage will be that of the Manipuri as an ethnic group, almost akin to a distinct race, but not as a caste.

¹¹³ Ponds. *Pokhri* in West Bengal and Assam. Most of the town and villages in the Manipur valley have many ponds, and they serve as an essential water reservoir for drinking, bathing and other domestic consumptions. They are also important sites of certain liturgical rites. In the Manipuri *cosmovisión* water bodies are powerful medium of communication with the spirit world.

¹¹⁴ Pestle. *Shuk shuba*, pounding. Mortar and pestle as sexual symbols, the word *naba*, to conquer or to fuck.

pukhri afterwards. This thing happened, since the days of the gods. It is in the *history*...This is not a story but an event [that actually occurred].

...

I don't know, people say that Manorama was a *naharol*¹¹⁵ once. But, it is said that she was in bailout. Well then, she is a bailout, and a woman... then why would they arrest her? From her house in the middle of the night, and without involving any female security personnel. They arrested her and took her away. Fine! They could have at least kept her with respect. We would have respected the soldiers, we would think of them as our own children. On the contrary, they dragged her out of her house, tortured her, played with her in whatever way they wanted, raped her, murdered her by shooting at her most important part, and then stuffed cloth into it. [Hitting her fist on her chest] I preferred to die rather than continued living like that in Manipur. We wanted to challenge the security to do whatever they wanted. They might have arrested us and killed us too. We did not care anymore, we were decided. That's when we disrobed ourselves.

They say there is a *rumor* now. Apparently some actress named Sabitri acted in a film called *Draupadi*, I did not see it nor knew anything about it. The rumor is that we were emulating Sabitri's nude act [in the film] in [the year] 2000. If that assertion is ever made in front of me, I will slap her cheeks ten times, a hundred times. It was she who emulated our own traditional feminism, traditional strength, in playing the role of Draupadi [in the film]. Besides, Draupadi, in the story, did not get naked, thanks to Krishna. She played that role by borrowing from our *history* and then she accuses us Manipuri women of imitating her. They should not spread such *rumors*.

It is interesting to note that she brought up the question of the rumor herself and she used the English word "rumor."¹¹⁶ Here, I had a brief moment to intervene and explain how I came across an article where it was mentioned. I told her that I had my doubts but I wanted to make sure if the participants of the Kangla protest had heard about the play before.

No, we never saw it. Only now, when this rumor appeared that people started

¹¹⁵ The Manipuri term *naharol* is used locally to refer to the active members of any of the proscribed guerilla groups. Currently, there are more than a dozen guerilla groups operating in Manipur. In her interview, the term "bailout" is being used to those who have officially surrendered and are under probation.

¹¹⁶ I was surprised by her using the English 'rumor' because it is not common in Manipur to use it in such contexts. There are two Manipuri words that are commonly used to refer to what she was talking about – *tong-nga*, or *chinthok*.

saying, “Oh really? They had performed such a *drama*?” We did not see it. We did not know it. But we knew that there was a history [of the rain ritual]. Even though it was suggested [by some] that it was time for that *history*, we all spontaneously jumped into it at once. There was no imitation of theirs [Sabitri and the play, *Draupadi*]... It is a public place where lots of people gather¹¹⁷. We will not be able to do it again even if someone offers us crores and crores of rupees. It was not easily done. It was not like in the drama, where they do [such things] to hike up the price of an actress and such. Only when it was resolutely decided in our hearts [that it happened]... you can’t do such things. If you do, then you have to do it in the public. It was a war cry, a challenge... it was taken up as a last recourse. We had done many agitations, many *dharnas*¹¹⁸, tear gases, rallies, we have done whatever we could and no one had listened. But there is a God who would listen. We had challenged even the gods. What is Assam Rifles, nothing... we felt like we should remove Indian Army from Kangla, AFSPA from Manipur. Manorama was the last straw. There had been Rose, we knew she was raped, but she committed suicide out of shame. We felt really bad about her. We had been thinking about how to *solve* [the issue]. Then there was the case of Ahanjaobi, and then Sanjana from Jiri...there had been a lot [of cases]. All of these cases had been burning inside us like a smothered fire. We had been discussing about how and when to end those.

When we saw Manorama in the photo, the way her body was laying on the ground, we could not take it. I wanted to die. I could not think of her as someone else’s child. I began to love her as my own child. If such a thing could be done to a Meitei woman, to a Manipuri woman, what was the point of living, that’s what we began to question [ourselves]. That’s why we were able to do that thing [the protest], not because we were thinking of copying the drama to gain international fame. Back in those days we were not even aware that it was being released in the Internet. Even though I have gone to school, I do not hang out with the ones who have a job. I have been working with the Meira Paibi, among the illiterates and semi-literates, and I am pretty much in that style. We never had this in our minds that if we did it, and if it was released in the Internet, it would reach the world and such.

Animism and the Efficacy of Magic

There is a slightly different version of the ritual, referred to by Ima Nganbi, in my

¹¹⁷ Implying it will be shameful or embarrassing to disrobe, especially in the presence of lots of people.

¹¹⁸ A form of agitation, like a sit-in protest.

town. In this version, during the times of extreme drought, a group of people from the town would go to the top of *Nongchubi*¹¹⁹, a hill located at the Southwest corner of the town. At the top of *Nongchubi* they strip naked and curse the gods, with obscene words and gestures. This is supposed to provoke rain. To my knowledge the town has not suffered any severe drought in recent memory. And, I did not find anybody in town who claimed to have witnessed the ritual. However, Abongpa suspected that the ritual might still continue, in secret, although he could not think of anybody who might be involved in it. When I asked him about the use of obscenity in the ritual he thought that it must have something to do with enticing or arousing the sky god, implying some idea of what Frazer (*The Golden Bough*) called “imitative” magic.

The symbolism of “sexual” union between the sky and the earth is a familiar notion in the “cultural imaginary” of the Meiteis. In fact, the mythical union of *Nongpok Ningthou* (personifying Father Sky) and *Panthoibi*, (personifying Mother Earth) is the central theme of the annual spring festival, *Lai Haraoba*. The term *Lai Haraoba* is a double entendre. *Lai* could mean god/deity or, alternately, the genitalia. *Haraoba* means both celebration and being happy. *Lai Haraoba* is celebrated during the months of April-May-June, right before the arrival of the monsoon rains, at the beginning of the planting season. Depending on the sylvan deity on whose grounds the *Lai Haraoba* is being celebrated it could last from a week to a couple of weeks. Manipuri scholars of *Lai Haraoba* have identified four distinct forms of *Lai Haraoba* – *Kanglei Haraoba*, *Moirang Haraoba*, *Chakpa Haraoba* and *Kakching Haraoba*. The last act on the final night of the *Kakching Haraoba* is the performance of *Thangkhul Shaba*, the re-enactment of the amorous affair between *Panthoibi* (personification of Mother Earth) and *Nongpok Ningthou* (personification of Father Sky). The performance is full of sexual innuendo, and gestures of copulation. Another concurrent theme in this performance is that of cultivation. *Thangkhul Shaba* is, then, an example of what Frazer would call magical rite of fertility. The usual Frazerian interpretation of such rituals is that the performance of the ritual is set up to cause the spirits animating earth and sky to “imitate” the union being enacted.

¹¹⁹ The name comprises of a noun stem, *nong* (rain) and a verb stem, *chu* (to rain).

Given the strong parallelism between the “rain ritual” and the ritualistic performance of *Thangkhul Shaba* one can see how the protesters have significantly re-signified the “rain ritual,” as a desperate act of defiance and not as an act of enticement.

As Ima Nganbi says,

We had done many agitations, many *dharnas*, tear gases, rallies, we have done whatever we could and no one had listened. But there is a God who would listen. We had challenged even the gods. What is Assam Rifles? Nothing!

The Kangla protest affectively aroused the emotion of the Manipuri public in an unprecedented manner. The images of the naked protest quickly circulated in the national media and the social media, spreading “shock waves” across the nation. [Apunba Lup’s visit to PM’s office] On November 20, 2004, four months after the protest, the then Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh visited Manipur to oversee the hand over of the Kangla palace complex to the people of Manipur. In the handover ceremony the Director-General (DG) of Assam Rifles, Bhupinder Singh handed over a giant symbolic key to the then Chief Minister of Manipur, Okram Ibobi Singh. It should be remembered here that the government of Manipur had been trying in vain to remove Assam Rifles from the Kangla palace complex for decades. The naked protest was clearly one of the turning points that set the tone of the mass agitations following the murder of Thangjam Manorama that resulted in the handover of Kangla to the people of Manipur. Although AFSPA was not removed from the whole of Manipur, the state government agreed to remove it from the Imphal municipal areas.

It is not enough to dismiss the “magical” explanation (for the efficacy of rituals) by replacing it with a linguistic one (Tambiah 1968, 1985; Bell 1997). Because, at least in this one context, we see that rituals do not always exist in a state of stasis and that the “meaning” of a ritual is constantly being *detrterritorialized* and *reterritorialized* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Thus, it is much more productive to approach rituals in terms of a dynamic process of *ritualization* (Bell 1992).

Perhaps there are other ways of imagining the efficacy of magical rituals, not as “folly” (“omnipotence of thought” in Freud 2001), and not just purely symbolic. Magic is also visceral and affective – it does things to our bodies.

What is required of us, I suggest, is that we adopt a particular view of what it is to reciprocate. We have to wrench ourselves away from the idea of reciprocation as a contract between humans and spirits responsible for effecting the cure. Instead it is fluidity of the mimesis that is at stake and not some form of instrumentally conceived mutual aid. By this I mean that the performer is neither asking for a gift nor entering into a contract with the spirits so much as *gearing into their world* [sic] through the perfection of his performance of *beingness*. In later life, Nietzsche saw this as essential to the Dionysian state, in trance or ecstasy, with music and dance, the Dionysian character becomes totally plastic and protean in a rush of becoming other. This is not so much becoming any specific other so much as becoming becoming itself. (Taussig 2006:140)

Performance, Performativity and Protest

It seems obvious to Misri (2011) that the Kangla protest of 2004 was conceived as a media spectacle, implying a strategic staging of the act:

To be sure, these protests were probably intended in their very conception as media spectacles—the shaming impulse of the protesters would not amount to much without the media’s amplification of the gesture. (Misri 2011:623)

Whereas Ima Nganbi, one of the participants of the protest, vehemently denies such suggestions:

It is a public place where lots of people gather [implying it will be shameful or embarrassing to disrobe]. We will not be able to do it again even if someone offers us crores and crores of rupees... We never had this in our minds that if we did it, and if it was released in the Internet, it would reach the world and such.

According to Ima Nganbi, it was done in the heat of the moment – a “spontaneous” act, unlike the *performance* by an actress on the stage. However, it is not always easy to distinguish the *performance* of an actress from that of the protester in terms of spontaneity, the risks involved, the staging and the motivation. Someone in the inner circle of the modern theatre fraternity in Imphal told me how the play director Heisnam Kanheilal had to go to great lengths to convince his wife, Ima Sabitri, the

veteran actress, to play the role of Draupadi. Responding to her critics, Ima Sabitri, the actress, said:

Many people in Manipur said, “Sabitri, what you have done is disrespectful to women...” You write this because you don’t think it through. Not one, many women have been stripped, and their rape took place in front of their husbands and fathers in law. The Indian Army raped them while making their fathers and husbands watch. Their fathers-in-law and husbands could only keep looking. You, who are educated, and write books . . . you don’t understand that when I play Draupadi and take my clothes off, it’s nothing to take my clothes off, it’s about my insides, my feelings. (In *The Lightning Testimonies* 2007)

The *performances* of Ima Sabitri (on the stage) and the protesters (at the Kangla gate) are both inspired by and implicated with the same cultural milieu (of militarization). In both, the “success” of the *performance* rests on the “spontaneity” with which the actors embody their roles/characters. And, like the actress of the play, the role of the protester was also “scripted” insofar as the protestors re-enacted the myth of the “rain ritual” (by their own admission). Nonetheless, Ima Nganbi seems to be saying that a play is a play and a protest is a protest. She is outraged by the suggestion that what they did might have been inspired by a play – thereby rendering what they did as “inauthentic.” What makes their defiant act in front of the Kangla fort an “authentic” moment is the *misrecognition* (Bourdieu, 1977) of it as a *performance*. Although Bourdieu (1977) illustrated the concept of *misrecognition* in the context of gift exchange, in developing a “theory of practice,” the same concept is equally instructive in approaching the protesters’ immediate refusal of their defiant act as a *performance*. Bourdieu (1977:5-6) writes, “... misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) of the reality of the objective “mechanism” of the exchange, a reality which an immediate response brutally exposes: the *interval* [sic] between gift and counter-gift is what allows a pattern of exchange that is always liable to strike the observer and also the participants as *reversible*, [sic] i.e. both forced and interested, to be experienced as irreversible.”

Is not this the same *misrecognition* that underlies our performance of social roles, including gender roles? Butler (1993: 178) makes a distinction between performance as a bounded “act” from what she calls *performativity*, “insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s “will” or “choice.”

In Ima Nganbi’s narrative the political crisis and militarism in Manipur is affectively registered as anger, particularly over the brutal murder of innocent women. Each time the tension builds up, until it comes to a point where the body simply snaps.

Manorama was the last straw. There had been Rose, we knew she was raped, but she committed suicide out of shame. We felt really bad about her. We had been thinking about how to *solve* [the issue]. Then there was the case of Ahanjaobi, and then Sanjana from Jiri...there had been a lot [of cases]. All of these cases had been burning inside us like a smothered fire.

But the ‘snap’ happens through a specifically ‘gendered’ body. By citing the “rain ritual” as the cultural “script” for their action the protestors seem to be claiming that they are simply reiterating their role as Meitei women. Let me highlight a particular movement in Ima Nganbi’s speech whereby the “we/mothers/Meitei women/Meitei mother” emerges as a *worlding refrain* (Stewart 2011) rendering a peculiar female body that is supposed to feel and emote in certain ways:

“We have *traditional feminism*...”

“We are different from other *jati*.”

“We have our own traditional strength...”

“We heard that when the suffering of the Manipuri women hit rock bottom..”

“In our *history*, since times immemorial [Manipuri] women have always had a high [ideal] of challenging. We [Manipuri women] have this conviction, especially for the cause of truth, to defeat anyone who dare *challenges* us [Manipuri women]”

“We had done many agitations, many *dharnas*, tear gases, rallies, we have done whatever we could and no one had listened. But there is a God who would listen. We had challenged even the gods.”

“When we saw Manorama in the photo...”

“If such a thing could be done to a Meitei woman, to a Manipuri woman, what was the point of living, that’s what we began to question [ourselves]. That’s why we were able to do that thing [the protest]”

In other words, the participants of the naked protest felt the way they did, not just because they were women but that they were Manipuri women. What I want to argue here is that gender is performative, but it is performative in “culturally” specific ways. The reiteration of a “we/mothers/women/Manipuri women” is not limited to the linguistic signification in Ima Nganbi’s speech but can be found in the everyday bodily practices and interactions. As Hollywood (2002: 95-96) points out, “the subject is formed not only through the linguistic citation of norms, but also by the bodily subject’s encounters with other bodies in the world and by its practical or bodily citations (this would include ritual acts and bodily practices like those analyzed by Marcel Mauss, Pierre Bourdieu, and Talal Asad—modes of walking, standing, and sitting; sleeping and eating; giving birth; nursing; healing; etc.),” all of which I would call cultural. Thus, the pre-individual but not pre-social capacities to affect and be affected must have a particular history.

Refrains are a worlding. Nascent forms quicken, rinding up like the skin of an orange. Pre-personal histories lodge in bodies. Events, relations and impacts accumulate as capacities to affect and to be affected. Public feelings world up as lived circuits of action and reaction. (Stewart 2011: 339)

Conclusion

Let’s return to that initial moment of silence, to that vortex of undifferentiated mixture of emotions, provoked in me and presumably in many others by the powerful image of the naked protest. I can only speculate, that is to *make* connections because there is none given (Rajchman 2000), as to why I felt the way I did. Undoubtedly, the

protest was set up as a spectacle, maybe not necessarily for the media, but a spectacle nonetheless. It was a spectacle because its efficacy relied on the power of imagery, and the protesters were fully aware of the potency of the image they were invoking. What is so powerful of this image? It is not just that their bodies were naked in public, which would have provoked some namable emotion. It must have something to do with the rage and fury with which their naked bodies were vibrating – hairs flying, fists clinching, mouths screaming. Why is the naked fury of the female body so potent? In Mahasweta Devi's story (on which Kanheilal's play was based) the interrogating officer, Senanayak was petrified to see the angry and defiant naked body of Dopdi confronting him.

She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, "There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counterme-- come on, counterme-?"

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (Spivak 1981: 402)

In setting up this confrontation between Dopdi (the victim turned aggressor) and Senanayak (the authoritative male figure) Mahasweta's story echoes the famous episode of disrobing Draupadi (of which Dopdi is the diminutive) in the epic, *The Mahabharata*. Mahasweta rewrites this episode and in doing so, Spivak (1981) argues, "the ideal masculinist protectionism" is subverted:

Mahasweta's story rewrites this episode. The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi – in the narrative it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law. She remains publicly naked at her own insistence. Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine (in this case it could have been a godlike) comrade, the story insists that this is where the male leadership stops. (Spivak 1981:388)

There is a slightly different reading of the Draupadi episode of the Mahabharata. I learned about this particular interpretation from Dr. A. D. Mathur of St. Stephen's College, Delhi. He is a professor of Sanskrit and an expert on ancient Indian law.

According to Dr. Mathur the figure of Draupadi posited a legal paradox in ancient Indian law. In his retelling of the episode, Draupadi addresses the court, as soon as she is presented, demanding clarification on the legal status of a married woman. If the law did not allow a separate identity for a married woman, apart from that of her husband's, then she was already lost when her husbands lost themselves in the game of dice. But the fact that they allowed the Pandavas to put her at the stake implied that she was recognized as possessing a separate identity (distinct from that of her husbands'), in which case her husbands had no right to put her on the stake without her prior consent. The entire court was allegedly stupefied by Draupadi's interjection.

What we are encountering here is a peculiar situation where the claims made from the denuded body of women threatens to undermine the patriarchal power edifice by exposing its limitations and inconsistencies, and the overall impact on the audience is that of stupefaction, or petrification. Could this be the same "petrifying" power that the imagery of the Meitei women's denuded (because they are forced to disrobe themselves out of the desperateness of the situation, the absence of rain in this case) angry bodies has over the Sky God? Why this Medusan effect of this image (of denuded female body) on the onlooker? "But we might also want to take into account that Medusa was she whom the mythographer Robert Graves suggests stood for the older, matriarchal, and godless ancient Greece," writes Taussig (2004: 257). In his meditation on the cultural practice of the "evil eye" in the Andean highlands of Colombia, Taussig evokes Walter Benjamin's notion of the *dialectical images* – "history decayed into images" (Ibid, p90) – seeking to explain the magical effect of Medusa's face in terms of history. The threat is not so much that the patriarchy will "revert back" to matriarchy (in the sense of implying an anthropological progression from matriarchy to patriarchy in a distant past). Rather, it is as if we see a glimpse, for a fleeting moment, of the abyss underlying our social reality.

Fundamental to the operation of the dialectical image, as I see it, is that it stands at the crossroads of a piled-up contradiction like a smash on the freeway of time such that several dimensions come into play, simultaneously. There is a juxtaposition of images; this is the montage dimension, and its task is to conjure

forth all the tricks in the surrealist tool kit; surprise, wonder, and even shock. Then there is the tense stasis of shock itself, a phase of compressed nothingness in which memory, space, and time all coagulate and then reconfigure past and present, leading to the third dimension, which is the alchemical one wherein image and material being fuse and transform one another. Voilà! The dialectical image! (Ibid., 235)

Chapter Four: A Body in Protest

In this chapter I examine the epic hunger strike by Irom Sharmila, demanding the repeal of Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958. The hungerstrike, which began in October 2000, is still going on. While trying to locate Irom Sharmila and her unique struggle, within the cultural and socio-political climate of contemporary Manipur, I am confronted with questions and controversies of *embodiment* vis-à-vis social protest.

A Sister's Cause

On the 4th of September 2013 Eche Sharmila was to be brought to the court of the Chief Judicial Magistrate (CJM) of Imphal East. It was a ritual that repeats almost every fourteen days. Irom Sharmila is under judicial custody for her “attempt to commit suicide.”¹²⁰ Since the October of 2000 Irom Sharmila has been on a hunger strike demanding the repeal of the draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958. Irom Sharmila has been forced fed through the nose¹²¹ and she is kept under surveillance in the security ward of the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences (JNIMS)¹²² Hospital, Imphal. Every fourteen day she is brought in front of the Chief Judicial Magistrate (CJM) of Imphal East for review. And every single time she refuses to call off her fasting, and she is escorted back to the security ward of the JN Hospital. Rumor had it that it was extremely difficult to meet her in the security ward and the routine appearance in the Imphal East Court was the only opportunity to see or talk to her. Even that was no guarantee because her appearance was usually very brief and there might be restrictions on getting close to her.

Abongpa told me that the best way to get in touch with Irom Sharmila would be through her elder brother, Irom Singhajit. Abongpa had Tamo Singhajit's number and

¹²⁰ Under Indian Penal Code (IPC) section 309.

¹²¹ Nasogastric intubation.

¹²² One of the two premiere public health institutions in the state, the other being Regional Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS), Imphal.

introduced me over the phone. We talked over the phone, I introduced myself and briefly explained what I was doing in the US, and we scheduled a time for the meeting. It was a long drive to his place. Besides Abongpa, my younger brother, Debe and a friend of mine also came along. Tamo Singhajit's place was in the outskirts of Imphal, and we were not very familiar with the area. It had been raining the whole day and the road going to his street was particularly bad. Some fifty meters away from his house our car got stuck in a pothole, dangerously close to the open drainage nearby. The people in the neighborhood had recently covered the pothole with sands and gravels, which turned into a slippery sinkhole under the heavy rain. Tamo Singhajit came out to help us, and I finally managed to get the car on the road. I parked the car on the side of the main road, and we walked for another twenty meters or so to get to his house. It was a modest house of mud floor, plywood walls and corrugated zinc roof. We were given towels to dry ourselves. And, as we sat down on the mat in the living room hot tea was served. Then, he began his story about his sister from the very beginning.¹²³

Right from the day she was born there was something different about Sharmila. She was born on the nineteenth of March nineteen seventy-two. It was a Tuesday. In those days, there was nothing here at Porompat. No constructions. Those days, children were delivered with the help of midwives. There were two *abok*¹²⁴ – one from Khurai and the other from Kongkham. They used to take care of everyone around here. The day Sharmila was born there was a big thunderstorm. And three of my aunts went to call the midwife, the *abok* from Khurai. You know how Porompat was like, a big marshy wetland. When they got to the middle of Porompat it began to pour down so heavy. It rained so heavy that they could not reach the house of the midwife and they came back. So when they got back home, Sharmila was already

¹²³ He did not mind me recording it on the audio recorder. The translation of the entire interview is not reproduced here.

Tamo Singhajit must have told the story of his sister Eche Sharmila many times before. He did mention Deepti Priya Mehrotra the author of *Burning Bright: Irom Sharmila and the Struggle for Peace in Manipur*, published in 2009. It might have been the first book on Sharmila. Mehrotra acknowledges Tamo Singhajit's contribution in the book too.

¹²⁴ The term *abok* is used for both grandfather and grandmother. Formally, the term is qualified with *nupa* for grandfather (i.e., *abok nupa*) and *nupi* for grandmother (i.e. *abok nupi*). In this context *abok* is being used to refer to an elderly woman (someone of one's grandmother's age).

born, without midwife. And, as soon as she was born the heavy rain suddenly stopped. Thus began the extraordinary nature of her life.

When she was little, she did not hang out much with her friends. She seemed to enjoy isolation. By the time she was in the seventh or eighth grade it became apparent that she preferred being a *vegetarian*. It was not like she was avoiding fish¹²⁵ completely, you know. She would put aside the fish in the curry and eat only the broth and the vegetables. By the time she was in the ninth and tenth grade she completely stopped eating fish, meat and eggs. She became a pure vegetarian. She was not good at studies, but she tried real hard. Her real interest seemed to be somewhere else. She would leave home for those private classes, but never got there. Instead she would go for yoga training or nature cure treatment classes.

By the final year of high school there was some change in her nature. I realized it in retrospect. Whenever any student's organization or volunteer organization organizes something, she is there, with or without invitation. It came to a point where, in order to get to such places, she would travel alone in buses or on a bicycle, to places very far away. She never finished her high school, after the first two or three papers she stopped going for the final exam.

A strange thing happened that same year. Far away, to the North of our place there was a military camp.¹²⁶ At night one could see some lights over there, it looked like a temple or something. One night, around two, Sharmila quietly left the house in a man's attire; she had put on a pair of pants and a *khudai* wrapped on her head. She had been curious about that light and decided to find out. That place is pretty far away, you know. By the time she got to the foothill of the camp, it was almost dawn she kept walking towards the light.

"Halt!" shouted one of the soldiers on guard but she kept climbing, ignoring him. They let her come up to the top. They probably thought it was just one person after all. They had assumed her to be a man. It was only later when she removed her *khudai* and let loose her hair did they realize that it was a girl. They asked her what she was doing there. She told them about how she saw the light everyday and that she was curious to find out what it was.

Fortunately the commander of the camp turned out to be a Meitei. He sat her down and talked to her. They served her breakfast and around eleven that morning the army dropped her off to our home.

She was always doing such unbelievable things. Sometimes we would find her reading alone in this one tiny Shiva temple, or in the backyard by the bamboo

¹²⁵ In Manipur, not eating fish is the sign of giving up meat, therefore of being a vegetarian.

¹²⁶ Indian Army

grove. She always sought out isolation. At some point she began writing regularly for Huiyen Lanpao.¹²⁷ She wrote mostly around the issues of women, about how to lift up the status of women and such. She often consulted me on her articles. In those days leading up to her hunger strike, she was not living with me. So I didn't know the details.

You know, we are five brothers and four sisters. She is the youngest of us all. When she was little, our mother could not breastfeed her, she had no milk. At dusk when she got hungry and started crying I would carry her on my back and take her to the mothers in the neighborhood who could breastfeed her.¹²⁸ If they were grinding the stone mills or pounding rice or mopping the floor whatever chores they happened to be doing at the time I would take over while they breastfed her. In 1997 our eldest brother died of blood cancer. From that time to 2000 when she began her hunger strike she was living with our widowed sister-in-law.

If she had consulted me before she made her decision. If she had said, "Tatomcha¹²⁹," that's what she calls me. If she had said, "Tatomcha, I am going on a hunger strike until they repeal AFSPA from Manipur," I would not have allowed her. And she wouldn't have been able to disobey me. She knew that, so she didn't tell me. Instead she came to our mother and sought her blessings. Mother didn't know anything. She simply said, "Oh mother I am going to do something for Manipur, and I seek your blessings." Mother unsuspectingly she gave away her blessings. That's how she began.

November 2, 2000, the CRPF¹³⁰ had massacred 10 civilians at Malom. It was a Thursday. She used to fast on Thursdays¹³¹. She was on a fast even before she heard the news of the massacre. When she heard the news later in the day she simply continued her fast. She continued fasting till the fourth. In the afternoon of November 4, she invited her friends for some sweets. She told them that she was going to go on an indefinite hunger strike. They ate some sweets together that afternoon after that she went to Malom, where the massacre took place. And, she began her hunger strike there. In the morning of November 5, the police *commandos*¹³² of Imphal West arrested her and put her in the Sajiwa Jail. She must have deliberated over her decision for

¹²⁷ At the Manipur State Archive I looked up at the *Hueiyen Lanpao* copies from 1996 to 1998 and found some articles and poems by Irom Sharmila.

¹²⁸ Common practice in Manipur, my own father was brought up in similar manner.

¹²⁹ Term of address to the younger of the elder brothers.

¹³⁰ Central Reserve Police Force, a paramilitary force of the Central Police Force.

¹³¹ It is common practice in Manipur, and many parts of India, to pick a day out of the week to observe a fast or abstain from eating fish or meat.

¹³² The notorious paramilitary force of the state police.

a long time. Because, earlier in the October of the same year, one retired Justice Suresh from Mumbai came and led an independent inquiry commission on the victims of AFSPA. And she went there without any formal invitation. They let her be in the end. It was being organized by Colin Gonsalves of Human Rights Law Network, Delhi, along with Babloo Loitongbam, Rakesh Meihoubam, Yambem Laba and other activists and lawyers from Manipur. That enquiry commission ended on the October 25 of 2000. Lots of cases were recounted during the course of the commission. For example, there was the case of a tribal woman who was raped in front of her father-in-law by CRPF personnel. In another case, the Army arrested and tortured a young man by shoving stick up his anus and prodding it, until his entrails came out of his anus. Such stories of the victims affected her deeply.

Although she was already resentful of the AFSPA, those stories she heard during the inquiry commission, I think, made her take the radical decision.

Barely seven days after the commission ended, the Malom massacre happened. The horrible imagery of the victims was still raw in her mind when ten more civilians were gunned down. Then she told herself, "That's it! I am a Meitei woman after all." She knew that all the marches, sit-ins, *dharnas* etc., were not going to repeal AFSPA from Manipur. That's when she decided that indefinite hungerstrike was the only recourse left.

After she was arrested in the morning of November 5, 2000 I went with a young friend to meet her in Sajiwa Jail. I told her to reconsider her decision because of the seriousness of the matter. They were not going to remove AFSPA easily, like one would remove leeches. The government of Manipur was profiting crores¹³³ and crores of rupees in the name of fighting insurgency; they were not going to just drop it. I told her to withdraw her decision and together we would spread awareness to the people of Manipur, and with the voice of the masses they would have to repeal it someday. She told me, "Tatomcha, I am a Meitei woman. I did not take this decision lightly I had deliberated over it for a long time. If you want to give me courage then come again, otherwise, let this be your last visit". I had not expected such a strong stand. In the end I gave her my blessings, telling her not to loose her strength and courage till the last breathe. I cried, and then I came back.

...

I used to work as an agricultural officer in an NGO for fifteen years. I left the job and began working with the human rights activists of Manipur. At that time I was the only bread earner of my family. When people from Moreh, Thoubal, Moirang started showing up to support her cause we had to provide food and lodging for the people. For example, people came from Moreh, 100 to 150 individuals came.

¹³³ A crore is a unit of numbering system used in South Asia, equal to 10 million.

The whole day they were on hungerstrike, showing support for her cause. Evening came and it was too late to go back to Moreh.

The least we could do was offer dinner and a place to sleep. I started arranging and organizing these things. People from every nook and corner of Manipur came. And I had to attend to them, so I stopped going to work. And the cost of managing the supporters began to run into lakhs of rupees.

In the very beginning, whenever the police would drop her off to our place The *meirapaibi imas* would tell us not to take her back. They forbade us to sign the release form. They would say, “Even if she was born as your sister, what she is doing is for the people.” I was in a tight situation, I could not sign the release form nor could I take her place. One time they¹³⁴ broke down the door of one of my brothers because we refused to take her back. Most of my brothers were staying away at their in-laws’ at the time. I told the police that I was not going to run away. Besides, my sister’s demand was a legitimate one. If they beat me I would react, I will get angry, I am a human after all. If they killed me the issue would become bigger. But I would never run or hide, I told them. The truth is that police run after the one who runs.

I would often run into difficulties due to shortage of funds and having left my job and such. I would overhear people talked about how I had unnecessarily brought it upon myself. But I never gave up, I took it as my own challenge, and accepted it as God’s will. My parents did not accept my wife so whatever we had, the house, the plot, everything we owned was mine, I had bought them all by myself. Eventually I had to sell them all and move. And we have moved from one house to another ever since. The current house is the seventh one since Sharmila began her hungerstrike. I want this one to be permanent [chuckles]. It is a strange world. I decided to join the *naharols*, the rebels¹³⁵. I even went two or three times, and talked to their elders. They did not take me in, they told me how it was not going to be easy and that I had my own children to take care of. It was around February, March in 2001. It might have been better if I had joined or died in action. Anyway, they refused to take me in so here I am.

...

After she received the Gwanju award from Korea and Rabindranath Tagore prize, there was some money. She started telling us about sending money for the flood victims in Bangladesh. I told her, “Look *ibema*¹³⁶, we are not a funding agency. What you are doing is a long term commitment, it is a marathon. We don’t know how long it is going to take. It is not an easy demand. It might end up taking

¹³⁴ Presumably the police commandos.

¹³⁵ He did not specify which rebel organization.

¹³⁶ Term of endearment used to address to a younger woman, or a little girl, like one’s younger sister, daughter etc.

crores and crores of rupees. Lets invest the money in your cause.” [28:30] She did not like it. But what about all those years from 2000 to 2007? It was with the help of friends and brothers from the locality that we had been managing. I sold my properties, and I was not even able to take care of my children properly. Now that she has all this money... The money is being managed by a trust. The trust has been organizing workshops, seminars and campaigns. When lots of money was being poured into these seminars and campaigns, she started suspecting that I had taken free rein over the trust fund. If I were driving a car, then she would accuse me of embezzling the fund. All that money was being put into the cause, her cause. With Babloo and others, we started an organization for the victims of extrajudicial killings in Manipur, EEVFAM¹³⁷. EEVFAM covers thousands of widows, and they are also the victims of AFSPA. To create a voice of these victims, so that the regional and central governments would hear, isn't it another chapter towards the removal AFSPA? Recently, the Supreme Court reviewed all the six cases that EEVFAM filed and ruled that all the 7 victims, in the six cases, were killed in “fake encounters.” After that declaration from the Supreme Court, the Human Rights Commission of the UN and many European countries have condemned AFSPA as inhumane and demanded the repeal of this draconian Act. The voices of the victims are stronger than the voices of ordinary Manipuris, you know. I wanted to spend money on such issues. But she wanted us to send some hundreds of thousands of rupees to the victims of flood in Orissa and such. Or, she would tell us to give away a certain amount to Medha Patker of *Narmada Bachao Andolan*, when she visited Manipur. I told Sharmila that we would have to help in each other's causes but we have a limited fund. If we ran out of the prize money, we might have to ask money from the people of Manipur. I wanted to do something with the fund while we had it. For example, at the Kakching Community Hall we organized the play “Mirel Masinga”¹³⁸ and we spent fifty thousand rupees for that. “Mirel Masinga” is a play based on Sharmila's struggle to remove AFSPA. We make prints of Sharmila on T-shirts, one thousand pieces every year. It costs us one lakh and twenty thousand rupees to make one thousand T-shirts with the prints. And we don't sell them. However, when these T-shirts are distributed to the delegates of a seminar in Europe, the message is spread to other countries. Things like that, in short. We could not do such things. For her part, she has been confined within those four walls for 12 years. You and I would have gone mad by now. But she... She practices yoga regularly and has managed to remain sane. She would give her opinions from inside and I would say things from outside, and there were some contradictions. She made a mistake of writing the contrasts in the local newspapers. People got an impression that there were misunderstandings between her and the trust. This is also an important aspect of organization.

¹³⁷ Extrajudicial Execution Victim Families' Association Manipur.

¹³⁸ Translated as the “Spirit of the Soul.”

...

In 2011, someone from UK, he was originally from Kerala. From Kerala he went to Africa and became an African citizen. And then from Africa to UK. His mother is a school teacher. UK citizen. So, they have been writing letters to each other. They were introduced to each other by Onil, one of our volunteers. Onil asked Sharmila, “Eche¹³⁹, there is one Desmond Coutinho from UK who wants to send you some books. Should I let him send the books?” And Sharmila told him to let him send the books. Then they started corresponding, sharing their thoughts and desires. At some point he announced his commitment to her. There is nothing wrong with that. Sharmila also has her rights to have a fiancé. But I had something in my mind... I told her if she ever gave up because of the man I would kill her¹⁴⁰. It might have been my mistake and I might have expressed it out of my concern for the honor of the family. Or, out of some fear of what people would say. Anyway, it became a big scandal. Now, she says the Trust is against her, and that the Trust does not listen to her. But it is not quite like that. What the Trust wants is to make strategies for the success of her cause. She would tell us to give some money to one of our sisters, who was going through bad times. She told us about giving money to Women’s Health Organization, another NGO, towards the construction of their new rehabilitation center. I told her, “That’s all good, but... you are inside the wall and I am outside the wall. And I know what goes on outside.” I know the general secretary of Women’s Health Organization very well. I mean, everyone must have heard about the organization, and the general secretary used to write a lot on women issues. Whatever property the organization owns, he puts them under his name. Second, we offered him funding for three to four lakhs and asked for a project proposal, so that we could implement the project together. He did not want to work together rather he just wanted the cash. We agreed but asked him to give a project proposal. There was some disagreement and he never gave the proposal. Now, I hear he has been expelled from Women’s Health Organization recently. I don’t know the details. But whatever the reason was he has been expelled.

...

After the recorded interview ended we spend a long time talking about the social and political issues of Manipur. At one point Tamo Singhajit told us about his grandmother and the folk tales that she used to tell them by the fireplace. Turned out she

¹³⁹ Term of endearment for elder sister.

¹⁴⁰ It is not uncommon to hear the expression, “I am going to kill you” without any associated intention of actually killing someone. Parents often use it while scolding their kids. If the neighborhood kids are running around the yard and making too much noise, an elderly person might use the expression, while telling them to be quite or go away. Given the cultural context in which the expression, “I am going to kill you” operates it does not seem appropriate to equate what Tamo Singhajit said to Sharmila, his own younger sister as amounting to threat of “honor killing.”

was also an active participant of the second Nupi Lal, the great women's revolt of 1939. He said that Eche Sharmila got her strength and courage from that grandmother. When the interview ended, he gave us four Sharmila T-shirts. It says, "REPEAL: Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958" on the front. Sharmila's mother was there the whole time, sitting on a *mora*¹⁴¹, in front of the door right outside the living room. As soon as we walked out of the room Abok Gourachandra prostrated in front of her, sought her blessings and wanted picture taken with her. Before we left, we took group photos with Tamo Singhajit, and his mother. He reassured me that I should have no problem having a few words with Eche Sharmila when she was brought to the court on the 4th of September. We did the interview on August 26 and I was in constant touch with him. And, as the day of Eche Sharmila's court appearance got closer Tamo Singhajit gave me Onil's number, just in case he couldn't make it himself. In the end Tamo Singhajit did not come, it was Onil who eventually introduced me to Eche Sharmila.

The tension between Just Peace Foundation and Eche Sharmila, as it was evident from what Tamo Singhajit told us, came as a surprise to me. Also, I had no idea about Eche Sharmila's involvement with Coutinho at the time neither did Abongpa. Abongpa was disapproving of the sudden appearance of a love interest in the middle of all that. Later in the evening I brought it up with my parents, I wanted to know what they thought. They seemed concerned that Eche Sharmila was involved with a guy. At some point my mother said, "If it ever came out..." She did not finish the sentence but it was clear that she and my father both took it as some sort of a scandal. The general impression I get from people in Kakching is that having a love interest is incongruous with what Eche Sharmila had set out to do. As Abongpa kept saying, "She can't waver at this point." That she can't afford to get distracted at this point. That what she is doing is something sacred where romantic passion has no place¹⁴² in it.

¹⁴¹ Traditional stool made of bamboo and wicker.

¹⁴² The misapprehension about her "affair" was not shared by her close associates, except her brother.

Meeting Eche Sharmila

On the early morning of September 4, 2013 Tamo Singhajit informed us over the phone that Eche Sharmila was to be brought to the office of the Chief Judicial Magistrate, Imphal East, between 10:30 to 11:00 am. By 10 am we were in front of the office building. We did not know what to expect. I was told that there would be time for a brief introduction after the court proceedings. I had a Guatemalan weaving from Nebaj¹⁴³ and, as I was advised to, a short note to accompany with it. There were a few others who were waiting for her, some of whom were from the media. I was told that the crowd who came to see her at the court had increasingly become smaller and smaller. There was another group of three who had come from Kakching. They came on behalf of a young sculptor from Kakching. At the time the young sculptor was pursuing Master's degree in Fine Arts at Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Gujarat. The young artist was inspired to make a life size bust of Eche Sharmila. So, the team from Kakching had come on his behalf, to seek her permission and, if permitted, take close up photos of her upper body, from different angles. As the small crowd waited for Eche Sharmila there was some confusion about which exact building she would be brought to. It was a huge complex with lots of government office buildings all over. I was informed that it was not unusual for them to change location at the last moment.

Finally, she was brought in an ambulance with police escort. Two police officers escorted her into one of the buildings and the rest of the crowd followed her inside the building. As she was taken inside a room next to the courtroom in the building the rest of us waited in the narrow hallway outside the courtroom. Onil from Human Rights Alert was there to coordinate my meeting with Eche Sharmila. After about ten minutes of waiting in the hallway one of the lady police officers came out and asked for "the research scholar from the US." I presented myself to the officer and followed her into the room. For some reason my brother Debe tagged along behind me but they did not say

¹⁴³ A municipality in the Department of Quiché, Guatemala, where I had worked with a local organization.

anything. He had wanted to see Eche Sharmila up close and, I guess, he thought that was the only opportunity. Anyway, the officers did not seem to mind.

It was a small room. In the middle of the room, Ronald Keishing, the JCM of Imphal East at the time, sat behind the desk, Eche Sharmila was seated across the desk, facing the JCM. A middle age woman in lawyer's dress sat in one corner and the two lady escorts stood by the door. Eche Sharmila and the JCM were in the middle of something when we came in. The JCM asked for my ID. I gave him the UT student ID. He asked for any other form of University ID that contained information about my current address, the names of my parents and such. The UT student ID had just my full name and ID number printed on it, the rest of the particulars being encoded in the magnetic bar code. In the end I gave my Voter Card and the Driver's License, both issued by the Manipur state government.

Eche Sharmila was having some issues. First, she wanted to follow up on her request to donate some books to the jail¹⁴⁴. The CJM explained, "This will take a while, it has to be checked by the proper authorities if the books are appropriate for the inmates or not." Second, she needed legal counsel regarding the recent summon by the Patiala High Court in connection to her protest at Jantar Mantar in Delhi. Apparently, some lawyers, claiming to represent her, had filed a petition to excuse her from coming to Delhi on health grounds. She was informed by a friend who read about the petition in a newspaper. She did not know what to do. The CJM told her that she would have to get in touch with those who had filed the petition. She said she had no idea who to get in touch with. The lady lawyer interjected at one point, she told Eche Sharmila, "You know Kanta, the one who was here the last time? May be you should talk to him." It turned out this Kanta person was the senior lawyer representing her. Unfortunately he was out of town that day and he had sent a junior lawyer in his place. The CJM was not happy about that and told

¹⁴⁴ From their conversation it was not clear which jail they were referring too. I presumed it must have been the Sajiwa Central Jail. The books were in her possession in the security cell at JNIMS Hospital.

the junior lawyer to get in touch with Kanta on the phone. After much waiting, and fretting about by the junior lawyer, Eche Sharmila decided to leave it for another day. And lastly, she told the CJM about the threats and intimidations her friend had been receiving¹⁴⁵. She refused to give any particular names.

“Who are these people who are preventing him from coming to Manipur?” the CJM asked.

“I mean there is no particular person as such... they are my supporters. How shall I put this... they are ‘social activists.’ Since he comes from outside he usually stays at hotels and they would go there and tell him to go away. What kind of rights do they have to do such things?”

The CJM said he could not do much without any particular names.

In the end, after about half hour, the CJM gave us sometime to interact with Eche Sharmila. We came out of the room and met up with the rest of the crowd in front of the building. Someone suggested that I should give the Guatemalan weaving in front of the media team. But she was reluctant to accept the weaving. It was only at that point that Onil briefly explained to me that she did not accept gift. Onil urged her to accept the weaving, given that Guatemalan women too had suffered horrible violation of human rights. I was feeling shameful at that point, remembering the Manipur saying, “Lamboibada samjet *piba*.”¹⁴⁶ She said she would consider it but first she wanted to talk to the media. Somebody suggested that we should go to a more comfortable place where Eche Sharmila should sit down properly. So we all went to the veranda of the adjacent building. I noticed that she looked frail, walked barefoot, and her fingernails had grown quite long. The interaction with the media was brief.

When I interact with the media like this, I have noticed from past experiences that they do not publish certain things that I say, things that came from the depths of my heart. I am very unhappy with that. I would plead not to do it. For example,

¹⁴⁵ Although no name was mentioned it was clear from her description that she was talking about her fiancé, Desmond Coutinho.

¹⁴⁶ The saying may be translated as “To give comb to a mendicant.”

as I was telling you how I disapprove of what the *naharols* have done¹⁴⁷. Now, the reporter should report, not edit out what I ought to or ought not say. It is not for the reporter to make such judgments. What she is saying is right or wrong or whether we agree or disagree, is for the people to listen, discuss and decide, which has never been the case. I have noticed this from my past experiences. They only published things they want me to say, or what they want to hear. I can't agree with this situation. This is very undemocratic. What should I say; they are all connected. Everyone has dirtied each other. I mean I should be able to prove with my own character. It requires courage and sacrifice for one's duty, for truth. Here I am, willing to give up my life for the cause – after all we die only once – and why should I be afraid of saying the truth for fear of what might happen if I say this or if I say that. Because of these brakes we have not been able to make much progress in our movement.

In connection to the 2006 protest in front of Jantar Mantar in Delhi, the Patiala High Court had summoned me. I am told that some lawyers have filed a petition to the court, apparently on my behalf, to excuse me from the court summon on health grounds. The news of this petition was reported, according to one reliable source, in some newspapers. I want to ask them if they have the right to decide on the condition of my health. What are they trying to conspire by doing something like that without my consent? I resent that from the depths of my heart. I mean, for some 13 years I have been living on artificial life support. They failed to see me as a human being – as if this were a natural phenomenon or something¹⁴⁸. But when they took me out there they could not close my mouth anymore. People began to hear what has been going on. The whole world began to know about the issue. It was a big help for the movement. I don't like the way they are trying to stop me. I need legal help from related authorities¹⁴⁹.

There were not many questions from the media persons. She took the weaving and the short note I had written in the end. I saw Eche Sharmila two more times after that. The second time was at JNIMS Hospital outside the security ward. The third time was at the court of the CJM Imphal East in July 2014.

¹⁴⁷ Referring to a recent violent incident involving some members of one of the armed separatist groups.

¹⁴⁸ Newspaper articles claiming Sharmila's fast as some sort of a feat; "world's longest fast," "longer than Gandhi's fast"

¹⁴⁹ She was eventually sent to Delhi for the court summon at Patiala High Court. Where she was charged with the crime of "attempt to commit suicide" which was denied by Sharmila.

A few days after our first meeting on September 4, 2013, there was a report on local newspapers about the young artist from Kakching who was beginning his work on the life size bust.¹⁵⁰ But Eche Sharmila requested the young artist to stop his work because she did not want anybody to make a statue of her while she was still alive¹⁵¹.

Sharmila, The Savior

A disheveled and emaciated Sharmila is nailed to the cross. Meanwhile, the then Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh, dressed in combat fatigue, is crushing the life out of the head of the Jeevan Reddy Committee¹⁵² with his boot. The sketch was Pukhrambam Birmangol's idea rendered by a local artist from Kakching. He had a hard time convincing local newspapers to publish the sketch. No newspaper in Manipur was willing to publish it. In the end, on February 4, 2009 it was published as a poster at the office of Human Rights Alert, Imphal, with the help of human rights activist, Babloo Loitongbam and others.

On the back of the poster are some slogans in English – “SUPPORT SHARMILA’S STRUGGLE!” “SUPPORT JUSTICE AND NON-VIOLENCE!” “MAY THE STATE AND NON-STATE ACTORS NOT BECOME SYMBOL OF TERROR TO THE PEOPLE!” – and a poem in Manipuri titled “Anti Terrorism Slogan.” And one can notice the faint impression, almost like a watermark, of a white dove between the slogans.

¹⁵⁰ “Sharmila's bust to be sculpted in honour,” *Hueiyen News Service*, September 8, 2013.

¹⁵¹ “Irom Sharmila decries threat on media,” *Hueiyen News Service*, September 19, 2013.

¹⁵² In the wake of the mass agitation following the custodial murder of Th. Manorama Devi in 2004, the then Prime Minister Shri Manmohan Singh had appointed an inquiry committee headed by Justice B.P. Reddy in November 2004 with the mandate of reviewing the provisions of AFSPA and advising the Government of India whether (a) to amend the provisions of the Act to bring them in consonance with the obligations of the government towards protection of human rights; or (b) to replace the Act by a more humane Act. The Committee submitted its report to the Government of India on June 6, 2005. The report was never made public. A “leaked” copy of the report was uploaded by *The Hindu* on its website (www.hindu.com/nic/afa) which is no longer available. The Jeevan Reddy Committee Report unambiguously recommended the repeal of AFSPA. So far the Government of India has ignored the recommendations by the report.

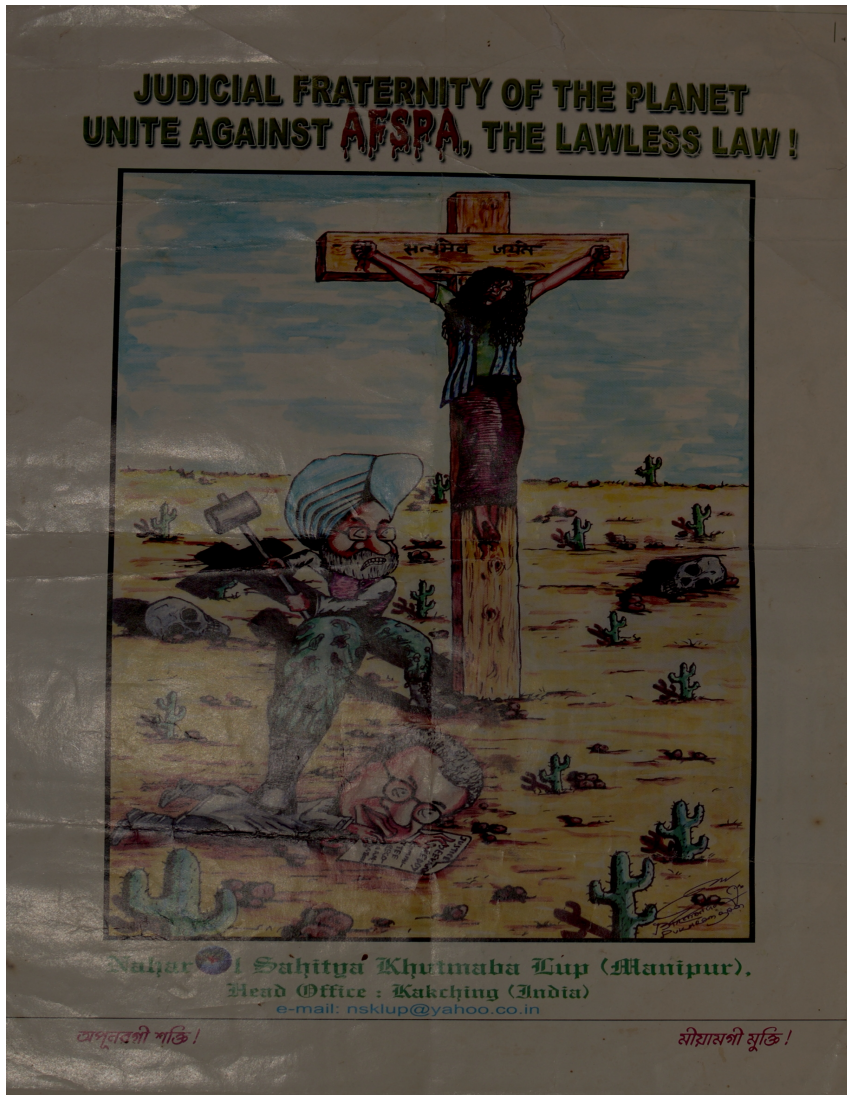


Figure 6. The poster by Pukhrambam Birmangol.

As a poet and teacher Pukhrambam Birmangol is well known in Kakching, and the white dove is characteristic of his style. The first time I saw his distinctive “white dove” sketch was in my school, Padma Ratna English School. He was feared as a teacher. He was known to be very smart but strict. Though he did not teach in my class there was one time when he came in, probably to fill in for one of the teachers. I must have been in my seventh grade or something, he usually taught classes for the higher grades. The only thing that I remember distinctly from that day was the white dove sketch he drew on the

blackboard with white chalk¹⁵³. By the time I got to the 8th and 9th grades he was no longer teaching in my school. Later I heard rumors of how he had a blowup with a student and things got out of hand.

In 2013 I had a face-to-face conversation with Oja¹⁵⁴ Birmangol for the first time. I noticed that he spoke very softly, which was not what I had expected in my mind. As we sat around the fire at Abongpa's place one evening, he said, "Anger is not good. I have been working on it. The Pukhrambams have a bad temper. You know, the first guy who pierced the British officer with a spear at Kangla, Pukhrambam Kajao, he was a Pukhrambam too. If he had not killed the officer there would not have been any Anglo-Manipur war of 1891, no issue of integration with India, no separatist movement, no violence today. All because of senseless temper."

Oja Birmangol has always been an active supporter of Sharmila and the movement to repeal AFSPA. However, he said what saddened him most was the plight of Eche Sharmila's poor mother. He said he used to visit her every other month and left her three hundred rupees each time. But he had stopped doing that because it was becoming too draining emotionally. Whenever he visited Sharmila's mother she would begin to cry and weep in sorrow. So, he had decided to visit her once every three or four months. In 2009 Abongba wrote and composed an ode to Eche Sharmila, which was sung and performed by a local folk singer the same year.

Oh my daughter, my love!
Irom Chanu Sharmila
Woe is me, thy mother
For you stand in the final battle
...
Death and destruction, yelling and crying

¹⁵³ It was only much later in life that I noticed the stark similarity between his dove drawing and Picasso's famous dove drawings.

¹⁵⁴ The honorific title equivalent to "Sir." Literal meaning is "teacher" or "master."

The things that must not be seen or heard
End them all
That's all my daughter cries for
...

The poem was composed in the style of *tenghaba*, a genre of singing associated with death wail. Here, the one who is lamenting could be Sharmila's actual mother, or Manipur personified as the mother, or *ima maibi*, the high priestess. The song ends with the distinctive *thawai mee konsinba*.

Wangangda Sangangdal Waheida Watada
With words/With speeches
Mifuda Micheida
With the beatings
Nongmei, bombgi makhonda
With the noise of guns and bombs

Thawai Leikhangkhiba/ Mirel Hamchatkhibasingbusu
The souls frightened/The spirits dampened
Imana konsil-lamlagey
Let ima gather them all
Hey, thawai manga-mak / Mee-ga thana tarukmak
The five thawai/Six, including the mee
Mi Mi, Kuk Kuk

Thawai nafamlenda famlasey/ Miren nakaiifamda leirasey
Souls, be seated in thy place/Spirits, stay in thy place
Hayi haya hayum hayum.

The Scandal

In November 2013, NDTV¹⁵⁵ picked up on the “treat of honor killing” statement made by Tamo Singhajit. One afternoon, I was with a colleague from MWGSN participating in an EEFVAM meeting at the office of Human Rights Alert, Imphal. During the meeting Tamo Babloo told the gathering about the “breaking news” on NDTV – Irom Sharmila had received threats of “honor killing.” Some of the EEFVAM members

¹⁵⁵ A Delhi based national news agency.

were outraged and expressed their disappointment with Eche Sharmila. An urgent meeting of the trustees of Just Peace Foundation and other associates of Eche Sharmila was called at Deluxe Hotel, Imphal to discuss the issue. I was invited to participate in the meeting. In the meeting we watched the unedited version of the news report by NDTV. The interview was filmed during one of her routine visits to the office of the Chief Judicial Magistrate. The entire footage of the report lasted 10 minutes during which Eche Sharmila was asked several questions about her struggle, her relationship with Just Peace Foundation and her love life. The interview was conducted in English and Eche Sharmila responded in English. When asked about Just Peace Foundation denying her to make monetary contributions to other causes she replied, “Actually, the cash awards are mainly to use for the betterment of the whole Universe. Huge amounts used only in campaigns... somewhat wrong... Campaign is all politics. My struggle is spiritual ... money is power.”

The question of “honor killing” came up when they were talking about her love life. The reporter began by asking if her relationship with Desmond Coutinho had become an impediment in her movement.

Eche Sharmila(ES): Actually, he encourages a lot in my struggle... He makes me stronger. I am human being, I have also human desire. No one has the right to ... [indistinct] my personal life... control my destiny... [indistinct] my power. They have no right to prevent from my... [she smiles coyly and left the sentence incomplete]”

Reporter: Who are these people? Is it just the Foundation?

ES: [smiling] So called “supporters”; they are very conservative like, Talibans [sniggering]. I mean ... they don’t ... [indistinct] religion or tradition. They plan to control my life. As for me religion is man made believe...

Reporter: Final question. Do you think your movement has been hijacked?

ES: [sniggering] My struggle is not easy... I have to face everything else... My target is very grave... such kinds of obstacles are minor. I am defiant [smiles].

Reporter: Any threats that you have ... What kinds of threats?

ES: Like, honor killing [smiles]... only because I fell in love during my struggle... But it is not man made. Everything is God's will.

Reporter: Who is... [too soft to hear distinctly]

ES: [smiles and a long pause]... Let it be.

Reporter: No issues. We respect that call and thank you for talking to us. [Turns his face away from Eche Sharmila into the NDTV camera] The one thing that we all of us will agree is that Sharmila has carried out a landmark iconic struggle and if there is any impediment into her personal life it is something that needs to be looked into. And that is something that Sharmila is also telling us about. At the end of the day we have an icon of resistance here. Who has carried forward her struggle for thirteen years now, this is her fourteenth year. And I think we all need to respect that. We also need to respect that more than an icon for struggle she is also a human being and needs all the diligence and respect that needs to be granted to any person in such a scenario. With camera person Sanjoy Chakravarty, Alok Pandey NDTV.

Tamo Babloo was the first to point out that the used of the term “honor killing” is incongruous in Manipur, that it is unheard of in Manipur. Tamo Singhajit, brother of Eche Sharmila, who was also present in the meeting reiterated the circumstances under which he made that regretful remark in a letter to her. He emphasized the fact that he never mentioned the term “killing.” All he said was that he might do something regrettable, possibly lending himself in jail. Although he did not have any objection to her choosing a partner he was worried that it might end up derailing her movement. The choice of the term “honor killing” to describe the “threat” by Tamo Singhajit was considered inappropriate and that it was further proof that someone had been feeding her all these ideas.

The meeting went on for a long time trying to figure out how to respond to the news report and what to do about the rift between the Foundation and Eche Sharmila. A few months later I read in the newspaper that Eche Sharmila donated Rs. 4 lakhs to the

International Red Cross¹⁵⁶. It must be remembered that Eche Sharmila's earlier requests to make such contributions to the International Red Cross had been denied by the Foundation.

A Body in Protest: Materiality and Discourse

When she began her indefinite hungerstrike most people did not take her seriously. Some even questioned her sanity. As weeks turned into months, months into years and years into decades she became a martyr, a savior – like Jesus Christ who died on the cross for the salvation of all. Eche Sharmila resents such adorations.

Instead of taking me as a human launching a struggle and endeavour to bring a just conclusion of my struggle by exerting courage, I have been assumed to be an alien person who is free from human desires and woes, who cannot experience the pleasures of distinct stages of life so I am placed in a different plane of incarnation assuming that she has sacrificed this life for the sake of motherland and has become a Goddess and cannot have a private life as she has no human desires and that God has not given her hunger and thirst; thus instead of people sitting with me and conversing with me, I have been placed apart and kept aloof from the people, and as a result people have been prevented from taking up my ideal. If I happened to be a man, people may have imagined themselves to be in the same situation as mine and would have come out in a large movement and brought about a logical conclusion in a life and death struggle.¹⁵⁷

Eche Sharmila tries in vain to reason with the masses who are unable to identify with who she “really” is – an ordinary woman fighting for a just cause, and not a “goddess” with extraordinary qualities. What is the reason for this “failure” to identify with her? Is it because she is a woman as she suspects? Undoubtedly some of her sympathizers and supporters have tried to “read” her actions and opinions as “emotional” (therefore, lacking in political astuteness). Both Tamo Singhajit and Tamo Babloo seemed to think that the disagreement with Eche Sharmila was only at the level of strategy, in spirit they all want the same thing – the removal of AFSPA and restoration of peace in Manipur – perhaps, implying, at the same time, political naivety on the part of Eche Sharmila.

¹⁵⁶ “Irom Sharmila donates Rs. 4 lakhs to IRC,” *The Hindu*, March 15, 2014.

¹⁵⁷ Excerpt from the original translated version of the unpublished article by Irom Sharmila.

Another human rights activist who claimed to be a close confidant of Eche Sharmila also made a similar remark to that effect. She thought that Eche Sharmila should end the hunger strike and use the political leverage she had generated thus far to further her movement. In her opinion Eche Sharmila should be using the fast only as a means to a political end, after all that's what Gandhi did too. Eche Sharmila seems to find such attitudes to be too patronizing, she writes, "As different from their efforts to project me in an image which they have created. **I have an imminent intention to wage the struggle by using my own reason.**"¹⁵⁸ [Emphasis added]

When a team of delegates from the National Human Rights Commission came to visit her on October 24, 2013 at the security ward in JNIMS, where she had been kept under judicial custody, she talked to them in English, even though she was not as fluent or articulate in English. I stood right outside the door of her room like the other trying to catch what they were talking about. Because there was already a big crowd inside her room I could not follow the conversation quite clearly. Everyone was extremely quiet trying to listen in. Now and then I could catch a broken sentence or a phrase from Eche Sharmila. Later, after the delegates left I talked to some of the more fortunate ones who were able to stand closer to her. Even they could not follow exactly what was going on. Back then I remember thinking and agreeing with those around me as to why she did not make use of any translator. A colleague even commented how important it was to give clear and concise statements to the National Human Rights Commission at such crucial junctures. I did not realize at the time that Eche Sharmila might have had her reasons for foregoing any translation.

It is evident that Eche Sharmila does not quite see eye to eye with the trustees of the Just Peace Foundation. While the trustees are skeptical about her idea of making monetary contributions to other causes, like the International Red Cross, or for the flood victims in Bangladesh, or for making roads etc., she does not believe in putting money

¹⁵⁸ From the unpublished article.

into the anti-AFSPA campaign. She says, “Campaign is all politics.” Her struggle, according to her, is a spiritual one. Her desire for the political without the ugliness of “politics” may have been considered too naïve by some. And, all of these “misunderstandings” might have something to do with the fact that she is a woman. However, that is only one part of the story.

The other part of the story, I contend, has to do with the cultural idiom of “giving up one’s life” for the greater good. There is the figure of the martyr who gave up life in the literal sense, for the greater good. But there is also the figure of the *sannyasi* (male) or *sannyasin* (female), those who have renounced the world in pursuit of higher knowledge. To renounce the world is to embody a certain way of life. For example, the mundane concerns of the “normal” social life like grooming oneself, or accumulating material possessions are of little importance to him or her. Ideally, then, the body of the *sannyasi* or the *sannyasin* is both the *sign* for the intense transformation one is going through as well as the *site* of truth, in the sense of “authenticating” the radical transformation that a quest for higher knowledge inadvertently brings about. The “authentic” embodiment of renunciation still inspires awe and reverence in people.

It is hard not to see Eche Sharmila somewhere between these two figures – the martyr and the *sannyasin*. The reverence and awe with which many people in Manipur approach Eche Sharmila is undeniably telling of such an attitude. In her brother’s story, with which I opened this chapter, we are told of the special sign under which she was born, and the various instances that reflected her “spiritual” nature, finally culminating into her radical decision to give up her life for the greater good. On her part, Eche Sharmila explicitly makes references to her struggle as a spiritual one. She does not cut her hair or her nails. She avoids receiving gifts whenever she can. But then again, her hungerstrike was not meant to last this long either. Whether it is the medical care she has been administered to by the state or her indefatigable will to see justice done, her body has lasted for more than 14 years now.

To make a dramatic cry for justice as the final act of martyrdom is one thing but to inhabit that moment of finality for 14 years is another. Unlike the body of the martyr, which is gone, Eche Sharmila's body lingers long after the final declaration is made. Such a situation makes us wonder, as Das (2000; 2008) puts it, "Thus, how does one not simply articulate loss through a dramatic gesture of defiance but learn to inhabit the world, or inhabit it *again* [sic], in a gesture of mourning?" Based on her ethnographic work in North India, Das (2000) discusses the case of Asha, a widow in a middle class Punjabi family. Tracing the trajectory of her life from losing her husband, to the pangs of Partition and remarriage, Das (2000) shows how Asha bears witness to loss and suffering through a "descent into ordinary life":

If the figure of Antigone provided one way in which we could think of voice as a spectacular, defiant creation of the subject through the act of speech, the figure of Asha shows the creation of the gendered subject through engagement with knowledge that is equally poisonous but is addressed through the everyday work of repair. (Ibid., 208)

While Antigone gave up her life, Asha had to live with hers, in spite of the "poisonous" knowledge of societal injustice. Unlike Antigone, however, Asha had to continually deal with her own body:

I don't mean just my needs. I could not help it when men looked at me with lust in their eyes. It was not I, it was this body which attracted them. If my *jija ji* had not begun to make passes at me, I might have lived an ascetic life, appropriate to a widow, in my husband's house. (Ibid., 217)

Even though both Antigone and Asha are witnesses to events that have marked their lives, the continued existence of the physical body, in the case of Asha, compels her to continually engage with it.

Neither a martyr nor descending into ordinary life Eche Sharmila's embodiment of "peaceful" protest raises questions of subject formation vis-à-vis the materiality of the

body. Barad (2007) questions how exactly do “discursive practices produce material bodies.”

What is it about the materiality of bodies that makes it susceptible to the enactment of biological and historical forces simultaneously? To what degree does the matter of bodies have its own historicity? Are social forces the only ones susceptible to change? Are not biological forces in some sense always already historical ones? Could it be that there is some important sense in which historical forces are always already biological? (Barad 2007:127)

Drawing on the insights of quantum physics Barad (1996,2007) modifies Butler’s notion of *performativity* as iterative intra-action. ‘Intra-action’ can be understood under an *Onto-epistem-ology* that Barad develops from quantum physics, where the basic unit of analysis is not ‘relata’ between atomized entities, but *phenomena*.

Phenomena are produced through agential intra- actions of multiple apparatuses of bodily production. Agential intra- actions are specific causal material enactments that may or may not involve “humans.” Indeed, it is through such practices that the differential boundaries between “humans” and “nonhumans,” “culture” and “nature,” the “social” and the “scientific” are constituted. Phenomena are constitutive of reality. Reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena, but of “things”-in-phenomena. The world is intra-activity in its differential mattering. It is through specific intra-actions that a differential sense of being is enacted in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency. That is, it is through specific intra-actions that phenomena come to matter—in both senses of the word. (Barad 2007:135)

The significance of Barad’s insight, along with that of the other proponents of “New Materialism,” becomes evident in Irom Sharmila’s case. The emergence of Sharmila as the iconic figure of non-violent struggle for peace has a lot to do with the extraordinary ‘phenomenon’ of her survival. Sharmila’s survival of the hunger strike, for more than thirteen years, is seen by many people in Manipur as the true sign of commitment. That is, for many people in Manipur, truth is located in the body, although Sharmila herself has repeatedly expressed concerns over this on various occasions. She is worried that people might delegitimize/undermine her political agenda by emphasizing on her physical feat. Nonetheless, it is significant that her body continues to live after

more than thirteen years of hunger strike. Sharmila is being kept in the security ward of JN Hospital, in Imphal, under constant medical surveillance. She has always been forced fed through the nose with chemical concoctions of nutrients and medicines. But, such treatments and precautions are no guarantee that physiological complications will not arise in her body. In any case, the *phenomenon* (in Barad's sense of the term) that is Sharmila's protest cannot be fully understood merely at the discursive level, it has to account for the 'intra-action' of medical technology, media technology, the constitution of Sharmila's body, its biological history, the *performativity* of being a Meitei woman, militarism in Manipur, the Manipuri separatist movement, Human Rights activism etc. Or, in other words, it has to be understood in terms of what some "New Materialist" writers have called the "material-discursive" as an effective move beyond the inherent tendency to emphasize the discursive often at the expense of the material in many postmodernist writings (Alaimo and Hekman 2007; Haraway 2007; Barad 2007).

Women *have* bodies; these bodies have pain as well as pleasure. They also have diseases that are subject to medical interventions that may or may not cure those bodies. We need to talk about these bodies and the materiality they inhabit. Focusing exclusively on representations, ideology, and discourse excludes lived experience, corporeal practice, and biological substance from consideration. (Alaimo and Hekman 2007:4)

Eche Sharmila's brother claimed (see the interview above) that any other ordinary person in her place would have become mentally unstable long time ago, given that she had to live in isolation for so long. It was only because she had been practicing yoga, which she continued to practice in her cell, that she was able to remain sane. One of the doctors at JNIMS who regularly attended Eche Sharmila said that the chemical concoctions that was being artificially administered to her body was no guarantee to prevent any medical complications from arising due to prolonged fasting. And, each day she continues to struggle against the weaknesses and vagaries of her physical body under these extreme circumstances. It is evident that 'various aspects of materiality,' including the biological substance of her body, have indeed contributed to 'the development and

transformation of discourse’ (Ibid, p4) on not only her unique protest but also on issues of gender, social protest and violence in Manipur.



Figure 7. Meeting Irom Sharmila, security ward, JNIMS. Photograph by Shanta Kshetrimayum.

Daffodils

In July 2014, we went back to JNIMS to see Eche Sharmila but we were not allowed to visit her. I talked to the security lady. There was another security guard besides her. She refused to let us go in. She said she had been in trouble already for letting people in. She could not afford to do it any more. We were told to get a written permission from of the Superintendent of Police (SP) of the Jail Authority. I talked to the security about Eche Sharmila. She said she supported Eche Sharmila’s cause because she

was doing it for the people and not for selfish reasons. They were on friendly terms she said. Somebody often sent flower seeds for Eche Sharmila and she always gave some to her. She showed me the photos of the flowers in bloom on her cell phone. They were daffodils. Apparently Eche Sharmila has a lot of flowers growing inside her cell.

Chapter Five: The Rebel

Naharol, the figure of the rebel in Manipur, is a key agent as well as a product of the “situation” in Manipur. He is the reason why the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 was imposed in the first place. He is the reason why they refuse to repeal AFSPA, they say. Chairman Mao is supposed to have likened the relationship between the guerilla and the masses to that of fish and the sea. We, the people, are the sea in which the rebel, like the fish, is supposed to survive. The Indian Army is trying to win the “hearts and minds” of the people as if it were all a matter of misunderstanding. For most people the rebel is this faceless and nameless shadowy figure. At the same time he is also one of our own. He is someone’s son, friend, brother or someone’s sister or daughter. He is somebody I knew once. Is he truly inspired by Marxist, Maoist ideologies of social change? Is he the dream that all Manipuris are going to wake up to one day? Or, is he the nightmare to become? Like another “Pol Pot”? Where does he come from? Maybe he represents the hope for the possibility of an alternative system. Or, maybe he is the inherent bug in the system, which refuses to allow the system to find its closure. In this chapter I trace the figure of the rebel following the affective intensities that he often leaves behind.

From the Shadows

As a kid we played *thang kappi*, shooting imaginary bullets at the opposite team – thang thang! Boom boom! Bang bang! We were the police one time and *naharol*¹⁵⁹ the other. I can’t remember clearly how we ever decided which team would play which. It was probably decided by flipping a coin or by one of those creative little games of chance that young kids seem to have a unique ability to conjure up every now and then. Anyway,

¹⁵⁹ UGs, insurgents, non-state actors, manung sarkar etc.

it did not seem to matter who was who. The fun was in the shooting. Very often, at one point, usually towards the end, the game would degenerate into a heated argument about who shot whom first. We spent many summers thus, playing *naharol* and police. But the *naharol* in those days existed as a disembodied figure for me. Then came the day when they came to our school and told us not to sing the Indian national anthem, *Jana Gana Mana*¹⁶⁰, anymore in the morning assembly. I did not remember their faces or their exact words afterwards but we never sang *Jana Gana Mana* at school from that day. Then, one late afternoon they came to our house. My mother had gone to the nearby rice mill¹⁶¹ and I was home alone at that time. There were four or five of them. One of them walked right inside the living room, where I was watching TV, while the rest of them stayed outside the house. He wore a long black overcoat. As he walked in he pulled back one side of his unbuttoned overcoat and I saw the gun he was carrying underneath. He asked me where my mother was. I told him she was in the mill. As soon as I told him I regretted telling him the truth. I could have lied about my parent's whereabouts. I was still in my awkward teen years and I was scared, so I blurted out. He told me to go fetch her. I went to get my mother from the mill, I felt like a coward. I came back with mother. It was about our "contribution" for the cause. My mother was confident and firm in "negotiating" the

¹⁶⁰ Composed by the late Nobel Laureate, Shri Rabindra Nath Tagore in 1911 it was adopted as the National Anthem of India in 1950. Originally written in Sanskritized Bangla it has been rendered into English by Shri Ranbindra Nath Tagore himself:

Thou art the ruler of the minds of all people,
Dispenser of India's destiny.
Thy name rouses the hearts of Punjab, Sind,
Gujarat and Maratha,
Of the Dravida and Odisha and Bengal;
It echoes in the hills of the Vindhya and Himalayas,
mingles in the music of Jamuna and Ganges and is
chanted by the waves of the Indian Sea.
They pray for thy blessings and sing thy praise.
The saving of all people waits in thy hand,
Thou dispenser of India's destiny.
Victory, victory, victory to thee.

Source: (http://knowindia.gov.in/knowindia/national_symbols.php?id=6)

Apart from the fact that the National Anthem is censored by the separatist movements as a symbol of Indian "colonization" there is a popular resentment in the Northeast that the region is completely absent in the imaginary of the "Indian nation" evoked in the anthem.

¹⁶¹ This is where people take their rice, one or two bags at a time, to get them unhusked and winnowed.

amount. Throughout the 1990s, such “negotiations” happened quite regularly. There were a few other occasions when they came to our house, but most of the “negotiations” happened over the phone. But our parents never told us the details about how much they were paying and who was delivering the money where. However one could always tell something was amiss, from the hushed tones, the unusual quietness and the nervousness around the house. And, the “negotiations” did not always go well. That’s when they tell you that they do not need the money anymore. After that, the amount would have gone up, or the person is summoned to their camp. Sometimes we read in the local newspapers of bombs being planted or lobbed into residential compounds in Imphal.

The other time I remember seeing a *naharol* as a kid was in the neighborhood playground. We were playing soccer and a group of men were playing cards in one corner. At one point there was some yelling and sudden commotion in the corner. Someone stopped kicking the ball and the game abruptly hung in suspended animation. I saw a man with a pistol in his hand pointed towards the startled men in the corner. He walked towards them telling them to remain where they were. As we all watched the event unfolding in front of us I felt both excited and scared. The group of tall grown men stood sheepishly, huddled awkwardly into a little crowd, while the man with the gun scolded them. He made them stand in a line and started beating them with a small branch torn off from the nearby eucalyptus tree. The branch did not last long. He turned towards us, the odd ensemble of preteen and teenage boys of various shapes and sizes, who had been witnessing the drama with great excitement and interest. He beckoned one of the boys to come. One of the smaller kids went and he was told to get a stick from the nearby shrub. He managed to pull out a long, sturdy looking, stem. When we saw the size of the stick we looked at each other and giggled. The little boy proudly presented the stick to the man with the gun. The man resumed his beating with gusto. After that, he paraded them in a line towards the nearby pond. We followed the parade from a distance. At the pond they were told to take a dip, one by one. They all obliged, with shirts and pants on. As one got out of the water the man with the gun gave one last beating and told him to go

home. That was the first and the only time I ever saw such acts of vigilantism by the *naharols*.

Gambling is often involved with card games in Manipur. In fact, the term *juwar*, probably from the Hindi *jua* (gambling), is used as the generic term for cards or card games. *Juwar* is, therefore, considered a social vice. The *naharols* sometimes crack down on such social vices in order to “cleanse” the Manipuri society. Generally, people seem to condone such acts of vigilantism. Local clubs and women organizations have always been active in such vigilantism themselves. In fact the Manipuri *meira paibi* (torch bearer) movement originally began in Kakching as an anti-alcoholism campaign. Local *meira paibi* organizations often busted moon shiners, drug peddlers, and regularly paraded drunks and drug addicts in the public.

Even though there is no overt criticism of such acts of vigilantism there are jokes in circulation making fun of the “ridiculousness” of the situation. The classic one is about the *meira paibi* activist who has a drunkard of a husband. Every day before she left home for her activism she forewarns her husband of which locality they are going to raid that day so that her drunkard husband could avoid the area. There are many classic jokes around the vigilantism by the *naharols*, here is one¹⁶²:

One evening, as usual, the *naharol* managed to round up a dozen or so drunks loitering in the streets. He herded them to a nearby community pond. Everyone was ordered into the freezing water and told to swim. In the great melee that ensued one drunk managed to slip away and hid underneath the bush overhanging at the edge of the pond. After about 15 minutes or so of swimming and dipping everyone was herded out of the water and told to go home. And as he counted the, now sober, former drunks getting out of the water the *naharol* found one missing. Worried that one of them might have drowned he quickly dived into the water and began searching every inch of the pond. When he got closer to the overhanging bush where one drunk was still hiding, the drunk whispered to the *naharol*, “Psst! Come here, it is a nice hiding place here.”

¹⁶² More in my MA thesis, where I have argued that these jokes also function as forms of speaking back to power.

The vigilantism of the *naharols* is not limited to “delinquent” bodies. They regularly punish corrupt officials, immoral characters and dispense “justice” in cases of extramarital affairs or love affairs. Sometimes the use of force in such situations could exceed a certain limit provoking public ire and contempt. One of the high profile cases of such extreme use of force in recent years was the summary execution of Prof. Md. Islamuddin of Manipur University in 2009.

Prof. Md. Islamuddin, a professor of economics, was the former Dean of Students’ Welfare at the Manipur University and at the time of his killing he was the Proctor of the University. There were some controversial irregularities with the Manipur University Student Union (MUSU) election of 2009, which resulted in the uncontested election of a new President of MUSU¹⁶³. Although the election was scheduled for April 24, the new President was announced on April 20 when the election scrutiny found no other rival candidate for the post¹⁶⁴. On May 25, 2009 Prof. Md. Islamuddin was shot dead inside the university campus around 12:10 pm¹⁶⁵. On May 27, 2009 the proscribed Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) issued a press release claiming responsibility for the killing of Prof. Islamuddin¹⁶⁶. According to the press release, which was reported in the local newspapers, Prof. Islamuddin was allegedly responsible, as the then Dean of Students’ Welfare, for the irregularities in the electoral process.

Secretary of Publicity and Research, KYKL, Lanngamba Mangang today charged in a press release that Prof Islamuddin was the root of many unforgivable errors committed in the recent election of MUSU resulting in discrediting the university and creating groupism [sic] amongst the students that hampered the academic atmosphere in the university.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ “MUSU poll takes ugly turn,” *Hueiyen News Service*, April 21, 2009; “MUSU Poll Process: KYKL, UNLF pick anomalies,” *The Sangai Express*, April 21, 2009.

¹⁶⁴ “New MUSU President,” *The Sangai Express*, April 21, 2009.

¹⁶⁵ “Prof Islamuddin shot dead,” *Hueiyen News Service*, May 26, 2009.

¹⁶⁶ “KYKL owns up to killing Prof Islamuddin,” *Hueiyen News Service*, May 27, 2009.

¹⁶⁷ “KYKL owns up to killing Prof Islamuddin,” *Hueiyen News Service*, May 27, 2009.

KYKL's decision to execute Prof. Islamuddin was condemned by many civil society organizations and it was especially unpopular among the Manipuri Muslim or Meitei Pangal community. In spite of KYKL's efforts to "justify" the execution of Prof. Islamuddin in the name of "sanitizing" the Manipur University¹⁶⁸ the act was condemned and resented by the larger Manipuri public¹⁶⁹. As one placard during one of the many mass protests that followed said:

"Prof Islamuddin's killing cannot bring quality education"¹⁷⁰

Genuine or Fake

In 2009 I was home for the summer. Like the previous two years, that summer I was involved in organizing a student's meet in town. And, as always, we did most of the organizing work out of our living room. So that people were always going in and out of the house till dusk. One evening, as soon as the last of our visitors left the house, someone rang up our home phone. We had stopped using the home phone for quite some time, so it was already suspicious. We did not pick up the phone. The same thing happened the following day – as soon as the last visitor left the house the phone rang. After the third or the fourth day we unplugged the phone line. The problem with the old style landline phone is that there is not way to know the incoming number. We instinctively knew that it was one of those calls that you wouldn't want to receive. Sure enough, a few days after we unplugged the phone line they came to pay a visit at night. "Eteima¹⁷¹, open the door," the guy yelled from outside. Fortunately we were all in and the front door had been locked. We decided not to answer. I could see only one guy through the window but there could have been more. "Is this how you receive people?"

¹⁶⁸ "KYKL elaborates charges against Prof Islamuddin-III," *The Sangai Express*, June 2, 2009; "KYKL elaborates charges against Prof Islamuddin," *The Sangai Express*, May 31, 2009.

¹⁶⁹ "JAC rubbishes KYKL charges as baseless," *The Sangai Express*, May 28, 2009; "Students flay killing/protest arrests," *The Sangai Express*, May 31, 2009; "Professor's killing protested," *The Sangai Express*, June 10, 2009; "Protest staged," *The Sangai Express*, June 8, 2009.

¹⁷⁰ "Professor's killing protested," *The Sangai Express*, June 10, 2009.

¹⁷¹ Literal meaning is "elder sister-in-law." The term is also popularly used as a polite way of addressing an older woman.

Open the door!” the guy was getting agitated and he shook the iron bars of the folding gate that served as the outer front door. At which point my mother opened the inner front door and told him to be civil.

“Why don’t you come during the day? We can’t deal with you like this at night. We don’t know who you are. Given the way things are going these days we are scared.” In the end the guy left a piece of paper by the door with a phone number on it. “Give us a call at this number. You must.” My mother protested but they left it anyway.

The following morning we found the piece of paper and one live bullet near it. When something like this happens you do not just inform the police. In those days there were all sorts of rumors about the police commando using surrendered or captured *naharols* to extort money. We pretended like nothing had happened and hoped that they would not come back for the bullet. Words got around, as always, and people in the neighborhood told mother about the suspicious vehicle seen parked at the end of the street everyday, around the same time. They said it looked like a police commando vehicle. Fortunately for us they never came back.

In this particular case everything looked very suspicious. Usually they come with official “demand letters” from the rebel organization and the demands are made to select families or individuals in the town around the same time. And the usual suspects would call up each other to confirm if a demand had been made by a particular rebel organization. Even with “demand letters” it was not always easy to know if they were genuine or fake. For example, in 2006, between July and August¹⁷², United National Liberation Front (UNLF) busted gangs of extortionists who had been operating in the name of UNLF.

¹⁷² “UNLF rounds up imposter,” *The Sangai Express*, June 12, 2006; “UNLF busts gang, one shot,” *The Sangai Express*, August 24, 2006.

“A gang of extortionists who have been terrorising the people by serving demand letters for a huge amount of money in the name of different UG outfits was pulled by UNLF and one of the member was shot at the right leg according to the gravity of his involvement in the crimes.”¹⁷³

Another rebel organization, Manipur Naga Revolutionary Front (MNRF), which was formed in 2008, had to release statement of clarification via local newspapers regarding a gang that had been collecting money in the name of MRNF.

A press release issued by the outfit's assistant publicity secretary Leishipam disclosed that the demand letters were signed under a fictitious name Achan as finance secretary, other than his former name Paul, Rambung, Max, Stone, Tsau and Unison.

However, the said person was expelled from the organisation on January 13 this year for his anti-party activities.

The MNRF warned that anyone found serving letters in favour of the gang would be awarded capital punishment. Anybody who extends financial assistance to the said gang in the name of MNRF will be at their own risk.¹⁷⁴

The situation gets complicated further when rebel organizations disintegrate and each splinter group begins operating as independent entities. On October 17, 2005 UNLF paraded two cadres of KCP (P) and one cadre of KCP (Emoinu) before media persons, and declared that ‘the banned KCP factions including the KCP (P), KCP (Emoinu) and KCP (City Meitei) have **no ideology or aspirations to work for the people**’¹⁷⁵[my

¹⁷³ “UNLF busts gang, one shot,” *The Sangai Express*, August 24, 2006.

¹⁷⁴ “MNRF clarifies on demand letters,” *The Sangai Express*, March 31, 2011.

¹⁷⁵ “UNLF to weed out pseudo revolutionary groups,” *The Sangai Express*, October 18, 2005. The report further mentions,

“To lend more muscle and to ensure greater legitimacy to the revolutionary movements launched in Manipur, the proscribed UNLF is set to weed out the pseudo revolutionary groups, which have done nothing except tarnish the genuine movement.”

As of 2011 the proscribed Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) reportedly had 12 faction groups (see, “Militant Groups’ Profile” at http://www.cdpsindia.org/manipur_mgp.asp).

emphasis]. The confessions made by the captured cadres were reported in the local newspapers. Here is an excerpt from the said newspaper report¹⁷⁶:

He also borrowed a vehicle from one Ibomcha of Kakching Ningthou Leikai by posing as a PREPAK cadre, said Ibungo and added that he also took Rs 5000 from Wangban RBI after serving a demand notice of Rs 2 lakhs.

Ibungo further said that he took up a case of a bank at Wangjing Wangkhei and took Rs 10,000. The money was shared equally between him and Leisem.

Ibungo said that he also took up a case of polygamy at Wangjing Wangkhei on the instruction of secretary of the Forum Yaimabi and added that he took Rs 1000 from a liquor vendor at Khongjom.

He also took Rs 1 lakh from the Thoubal Bus Association after serving a demand notice of Rs 2 lakhs.

People in Manipur are all too familiar with the scenes described in the above excerpt. The notion that most of the naharols are there to exploit the masses rather than working for them is nicely captured in the following story that began circulating in Kakching sometime in the late 1990s:

One early morning a naharol came to a farmer's house. He was looking for a place to spend the night and he requested chicken for dinner. The old farmer told him, "Sure, we can do that. But right now I have lots of work in the rice field. Why don't you come help me in the field now and we will have a nice dinner in the evening together?" The naharol excused himself quietly and never came back.

The story was mostly told as a joke but some claimed it actually did happen to an old farmer in Kakching. On many occasions people have organized shutdowns and sit-ins to protest against certain "demands" as being unreasonable and unrealistic¹⁷⁷. And, on

¹⁷⁶ "KCP (P), KCP (Emoinu) cadres spill the beans," *The Sangai Express*, October 18, 2005.

¹⁷⁷ "Ceremonial performer in demand web

Sit-in-protests urge for sanity," *The Sangai Express*, August 31, 2008; "MU protests against UGs extortion demand to a teacher," *Hueiyen News Service*, April 1, 2011; "UG demand flayed," *Hueiyen News Service*, May 19, 2013; "Students rally," *The Sangai Express*, June 13, 2013; "UG demand lands IOC, dealers in deep trouble," *The Sangai Express*, August 2014;

some occasions locals have nabbed those who came to serve “demand letters” at individual homes. Like the one recently reported in the local newspapers¹⁷⁸:

Out of suspicion, Dr Subita alerted nearby locals after which they managed to pull up the man.

When searched his body, one letter head of 'United Liberation Front' with signing amount of Rs 2.50 lakh, two mobile phones, one neck chain for women and cash amount of Rs 2150 were found.

Later, locals handed over the man to police for further interrogation.

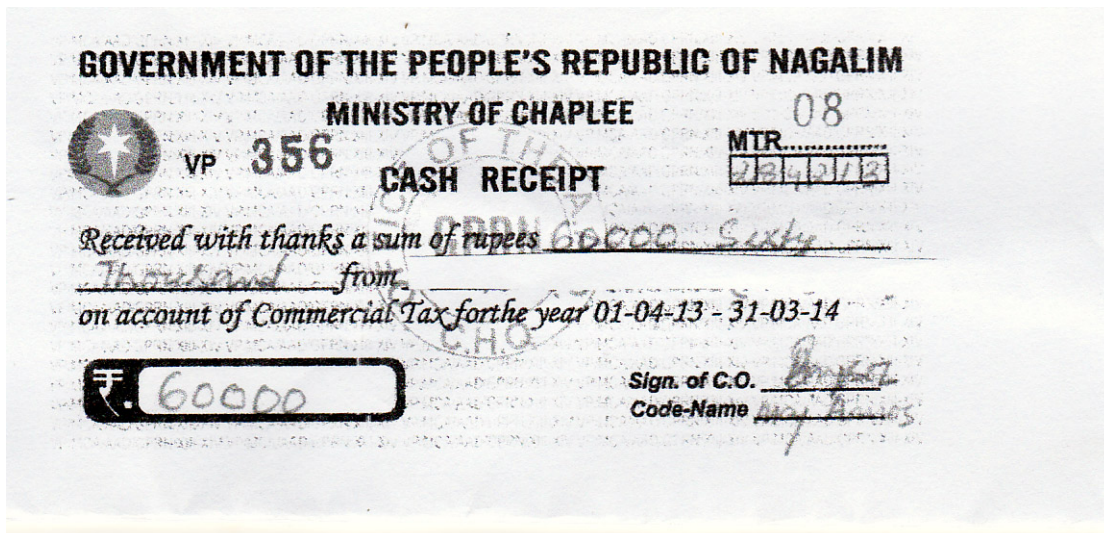


Figure 8: A copy of a cash receipt from one of the rebel organizations.

Becoming a Rebel

I can recall at least three classmates in secondary school who joined one rebel organization or the other. The first one must have been in 7th or 8th grade. I hardly hung out with the guy and he was bit of a recluse. Some of my friends used to comment that he might not be mentally stable. At some point his absence was noticed and words got around that he had become a naharol. I knew the second one well enough and he hung out

¹⁷⁸ “Man with demand note pulled up,” Hueiyen News Service, July 16, 2014.

in our circle. He was bigger and taller than most of us. We even had a nickname for him because of his size. But he was not like a bully or anything. In fact I remember him to be nice and fun to hang out with. I remember being surprised when I learned that he had dropped out and became a naharol. It must have been in the 8th or the 9th grade. He was not doing so well in class but I had not expected him to drop out and join the naharol.

The third one, I knew him well. We were good friends. I had not known him before the 9th grade but by the time we got to the 10th grade we spent a lot of time together. We went to the same coaching centers, and hung out a lot at my place or the local library. In those days the Library and Information Centre¹⁷⁹ had a small building with a few hundred books. But it was the only public library in town (it still is) and I really enjoyed going there. It was there that I first saw copies of prospectuses of foreign universities, mostly of universities in the UK. I remember the distinctive fresh scent of the thick glossy papers as I flipped through the pages. I remember being completely enchanted by the beautiful and exotic scenes of campus life at Leeds, Virginia, SOAS etc. – those fancy places on the other side of the world. I tried to convince my friend to come to the library too. The times he would come with me I always saw him in the Manipuri section. On a couple of occasions I found him with one of those “revolutionary” books – books circulated by rebel organizations. I had never read any of those myself and I could not quite understand his appeal for them. I might have asked him once or twice about why he was reading those but we never had a real “discussion” on the matter. It was just something I found strange that he would be interested in those books. On his part, he did not seem to make a big deal out of it.

After secondary school I went off to Chennai for senior secondary school and my friend stayed in Kakching. We lost contact for a year or so. Shortly after I got back home the following year, I tried to catch up with him. His house was by the bazaar and whenever I passed by the bazaar I would drop in to see if he were around. One day his

¹⁷⁹ The building was inaugurated in 1995 and I graduated from secondary school in 1998.

mother took me aside and told me that he had joined one of the rebel groups. And she told me to stop coming around because their house was under constant surveillance.

I still don't understand what motivated him to join the rebel. We never had the opportunity to really talk about what was going on with him at the time. The last contact I had from him was in 2004 or 2005 when I was in Delhi. He got in touch with me through Orkut¹⁸⁰. He was in Burma at the time and briefly alluded to the difficult life he was having there. We quickly lost touch again. I have not heard from him or of him since then.

The popular perception in Kakching at least by the 1990s is that people no longer joined rebel groups for ideological reasons. The older generations still fondly remember the reformist activities of Hijam Irabot at Kakching after he was declared an outlaw¹⁸¹. There is even a general favorable opinion of the naharols in the 1970s and 1980s. Nowadays, they say, young guys who become naharols are mostly high school dropouts. They are lazy, opportunistic or, just stupid. And there are plenty of instances that seem to reinforce this perception. Like what the elder brother of my friend R did. R's brother was a body builder and he had won many state level championships in bodybuilding. Once there was a shoot out in the fields behind their house. The following morning they found two dead bodies and some guns. The story was that R's brother took in one of the guns. And, at some point he got in touch with the rebel group to whom the gun belonged and he got himself into something he could not get out of. Ironically, he eventually got selected for the Indian Army as a body builder. The day he left Manipur to join the service the Indian Army based at Keirak¹⁸² came looking for him. They could not find him so they

¹⁸⁰ A popular online community in India at the time. It was bought up by Google and has been shut down since September 2014.

¹⁸¹ Most historians trace the revolutionary movement in Manipur to the social activism of Hijam Irabot in the 1940s and early 1950s. An official document reporting the presence of Hijam Irabot at Kakching in 1950 is archived at Peoples' Museum Kakching. He passed away in the Burmese border in 1951.

¹⁸² I can't confirm if it was the Gorkha Regiment or the Assam Rifles that was stationed at Keirak at the time.

took my friend R instead, to their base. They interrogated him and tortured him. Some say that it was all, his stupid brother's fault.

Encounter of the “Real”

In the summer of 2009 I met up briefly with J. in Delhi. He was a captain in the Indian Army then. I was on my way back to the US and he was going to some joint military exercise in Southeast Asia. I knew him from our school days at Kakching. We ran into each other at a mutual friend's place in Vijay Nagar, near the Delhi University campus. It was a dinner party and he was already a bit tipsy when I talked to him. It was nice to finally catch up with him. He told me about his training days in the army; the near death experience in his first deployment in Kashmir; the awkward situation of being addressed as “sir” by a private soldier in his unit who turned out to be some elder person from Kakching; the “caste” like division between the soldiers and officers in the Indian Army which the officers from the Northeast found annoying. When he found out about my research interests in Manipur he said, “Well, if you want to know the real truth about the Manipur rebels, you should ask me.” He told me about this covert operation in Manipur by a special team of the Indian Army that he was part of. Officially they were not supposed to be there he said. It was in some remote place in the hills controlled by one of the valley rebel groups. For a long time his team monitored a small village that served as a contact point for the rebel group. During the course of their surveillance he established contact with one of the rebels; they started leaving written notes for each other. He did not divulge any details about the contents of the notes or what was the result of the covert operation. When I pressed him further he simply said, “May be we should talk about this sometime when I am sober.” We never had a chance to talk about it afterwards. But his incomplete story has often made me wonder about that nameless and faceless rebel, languishing in the dense forest fighting, with burning passion, for a different Manipur.

On the road to Burma

In the summer of 2014, Abongpa and I got an opportunity to meet up with someone from one of the rebel groups. Our local contact told us that his rank was that of a major in the organization. He had been studying the *puyas*¹⁸³ with ardent interest and that he would like to talk to us about Meitei culture and history. As I have mentioned in the introductory chapter, Abongpa is a well-known expert on ancient and medieval Meitei texts. We decided to take up the opportunity to meet him. Like most people in town I knew him only by reputation. He was one of the very few rebel leaders from Kakching. Although Abongpa had not met him after he joined the rebel organization he knew his family well enough. According to Abongpa his family was poor but respectable. When he was still in college his elder brother was “disappeared” by the Indian Army. Days after his “disappearance” someone found the body floating in Kharungpat lake, where the Sekmai river empties its waters. That was when he joined the rebels. We fixed the time and the place for our rendezvous. We were to meet up at Tamu, the Burmese border town, around noon.

We decided not to tell my parents about the scheduled meeting. My mother would be worried sick if she knew and that would have complicated the whole plan. The day before we were set to go to Burma Abongpa realized he had a family affair he could not get out of. We decided not to cancel the appointment though. He gave me some books to take with me. In the end four of us went – me, my cousin Somen, the local contact person and his little daughter.

It was around 6 am when we finally hit the road. Our contact person drove the car. Back in the day they would hold up all vehicles at Pallel, till 8 am and then they would open up the road. It was done as a security measure. There had been lots of looting in that route. He said:

¹⁸³ The archaic Meitei manuscripts.

Situations are better now. They don't hold you up for long, especially if it is a private vehicle, like a car for visits and such. It is different for the commercial vehicles though. There is less checking on the way in, anyway. The problem is on the way out - when the vehicles come out overloaded with all sorts of merchandizes. They will ask you to unload each and every thing. They will search and scatter everything. Then you have to upload everything again. Such a pain! But if you are travelling in your car with the family, they let you pass easy.

Our driver knew a lot about the route. He worked for a big trader at Moreh and he travelled the Moreh-Kakching-Imphal route quite frequently. We got to the Tengnoupal checkpoint easy. Tengnoupal is the highest point in the route. From there, one could see Kakching. Our driver pulled up the car to the side of the road and went to talk to the security person manning the check post. The rest of us remained in the car. I heard him say, "Jai Hind sir!" After a minute or two he came back with the security person. The security person looked inside the car, checked the trunk of the car, and we were good to go. The road was pretty empty that morning. I did not see any other vehicle at the checkpoint except for a couple of young guys on a Hero Honda Pulsar, the new definitive bike for the young generation. As we hit the road again our driver continued,

They are smuggling in the bike. I used to do that. In fact we started it all. They would drive it across the border and sell it there. Right now, it is very popular in Burma. At every checkpoint they will have to pay off some money. When we started, it was ok. We had a good margin. But now everyone is doing it.

Stupidity

The last checkpoint of the Indian Army before we get to Moreh is at Khudengtabi. As the highway snaked out of the western slopes of the mountain range and ran along its eastern edges, the great expanse of the Kabaw valley began to unroll to our left.

Historically a border region between Burma and the erstwhile Kingdom of Manipur, Kabaw valley is under Burmese territory now. This is the first dramatic panoramic view of Burma in the route. At the Khudengtabi checkpoint, I was reminded that everyone had to get out of the vehicle and walk across the check post, while the

soldiers check the vehicle and only the driver was allowed to remain in the car. As we were getting out of the car I thought of taking a photo of the great view. So, I took out my camera and took a photo to the left (where the Kabaw valley was) and then turned to the right and took a picture of the check post of the Indian Army.

“Halt! Hey you!” a soldier shouted at me from behind. He caught up with me, told me to delete the picture, which I promptly did, and then instructed me to come with him. I should have known this but it was too late. I was taken to the Army officer manning the check post. He was furious. He seemed so outraged as if I had just raped the entire battalion or something. He screamed at me in Hindi.

“What the hell you think you are doing? How can you do that in a place like this? Don’t you see the soldiers? Don’t you see the big sign?”

I followed his index finger and saw the big sign drawn on the wall “Photography Prohibited.” Below that were a series of penalties in bullet points. They were written in smaller letters and I didn’t get to read them properly.

“How dare you walk around openly with a camera like that! Are you trying to be a jerk?” the officer continued, and let it hang for a while. The aging jawan who was standing next to the young officer looked unimpressed. Unlike the young jawan who proudly presented me to his officer and the young officer who was outraged, the elderly jawan was quiet and unfazed.

“Sir, I am sorry I hadn’t realized it. It has been my first...”

“Shut up! How dare you retort back to me like that. What do you do?” he was clearly not done with me yet.

“I am a student, sir.”

“What have you finished?” in an angry tone.

“MA, sir”

“Even the ones who have failed 10th grade know it. Why are you being so stupid? Don’t you know we can apply *act* on you and your career will be over? You have barely started your career...”

“I am really sorry, sir. I wont make the mistake again in the future.”

At this point the senior havildar¹⁸⁴ standing on the right side of the officer beckoned me to move on. I took that as an opportunity to escape. The officer was still in a foul mood but he did not try to stop me. Five minutes drive away from the checkpoint we pulled over to the side of the road, and took pictures of the unrolling valley in front of us. I was still a bit shaken up but I tried best not to show it. They were curious to know what the Army officer said to me. I laughed it off by telling them how the young Army officer was just bossing me around and that it was nothing serious. But it was clearly my mistake I should have known better. If he had found out that we were on our way to meet a rebel leader across the border we could have been in some deep shit. There was no excuse for my stupidity. It had never happened to me before. But I wondered if it had ever happened to the Army manning the security checkpoint before – someone just got out of the car with a camera and started clicking away as if it were a tourist spot, as if everything were normal.

Brecht once noted that intelligence is finite but stupidity, infinite. That it knows no limits means it knows no law, no alterity; it is indifferent to difference and blind to hierarchy. (Ronell 2002:43)

Crossing the Border

By the time we got into Moreh it was around 8 in the morning. As we drove into Moreh town, our driver pulled up the car in front of a corner store. There he took our IDs to get them Xeroxed. We discovered that in the rush to leave early his daughter had forgotten to bring her school ID. Xeroxed copies of photo IDs are required to obtain an official permit to enter Burma. The driver and I went inside the immigration office at the Moreh Police Station. There the officer in charge took the Xeroxed copies of our photo IDs and the registration papers for the car. Our driver told the officer-in-charge about his daughter how she had left her school ID behind. The officer seemed annoyed.

“How old is she?”

“Nine, sir.”

¹⁸⁴ A non-commissioned officer.

He gave the permit in the end without a big fuss. The permit is basically an official letter to the corresponding officer-in-charge on the other side of the border stating the names of the visitors and the purpose of the visit. And, the purpose of our visit was, tourism.

There are more than one official entry points. We took the one through Gate 1. There is bit of a drive between the last checkpoint on the Indian side to the one on the Burmese side. We crossed an iron bridge, over a river with strong currents, right before we enter Gate 1. Unlike the Indian side of the border there were no military with guns in sight on the Burmese side of the border. The uniformed guards manning the check-post were very cheerful and cordial. One of them even saluted us in Manipuri. They took the permit and let us in. The condition of the highway was already much better on the Burmese side. The highway, ironically, was rebuilt and refurbished by the Government of India all the way to Thailand, as a goodwill gesture towards opening up the border – part of the “Look East” policy of the Indian government. The driver was very impressed with the road condition; he went 70 miles an hour as soon as we entered Burmese side. As we got closer to Tamu our driver called the rebel leader. We would be meeting in a restaurant.

The Meeting

“That’s him, with the black bag.”

I saw him from the car. He was standing in front for the restaurant, looking out in our direction. He had that small black bag around his waist that every typical Burmese or Manipuri trader in the border towns seemed to carry. Our driver had one too. He looked Burmese every bit. There was no way I could have suspected him to be a Manipuri if I was not told beforehand. We parked the car in the front of the restaurant, across the main road, and we all went inside the restaurant.

Introductions were made and we greeted each other. I told him about how Abongpa could not make it and gave him the books he sent with me. As we sat down in the inner room of the restaurant he called for someone. A young woman appeared at the door and took our orders. He seemed very fluent in Burmese. I learned later that he had been in Burma for five years. They chatted and laughed. We had no idea what was going on. At one point he mentioned “America,” the woman looked at me and giggled.

“I told her that you are the one who is going to marry an American lady soon. I had been telling her about you.”

Our contact person might have told him about Maria’s brief visit to Kakching, I figured. But, during the course of our conversation I learned that he knew a lot about who was doing what in Kakching. He was saying, “I remember you when you were a little kid. You had bad teeth when you were a kid, didn’t you? I often saw you at our neighbor’s house. I was telling my seniors about you. They loved your story – that little boy with missing front teeth and snotty nose is now going to marry an American lady. They all laughed at it so hard.” The restaurant woman took the orders and disappeared for the moment.

“How does he know all this?” I was thinking. Yes, I did have very bad teeth as a little boy. “Eaten by worms” as they say in Manipur. I remember the one time my father took me to this one guy who I remember was the one who finally cured my teeth problem. He had a very unusual method of treatment. He made me blow a pipe over a plate. And I remember seeing worms falling out of the pipe onto the plate. So, he must have seen me in my bad teeth days. It must have been before his brother got “disappeared” by the Indian Army, and long before he became a rebel.

Our conversation was all over the place. We talked about Manipuri films, and the ban on Hindi films imposed by the rebel organizations. My cousin Somen’s PhD research was on the history of Manipuri film industry. Our host reiterated the sequence of events that led to the imposition of the ban on Hindi media in 2000. He also mentioned some Burmese actress who was going to star in an upcoming Manipuri film.

Then the conversation moved to the current movement for the implementation of Inner Line Permit System (ILPS) in Manipur, spearheaded by FRIENDS. He was very clear about where he stood on the issue, he said, “Well, what FRIENDS is doing is good but our party agenda is different from theirs. FRIENDS is rounding up illegal immigrants without proper documentations, which is fine. But we want all the non-Manipuris gone until our political situation¹⁸⁵ is settled.” He continued, “It is a big mess. But at least in Kakching there are no longer any big business establishments owned by those mayangs. That’s what I did. As long as I am alive and I am in the party I would not let any mayang take over the Kakching market. Look at what they have done to Imphal, it is practically under the control of the big mayang businesswalas. Our comrades in the party cant do much about that either. Nothing! I sometimes call on them – why they have not done anything about it. Well, it is also a complicated issue. We know it is not right to target the poor Bangladeshi or Bihari immigrants who are working as day laborers. We want to go after the big businessmen but we cant. Our hands are tied right now. We have lost so many of our comrades in recent years...”

Finally, a pile of food was brought out – big bowls of soup, sweet and sour chicken, beef, shrimp, vegetables and fried rice. It was plenty. They do things differently with food on this side of the border. The food had distinctive flavors that were different from the typical Manipuri cuisines but I enjoyed the food, especially the pickled bamboo shoots.

Our guest and the restaurant woman were talking again. She was nodding her head presumably agreeing with whatever our guest was telling her. She laughed and giggled a lot. He turned to us to say how the Shan people are so close to the Meiteis. I keep hearing “kathe” in their conversation. People on this side of the border call us Manipuris, “Kathe.”

¹⁸⁵ I presumed what he meant was the question of sovereignty of Manipur.

“There has always been close affinity between the Shan and the people of Manipur. That is why we feel safe here. They let us be here. There is trust. Our forefathers of Kakching always had close relationships with the people in the Kabaw valley. I have been doing a lot of research lately. I have been consulting their scholars, studying their language,” he added.

What was nice about him was that he listened with the same intensity in which he spoke. I had always been curious about his party’s stand on Irom Sharmila, given that she had often criticized the use of violence as a means of political liberation. He said he and his party fully supported what Sharmila was doing for the people of Manipur. In fact in previous years he had even written letters of encouragement to her. I told him about my recent meeting with eche Sharmila and that her struggle was going through a difficult phase.

“So what is happening? Do tell me.”

I explained as much as I could about the strained relationship between her and the Just Peace Foundation, about the appearance of a man in her life, her frustration with the media and so on. He listened quietly, looking straight into my eyes, the whole time. After I ended, he said, “She can’t waver, no matter what. I will have to write to her again. We will have to remind her what inspired her struggle in the first place. She had seen the bloody aftermath of a massacre. She has seen things like I have. She will feel the weight of my words. I must write to her. She must not waver.”

We spent nearly two hours talking about so many issues but one topic he kept returning to was what he described as “Meitei genealogy.” He said, “We have to begin with our genealogy. Do you know the name of your forefathers?” He began listing names of his forefathers to the fifth or sixth generation. He continued, “These days, I am

meticulously studying the genealogy of our forefathers. That is the source of our history and history is patta¹⁸⁶.”

He turned to me and asked, “Now, tell me your mother’s sagei.”

“Naorem,” I replied.

“Ah see, Naorem women are very intelligent. Your scholarly aptitude is from your mother’s line not your fathers.”

Then he turned to our driver’s daughter. Her mother, turned out to be Naorem too.

“See, that is why you are doing so well in school. That intelligence comes from your mother’s side not your father’s.”

He talked very passionately about his quest for Meitei history. He was very proud of the fact that he was being acknowledged as the go to person regarding Meitei history within the party.

...

On our journey back to Kakching our contact person remarked that it was difficult for someone from Kakching to get to the upper echelons of the party hierarchy.

He said, “He is getting there. He is not quite there yet. There are scores of high-ranking officers above him. I know him well. He is a man of integrity. If he had wanted he could have pocketed lakhs of rupees. When he was in charge of Finance he did not take a single penny for his personal use.”

According to our contact person, he was no longer in Finance, now he held the portfolio for Agriculture or something. It is an open secret in Manipur that the various departments of the Manipur State Government are divided up as turfs under the rebel organizations. The rumor is that two percent of the total budget in each department is earmarked for the rebel organizations.

¹⁸⁶ Land title.

Conclusion

In this dissertation I have examined some of the ways in which precarity¹⁸⁷ takes form, in a place marked by long duration, low intensity armed conflict. Indexing the “existential and social condition of life” (Allison 2011) of a “historical present” (Berlant 2011a), the precarity of contemporary Manipur is often experienced as the “situation.” There is no knowing where a bomb would explode or a shoot out would break out (chapter 1). A general strike, a *bandh*, or an economic blockade could end up lasting for months. Many young men and women look outside the state for education and employment because there is no guarantee for either within Manipur. While precarity is exhausting it also compels, moves, energizes bodies. We see in the twelve elderly women confronting the Indian Army with their naked bodies (Chapter 3) or Eche Sharmila’s epic hunger strike (Chapter 4), or the rebel (Chapter 5) a desire for the political – to affect change, to register one’s voice. But the call for social change coming from the impasse of the present is a heterogeneous mix, precariously held together. While some protest the “excess” of violence (chapter 1 “Exposé”; Chapter 3 “Naked Fury”) Eche Sharmila’s “peaceful” struggle (Chapter 4 “A body in Protest”) is against any form of violence as political means. And, the rebels only believe in a “revolution” via armed rebellion (Chapter 5 “The Rebel”).

In this heterogeneously mixed, precariously held together, rallying cry for social change we see, what Berlant (2011a: 263) calls, “affective paradoxes of the political.” Eche Sharmila demands something that can only be called political but without politics. “Campaign is all politics,” she says (Chapter 4). Human rights activism, which professes

¹⁸⁷ Here, the term “precarity” is being used, as Allison (2011:1) puts it, “to index not merely the state or condition of precarious work, but also the existential and social condition of a life that feels risky, uncertain, and unstable” and drawing mainly on the works of Lauren Berlant (2011a, 2011b) and Kathleen C. Stewart (2011) my interest is in exploring the relationship between the precarity of the “historical present” and the precariousness of life forms.

to safeguard universal human rights, is accused of being partisan in practice (Chapter 1 “Migrant Workers”). The rebels who are inspired by Marxists communist ideologies are “forced” to massacre the migrant laborers (Chapter 1 “Migrant Workers”) because they cannot “touch” those other non-natives with capital (Chapter 5). Also, is it not paradoxical to condemn only the “excess” of violence? Do these affective paradoxes of the political extend from, as Berlant (2011a: 263) says, “cruel optimism’s double bind”?

All of the affective paradoxes of the political in relation to mass demands for social change uttered from the impasse of the present extend from this, cruel optimism’s double bind: even with an image of a better good life available to sustain your optimism, it is awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working. (Berlant 2011a: 263)

Perhaps, herein lies the limit of the analogy between how precarity takes form in post-industrial life of the “First World” and in places of prolonged political instability in the “Third World,” like Manipur. Although life in both places are reeling under an impasse, it is hard to say if the desire for the political, in the context of contemporary Manipur, is necessarily bound up with an “attachment” with the present in the same way. In the context of Manipur, the object of *the desire for the political*, if such a thing could be imagined, appears to be in the form of a closure –say, a peaceful resolution to the ongoing conflict. This closure, however, is oriented toward the past. For example, the four points proposal of UNLF¹⁸⁸ demands that the Indian State recognizes her “illegitimate” annexation of Manipur (Gokhale 2005). “History is our *patta*¹⁸⁹,” says the

¹⁸⁸ UNLF’s proposal to end the conflict in Manipur includes the following four points:

- (i) A plebiscite under United Nations (UN) supervision to elicit the opinion of the people of the state on the core issue of restoration of Manipur's independence.
- (ii) Deployment of a UN peace keeping force in Manipur to ensure the process is free and fair.
- (iii) Surrender of arms by the UNLF to the UN force, matched with the withdrawal of Indian troops.
- (iv) Handing over of political power by the UN in accordance with the results of the plebiscite.

¹⁸⁹ A land title.

rebel (chapter 5). It is not clear if this unwillingness to detach from the “wounded” past, to undo what was undone, amounts to a relationship of cruel optimism¹⁹⁰ or not.

However, as Stewart (2011:1) points out, “If precarity is one of the ways that form is incited, you can find its flood marks in long-standing ways of living and in non-melodramatic scenes of attachment or in little attentions to things that matter because they shimmer precariously.” We often see it in the relationships one inherits, maintains, sustains or cultivates with places, people and others. A simple walk down the street after a long absence feels vulnerable to familiar faces and familiar questions (Introduction “Home Coming”). It is in the response to a sudden dinner invitation (Introduction “Home Coming”) or, in figuring out what to do with an intimate knowledge secretly revealed about one’s father (chapter 2 “Rites of Affliction”). What one expects from one’s brother or sister could be the undoing, or even worse, poisoning of that which holds us together as siblings (chapter 4). Precarity is not just in the everyday rituals of the ordinary but the rituals themselves seldom exist as stable categories (chapter 2).

Thinking of precarity as something that marks our quotidian life opens up the question of “how it pulls some collection of forces, situations, sensibilities, and materialities into alignment, how it becomes nervously generative as a something” (Stewart 2011:1). In other words, it demands us to read the social field cartographically not just archeologically (Stewart 2007; Biehl 2011; Biehl and Locke 2010). This, in turn, requires thinking of subjectivity in terms of potentialities – of “subjects” to become.

¹⁹⁰ “A relationship of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.” (Berlant 2011a: 1).

Archaeologies assume the subject as dependent on past traumas and unconscious complexes, as in Sigmund Freud (1957), or overdetermined by regimes of power and knowledge as in Michel Foucault (1980). In arguing for life's immanence and its horizontal transcendence, Deleuze writes: "The trajectory merges not only with the subjectivity of those who travel through a milieu, but also with the subjectivity of the milieu itself, insofar as it is reflected in those who travel through it" (1997:61). (Biehl 2011:3)

The expectations, dissonance, and contestation of meanings around the protesting bodies of Eche Sharmila and the twelve elderly women (chapter 3 and chapter 4) reminds us of the precarity of the desiring subject. "We have our own *traditional feminism*," says one of the participants of the naked protest in front of the Kangla gate (chapter 3 "Naked Fury") trying to fix what they did as authentic act of protest and defiance, not mere performance.

In this precarity of the desiring subject what remains or perseveres in the end, according to the Deleuzian critique of the sovereign subject, is *desire* – a desire that "lacks a fixed subject" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Spivak 1988). However, Spivak points out:

This definition does not alter the specificity of the desiring subject (or leftover subject effect) that attaches to specific instances of desire or to production of the desiring machine. Moreover, when the connection between desire and subject is irrelevant or merely reversed, the subject-effect that surreptitiously emerges is much like the generalized ideological subject of the theorist. This may be the legal subject of socialized capital, neither labor nor management, holding a "strong" passport, using a "strong" or "hard" currency, with supposedly unquestioned access to due process. This is not the desiring subject as Other. (Spivak 1988:68)

Spivak (1988:1) argues that the "theory of pluralized 'subject-effects' gives an illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty while often provides cover for the subject of this knowledge" reminding us of the complicity of power in the production of knowledge. "Representation has not withered away," she adds (Ibid, 104). What then to make of Eche Sharmila's hunger strike or the naked protest?

In between our “precarious habit of quick jump from concept to world” (Biehl 2011; Stewart 2011) and the recognition of this annoying academic habit, I think, we have not quite figured out what to do with the desiring subject as the Other.

Attending to people’s desire for the political in the midst of “disorder” the dissertation aligns itself with ethnographic works (Das et al., 2000; Klienman et al., 2007; Labukeman 2008) on violence that are open to the possibilities of subjectivities which are not overdetermined by trauma and suffering. The dissertation also contributes to the understanding of social protest by looking at the visceral (Taussig 2012) and embodied (Comaroff 1985a, 1985b) experiences of protest, and not just limiting it to the realm of political activism or resistance (Sharpe 1959, 1989; Tilly 2008; Tilly and Tarrow 2006; Scott 1977a, 1977b, 1979, 1985, 1993; Jasper 1997,1998; Fox and Starn 1997).

Appendix

THE ARMED FORCES (ASSAM AND MANIPUR) SPECIAL POWERS ACT, 1958 *

(No 28 of 1958)

[11th September, 1958]

An Act to enable certain special powers to be conferred upon members of the armed force in disturbed areas in the State of Assam and the Union Territory of Manipur

Be it enacted by Parliament in the Ninth year of the Republic of India as follows:

1. Short title and extent : -

(1) The Act may be called the Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act, 1958.

(2) It extends to the whole of the State of Assam and the Union Territory of Manipur.

2. Definitions : - In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires -

(a) "Armed forces" means the military forces and the air

* For Statement of Objects and Reasons, see Gazette of India, Extraordinary, PT. II, S.2, dated 11-8-1958, p.71

forces operating as land forces; and includes any other armed forces of the Union so operating;

(b) "disturbed area" means an area which is for the time being declared by Notification under S. 3 to be disturbed area;

(c) all other words and expressions used herein, but defined in the Air Force Act, 1950, or the Army Act, 1950, shall have the meaning respectively assigned to them in those Acts.

3. Power to declare areas to be disturbed areas : - If the Governor of Assam or the Chief Commissioner of Manipur is of the opinion that the whole or any part of the State of Assam or the Union Territory of Manipur, as the as may be, is in such a disturbed or dangerous condition that the use of armed forces in aid of the civil power is necessary, he may, by notification in the official Gazette, declare the whole or any part of the State or Union Territory to be disturbed area.

4. Special powers of the armed forces : - Any commissioned officer, warrant officer, non-commissioned officer or any other person of equivalent rank in the armed forces may, in a disturbed area -

(a) if he is of opinion that it is necessary so to do for the maintenance of public order, after giving such due warning as he may consider necessary, fire upon or otherwise use force, even to the consider necessary, fire

upon or otherwise use force, even to the causing of death, against any person who is acting in contravention of any law or order for his time being in force in the disturbed area prohibiting the assembly of five or more person or the carrying on of weapon or of things capable of being used as weapons or of fire-arms, ammunition or explosive substances;

- (b) if he is of opinion that it is necessary so to do, destroy any arms dump, prepared or fortified, position or shelter from which armed attacks are made or are likely to be made or are attempted to be made or any structure used as a training camp for armed volunteers or utilized as a hide-out by armed gangs or absconders wanted for any offence;
- (c) arrest, without warrant, any person who has committed a cognizable offence or against whom a reasonable suspicion exists that he has committed or is about the commit a cognizable offence and may use such force may be necessary to affect the arrest;
- (d) enter and search without warrant any premises to make any such arrest as aforesaid or to recover any person believed to be wrongfully restrained or confined or any property reasonably suspected to be stolen property or any arms, ammunition or explosive substances believed to be unlawfully kept in such premises and for that purpose use such force as may be necessary.

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