

Final Report on the research project,  
**“Collective concern for violent death and non-violent protest in the midst of  
armed conflict in Manipur, Northeastern India”**  
(Project funded by IPRA Foundation Peace Research Grant, 2013)

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During the course of the field research in 2014, I was able to gain significant insights into the research questions that I set out to investigate, as elucidated in my project proposal. Specific to this project I was interested in three sets of questions in relation to (1) the practice of funeral rites in case of “violent” deaths, (2) the nature of social protest associated with “violent” deaths, and (3) the “local” critique of violence underlying the non-violent forms of protest, in Manipur.

In my ethnographic field research I found that the funeral rite of *chup-saba* was not performed in all cases of “violent” death. The initial concept of “violent” death had to be readjusted and reframed as “improper” death in line with the local idiom of *mishi-chadana-shiba* (“to die an improper death”). There were three main reasons for not performing *chup-saba*. They could be due to (a) let’s call it “ideological” reasons, where the parties concerned (in one case it was basically the head of the family) either do not believe in the efficacy of the ritual or do not recognize the particular violent death to be “improper,” (b) social stigma associated with particular “improper” deaths (in the case of delinquent bodies), and (c) “surrogate” Hindu rituals, although it was hard to see how widespread this practice is it is definitely becoming a norm in recent years. In case of “improper” deaths caused by the state, especially in the case of extrajudicial killings, the ritual of *chup-saba* seems to be absent.

The cases of “improper” death that I followed during the field research in Manipur occurred from 2000 to 2014, some of which were widely covered in the local and national newspapers. Whenever social protests are provoked by an “improper” death the form the protest takes often happens through a process of “ritualization” (Bell 2009a). 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 [see photo 1]. 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, 2009a: 74)

The process of “ritualization” through which these protests take form ranged from adopting elements of ritual mourning (funeral dress, silence, *aarti* etc.) to re-enacting esoteric rituals of affliction.

The rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama by the Indian Army in 2004 became one of the most controversial and infamous cases of extrajudicial killings in recent years. Manorama’s death provoked massive protests for weeks. It sparked an unprecedented mass movement for the repeal of the draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (aka AFSPA)<sup>1</sup>. In a dramatic display of great defiance, on July 15 2004, a group of twelve elderly women stood naked in front of the western gate of the Kangla Fort<sup>2</sup>, where the Assam Rifles<sup>3</sup> responsible for the rape and

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<sup>1</sup> AFSPA guarantees legal impunity to personnel of the Armed Forces – including military, paramilitary and police. It was imposed in various certain parts of Manipur in 1958, which was extended to the whole of Manipur in the 1980s. The public outcry that erupted in the wake of Manorama’s rape and murder lead to a partial removal of AFSPA from the municipal areas of the capital city, Imphal. So far, AFSPA has not been repealed in spite of the recommendation by the Jeevan Reddy Committee in 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The fortified Kangla Palace complex is the historical site of Manipuri sovereignty. It had been the site of Manipuri kings since the first century AD. At the end of the 1891 Anglo-Manipur war, it was under the occupying forces of the British Empire until 1947 when India

murder of Manorama were stationed at the time. They dared the Army to rape them. The banner they were holding read, "INDIAN ARMY RAPE US." The images of the twelve naked women protesting in front of the Kangla gate send "shock" waves across the nation [see photo 2]. In 2014 I was able to interview one of the twelve protesters. She referred to an esoteric "rain ritual" or rather to the myth of the "rain ritual" as the inspiration for the dramatic protest. She said,

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*<sup>4</sup>, scolded *Shoraren*, the sky god, pounding the *shuk*<sup>5</sup>, and then the *shuk* would be thrown into the *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].

Although the idea, that rituals provide some sort of an explanation of "how things are," has been criticized for being too "intellectualist" (Bell, 2009b) we see in this case that the protesters reinterpreted or re-appropriated the "meaning" of an esoteric ritual for their dramatic protest.

One feature of protest that was regularly seen in case of "improper" death was the refusal to accept the dead body of the victim after the postmortem. Such refusal by the party of the deceased family and their supporters sets up a situation to pressure the concerned authorities to hasten the process of justice. However, if no agreement could be reached between the victim party and the government then, sometimes,

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got 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.

<sup>3</sup> Assam Rifles is one of the oldest paramilitary forces of the Indian Army.

<sup>4</sup> Ponds. *Pohkri* 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.

<sup>5</sup> Pestle. *Shuk shuba*, pounding. Mortar and pestle as sexual symbols, the word *naba*, to conquer or to fuck.

the police would cremate the body. This happened in the case of Manorama too. On July 24, 2004, the police cremated Manorama's dead body with the authorization from the government of Manipur. It was only on July 11, 2008 that the Manoram's family performed her funeral rites; as per Meitei tradition a log of the *pangong* tree was used as her "surrogate" body for the cremation.

I also got an opportunity to follow up on the epic hunger strike by Irom Sharmila. On November 2, 2000, 10 civilians were mowed down by the Indian Army at Malom, on the outskirts of Imphal, the capital city. The shooting frenzy followed after IED exploded near a convoy of the Indian Army. In the wake of the massacre Irom Sharmila began an indefinite hunger strike demanding the repeal of the AFSPA. She was arrested by the Manipur police for her attempt to commit "suicide." For more than 14 years Sharmila has been languishing in the security ward of the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences, (JNIMS) hospital since then [see photo 3]. She is now being recognized as an icon of peace and non-violence. Perhaps, because of the extreme nature of her position and commitment, there is a tendency in people to elevate her to a higher plane of existence. Sharmila has had to struggle with this image of hers. In an unpublished article she wrote:

*Instead of taking 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.*

At the same time she tries to distance herself from the human rights activists who have tried to support her struggle through anti-AFSPA campaigns. She says, "Campaign is all politics," and that her struggle is a spiritual one. Thus, her "embodiment" of a unique social protest is mired in domains of sacred and profane in fundamental ways.

However, not all protests provoked by “improper” death overtly criticized “violence as political means” as such. In 2009, when a young woman was killed in the alleged crossfire between a rebel and a team of city police, the public ire was directed towards the fact that the shooting took place in a crowded place<sup>6</sup>. Protesting the shootout the All Manipur Roadside Vendors' Association and the Manipur Keithel Nupi Marup Reporting organized a 24-hour market shutdown. According to one newspaper the joint statement released by the organizations stated “the 24-hour *bandh* has been called to put an end to any firing incidents at crowded places in future.”<sup>7</sup>And, in 2013 when nine non-Manipuri, migrant workers were killed in a bomb blast, the response from the Manipuri civil society and the human rights activists was not as intense as it was in other cases involving Manipuri natives. These are some of the instances to highlight the fact that most of the protests of “improper” death seem to condemn the “excess” of violence rather than violence itself. These protests do not amount to a call for a utopian society completely free of injury or violence.

As anthropologist Alan Klima (2002: 287) points out, that any “return to the state of the whole, whether social or individual organism – the whole before the lesion, can never happen because such integral states themselves never were there to begin with.” What these protests seem to be calling for is not a return to a “state of whole”, but to a more habitable or livable “quasi-equilibrium” state.

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<sup>6</sup> The shooting at Khwairamban bazaar, in the heart of the Imphal city, later turned out to be a case of “fake” encounter by the police. However, there was a moment, in the aftermath of the shooting, when the public was outraged with the shoot out, without necessarily condemning the armed movement. (“Market ‘shootout’ condemned,” *Hueiyen News Service*, July 25, 2009.)

<sup>7</sup> “Market women bodies call 24 hr bandh today,” *Hueiyen News Service*, July 24, 2009

Anthropologists, Klienman and Desjarlias (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 losing 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, p11)

What Klienman and Desjarlias (1994) espouse is a certain belief in a fundamental “character” 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. However, without denying any demoralizing effect of the situation of instability in Manipur what we also see is that in spite of the prevailing precarious situation, or perhaps, *because* of the precarious situation, extreme forms of violence are met with immediate condemnation, public outcries and protests. In fact, exceptional measures are taken up by individuals to affect change, *because* of the exceptional “situation” that Manipur is embroiled in. What we see in the twelve elderly women confronting the Indian Army with their naked bodies or Irom Sharmila’s epic hunger strike is the desire for the political – to affect change, to register one’s voice.

The research project provided the key experience, opportunity and insights for my doctoral thesis, “Affecting Change: Death, Violence and Protest in Manipur” which I am preparing to defend in Spring 2015. Once approved the doctoral thesis will be

available in electronic format at the University of Texas at Austin's library website. The doctoral thesis would be a contribution towards the better understanding of social and cultural life of people in places affected by long duration, low intensity armed conflict.

Reference:

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Klima, Alan. 2002. *The Funeral Casino: Mediation, Massacre, and Exchange with the Dead in Thailand*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Desjarlais and Kleinman. 1994. "Violence and Demoralization in the New World Order." *Anthropology Today*. 10(5): 9-12.

Photos from the field:



Photo 1: A scene from a sit-in protest against the murder of a young woman by unknown assailant. (Photo by Kshetrimayum Jogendro Singh)



Photo 2: A scene from the Kangla protest of 2004. (Photo courtesy e-pao.net)



Photo 3: Meeting with Irom Sharmila in the security ward of the JNIMS Hospital, Imphal. July 2014. (Photo courtesy, Kshetrimayum Shanta Singh)



Photo 4: Irom Sharmila interacting with the media during her routine appearance before the Chief Judicial Magistrate, Imphal East, in September 2013. (Photo courtesy, Kshetrimayum Debeshwar Singh)



Photo 5: Lunch break during a human rights workshop organized by MWGSN (Manipur Women Gun Survivors' Network). I worked as a volunteer with MWGSN during the field research. (Photo by Kshetrimayum Jogendro Singh)



Photo 6: A scene of sit-in protest against threats on newspaper hawkers. (Photo by Kshetrimayum Jogendro Singh)