

Narratives of Violence against Women in Armed Conflict: A Study of Naga Women in Manipur

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Chapter 6

Conclusion

The thesis tries to highlight the insurgency and the counter insurgency measures taken up by the state, which have affected normal life in Manipur severely. It is the acts of subversion by Non-state armed groups that have prompted greater repression by the State. Violence is being used not only by the State, but also equally by the Non-State armed groups and conveniently in such a militarized place. The cycle of everyday armed violence has resulted in intimate personal consequences, and tends to feed other forms of violence between citizens, including at home, schools, streets, and the neighbourhood. The gender relations have also become more asymmetrical and violent due to decades of armed conflict. Violence and conflict have serious ramifications for civilians, particularly for women – it renders women at a disadvantage both structurally and socially. Not only are women subordinated by the culture and custom imposed on them in situation of conflict, but their lives are caught between two opposing parties, impacting their human rights and fundamental freedoms. The unwillingness of the Indian State to address the conflict issue in Manipur has greatly hampered the region in terms of its economy, social relations, gender relations and the over-all development of the place. The military measures it has taken up to control the people of Manipur have only worsened the situation instead of mitigating the problem.

All individuals if given the power have within them the potential to violate basic human rights and dignities. This is best explained by the actions of the Indian armed forces operating in the disturbed areas. They are empowered by the AFSPA, 1958. The

power vested on them allows them to resort to killings rather than gather evidence. Some, on the other hand, resort to killing for personal benefits such as promotions. The state forces serving in such conflict region are also at constant stress, as they are put under heavy duty to tackle insurgency, and knowing that they can be a victim anytime makes their lives miserable. They are also looked upon as outsiders and are viewed enemy by the entire population.

The impunity enjoyed through AFSPA are responsible for the arbitrary killings, extra-judicial executions, fake encounters and many other forms of violence. As evident from the experience of Manipur, it has proved that the justification for the imposition of AFSPA for the maintenance of law and order and national security is a wrong approach. It has not only failed, but has also brought about more dissent and alienation from the people of the region on account of rampant violation of human rights, breakdown of various institutions, lawlessness and insecurity. The arbitrary use of violence toward the civilians for decades has led to the undermining the rule of law and alienation of the people, who take up arms against the state for the injustice that the innocent citizens have gone through.

As a result of the continuous cycle of conflict, the state's counter-offensive has affected the domestic space as well. The use of rape by the security forces as not just accidental, but a form of collective punishment effectively dismantles the official war story. The use of rape as weapon of war challenges the presumption that sexual abuse of women is a consequence of militarization and underlines the fact that such violence is used to serve various ends. To believe that it is worth sacrificing all individuals' right and democratic values for the sake of counter insurgency, maintenance of law and order by

giving military the full power under AFSPA is a wrong approach. First and foremost, India should repeal AFSPA, or at least radically amend it. This would mean that the state security forces would function in line with the law, being accountable to the democratically responsible government and also this will also mean that the legal barrier for the criminal persecution of the members of state forces are removed.

Even if the State is to engage in counter-insurgency, it should be solely directed against the non-state armed groups and their collaborators. But what is evident in Manipur is that the state forces in their failure to engage and deal with the non-state armed actors, it terrorizes the innocent civilians including women and children. This in away give the credit to the insurgents to claim that the Indian democracy is a failure, and that the people will always be subjugated as long as they are under the occupation of India. The impunity enjoyed by the Indian security forces for the violence further give rise to the elements of injustice, hatred, and the anti-India feelings, leading to the taking up of arms. When the basic rights of the innocent citizens are snatched away by the state, it is morally justifiable for the minority groups to resort to political violence as they have little or no alternative in order to defend themselves. The resort to violence by various ethnic communities through their respective community armed groups including the Nagas in the northeast are the results of multiple issues such as historical independence, injustice, revenge, and self-protection.

The insurgents have also appropriated the meanings of gender and used it as a patriarchal social agenda by trying to take control of women and their bodies through various ways such as moral policing, character defamation, vilification, traducement etc. The Naga struggle for self-determination that once drew popular support of the masses

including the women is now perceived as corrupt and illegitimate due to violations of human rights and the crimes committed by the non-state actors. They don't seem to have any respect for fellow human beings and their rights. Many also believe that the so called freedom fighters have now become more like warlords and gangsters. They have been responsible for a series of bomb blast targeting both the State securities and individual civilians, causing fear, administrative disruptions, and committing all kinds of violence. Any forms of dissent or voices against their inhumane acts are barely tolerated and portrayed as betrayals of the national struggle. The real threat that people face today is the rampant criminalization of the non-state actors in the name of their struggle for self-determination and independence from the Indian state.

Some of the direct consequences of armed conflict on Naga women include physical abuse, sexual violence and psychological fear. Besides, the cultural norms placed on women have more repercussions, consequently affecting the whole society. Owing to these factors, there has been an alarming increase in incidences of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). With the economy in shambles, there is also an increase in women involving in drugs trafficking and as well the abuse of drugs, rise of prostitution, and trafficking of women and children, enforced recruitment of children in armed groups, rise of sexually transmitted diseases etc.

The State and non-state forces have also been responsible in controlling the local media by giving threats and orders as to what is to be published for the public. As a result, the media itself has not been able to fulfil the vision of what it aims to, to give voice of the subjugated and the oppressed and also to enlighten the citizens of what is happening. Like the Indian State and its people, the mainstream Indian media has also not

been bothered by what is happening in the Northeast region in their decades of armed conflict. It seems to have acted along with the Indian State in leaving out the region from letting other Indians and the world know as to what is really happening. The only time that we have witnessed a national media present 24 hours in Manipur was not to cover the real issues of the people, but to report the Olympic journey of Mary Kom when she reached the semi-finals in women's boxing in 2012 Olympics. The people from the region who have been ignored for decades as citizens of India, suddenly came to limelight in the wake of Mary Kom who was already guaranteed a medal in Olympics. What an irony.

To a significant extent, the insurgency problem in the Northeast is a response to the Indian state policies. And if policy makers and leaders are to continue relying on the state-centric literature and reports, the real issues will never be understood, and the state policy makers will continue to fail in their approach. Women organizations in Manipur, while not denying the State and non-state actors responsible for the Violence against Women, in most cases, have been more vocal on the VAW meted out by the Indian armed forces. They are also equally vocal if a non-state armed group of other community commits any form of VAW to one's own community. But not vice-versa. There is a lot of politics being played upon VAW based on community rivalry and difference. As discussed in chapter women who were sexually violated by the Non-state armed groups, many civil and human rights groups remained silent, including the media. The interest of one's community is considered the priority, and other issues including VAW are considered as secondary and as expendables at certain times.

This has been the picture of women's movement against VAW in Manipur. Both at the ethnic community level to the larger women's community as a whole in the state, women's fight against VAW does not seem to be heading in the right direction. There is little or no coordination and support for fight against violence against women among women of Manipur and their organizations. There is also a failure on the part of women to speak out against their own community's non-state armed groups for VAW. This is also largely based on the fear factor. Women leaders would have a second thought in coming forward and leading the protest against VAW. The scope for raising their voice in the fight for justice is very limited as they are also scared for their lives. Such is the environment in which human rights organizations and other civil societies function, as much is controlled either by the state and the non-state armed groups.

Two crucial aspects of this thesis which could be worth pondering upon seriously by future researchers and the present academics alike could be the following two. Firstly, the need of a drastic change towards how the Indian state perceives the issue of insurgency in the state and secondly how to tackle it. There is a need to address the Indo-Naga armed conflict with sincerity and genuinely so that a solution can be reached. And for this, the political, social, and historical nature of the demands and the context of the Nagas must be understood rather than the use of military means. The Indo-Naga conflict is a clear example which shows that forceful military strategies can never resolve any political issue. As long as conflict continues, the civilians, particularly women and children will be the ones who will be affected the most.

It is widely considered among the Nagas that taking up arms to fight against the oppressive Indian State is as equally important as any other form of non-violent struggle.

While armed struggle of the Nagas is largely considered to be seen as an open fight against oppression, colonization, and injustice, the way the struggle is organized; it does not liberate or empower women, but rather it strengthens its control over women in patriarchal norms in every sphere of social, political and economic.

Conflict also provided a space for women to be active citizens, but their issues are suppressed or kept aside in order to attend to other issues which they felt were more urgent to tackle. The Naga women do not think or speak much for themselves, but they seem to be more concerned about the bigger issue which they think is National or the Naga issue of right to self-determination. Most Naga women believe that everything will come to place once the Naga-Indo armed conflict is settled politically. But I strongly propagate that their rights will not be just given no matter what the situation is, be it in times peace or armed conflict. It is something which they should fight for along with men and it should not be compromised.