

**WHO GAINS?**

**WHO LOSES?**

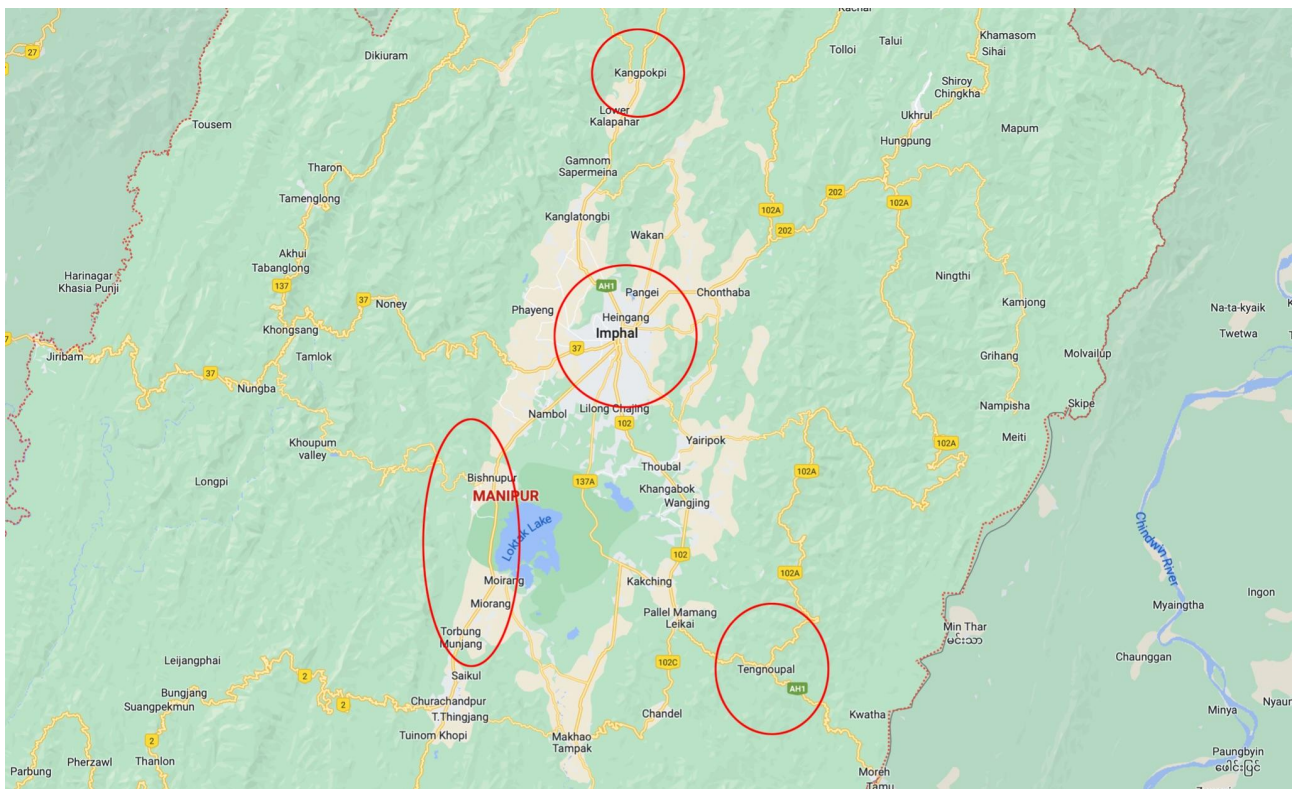
Interim Reflections from Manipur

Syeda Hameed, Roshmi Goswami, Jarjum G Ete, Angela Rangad

**Dr. Syeda Hameed** : Mentor - Bharat Jodo Abhiyan, Founder member South Asians For Human Rights. **Dr. Roshmi Goswami** : National Council Member Bharat Jodo Abhiyan, Co-Chair South Asians For Human Rights, Co-founder, North East Network. **Jarjum G Ete** : All India Union of Forest Working Group **Angela Rangad** : TUR - Thma U Rangli Juki, KAM Meghalaya

## WAS IT THE RIGHT TIME TO VISIT MANIPUR?

We were a team of four women from different places and having different affiliations. Three of us from the North East and one from Delhi, having different ethnicities and four different religions - Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Indigenous tribal faith. For one of us the process of connecting with Manipur during this moment of unprecedented crisis had already begun by way of a three day closed door meeting in a very private enabling feminist space where women from five different communities of Manipur were able to come together to talk. This visit came about from that closed door meeting and was initially planned as a Goodwill visit. But as we traveled through battle ravaged Manipur the objective of our visit kept evolving, incorporating new perspectives and taking different directions. Eventually it was just a 'mission of listening'. It was also the first in a series of proposed visits that we are committed to undertake.



We landed in Imphal on the 3rd of August. A most contentious day to arrive as it marked three months since the fateful day of May 3rd, and the Kuki community had proposed to hold a mass burial programme of their dead on that day. The proposal was to bury 35 dead including 3 women lying in the Churachandpur district hospital morgue at S. Boljang village. The proposed burial was turning out to be a hugely controversial and charged event as the proposed burial grounds were being claimed by both sides - for the Kukis primarily led by the Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum ITLF and by the Coordination Committee For Manipur Integrity (COCOMI) for the Meiteis. Mass condolence ceremonies paying tribute to the deceased were conducted at the peace ground at Turbung and in other Kuki areas and were already over by the time we reached our destination, and the burial was however deferred for another week by the Manipur High Court, which asked

both the Kuki and Meitei communities to maintain status quo and to arrive at an amicable settlement during the period.

Starting with this flashpoint of fresh confrontation, the entire period of our visit was indeed a 'flare up' period which was highly charged, each day bringing new challenges of heightened aggressive and combat posturing by all actors - Kuki and Meitei groups, Meira Paibis, Armed volunteers, State and Central security forces and the Military. We were therefore literally in the middle of 'events and incidents'. It was a lived experience of the 'Manipur battleground'. This also determined where we could go and where we could not.

On arrival at Imphal, we met a cross section of Meitei civil society people - old friends who we had journeyed together with in earlier struggles and movements as well as new acquaintances. The conversations that evening were very open and trusting and provided some context as well as questions. We were to visit Churachandpur or as some like to call it today Lamka, the very next day after our arrival. But after the tensions of 3rd August, we were advised to visit Tengnoupal - another Kuki stronghold District instead. An important District that has the Asian highway connecting Moreh, here we witnessed the massive community mobilisation particularly of women not only to support and run Relief camps but also as a part of the resistance / defense efforts. Next day, the 4th of August we decided to leave Imphal at the crack of dawn to head for Churachandpur, only for us to get caught up in events of yet another volatile day this conflict had seen. After having managed to negotiate our way through several Meira Paibi barricades, we managed to reach the border village of Kwakta, when our Pangal (Meitei Muslim) driver flatly refused to go any further after we had cleared every other hurdle. The incessant shelling and sniping from the surrounding hills unnerved him. It was the morning when three people had just been killed at 3 am while still sleeping, and the bodies were yet to be retrieved. Meira Paibis from every nook and corner of Bishnupur district and armed volunteers were pouring in to join the mourning family members and were also readying themselves to protest/retaliate. It was a very charged situation, and yet we might have taken a chance and walked through no man's land across what everyone there describes as the LOC, where our Kuki friends were waiting to receive us, but there were people with limitations in our team and we had to be mindful. Our return journey across Imphal towards our hotel was also fraught with tension as the anger and anguish about the deaths that day was palpable when we were stopped at every crossing by groups of people, mainly women who demanded to see our IDs.

Our journey to Kangpokpi the next day was relatively easier and smoother, but what we heard and saw there left us heartbroken.

During our short visit we interacted and had wide ranging discussions with a cross section of people (Meitei, Kuki Zo as well as Naga). We met organizations, women and student leaders, concerned individuals, experts from human rights and environmental movements, peace activists and negotiators, journalists, researchers, filmmakers, writers and theater personalities, students, relief providers, church workers and others. We also met survivors of sexual violence, assault and killings, families of disappeared peoples, displaced people and individual voices against the drug cartel. There were several narratives - some more dominant than others and also constantly changing as the situation on the ground changed.

## ANGUISHED NARRATIVES

The most striking expression cutting across both the Kukis and Meitei people we interacted with, regardless of their situation, was their unequivocal assertion that the present regime both at the Centre and in the state are clearly and solely responsible for the continued violence and complete anarchy in the state. People were unanimous in saying that if the violence was controlled and reined in in the first few days of its outburst in May, it would not have accelerated the way it did and they would not be in the present state that they are in. They also pointed out that many of the sexual violations and killings that happened after the 3rd and 4th of May could perhaps have been avoided. The issue of command responsibility and state accountability rang loud and clear from every quarter and category of people. In Kwakta when we knelt down to pay our condolences to the grief stricken widow of Prem Kumar Yumnam who was brutally killed just a few hours earlier, she screamed out - *'If Narendra Modi had controlled this violence three months ago my husband would be alive today. Why is he still silent?'* Both sides believe that the violence and aggression has been deliberately left to fester and as new elements are added the situation gets aggravated every single day. The Manipur crisis is therefore a clear indication of both the culpability and incapability of the BJP government led by Narendra Modi. In addition, the PM's petulant and arrogant silence and lack of empathy for the affected people shows a complete disregard for the state of Manipur and is deeply insulting to its people.



State institutions have collapsed and there is a clear sense of state inaction with bodies lying in the morgues and the state not enabling a process of identification and closure for

grieving families. Instead, the BJP regime ( Cf: Tushar Mehta's claims) is seen indulging in its typical diversionary blame game by labeling the unclaimed bodies as those belonging to illegal immigrants, while families wait in anguish and grief.

Concerns were also raised about undertrials in the jails in Imphal and other Meitei dominated districts, with Kukis having no access to their loved ones and of not even knowing if they are still alive. As one person pointed out, the state has been 'strategically absent'. This strategic absence seems to have become the DNA of the ruling regime when they are unable or unwilling to take action either because of incapability or calculations around some electoral gains or losses. People simply do not seem to matter.

The question of the state's strategic absence and the Manipur government's culpability was particularly glaring in the incidents of violence against the Kuki Zo community. While we had read about the extent and depth of the violations that had taken place since May 3, the first hand accounts of brutality and mayhem was extremely shocking, especially accounts of the sexual violence and the complete breakdown of any norms of humanity. Serious doubts were also raised about the partisan and communal role played by higher ups in the administration.

Another narrative is that the core issue is not even the formation of a separate Kuki administration or clash with militants in different locations but that it is essentially a geo-political conflict driven by people with a deep rooted political agenda. The 'strategic absence' and silence of the Centre seems to lend credibility to this narrative. Along the same narrative a question that was raised by several people including those who have been directly affected is "Who gains?" from allowing this impasse to continue and for the violence to fester. Is this lingering conflict a cover up or a diversion from other things that are going on? Linkages to the poppy cultivation and the drug cartel and drug money being used for electioneering was made by several people - some alluded to it while others were very vocal with ex police officer Thounaojam Brinda going public with evidence in asking 'Is CM Biren Fighting a War against Drugs or For Drugs?' She spoke to us at length on the various aspects and operational strategies of the drug mafia and the inextricable nexus with the seats of power and of the involvement of the higher ups of all the communities. And as the impasse continues, there is a growing realization on both sides of the divide that ultimately all communities are expendable.

On the ground, the ties between the two communities in conflict seem to have been severely snapped at least for now. Colleagues and friends who had lived together and worked together still maintain contact but the strains of everyday strife are pressing down and here and there fissures and doubt were visible. Amongst the women on both sides, this breakdown of ties is deeply felt. There is immense sadness, grief and regret for the loss of lives and the incidences of barbaric violence. There is also huge rage and anger. It is very early yet and too fraught to talk about peace. For now, the need is to focus on the practical requirements that have arisen and to find ways to build trust through a sense of urgent concerns common to both sides of the divide. But most importantly, it is for a cessation of violence and hostilities. Most felt that this was possible only with the removal of CM Biren Singh. The call for his removal came from both the communities and debunked the narrative that he has unanimous support from the Meiteis.

The Kukis across the board reiterated their demand for separate administration as trust has been broken and they no longer feel safe to be under the same jurisdiction as the

Meiteis. No doubt the demand for separate administration precedes the May 3rd outbreak of violence but since then and whatever has happened during this three month period strengthens the demand and the resolve of the Kukis to be separate.



Our visit to the relief camps and our conversations with family members and women support groups of the disappeared and a survivor of sexual violence has provided practical and some telling gendered insights which is being included in the section on Relief and Rehabilitation. The meeting with a survivor of sexual violence and getting to know her story and its aftermath from her detailed FIR and from people around her was especially painful and shook us profoundly. Her mother (a person who worked as a cleaner in Imphal) was emphatic about justice, seeking life imprisonment for the perpetrators but not capital punishment. The silence and the blank expression on the face of the survivor - a mere child barely 18 years of age, spoke volumes. We tried to draw her out and finally got the hint of an impish smile when we urged her to think about herself and to tell us what she wants rather than what others want for her! She was able to articulate what she wanted and that was enough.

The role and power of women on both sides of the divide is simply astounding and also very complicated. As one of our team members put it, she has never seen this kind of spirit and resistance across the country. We met Kuki women sitting in the pelting rain and thick fog at Tengnoupal day in and day out blocking the movement of RAF Commando trucks on the Trans Asian highway to the border town of Moreh. We saw too the sensitivity and gentleness of a group of young women who have encircled a young survivor of sexual

violence and her family moving them out from a very public relief camp and helping to set up a home in a beautiful and secure homestead enabling healing and freeing them from constant media and public focus and supporting the whole family on a daily basis.



We encountered the absolutely formidable force and power of the Meira Paibis as they enforced a Public curfew in Meitei districts, blocked access to Kuki dominated areas or organised/participated in collective mourning for a slain youth from the security forces. We saw their power but have come back with troubling as well as complex questions about their 'agency' in a strong patriarchal society like theirs. What was quite evident though was that unlike women from the Kuki and Naga communities the Meira Paibis and the Meiteis in general do not appear to come under any Unified Command Structure and therefore defy any attempts at disciplining. In our team itself there were disagreements about this structure of the Meira Paibis but it was obvious that while a loose and amorphous structure allows for autonomy and resilience at the local level as each Leikai or locality has its own group of Meira Paibis with different operating styles and norms, it can also be hugely chaotic and unrestrainable. A keen sense of justice and defiance against subjugation or oppression is deeply embedded in the political consciousness of Meitei women in general and in the Meira Paibis in particular. For lack of autonomy within the four walls of their home, the expression of this political consciousness in the public space is immensely important to the Meira Paibis and to their sense of being, and this is their driving force. While this is their strength, it is also their vulnerability, as vested interests from even among them, can so easily manipulate it in any which way. There is enough evidence coming in to show that 'lines were crossed' and extremely negative roles were played by sections of Meira Paibis in the present conflict and that at certain moments of

the conflict there was manipulation. There can be no justification for these roles, but neither can there be sweeping generalizations and condemnation for all. The question then is how to 'channelise' this political consciousness and this resistance to stay focused on a community enhancing rather than community dividing approach, that can form the core of peace building efforts. It is a daunting task but not impossible, and very tiny baby steps have already been initiated quietly at the local level by women who do not wish to be named or identified.



On the Kuki side we also met and interacted at length with young women, educated in Universities outside Manipur but who are now back in their villages, who provided a refreshingly different and gendered perspective and analysis of the conflict, the ethnic divide and the stereotypical role of men in general including men from their own community. They were enraged that men who cannot manage their personal lives are entrusted with managing the country, with the mess that men as 'decision makers' from Delhi down to the local level have created and of women being caught in between, and having to attend to and clean up the 'mess'! These women were grateful and appreciative of the opportunity to interact with our team, air their frustrations and share their thoughts, as they were fed up of answering mechanical questions posed to them by visiting media teams and others. They were also able to discuss at length and in a balanced and unbiased manner the role that social media and fake news has played in fuelling the conflict. Many of the older women also felt that the strategy of the Biren Singh government, of having appointed advisors from outside with right wing links, as opposed to listening to voices from the ground is also a critical contributory factor to the present catastrophe and to determining the hate filled political narrative of the state in general.



## WHAT SHOULD WE BE THINKING ABOUT?

- Manipur has witnessed several episodes of violent conflicts over the years. But this time, civilisational control and norms seem to have been lost, and lines of control crossed like never before. If this is a 'war', as has been pointed out by both sides, then the basic principles of the Geneva Convention as well as the principles of the Meitei War principles and the Tribal war principles which predate Geneva have been grossly violated. The fact that lines have been crossed is indeed alarming as is indicated by the numerous cases of brutal sexual violence as well as the fact that ambulances carrying the injured were waylaid and attacked even as convention dictates that hospitals and health services be exempt from attacks in even the most brutal of wars. These tragic instances raise the question as to why such lines were crossed? In any process of peace building this question will have to be thoroughly probed and factored in.
- Killings and death is inevitable in a 'war' or in the process of 'defense' but what is not acceptable and was strongly condemned across sections is the levels of barbarity. We were able to initiate some conversations on the levels of barbarity with the Meiteis but it was only with the more progressive people. More in-depth engagement is required and with a wider cross section of people of both the communities including with the Meira Paibis.
- The systematic clamp down on civil society organisations and dissenting local voices by the BJP government, and the promotion and patronisation of vigilante groups that toe the political line has obliterated or systematically suppressed an important section of credible voices that help to maintain a level of checks and balances that keeps together the social fabric of communities. In conflict affected Manipur this has always been of particular significance. The BJP regime's coercive approach has enabled the hijacking of rational and societal building voices by the divisive and hate filled agenda of the state supported non state groups. The blanket impunity provided to such forces and select CSOs by the State has totally emboldened such groups, given them a sense of complete security and enabled them and not the progressive voices to control the narrative.
- There is a huge proliferation of arms and ammunition ranging from light machine and combat guns to mortars and rocket launchers. We were told that the arms were both looted or handed over upon production of 'aadhar cards' from the police stations and depots! We saw people moving around with AK 47s casually slung over their shoulders clad in casuals or in military fatigues! As army fatigues were also looted and widely distributed, oftentimes it was difficult to distinguish between a civilian in 'defense' role versus state security forces! The availability of this level of arms and ammunition in a state with an extensive international border is deeply disturbing and totally incomprehensible from a National Security point of view. It totally defies one's understanding and sense of 'internal security' and of the responsibility of the Government in question to be in control. In Manipur today who is in control has become a guessing game.
- The issue of 'toxic masculinity' and the need to form a network of exposed young men from both communities to work against it was also raised by a PhD researcher - a young man from the Meitei community.

- We encountered shelling, gunshots and aggressive tear gassing at different places and at different moments of our visit. One night we were housed with a friend and his family and prevented from going back to our hotel by the relentless onslaught of peppered tear gas and gunshots and witnessed the reaction and trauma of his little children. We wondered about the collective trauma of children across the ethnic divides in Manipur for the last three months! And yet instead of working towards finding a sincere solution, it is whataboutery that members of the ruling regime indulge in. What if their own children were caught up in such a situation was our question?
- The issue of illegal migration of people from across the 1700 km long border with Myanmar was repeatedly mentioned as a key trigger of the present conflict by the Meiteis. There were allegations by both sides that border management which lies with the Centre is pathetically run or deliberately mismanaged. Picking up on the question of poor management of the border issues, the Kuki leaders pointed out that with the ongoing war in Myanmar and the extensive human rights violations by the military junta, crossing over of refugees from Myanmar is inevitable. India needs to urgently formulate a clear Refugee Policy guided by International standards and play a role on Refugee protection as an Asian leader. They further reiterated that there should be clear guidelines to identify refugees so that genuine Indian citizens are not repeatedly harassed.
- The immediate as well as long term fallout of the present conflict is the issue of internally displaced people, which needs urgent attention. In the relief camps, apart from the conditions of the relief camps itself and the horror that drove people to these camps, the large looming question on everyone's face was about their uncertain future and status. The issue of IDPs has repeatedly been raised by human rights and relief workers in the past and the situation in Manipur certainly calls for urgently pushing for an IDP policy to be drafted and adopted.
- There is undoubtedly an angle of dwindling land resources and increased populations making claims on the limited land and the tension around this. An opinion that was expressed from the Meitei as well as the Nagas was that perhaps there is a need to stop the 'recognition' of new villages.
- The clear cut agenda of bringing about a communal divide along religious lines by the right wing Hindutva forces was strongly pointed out by the Kuki side with documented evidence. On the Meitei side, while the role of the Meitei Leepun and the Arambai Tenggol (which appears to be more like Biren Singh's private army) is loud and clear, opinions are divided about the actual control and power of the communal forces over the Meitei ethos. Some are reluctant to give them more importance and power than they actually have, some wonder whether they can be used while yet others see them being at the root of the hate filled agenda. Whatever be the various opinions, the insidious inroads of Indian right wing forces into Meitei society, having a clearcut agenda especially in districts like Bishenpur, where there are large numbers of followers of the indigenous Sanamahi faith cannot be trivialized. They are there with their agenda advancing stealthily, fraying and diluting the social fabric of the Meitei ethos and sense of pride.
- Narco Terrorism is a phrase that is bandied around by all and sundry but it is also an issue of great concern. That there is a nexus between the politically powerful, the

corporate world, elections and drug cartels is obvious enough but it is an extremely murky and violent world and beyond the reach of common analysis.

## **SURVIVING : ON RELIEF AND REHABILITATION**

We visited relief camps in Moirang, Tengnoupal and Kangpokpi. Camps in Moirang had mostly Meitei people and the camps in other two places had displaced people belonging to Kuki-Zo communities. These camps were housed in school and college premises. This has meant that educational activities in these spaces have come to a halt since the last 3 months.

State presence appeared to be absent or minimal in the relief Camps. We were told that when the conflict began much of the relief arrangements were being done by community groups particularly the localities where these camps came up. In fact it is only now, 3 months later that the state is attempting to intervene by way of relief. However, the relief is still far from satisfactory. The living conditions in the camps continue to be difficult. Only two substantial meals consisting mostly of rice and dal are served twice a day and not much is provided in between, not even morning tea, which the people have expressed is very difficult especially for the elderly and the children. Children have no access to other snacks. Mattresses have been spread out on the floors of the rooms and with the rains the rooms double up as a space for drying clothes. This makes the atmosphere damp and poses a health risk.

There is no privacy. Men, women and children are sharing the same space. Pregnant and lactating mothers are also not provided separate space. Mothers and pregnant women lacked necessities such as thermos and hot water bags which were then provided by the community groups in some places. PDS provisions have not reached the camps. In fact PDS has not reached the districts in the past 3 months.

There are no dedicated health services in the camps, just informal arrangements with locality medicine shops for providing medicines where necessary. No psychosocial counseling is being provided and as one of the camp persons expressed that she feels there is no one she can share her sorrow with even though there are many people in the camps.

Education has come to a complete halt and is a big concern especially for parents of those who are in class 10 and 12. There are concerns about their board exams and preparations for the same.

Many camp members have also expressed the need for work and some camp residents are compelled to leave the camps in search of work. Some community groups have initiated livelihood activities in some camps but have expressed that this is merely a stop gap arrangement.

Some persons who arrived at the camps have subsequently also moved out of the camps and are residing with relatives in the state or outside the state.

A big question that is left unanswered is rehabilitation. How and when can those in the camps safely return? How will they rebuild their homes that have been destroyed? Many including community relief camp committee members are raising this concern.

Given the observations and information gathered after interactions with those in the camps and the volunteers and community groups the following suggestions are being made:

1. SOPs for camps need to be developed along with camp residents, local groups in the area, community and volunteer groups and the state administration that should be shared with everyone.
2. Safety and security audits of the camps need to be carried out.
3. Audit of health and sanitation in the camps needs to be done individually for each camp to ensure that living conditions including toilets are adequate.
4. Administration should ensure that PDS, Mid day meal and ICDS entitlements reach the camps and local areas.
5. A system be put in place for regular and assured health check-up and access to medicines and healthcare in the camps including referrals.
6. Immediate educational support be extended to the children in the camps by way of extension of SSA teaching.
7. Psychosocial support through counselors be provided in the camps.
8. Support services for pregnant and lactating mothers be ensured in the camps
9. Support to the local community hosting the camps by ensuring timely, regular and uninterrupted supply of PDS and other entitlements. Ensuring supply of medicines and medical essentials to the local area dispensaries and PHCs.
10. Ensuring access to information in the camps, including internet access.
11. Putting in place an accessible and transparent grievance redressal mechanism in the camps.
12. MGNREGS should be immediately implemented for the displaced people for income support.
13. Legal support teams should regularly visit the camps for support and providing information and updates on FIRs lodged by camp residents.
14. Many residents who lost their family members and whose bodies lie in Imphal morgues need immediate support in identifying the dead and for getting the bodies back so they may be given a dignified burial. State administration should proactively support such families in this.
15. Budgetary support to neighbouring states where relief camps have come up, and ensuring an SOP for internally displaced persons is put in place at the earliest.
16. A Special and comprehensive provision for all the survivors of sexual violence which includes a series and as many as required gender sensitive psychosocial counselling for the survivor as well as the family members including siblings, partners etc, survivor centric economic and social reintegration packages.

## **CAN THERE BE ANY FINAL THOUGHTS?**

People go back from the Manipur battleground with a high level of despondency. Our team experienced the same sadness, depression and sense of futility. The strange refusal of the PM to say anything till pushed, speaks volumes about the apathy of the Centre to the state and to the sufferings of the people on both sides of the conflict. At another level though, it also appears to be part of the larger militaristic strategy of tiring out your opponents by making them 'wait' it out. We could see the fatigue on the faces of the women on both sides who were out protesting or grappling against emerging crises on a daily basis. The class and economic dimensions of peoples suffering and how they will rebuild their lives is

also quite apparent. Without a doubt, it is the poor and primarily the rural poor who will face the greatest challenge in rebuilding their lives for a long time to come. That peoples and communities are expendable was a clear message that seemed to run through all the State action or inaction. Yet at the end of the day, we could not but be affected by the 'spirit' of the people and the continued 'resistance' against all odds. We heard numerous accounts of people cutting across communities helping each other during the height of the violence. These voices have mostly been drowned in the overwhelming narrative of violence, but needs to be picked up and heard. Finally, it is Regina's words that we carry back with us. She said " We have hope and we cling to it for it cannot be taken away from us. Hope is all that we have left after our houses and homes have been burnt, our fields have been destroyed,, our places of worship gone and our social lives ripped apart". We parted in hope that we would find more such voices in the period ahead and that we may join hands towards healing and rebuilding.



## POSTSCRIPT / SNAPSHOTS FROM MANIPUR

Syeda Hameed

There is a sense I am in a foreign country. The word LoC is bandied around. Barricades are visible everywhere. It is a war zone. It's as if two countries are struggling to be born. Meiteis and Kukis, in full battle gear, are ranged on either side. AK 47, bombs, hand grenades. Sights and sounds which send a chill body signal. I am in Manipur.

A small delegation of 4 women. 3 from the North East and me. I, Kashmir born, partition torn, stand on the debris of a land that is rightly known as the most precious jewel of India. I stand here because since the last 20 years when Kangla Fort was handed to people, I have identified with Manipur. Today we are in mourning. Wamiq Jaunpuri wrote these lines 'Who will answer?' when Gandhiji was assassinated. Today they resonate with Manipur

*Ye kaun qatl ho gaya?*

*Ye kaun dil ka raaz sabse kehte kehte so gaya*

*Jawab iska kaun de?*

*Ke khud hamare haath iss lahu mein hain rangey huey*

Who has been killed?

Who has been put to sleep while pouring out his heart?

Who will answer?

We? But our hands are dyed in the same blood.

Here are some of my thoughts which I need to express while they rage within me.

### Scene One

Images rise on the mind. We are on our way to Churachandpur. We reach Kwatka Bazar, a Pangal-Muslim village. It is raining. Hundreds of women are sitting in partly covered shelters along the road which leads to the LoC dividing Bishnupur from Churachandpur. Hundreds of men swarm around, many with guns. 3 Meiteis, father-son and their friend have been butchered then shot at 3 AM. Their bodies are still lying there. 'Pay your respects' we are asked. I cover my head with my namaaz scarf. We walk towards the women. In their midst is the young wife of the victim. My colleagues bend down to hug her trembling form and let their tears mingle with hers. We hear shots, cross firing very close; my heart lurches. This is the end but we cannot move. I have just finished mourning for the martyrs of Karbala; Bishnupur and Churachandpur are also Karbala. We get up and move to the car; a man appears at the window. 'He is Nobo Volcano, beloved Manipuri singer.' someone says. In a loud voice he shouts into the cameras being held before his face. 'Modi! We voted you in; in the centre and state. And you? You have betrayed us. You have let us butcher each other, rape and kill our daughters while you and your Manipur colleague are watching from your far off high perches.'

Four of us plus two of the brightest and kindest women from this state who have accompanied us, sit in stunned silence while word comes from the border that any further movement is fraught with danger. We turn back. We were just 15 kms from the Line of Control.

### Scene Two

This time it were the Kuki we saw as we entered district Tengnopal from Imphal. The last post, Moreh is 30 kms from Burma border. Moreh is where long ago we went for shopping for gadgets smuggled from Burma. From the car window, while it poured heavily, we watched the large sign Separate Administration. In the downpour we saw more than a thousand women and girls sitting in the open in defiance of both the elements and the central and state governments. Drenched but not subdued. Two women, equally strong, balanced and sensitive steered the meeting which was held in a shed, slightly set back from the main road leading to Moreh. Kuki Women's Union for Human

Rights Voices rose around us; 'We are betrayed so brutally; we don't believe in uniforms, in fake id-cards. Militias in army uniforms raze our homes and kill us; Arambai Tengot and Meitei Leipum. We demand separate administration for the Kuki- Zo Tribal People.

I think of lines from Sahir Ludhianvi as the first glimmer of light in this dark tunnel:

*Laakh baithe koi chhup chhup ke kamein gahon mein  
Khoon khud deta hai jalladon ke maskan ka suraagh  
Saazishen laakh udhatien rahein zulmon ko naqab  
Le ke har boond nikalti hai hatheli pe chiragh*

No matter how long they crawl in their hideouts  
Each blood drop gives clue to executioners' hideouts  
Conspiracies throw endless veils over injustice  
Each blood drop emerges with a lamp on its palm