State Violence against Women in Conflict Zones: A Study of Manipur

M. Yurreisem
Ph.D Scholar, Centre for Women’s Studies
University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad- 500046

Abstract: According to some studies, one sixth of India’s population live in areas affected with armed conflict. There are the secessionist movements in the Northeast and Kashmir, and the Maoist movements in several regions of India. The Indian government denies that there are any armed conflicts in India (GOI, 2007), and uses phrases like ‘disturbed areas’, ‘insurgency infested’, ‘law and order problems’. Armed conflict in Manipur is a result of the contestation between the Indian state’s forces and the insurgency / non-state armed groups over the question of ethno-nationalism/self-determination, which has a historical setting. The response of the Indian government has been the perpetual reliance on military methods, counter insurgency and enactment of anti-people laws such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958. This paper attempts to look at how women in the state of Manipur are subjected to violence by the state forces, conveniently with impunity.

Key words: Armed Conflict, Violence against Women, Armed Forces

Introduction

India is a highly militarized state. Its total national armed force, with around 1.1 million personnel, is the third largest in the world. Its air force is the world’s fourth largest (Cockburn, Cynthia). Internally the army is deployed against insurgency in two peripheral areas, Kashmir in the north and the cluster of small states in Northeast India. According to Gautam Navlakha, India’s armed forces remain the busiest ‘peacetime’ army fighting internal wars…More than one-third of the army is engaged in counter insurgency…. If paramilitary forces are added to this, no less than 50 percent of the security force is deployed against…people (Kazi, 2010, p. 9). The irony is that Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958, was first imposed ostensibly to secure territories that were not fully integrated into the India union; to bind the not-India that lay at India’s peripheries into the Indian geo-national imaginary. But after the act being applied for more than half a century and with an ever increasing scope, the AFSPA has only confirmed the raptures between what is and what is not India (Kazi, 2010, p. 38).

Under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, a large number of police and security forces have been deployed in Manipur. The government does not provide figures of the forces deployed in insurgency infested regions so analyst can only make estimates. It is estimated that the state has over 14,000 police and at least 50,000 military and paramilitaries being deployed in Manipur (Human Rights Watch, 2008, p. 22) where the population stands at 2.2 million. Indian armed forces include the army, the central Reserve Police Force, the Border Security Force, the Assam Rifles, and the Indian Reserve Battalions. And for this study, Manipur state police forces are also taken into account. The paper attempts to argue that in such a situation of heavy militarization, women and ordinary civilians are caught in between the state and non-state armed forces. Physical and sexual violence against women during conflict is not a new phenomenon. Violence affects women and men, however this article tries to argue that women are more likely to be subjected to violence, particularly sexual violence. The source for the article includes both primary and secondary.

Violence against Women

Violence against women takes many forms. The 1993 United Nation Declaration of the Elimination of violence Against Women was the first to arrive at an internationally agreed upon definition of violence as it pertains to women’s experiences. Violence was defined as ‘any act that results in or likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats or such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life’ (Johnson, Holly et al, 2008). Physical and sexual violence, particularly against women, continues to be a well-documented feature of conflict in Manipur as they Indian security personnel enjoy impunity guaranteed by the AFSPA.

In many nationalist discourses the nation is depicted as the ‘motherland’. The language of nationalism is itself gendered and the image of the nation is often linked to the ‘mother’ or ‘mother goddess’. Women become identified with the nation and their bodies used to reproduce the boundaries of the nation and as transmitter of national culture. Since women are identified as territory and linked with the ‘honor’ and control of
this territory, rape has always been part of the act of war and conflict. Here the aggressor by violating the honor of the enemy, the act is symbolized as violating the community honor of the ‘other’ – enemy (Chenoy, 2002, p. 63). And it is through the use of this symbolism that women are being raped by soldiers in conflict regions like Manipur.

According to Paula Banerjee, the impact of border laws (such as AFSPA, 1958) on people in North East India is often considered from a male perspective. There is little realization that these laws have a different impact on women. The women of the region are often portrayed by the coercive machinery of the state as not merely deviant, but their sexuality itself is considered threatening, rendering the impact of these laws on women even more violent (Banerjee, 2008, p. 258). Women are more prone to violence from the Indian army, as most of them hail from other mainland states of India which are considered to be more patriarchal. The first reported rape case in Manipur by the military was that of Miss Rose, a Tangkhul girl of Ngaprum village, Ukhrul district, who was gang raped for hours on the night of 4th March 1974 by Border Security Forces (Combat Law, Vol. 2, Issue 1). She wrote a suicide note to her fiancé with whom she was to be married (Morung Express). After the incident she was rejected by her lover, family and community due to the deeply rooted patriarchal and cultural notion of the Tangkhul Nagas, considering her to be no longer pure and clean. Rose committed suicide two days later out of shame and rejection while the perpetrators went scot-free, due to lack of sufficient evidence. Women occupy a very different position in the Tangkhul Naga society as compared to men, and so they are treated differently. Women who are raped are frequently shunned, ostracized, and considered unmarried or spoiled. This is where the issues of rehabilitation and counseling survivors of violence in conflict zones come into being. Even today, there is little or no mechanism of support system to deal with survivors of sexual violence, and this needs to be seriously looked into.

Violence and torture against civilians, particularly against women, is another consequence of the power and privileges enjoyed by security forces in Manipur. Countless incidents of physical and sexual violence go unreported and uninvestigated due to fear of social stigma. Only a few cases were ever filed and even in these cases women did not get justice. On 10 July 2004, members of the 17th Assam Rifles arrested Thangjam Manorama as a suspected member of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) at her residence in Bamon Kampa. An arrest memo was given to her family at the time. The next day her dead body was found a few kilometers from her residence. There were gunshot wounds on her genitals. An autopsy revealed semen marks on her skirts, suggesting rape and murder (Sangai Express). Justice Upendra Singh who headed the Commission to look into the case found the security men guilty (NDTV). But the Assam Rifles had challenged the validity of the commission arguing that they are governed under a special act and only the centre can set up a commission of inquiry and not the state (NDTV). Like any other case, justice for Thangjam Manorama is still awaited.

The extraordinary repression gives rise to extraordinary response. It was in July 15, a dozen of elderly Meitei women marched to the area headquarters of the Assam Rifles, stripped naked and waved banners which read, “Indian Army Rape US”, “Indian Army Take Our Flesh”. The naked protest made it into the headlines and portrayed to the world the atrocities committed by the Indian state with the use of its military forces; backed by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958. Section 4, of the AFSPA, 1958 gives the commissioned officer, warrant officer, or non-commissioned officer, the power to shoot to kill any person who is acting in contravention of any law and order. And section 6, establishes that no legal proceeding can be brought against any member of the armed forces under the AFSPA, without the permission of the Central Government. This section leaves the victims of the armed forces abuses without a remedy (South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre).

A recent incident of crime against women which came under strong criticism was the gang rape of Jangthailiu Kamei (age 40 yrs), a U-morok (King Chilly) trader from Nungleiband village of Tamenglong, at Meijrao (Bishnupur) by four persons, of whom two are Indian Reserve Battalion (IRB) personnel. The woman is a mother of four. The incident happened on the night of March 21, 2012. When the victim along with her brother-in-law were on his truck to sell U – Morok (king chilli) at Imphal, they were suddenly stopped by four persons travelling in a car. They assaulted her brother-in-law on the pretext that he had not registered the vehicle at the forest check post. At gun point they abducted her to a nearby field and gang raped her. They threatened to shoot her dead while she screamed for help. She was later found in an unconscious state. Apart from the physical and sexual violence, the perpetrators took away their cell phones, a sum of Rs 6,500 and about 40 kgs of their chilli. She pleaded to them to have mercy on her saying she is a mother of four. While filing for a complaint in the police station she mentioned that she overheard one of the culprits calling ‘Sir Tiken’ on the cell phone and this was used as a big clue in demanding a thorough probe into the case. And also taking note of the insistent demand by various civil societies, the police apprehended the perpetrators along with the confiscated goods and money. While she went to identify the culprits in the police station, to her surprise and anger she was offered money to keep silent about the incident. But instead she demanded for capital punishment. Being a poor woman doesn’t mean that she can sell...
her dignity after what they had done to her by committing the most heinous crime. She is a mother of two girls and two boys. She was on her way to sell king chilli so that she could use the money to pay their school fees.

In a conflict area, spaces, especially that of women become restricted and their mobility is severely hampered. For example, women, particularly in the hilly regions of Manipur are unable to work long hours in their fields and are compelled to go in groups or accompanied by men for fear of assault from armed security personnel. Fewer hours in the fields mean that food security gets affected (Gill, 2010, p. 9) as women contribute equally or more than men in a household economy. Not only are women raped by the security and police forces, but they are also targeted for raising their voices against injustice. A mass rally was organized by the Joint Action Committees constituted against the rape of Kamei and murder of one Keisham Premila in collaboration with several civil society organizations. But the peaceful women protesters were made the targets of Thoubal District Police, where the rally was blocked by the police leading to intense scuffle between the two sides. The police in their efforts to drive back the protesters fired several rounds of tear gas shells and mock bombs causing serious injuries to six women (Sangai Express).

Cases of physical violence are very common in conflict regions like Manipur. Mrs. X (37 yrs) along with three of her male friends was picked up for no reason by the state police commandos in plain clothes while they were collecting pig feed in Imphal. They were blindfolded, driven around, beaten and tortured by the police personnel who were all male. She was then handed over to the East Imphal police station, where she was again beaten and tortured by three police women. It was in the police station that she was falsely branded as a National Socialist Council Nagaland (Isack-Muivah) cadre who was trying to plant bombs in the town, and passed remarks like “these days women are more dangerous than men.” She was interrogated and when she replied saying that she is a mother of eight children and the youngest is just five months old, they tortured her more saying that she was lying. “They beat me on my hands, lower limbs and buttock until I lost my consciousness. I was taken to court and released the next day. Doctor advised me to go for x rays and other health check up caused by the torture but I could not go due to financial problems. I was bedridden for more than two weeks and during which I could not even hold my son nor was I able to properly breast feed him. I felt so sorry for him.” The incident gives us a clear picture as to how violence against women affects not only the individual, but the entire family. Firstly, as a mother she could not take care of her child and her own needs. For example, women require additional nutrition and health care if they are pregnant or lactating (UN 2002). Secondly, there was a lost of two hands in the family, considering that tribal women contribute equally or more than a man in their family subsistence apart from handling the daily chores such as fetching water and woods, taking care of the children etc. Food scarcity and unequal distribution of food items are also said to be exacerbated during periods of conflicts, rendering women and girls more susceptible to malnutrition (UN 2002). In conflict zones women are stereotyped as just mothers, wives, survivors and victims, while men are portrayed as aggressors and soldiers. But the above incident involving the police women clearly shows that women are also active perpetrators of violence.

Patterns of violence against women in conflict areas do not arise naturally, but are ordered, condoned or tolerated based on political calculations. Furthermore, these crimes are committed by the state armed forces as they know that they will not be punished for committing crimes against women. And since the perpetrators enjoy impunity, many women victims choose not to report cases of sexual violence. Many women hide or deny abuse for fear of social stigma, or because their coping mechanism may dispose them not to publicize for the abuse they have suffered. Social stigma is greatly increased by the failure of the states to prevent and prosecute sexualized violence, leading women to feel doubly victimized in their attempt to seek justice. Women also have particular healthcare needs as a result of these violations.

Conclusion

There is an immediate need to address the armed conflict in Manipur. For this purpose the political, social and historical nature of the demands and the contexts in which they are embedded must be understood, and it means the need of a serious dialogue for solution rather than military force. Only then that security forces will operate entirely within the framework of law. Nowhere is the rule of law established by allowing law enforcement agencies to work with impunity. Ordinary citizens, particularly women, having seen and experienced so much violence inflicted on them by the state forces, have even failed to recognize the kinds of violence to which they have been subjected, it has become so normal to them. Women continue to be at the receiving end of both conflict and patriarchal dominance. And hence to tackle violence against women it requires change in attitudes and behavioral norms, especially of men. Armed conflict negatively affects women and men and results in gender-specific disadvantages, particularly for women who are not always recognized or addressed by the mainstream, gender-blind understandings of conflict and reconstruction. And since these conflicts are not part of the Indian growth story, the communities affected by them are not visible, upper caste elite
and their stories and voices are not part of the mainstream discourse. (Chenoy et al., 2010, p. 30). AFSPA, which was instituted by the Government of India (GOI) has today become a symbol of state repression in the state of Manipur, and this was declared by none other than Justice Jeevan Reddy Committee. (GOI)

References


Insider/Outsider: Feminists in India Addressing the State’s War


Armed Forces Special Powers Act: A study in National Security Tyranny: South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre


Gender and armed conflict: Overview report (United Nations, 2002)


