

The Victimization of People in a Conflict Ridden Zone: Manipur and Nagaland

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Abstract:

Violent political conflicts are not new for the people in the North Eastern India as the region has been in turmoil for many decades. Recurring violence affects the lives of the ordinary people directly or indirectly. This paper tries to explore some of the ways in which common people are victimised by the armed groups whether it be security forces or insurgents. Many social and political analysts have described the contemporary socio-economic and political situation in the North Eastern states of India as an impasse. With particular focus on Manipur and Nagaland, two of the eight North Eastern states, this paper looks at the ways in which people live through this social and political crisis. Through some selected short stories from Temsula Ao, Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh and Yumlembam Ibomcha, the precarious lives of these people are discussed. These fictional narratives echo not only the unending conflict but also engaged in the larger critical debate on human rights violation where one act of violence can result in a chain reaction and an unending vicious cycle that seems impossible to come out of.

Keywords: North East India, Conflict, Victim, Insurgent, Security Personnel, Short Story

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Introduction

The “North Eastern region of India is both a [c]olonial [c]onstruct and a post – colonial region created by the Partition of the sub-continent” (Nepram 86). It comprises the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. The entire region is linked with the mainland India through a 22 kilometre stretch in Siliguri that is often called the Chicken Neck¹. The region is multicultural with close historical links with China and Southeast Asia and one of the most ethnically diverse areas in South Asia. It is home to around 40 million people including 213 of the 635 tribal groups listed by the Anthropological Survey of India. The native population has much common in culture and tradition with the neighbouring Tibet, Burma and the countries of Southeast Asia but each of the states that form this part of India has its own culture and tradition. Despite its rich cultural heritage, the North East (NE) India is plague by the problem of insurgency and various political and social problems related with it. In August 2011, the Indian central government identified 79 armed insurgent groups active in the six states of NE India. The conflict dynamics ranges from insurgency for secession to insurgency for autonomy, from sponsored terrorism to ethnic clashes, to conflicts generated as a result of continuous inflow of migrants from across the borders as well as from other states of the country (Hayes 6). All these conflicts are for power and control of territory and are traceable to the historic reasons rooted largely in the colonial period.

The notion of lack of development and security has also created strong feelings of frustration and anger against the Indian Union in the region. Apart from this there is economic backwardness and lack of opportunities. The continuous inflow of illegal immigrants from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh has added an additional burden to the people which has changed the demography of the region. All such major issues have sown seed for the several movements for sovereignty and right to self-determination and self-identity and finally generate militant organizations. One of the root causes of insurgency also lays in the economic factors such as inequality caused by continual deprivation and exploitation of the region. Even though the causes of these rebellions are diverse, in Manipur and Nagaland the nature of conflict is similar. The idea of resistance against alleged Indian

domination and territorial claims gave birth to rebel groups in these two states (Sen 12). This is the reason why Nagaland and Manipur have been chosen out of the eight North Eastern states for the analysis.

Narratives of Violence

While discussing the work of the writers from North East India, Preeti Gill, a senior editor – Zubaan Books says, “Many writers continue to grapple with these [violence] issues. Having grown up in the shadow of the gun, their desire to analyse the common people’s reaction to insurgency is as strong as ever” (Gill n.pag.). Literature produced from NE in fictional form has tales of violence encountered in everyday life because of the socio-political unrest.

Writers like Temsula Ao in her *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum for my Head* (2009) locate the trauma and suffering of both individual and collective. Easterine Kire in her *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) and *Life on Hold* (2011) illustrates the human rights violation both by the state and non-state actors in Nagaland. Similarly Indira Goswami in her *The Shadow of Kamakhya* (2001), Siddhartha Deb in his *The Point of Return* (2002) Mitra Phukan in her *The Collector’s Wife* (2005), and Dhruva Hazarika in his *Sons of Brahma* (2014) has explored the widespread of violence and its victims in Assam. Yumlembam Ibomcha in his *Numitti Asum Thengjillakli*² (1990), Hijam Guno in his *Epam Meihoure*³(1992), and Siddhartha Deb in his *Surface* (2005) explain the same genre of violence from the state Manipur. These literary productions highlight and question the violence that has damaged the land and complicated the ordinary lives of these peace-loving people:

The writer from the North-east differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way. While it may not make him a better writer, living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but perforce master the art of witness. (Nongkynrih and Ngangom IX)

At present none are left untouched by the violence of insurgency. Violence becomes a mode of life. This is what Temsula Ao writes about in her volume of short stories *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. She describes how ordinary people cope with

violence perpetuated by various militant outfits as well as the armed force. In the introduction to this book, Temsula Ao comments that:

[For] the victims the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life — their very humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves the survivors scarred both in mind and soul (X).

The present study finds that the insider position in turn influences the writer's specific instance and outlook on the war. The study focuses on the short stories of Yumlembam Ibomcha, Temsula Ao and Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh in which characters such as Leihao and Sakhitombi in "Theng-gainaba"⁴, Satemba and Jemtila in "Curfew Man", Apenyo and Libeni in "The Last Song" and Tombi in "The Mauled Cub" depict all the shared condition of uncertainties and anxieties regarding their survival in a society torn apart by violence.

Men as Victims in Conflict Situations

The impact of armed conflict on gender relations are significant; even if "men are the primary perpetrators of violence towards women and children, it is important to note that men too are subject to victimisation and violence, including sexualised violence" (Jack 3). Not only women but also men experience human rights abuses that are different from but equally unjust to those afflicting women, whether as prisoners of war or soldiers. Ao's brings up her protagonist not as prisoner or soldier but as an informer to the SDO (Sub- Divisional Officer) in her story "The Curfew Man". The story has its setting against the background of the Naga nationalism in which the author reveals the predicament of people living under constant worry under the shadow of violence from both the insurgents and security personnel in Nagaland where:

Everything had been plunged into a state of hostility between two warring armies; the one overground labeling the other as rebels fighting against the state and the other, operating from their underground hideouts and calling the Indian army illegal occupiers of sovereign Naga territories. Caught between the two, it was the innocent villagers and those living in small townships who had to bear the brunt of the many restrictions imposed on their lives. (Ao 34)

The opening of the story itself draw the reader attention to the political turmoil of the region “[the] night curfew was still on because there were troubled times for all in the land” (Ao 34). In this situation Ao introduces two characters Satemba, a retired Naga constable in Assam Police and his wife Jemtila who comes to Mokokchung town in search of a new beginning of life. The husband is appointed as a government informer by the SDO and made him a messenger against those insurgent groups. But unfortunately during the process he is caught by one of the insurgents and warned him to quit his job. He “gripped Satemba by the neck and hissed in his ear, ‘Go back home curfew man, and if you value your life, never carry tales’. So saying, the stranger quietly vanished into the night” (41) and wounded him on his knee. At this moment he does not understand how to react “should he do as the stranger [insurgent] had just ordered? What if his movements of the evening and the encounter with the masked character had been monitored by ‘other’ secret eyes?” (41). The husband-wife, after this incident is frightened to take risk of their lives and thought of departing the land. Here the protagonists conditioning to fled the land is a part of “forced displacement, the clearest violation of human, economic, political and social rights” (Moser and Clark 32) produced by the SDO and the insurgent.

The story also represents the socio-political scenario of NE India where the gun culture and curfew culture are always associated with the people and their land. Ao’s narrative gives light to the most striking situation of the people living in this region with the character Satemba. The nightmarish atmosphere in the story that traps almost all the characters without giving any hint of upcoming events is the reality faced by the people. The characters are seen all the time in disturbance of possible violence that may come anytime to their lives. Both the armed groups threatened the protagonist time and again and at the end of the story the SDO says to Jemtila “Tell your husband that his services will no longer be needed. And also say that his wounds will heal properly only if he nurses them quietly” (Ao 43). The life of Satemba is what Butler called “ungrievable”⁵ lives in the essay “Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect”. Satemba is no more different from what Butler considered ungrievable being as he most oftenly becomes the target for annihilation in protecting the life of the SDO who is considered creditable of living. The ordinary people such as Satemba is taken for granted; time and again such folk are used by the dominant one during these curfew nights.

The political term 'Curfew' is what Ao puts forward at the title of the story "The Curfew Man". If there be a hidden connotation to this; is it possible to articulate this political term 'Curfew' with a man? This answer can be conceived from the author portrayal of the character Satemba whose business is to carry information during the curfew night. He is the mighty man during the curfew night and "curfew [is] no problem for him because he [is] given the password each night by his masters to enable him to move about freely gathering or giving information" (Ao 39). Curfew is a political situation that is familiar to the people of the NE India. It becomes the most terrible thing for the people living in this region because soon after "dark all social activities ceased, even church services or social gatherings [have] to be concluded before the curfew hour began" (34). Curfew is something that is declared to keep situation under control but "[there are] several incidents where civilians were shot dead by the patrol parties after curfew and their deaths reported as those of underground rebels killed in 'encounters' with the army" (34).

The attack on the civilians both by state and non-state actors is also depicted by Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh, a poet, writer and translator from Manipur. He is keenly aware of the victimhood of his land – "deaths, injuries and humiliations resulting from 'insurgencies' and 'counter-insurgency operations,' as well as the hidden hurt that citizens quietly endure" (Baruah 3). In his story "The Mauled Cub" the author made a striking in the narrative by showing the two way victimization of an innocent family. Located in the heart of the present Manipur, the story portrays the anguish of people in a designated disturbed area:

The shootout went on for nearly half an hour. Soon after the sound of the gunshots has died down, heavily armed men in uniform forcibly entered their house and dragged her brother, a student of class X at that time, out of the house without giving any reason (Misra 188). He has become one of the many youths arrested without arrest-memos and not returned (189).

This arrest of Tombi's brother by the security personnel deployed in the region reflects a militarized zone. Random arrest and killing of "innocent people [are] not a new development in Manipur, as also in various areas of the Northeast where the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act⁶ is imposed" (Gill 358). Primarily focusing on the characters Tayenjam also

draw attention of the readers how the characters out of fear become the victims of the underground groups:

He was the leader of the three youths who claimed to belong to one of the numerous insurgent groups and had forcibly stayed in their house. They had done so earlier many times. They came and went as they wished. Tombi and her mother were helpless against the heavily armed strangers. They could neither inform their neighbours nor report to the police - it would only create more trouble and complicate the matter. (Misra 190)

The story depicts the nightmarish experiences of a family where the son (Tombi's brother) has been taken away by the army and "the whereabouts of [him] could never be known" (Misra 191). On the other side of this violence, the protagonist, Tombi has been raped by the insurgent as well as the security personnel. Tayenjam is successful in bringing up his fictional characters and visualizing both the state and non-state sponsored violence.

The narrative centres on human rights abuses and particularly the juvenile group, in the entirely social and political agenda. The author also creates the image of the dishearten parents and their traumatic memory of losing their children. When Tombi's father reported to the police about his son, they "charged that her innocent brother must have been a member of an insurgent group to warrant arrest" (Misra 190). The father was being harassed by the police and detained for a number of days for questioning. It seems totally tragic in the setting as the consequence is the death of the father. This story portrays the emotional experiences of every individual in a conflict ridden state by highlighting the predicaments of Tombi's family – the arrest of the brother, death of the father, rape of Tombi (both by insurgents and army personnel). The character Tombi and her brother represent a whole generation of children and young people in Manipur who have been emotionally shattered by the violence all around them.

Women as Victims in Conflict Situations

In conflict situations, "women are activists, caretakers, providers and survivors" (Dodds 58); their role changes according to the situation and their lives are more vulnerable because of their status and femininity in society. During conflict, the image of men on the frontline and

women and children stay in the safe zone of the home, no longer holds true. Women and girls are the main victims in many armed conflicts as they are subjected to attacks and violence precisely because of their gender and “rape has been used as a weapon” (Pilar 247) to dishonour and bring harm to the hostile community. This is no different during the Naga Independence movement and Ao has taken up this issue to explore terror in Nagaland. In the narrative “The Last Song”, Ao looks at the Naga society where tremendous brutality is practised by the Indian army. The story begins with a widow called Libeni, whose husband has gifted for singing. Their daughter, Apenyo has inherited the gift of the father. The setting of the story happens to be a Naga village where the background is given as:

These were, however, troubled times for the Nagas. The Independence movement was gaining momentum by the day and even the remotest villages were getting involved, if not directly in terms of their members joining the underground army, then certainly by paying ‘taxes’ to the underground ‘government’ in which this particular village is ‘no different. (Ao 25- 26)

The narrative discloses how the militants in the name of Naga nationalism corrupts to the villagers by collecting money from every household as a tax for the travel expenses of the rebel leaders. To this particular year in the village, a church is built and now the villagers are busy with the dedication of this new church building. The singers, the church members and the rest of the villagers are all moving with preparations for the grand event, on the other hand, the army is also arranging to use their power to arrest the village leaders for their support to the underground groups by paying taxes (Ao 26). When the function starts the villagers could hear the sound of gun fire in the distance. The choir started singing and the soldiers are incensed because it is an act of open rebelliousness. Everyone runs for their safety including the members of the choir; it was only Apenyo who stood the ground. Hers only single voice becomes a challenge to the soldiers, later she was grabbed by the army and pulled her away from the crowd towards the old church building. The girl was heard singing the chorus of her song over and over again even as she was being carried off to be repetitively raped by the Indian Army. Even the mother was raped by the soldiers and killed. The Captain ordered his men to take position around the church and empty their guns into the building so that those who witnessed the scene should not forward the story of this Black Sunday. Again the old church is burnt down and many innocent villagers lose their lives. Apenyo and her

mother lose their life in a mindless massacre and the action of the brutal killing explores how the soldiers treat these ordinary people. One can also visualize and experience the destruction and the terrible situation produced by the armed forces in the following depiction:

There was chaos everywhere. Villagers trying to flee the scene were either shot at or kicked and clubbed by the soldiers who seemed to be everywhere. The pastor and the gaonburas were tied up securely for transportation to army headquarters and whatever fate awaited them there. (Ao 29)

From the postscript one knows that the story is told by an old grandmother who is witnessed to the killings and who cares the memory of that Black Sunday. Ao's characters projected that how people are locked in a conflict area that somehow becomes the historical setting but who are still human in their suffering and pain. Through the characters of Apenyo and the mother, Ao rebuilds the representative of all the women who becomes victim at the hands of the state army. She gives voice to the outside world "how half a century of surviving in a war-zone has taken its toll especially on the women who have to bear the maximum brunt from both the establishment as well as the rebel militants" (Zama 73).

The story demonstrates the manner of power and powerlessness. Within the artistic of storytelling the author brings the incident of that Black Sunday and reveals the violent action of the army where human rights are being violated where "the storyteller invests the past with a significance that must be kept alive" (Syiem 31). The narrative elucidates the conflict that has made up the texture of the struggle of the Naga community. Even the title 'The Last Song' signifies much more than the mere song (of voice), it defines the need for revenge, the blood of sacrifice of the innocent and the blood which purifies. The story sensitise the reader to the disturbing currents of a hostilities society.

With this particular story the reader can bring up what Butler has mentioned in *Frames of war*:

[We] feel more horror and moral revulsion in the face of the lives lost under certain conditions than certain others. If, for instance someone kills or is killed in war, and the war is state-sponsored, and we invest the state with legitimacy, then we consider the death lamentable, sad, and unfortunate, but not radically unjust. And yet if the

violence is perpetuated by insurgency groups regarded as illegitimate, then our effect invariably changes. (41)

What Butler emphasized is to the idea that most of the people considered the state sponsored attack as legitimised to some extent. Ao resists to this idea of Butler and her narratives can be a response to this notion. She does not take any consideration to the killings of the state sponsored as legitimate; her narrative implicitly reveals whether the killing is through the state sponsored or non- state sponsored; lives should be seen from the humanistic perspective.

Ao also explicates women's fatality in the narrative "The Curfew Man" through the character of Jemtila. She is not a direct victim in the sense that she does not receive any physical harm or assault like her husband; but she too have the psychological injuries because of her husband position and the environment where she lives:

This woman was by no means ignorant of what was happening all around them and how circumstances were forcing innocent, peace-loving people to turn to means that they would not ordinarily employ, just to stay safe and alive. She had to admit that they were indeed caught in a vice-like situation and every time Satemba went out at night, she kept a lone vigil in the darkness of their small hut and worried until he appeared at the door. (Ao 39)

Manipur being one of the conflict torn areas of India, the women of this region also experiences the degradation of the human values in the society. In his story, Yumlembam Ibomcha, a short story writer and a poet, articulates the same sentiments which Ao expresses earlier. The short story "Theng-gainaba"⁷ by Yumlembam makes an attempt to foreground and highlight the underlying theme of violence. Through the third person omniscient narrator the story begins when Leihao, a sixty year old vegetable seller is asked not to go to market because of the firing that had taken place earlier day. A market place where people gathered from each and every corner of the society becomes a target for their conflict. Yumlembam here creates a situation to illustrate how the prolonged unrest in the region has affected the social harmony and the people of NE as a whole and particularly women and children and particularly the poor one. The author here uses the flashback technique in which he portrays the strife (interior and exterior) of Leihao. The protagonist, Leihao even feels terrified when she remembers the incident of Sakhitombi dead and exclaimed:

Ish! Magi asum thok u tamlakpa haibadu tareko. Eigi ekoksi lanthok khraga etung da famlibi magi makokta hotchinduna karamna paluriba. Emaipema! Ei siramgani. Ish:Siramlabanine siramlaba. (Yumlembam 111)

[Alas! It was written to be happened in her life. How is it possible the bullet whizzed overhead of mine and hit her. Oh! I would have died. I am almost dead, dead]

*(Independent Translation)

It is seen how a firing on the market place changes the entire otherwise peaceful environment into a tense one. An innocent woman has to lose her life in the firing creating a psychological trauma to the main character Leihao as she used to sit next to her in the market. This kind of frightful incident happens in a routine manner in Manipur. For instance the killing of Rabina⁸ on 23rd July 2009 and the incident of Malom Massacre⁹ on 2nd November 2000, are few examples of such killings in the state.

In order to show such terror Yumlembam brings out the incident of Sakhitombi's death. The story indicates the chaotic situation at the market place like Ima Keithel¹⁰ in which the civilian population, especially women has to cope with daily occurrences of violence at their very doorsteps. It also explores a sense of despair with the increase of happening unexpected things. We are unsure about our lives what will happen in the next moment. Just as Sakhitombi died, we feel unsafe and insecure at every place. This is what Butler explains in her essay "Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect" when she says that our lives are vulnerable in the social way we are living. We feel insecure when we are exposed to other persons whom we know or have never met. This uncertainty of our lives in the hands of the other is the underlying message of this narrative "Theng-gainaba".

The author has used Leihao's way to market as the route to reveal her psychological sufferings of this violence ridden society. With open ended narrative the author tries to draw the picture of the contemporary Manipur society where every place is seen as an execution

ground, the market place being no exception. The realistic picture of society where the virtual collapse of the law and order is clearly highlighted by the writer, also tries to narrate the lives of the unsung heroes, the hardworking innocent masses made victims of circumstances.

It would not be out of context to make a reference that Yumlembam is true of being a sensitive writer who writes of human sufferings, particularly of sufferings that are encountered in everyday life due to the instability of the socio-political nature.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the selected short stories it can be concluded that the North East India has witnessed a prolonged conflict situation in the last several decades. With this study of the narratives it is exposed how both innocence men and women become victims of conflict, whether directly as war fatalities or casualties or through the effect of dislocation of their livelihood and social network. All the stories which have been discussed reflect the hardening of hearts against the militants at a particular phase in the course of the armed insurgencies in these states. To some extent it also reveals the extra judicial killings and fake encounters taking place routinely in the region. The significant epicentre of Ao, Tayenjam and Yumlembam stories are within the realm of the human; their concern is with the lives of ordinary people who are caught in the socio-political conflict with no choice of their own.

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¹ It is the narrow 22 kilometre corridor between Bangladesh and Bhutan that connects the Indian subcontinent with the North East and also often used as an apt image to describe the alienation of the North East from the national mainstream. This 22 kilometre border is supposed to constitute only about 2 per cent of the total boundary of the North East with India. The remaining 98 per cent are international borders, with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal (See Phanjoubam Pradip "Northeast Problems as a Subject and Object").

²Numitti Asum Thengjillakli meaning *The Day has Advanced Gradually*

³Epam Meihoure meaning *My Home is on Fire*

⁴Theng-gainaba meaning the Clash

⁵An ungrievable life according to Butler is the one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all (See Judith Butler *Frames of War*, 38).

⁶AFSPA was first enacted on 11th September 1958 in the Naga inhabited areas of the state of Assam and the Union Territory of Manipur to tackle the Naga insurgency but later to control the secessionist action and other issues such as drug trafficking and other border-related crime, it has extended to all the other states of the North East region barring Sikkim. AFSPA violates the right to life of the Indian Constitution by section 4(a) which grants the armed forces to shoot to kill in law enforcement situations without regard to international human rights law restrictions on the use of lethal force. The right to liberty and security of a person is violated by section 4(c) of the AFSPA which allows the soldiers to arrest without warrant merely on suspicion. The law also states that “no prosecution can be initiated against an officer without the previous sanction of the Central government”. (See Saikia “9/11 of India: A Critical Review on Armed Forces Special Power Act (Afspa) and Human Right Violation in North East India” 268-269).

⁷“Theng-gainaba” can be translated as “The Clash”

⁸ On July 23, 2009 there was a shootout at Khwairamband Keithel (market) of Imphal where Thokchom (o) Rabina Devi was killed by a stray bullet that pierced through her head. The ex-militant Chungkham Sanjit was killed in what is obviously a case of fake encounter and injuring five others in this incident (See Vivek Chadha *Armed Forces Special Powers Act: The Debate*, 2013).

⁹ On November 2, 2000, in Malom, a town in the Imphal valley, 10 civilians were allegedly killed by the 8th Assam Rifles at a bus stop including a 62 year old woman, Leisangthem Ibetombi and 18 years old Sinam Chandramani, a 1988 National Child Bravery Award winner. The incident later came to be known as “Malom Massacre”. This incident has promoted Irom Sharmila to take the fast-unto-death agitation (See Meghalaya Times, accessed on Thursday 29, June 2017).

¹⁰ Ima Keithel (literally a market run by mothers) is the second largest women’s market in Asia. (See Bisoya Loitongbam and Priyatam Anurag “Interplay Between Individual and Shared Identities of Women Entrepreneurs in Manipur).