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**The Politics of Fixity: A report on the ban of Hindi films in  
Manipur, Northeast India.**

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**The Politics of Fixity: A report on the ban of Hindi films in  
Manipur, Northeast India.**

**by**

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**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**December 2011**

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this report to my parents who have always believed in me and Oja Niranjay who was a passionate teacher and a kind soul.

## **Acknowledgements**

I thank Tamo Sunil for providing me with valuable insights and information about Manipuri film industry. I also thank him for his time and his efforts to connect me with Manipuri filmmakers, Mukhomani Mongsaba, Lancha and Oken Amakcham. I am very grateful to Maria Luz Garcia, who has been a constant support throughout the different phases of writing this report. Without her constant encouragements it would have been difficult to finish this report. I also thank her for patiently going through my materials and helping me with copyediting. I am grateful to Kathleen Stewart for her comments and suggestions on the report. I thank Kaushik-da for always believing in me. I owe a lot to Kaushik-da for his wonderful insights on a wide range of topics. I have constantly found them useful in this report. I have benefited a lot from the numerous conversations and discussions I had with Tatha, Omer, Chang, Vova, Noman, Claudia and other graduate students from the Department of Anthropology.

## **Abstract**

### **The Politics of Fixity: A report on the ban of Hindi films in Manipur, Northeast India.**

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The more than half a century long armed conflicts in the Northeast of India have created a condition of existence in the region that is often described in pathological terms like 'crisis' or 'disorder'. Such diagnostic attitude towards the region invites 'solutions' to 'fix' it. This has result in increasing militarization of the region on the one hand and opening up markets on the other. In the rush for a 'solution' we might have denied intelligibility to the everyday life of people in the region. The report examines some of the creative ways in which people constantly navigate and negotiate a field of contesting powers. In 2000, Hindi films were banned by militant Manipuri nationalist groups in an effort to stop what they have called the process of *Indianization*. The report explores the circumstances in which the ban took place as well as the trajectories that the ban has taken. In this engagement with the ban, the report uncovers that any attempt, by the Indian state as well as the militant Manipuri nationalist, to put bodies in fixed categories is often frustrated and negotiated in everyday practices.

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2: Sense of the place .....	9
Where in India is Manipur?.....	12
People and the place.....	14
Purity and Pollution.....	15
Back in Delhi .....	17
Cinema Halls in Manipur .....	19
Chapter 3: The Ban and other trends .....	26
Singing nation.....	27
Manipuri cinema and the ban.....	30
Silent state.....	37
Korean wave hits Manipur!.....	39
Tamil films in Manipur .....	43
Manipuri "Digital" films .....	45
Film Forum, Manipur .....	49
Conclusion .....	50
Chapter 4: The ban as refrain .....	52
Being Manipuri .....	53
Manipuri sexuality .....	56
Sovereignty .....	58
Conclusion .....	59
Chapter 5: Manipur as a "contested space".....	61
The 'merger' of Manipur .....	62
Contestation over time, place and bodies.....	65
Foreign body: <i>Mayang</i> .....	71
Speaking back to powers through jokes.....	72

Conclusion .....	78
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	81
Bibliography.....	84

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Why are Hindi films<sup>1</sup> banned in Manipur<sup>2</sup>? RPF (Revolutionary People's Front), one of the proscribed militant groups in Manipur, has banned Hindi films in Manipur since 2000. Though this ban of Hindi films is the event around which I have framed this report, the ban and its trajectory are just openings that allow me to talk about how the logic of nationalism, both in the sense of nation-state and those aspiring to be nation-states<sup>3</sup>, is a powerful force in producing places, bodies and cultural practices. Yet, this force is made with resistance and escapes, such that power is always forced to negotiate at its extremities. The ban of Hindi films in Manipur provides an interesting "site" to examine precisely these ambiguities and conformities of power.

On October 14, 2000, Revolutionary People's Front (RPF), a proscribed militant group in Manipur, put a ban on all forms of Hindi media in Manipur, including Hindi films. This ban came couple of days after a captain of the RPF, Captain Mangal, died in the custody of the Indian Army. The ban was very strictly imposed by RPF – there were reports of RPF cadres confiscating and burning CDs and cassettes containing Hindi films and songs in the first couple of years following the ban. The ban has been particularly effective in the cinema halls of Manipur. Cinema halls in Manipur had always depended on the availability of Hindi films, as the numbers of Manipuri films produced, since the 1970s, were limited to one or two every year. Besides, Hindi film always had a huge following

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<sup>1</sup> Films produced by the Mumbai Film Industry, also known as Bollywood films, the two terms are interchangeably used. The medium of these films is Hindi.

<sup>2</sup> One of the North Eastern (NE) states of the Republic of Indian Union.

<sup>3</sup> The Republic of Indian Union is a nation-state; militant Manipuri nationalist organizations like RPF, UNLF (United Nationalist Liberation Front), KYKL (Kanglei Yaol Kanba Lup) are aspiring to a Manipuri nation-state.

in Manipur, even before the Second World War<sup>4</sup>. The first (aborted) attempt to make a Manipuri film<sup>5</sup> (in the early 1940s) was, ironically, to be in Hindi language. The reason for making the film in Hindi was the lack of a significant market of Manipuri films at the time. Following the ban on Hindi films, all the Hindi film distributors withdrew from Manipur. This was a huge blow on the cinema hall business in Manipur. Many cinema halls were forced to shut down temporarily, and a few others permanently. Some cinema halls tried screening English<sup>6</sup>, Bhojpuri, Nepali and Tamil films etc., but it was not enough to keep the theaters running. However, the respite came for many cinema halls in 2003 – 2004 when many Manipuri filmmakers started producing what has come to be known as CD films or digital films. Unlike the celluloid films, these films came in CD format, hence the name. They were made on low budgets, using easily accessible digital technologies. There was a sudden “explosion” of CD films in Manipur, many of the films gaining much popularity. Though legally, the license given to the cinema halls did not permit to screen films in the CD format, the cinema halls were allowed to anyway, in a “tacit” understanding with the state authorities. Some of the cinema halls that were closed following the ban reopened. However, it is not the same without Hindi films. The revenue recovered from cinema halls in Manipur today is a small fraction of what it used to be before Hindi films were banned. Ten years since the ban not a single Hindi film has been screened in the cinema halls of Manipur. However, that does not mean that people in Manipur, or Manipuris outside Manipur had stopped watching Hindi films. Hindi films are still quite popular, maybe lesser than it used to be nonetheless still popular. Pirated CD and DVD copies are sold on the streets and the markets. RPF and their

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<sup>4</sup> Imphal, the capital city of Manipur had couple of cinema houses running before the bombing of the city in May 10, 1942 by the Japanese forces. Some of the popular films screened in these cinema houses before the War were *Alam Ara*, *Prahlad*, *Mei Hari*, *Raja Harishchandra* etc.

<sup>5</sup> It was to be called *Mainu Pemcha*, an adaptation of a popular Manipuri play of the same name.

<sup>6</sup> Hollywood films

supporters seem to have stopped their crack down on the selling and renting of Hindi films. In the mean time, Korean films and, to a lesser degree, Tamil films have become immensely popular in Manipur. Especially, the craze for Korean telenovelas is phenomenal. It is as if Manipur has been blown over by a strong *Hallyu*<sup>7</sup>.

This report is basically a tracing of the trajectory the ban has taken in the last ten years or so. Tracing this trajectory has opened up questions about sovereignty and territoriality in Manipur. First of all, unlike the forms of censorship one is used to while talking about films in India, the ban, that is the censor of Hindi films, comes not from the Indian state. Neither can it be comfortably located within what has been called *cultural regulation* (Mazzarella and Kaur 2009: 14):

So whereas the term ‘censorship’ to a greater or lesser extent alludes to the institutionalized frames of a legalistic discourse, the concept of ‘cultural regulation’ points to the performative, the productive, and the affective aspects of public culture.

The form and the intent of the ban by RPF bears marked similarity to the one associated with the state. Like a state, it often exercises the sovereign right to take life. However RPF is not a state, per se. Or is it? Secondly, despite repeated appeals from the Manipuri film fraternity, the regional state government or the central government have never acknowledged the “existence” of such a ban. Thirdly, as I get closer to the circumstances around the ban, it becomes less and less clear why the ban was imposed in the first place. There is a lot of obscurity, and inconsistency between the claim and practices of the ban. Immaterial of whether RPF had any well-defined agenda or ideology behind the ban or not, the ban made more sense once we see it in the larger historical context where cinema (or film viewing) is situated in Manipur.

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<sup>7</sup> The Chinese term for what is also called the “Korean Wave.” It refers to the sweeping craze for Korean pop culture particularly in, but not limited to, East and South East Asia.

First, the issue is in “situating” or “locating” Manipur, the place I have referred to in the report. Instead of pointing the place as “there”, I have tried to invoke a sense of the place Manipur in the reader by juxtaposing different aspects of the place which might constitute the Manipur I have referred to here. In the process I have engaged with authors who have raised important questions about “place” in anthropological theory and critiqued the notion of a place or culture as bounded units (Appadurai 1986,1988; Marcus 1999; Gupta and Ferguson 1992). In Chapter 2, there is an effort to define and locate the two “places” that become predominant in the report – Manipur and the cinema halls in Manipur. The struggle is in privileging (for heuristic purposes) certain “voices” in locating Manipur, and yet inviting the readers into the details, conflicts and contradictions that could easily frustrate that privileged position. While locating cinema halls in Chapter 2, the focus is given more on what that space – cinema hall – invokes in people rather than giving physical descriptions of the cinema halls themselves. There is a sense of “anxiety” associated with cinema halls, which I have developed in the chapter. This, I believe, helps in giving the reader a sense of why cinema halls became a site of assertion, or claim by the militant Manipuri nationalist<sup>8</sup>.

In provoking a sense of the cinema hall as a place, I have used oral narratives of the local where the social experiences of cinema and cinema halls are registered in interesting ways. The social experience of cinema in Manipur has not been documented, in academic as well as in popular writings. However there are lots

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<sup>8</sup> In this report, militant Manipuri nationalist groups will refer to those armed organizations who are engaged in guerrilla warfare with the Indian Army in the name of an independent Manipur. Some of the major ones operating in Manipur today are: People’s Liberation Army ( PLA ), United National Liberation Front ( UNLF ), People’s Revolutionary party of Kangleipak ( PREPAK ), Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), Kanglei Yaol Kanba Lup ( KYKL ), Manipur People’s Liberation Front (MPLF), Revolutionary People’s Front (RPF ) etc.

of jokes and anecdotes around the social experience of cinema and cinema halls. These oral narratives provide not only a rich repertoire of social experience of cinema and cinema halls, but also work as ‘vehicles for a kind of micro-sociological analysis’ (Basso 1979:17). In analyzing the “Whiteman” jokes among the western Apaches of North America, Basso writes:

Ethnographers, of course, are not the only ones who do ethnography, and Western Apaches jokers provide an admirable case in point. For in staging imitations of Anglo-Americans, in creating living models of them, Apache jokers give oblique expression to a set of ‘findings’ about them as well. (*Ibid* p18)

The jokes and narratives I reproduce and examine in Chapter 2, often work in similar manner in the context of Manipur. They present both the social experiences of cinema and cinema halls as well as the social commentaries to those experiences.

In Chapter 5 where I have tried to conceptualize Manipur as a “contested space” I have used this approach to frustrate the claims made on the bodies of people by both the militant Manipuri nationalist groups as well as the Indian Army. Privileging the voices of the Indian state as well as the militant nationalist groups in an effort to conceptualize Manipur as a “contested space” is motivated by a heuristic choice of situating the ban on Hindi films within the larger questions of sovereignty and territoriality in Manipur. Framing Manipur both in terms of ‘sense of a place’ (Chapter 2) and ‘contested space’, I am engaging, though not always explicitly stated as such, with Lefebvre’s idea of ‘production of space’ (Brenner and Elden 2009) as well as the phenomenological reading of *place*, where *space* is considered posterior to the experience of place (Feld and Basso 1996).

Chapter 3 is mostly tracing the ban and following some of the cultural trends that came after the ban. In the chapter the voices of the interviewees are made more audible and distinct whenever they are talking about the cinema halls and the impact of the ban on cinema halls etc. However, the connections between the dots and the insights on the popularity of Hindi films, Korean films, Tamil films and piracy etc are drawn from my “own personal and cultural biographies as significant sources of knowledge”(Collins 1986).

In spite of the ban people continues to watch Hindi films by other means (other than the cinema halls). If the main purpose of the ban was to stop people from watching anything Hindi, it failed. However the ban persists, in spite of this failure, in everyday life, informing bodies and generating discourses about sexuality, Manipuri culture, Manipuri cinema, sovereignty etc. This is the theme of Chapter 4; to see the ban as a refrain, as repetition. Not as a repetition of signs, but as ‘a repetition that underscores, overscores, rescores in a social aesthetics aimed at affect’s moves’ (Stewart, 2010), as ‘transducers of affective forces’ (Bertelsen and Murphie, 2010). Where “affect” is defined as something that ‘arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*; in the capacities to act and be acted upon’ (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010). I found this exercise instructive and generative. What emerges from this is an idea that bodies can never be completely controlled or inscribed. There will always be some excess of meanings and that excess often opens up possibilities of new politics.

I explore this idea further in Chapter 5, examining how people’s everyday life encounters with the contesting powers of the Indian state and the militant nationalist groups in Manipur. I begin with the historical context of the controversial Merger Agreement of 1949, when Manipur became part of India or Manipur lost its sovereignty, depending on which position one takes in the

contestation. Juxtaposing the Armed Forces Special (Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA) on the one hand a list of diktats imposed by KYKL (Kanglei Yaol Kanna Lup), UNLF (United National Liberation Front) and other militant nationalist groups, I have tried to conceptualize Manipur as a “contested space” where the Indian state (represented by its militant form, the Indian Army) and the militant nationalist groups each try to claim over sites, symbols and bodies. Towards the end of the Chapter 5, I introduce a list of jokes and other oral narratives that registered these contestations and people’s encounter with them.

In conceptualizing Manipur as a “contested space” of sovereignty, I might be suspected of reiterating an old song, especially at a time when many in and outside of the Northeast region are tired of the “durable disorder” (Baruah 2005) and looking for a way to ‘break the impasse’ ( Baruah 2009). However my intervention by invoking Manipur as “contested space” is precisely this – in this desperate need to find a solution to the “problem” or “crisis” we might have denied intelligibility to the way people live life in the midst of the conflict. The ‘undeclared war’ in India’s North East is one of the longest and the least known armed conflicts in the world (Baruah, 2005). Like many places in the world which have endured prolonged armed conflicts for more than two or three decades, Manipur (one of the North eastern states) is marked by the presence of a ‘weak state’, violence, civil strife, underdevelopment etc., a condition often classified as ‘crisis’ or ‘disorder’ (Baruah, 2005; Desjarlais and Klienman, 1994). The danger, however, of analyzing war as a ‘disease’ or ‘disorder’ is that it not only tend to take war out of its social context (Richard, 2005) but also overemphasizes the degenerative affects of war (Desjarlais and Klienman, 1994). Instead, I have tried to approach war as ‘a social project among many others’ (Richard, 2005), and as a transformative ‘social condition’ (Lubkemann, 2008). The “impasse” in the Northeast, perhaps an effect of the incessant fighting between groups and

subgroups and the Indian state along the lines of sovereignty over territory, should not however mislead us to think that the “solution” lies in development or market or rule of law. There are lessons to be learnt from the ways people negotiate powers everyday. Perhaps some creative politics could be recovered from these lessons.

## Chapter 2: Sense of the place

More than with any of the other human sciences, anthropology is based on circumstantial evidence. The circumstances in which the evidence is gathered (those of fieldwork) and the circumstances of the writing up of fieldwork have been much discussed recently and do not need to be revisited here. But it is worth noting that the spatial dimension of this circumstantiality has not been thought about very much (Appadurai, 1988)

The 1988 edition of *Cultural Anthropology* titled “Place and Voice in Anthropological Theory”, was an attempt, through the collection of various articles, to recognize and conceptualize “the problem of place, that is, the problem of the culturally defined locations to which ethnographies refer”<sup>9</sup> as one of the central aspects of the spatial dimension of circumstantial evidence. From the observations in the aforesaid volume, two important implications emerged from the engagement with “place” in anthropological theory, as Appadurai observes in its introductory article, (a) place cannot be comfortably identified with a culturally bounded unit and (b) ‘the problem of place and voice [in anthropology] is ultimately a problem of power.’

For the present report both of these aspects of place are very insightful and crucial<sup>10</sup>. In this ethnographic report I am indeed referring to a place. But the problem is in locating this place that I am referring to here. If I say “Manipur” (as I have in the title of this report) I am already stifling many other voices<sup>11</sup>. Even if I use “Manipur” to refer to the place, there is an immediate need to qualify which

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<sup>9</sup> Appadurai in *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Place and Voice in Anthropological Theory (Feb., 1988), pp. 16-20

<sup>10</sup> The issue of power vis-à-vis place and voice, including my position as an ethnographer shall be dealt in more detail in the concluding chapter of this report.

<sup>11</sup> Some prefer to call it Kangleipak, the older name of the “place” as opposed to Manipur which is seen as a sign of *Sanskritization*, thereby an imposition from outside, not authentic etc. The ultra nationalist would call it *Meiteileipak* (the land of the Meiteis).

Manipur. The “Manipur” being used by the state administration is identifiable, more or less, with that represented cartographically in the political maps. But then that reduces “Manipur” the place to its territoriality only. Apart from the fluidity of boundaries due to the permeability of borders, the reduction of “Manipur” to its territory does not go without dismissing/erasing the ‘territory of Manipur’<sup>12</sup> as envisioned in the political imagination of Manipuri nationalism. And to this complexity is introduced the problems of *multilocality* and *multivocality*. I have not included all the voices and all the locations (as envisioned or experienced by different groups or individuals) in this location (as I have described Manipur in the report here). The exclusion of voices in the process is not so much an unintended consequence of an effective sampling but rather a desperate act of heuristic choice.

Manipuri nationalism as a generic expression convolutes and obscures diverse voices of how people envision Manipur and its relation with India. However, if we dismantle Manipuri nationalism by invoking the various contradictory voices within it, the struggle of political sovereignty in the region is, in a sense, delegitimized. On the other hand, if the Indian state, like any other state, is not to be taken as given but rather to be understood as ‘effect’ of multiple practices (Geertz 2003) there is no centralized entity that Manipuri nationalism could direct its resistance against. In the process what is lost is the significance of the sixty or so years of existing struggle for political sovereignty in the region, which has marked the social and cultural life of the people. Recognizing this struggle will be

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<sup>12</sup> The area between Manipur and Burma known as the Kawbaw Valley, recognized as part of the Kingdom of Manipur in the Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826, is now part of the state of Burma. The controversial “transfer” of this huge tract of land to Burma is seen by many in Manipur, particularly Manipuri nationalists, as an act of treachery and betrayal on the part of the India State. Thus in the political imagination of the militant Manipuri nationalist this tract of land is part of “Manipur”. The feeling of nostalgia and intimacy with Kawbaw Valley is also heightened by its association with the death of the populist Manipuri leader, Neta Irabot in the Valley during his underground struggle for independent Manipur.

instructive, I suggest, in understanding the nature and significance of the nation-state in a post-colonial state like India.

Having salvaged the struggle of political sovereignty in Manipur thus, I will try to locate Manipur in its relation to India. In doing that I have resisted identifying Manipur with the political boundary of the state of Manipur (as a part of the Indian Union), though it is difficult to completely disengage the association of the political territory with the place 'Manipur'. Instead, my effort has been to develop a sense of the place throughout the report. The place as *a sense* because the Manipur I am presenting here is at best an allegory, as James Clifford (1986)<sup>13</sup> would say about any ethnographic writing. I invoke allegory here not out of an immediate concern for 'representation'; rather, because of its power to conjure up images, sensations, meanings and memories, such that the reader could develop a sense of Manipur in the process of locating it.

The cinema hall occupies a space of much anxiety in Manipur, what I have called "anxious encounter with modernity" that I develop later in this chapter. The ban on Hindi film has had tremendous impact not only on the cinema halls and the Manipuri film industry also. Though pirated CD and DVD copies of Hindi films are easily available in the open markets, Hindi films have not returned to the cinema halls in the last ten years. Understanding the intricate link Hindi films had with the cinema halls in Manipur on the one hand and the space cinema halls occupy in the cultural and social experiences on the other is very crucial in exploring the implications of the ban on Hindi films in contemporary Manipur.

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<sup>13</sup> "On Ethnographic Allegory" in Clifford and Marcus (1986).

## **Where in India is Manipur?**

There was a Manipuri heart surgeon in Chandigarh PGI (Post-Graduate Institute of Medical Study and Research, Chandigarh)<sup>14</sup> who was once asked by his colleagues in PGI if people in Manipur wore clothes. Annoyed by the preposterous question he told them in jest, “ Not really. As soon as we reach Guwahati railway station<sup>15</sup> we all leave our cloths somewhere and then swing from one vine to the other till we reach home.”

I heard this story in the early 2000s, while I was doing undergraduate studies in Delhi<sup>16</sup>. The story is one of the many stories and anecdotes around the difficulty of locating Manipur for many in North India<sup>17</sup>. In 2007, I was preparing for ICSE<sup>18</sup> (Indian Civil Service Examination) in Delhi, and at that time one of the very common “tests” for basic knowledge of geography among the young IAS (Indian Administrative Service) aspirants was having to point out the correct names of

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<sup>14</sup> An elite institute for medical studies in Punjab, North India.

<sup>15</sup> Former capital city of Assam, it is the most important city in the Northeast (NE) region. To get to the other NE states, including Manipur, one has to go through this city, particularly the land route. The rail tract gets narrower from Guwahati. There is no railroad from Guwahati to Imphal as of now, the construction of one such link is going on. So people going back home to Manipur usually complete the journey from Guwahati to Imphal in bus or (nowadays) flight.

<sup>16</sup> There is a significant number of Manipuris studying in major cities of India like Delhi, Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai etc. I come from a small town in Manipur called Kakching (population 22,000 approx.), and I did my three years of Bachelor’s degree and two years Master’s degree in Delhi. At the time I was studying in Delhi, there were approximately 300 students from Kakching alone.

<sup>17</sup> Conventionally refers to the region covering the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Punjab, parts of Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh etc. The region is also often identified as the Hindi speaking belt.

<sup>18</sup> A centralized examination conducted by Union Public Service Commission (UPSC). Most of the top administrative posts of the country, including the diplomats for foreign affairs are recruited from the successful candidates of this exam. Most important services include IAS (Indian Administrative Services), IFS (Indian Foreign Services), IPS (Indian Police Services) and IRS (Indian Revenue Services) etc.

the eight Northeastern<sup>19</sup>(NE) states with their respective capital cities. The “test” was often done in jest, yet many would flounder in naming the NE states and matching it with the respective capital cities. Such symptoms of myopia betray a sense of the region being “peripheral” in the imagination of the nation, India. However, ironically, the region has always been “central”<sup>20</sup> to the security policy of the Indian state. The existence of more than half-a-century old militant “separatist” movements<sup>21</sup> in the region constantly threatens and challenges the very premise of the Indian Union, posing a serious internal security threat to the Indian state. Connected through a narrow strip of land called the “chicken’s neck”,<sup>22</sup> the Northeast (NE) of India is almost engulfed by countries like Bangladesh, Burma, China, Tibet and Bhutan, making the region extremely crucial to the geopolitics and security of the entire South and South East Asian region. Thus Manipur, and the NE in general, has an ironic tension in its relation to the Indian state, in the sense that neutralizing the security threat in this “peripheral” region is “central” to the preservation of the national integrity and securing stability in South and South East Asia.

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<sup>19</sup> Assam, Arunachal, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura.

<sup>20</sup> In the post-90 India, Kashmir and the North East have been the major focus of India’s security policies, and more recently the Red Corridor, with the intensification of the Maoist militancy in central India, the stronghold of the Maoist.

<sup>21</sup> Under the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Department of Internal Security lists at least 13 organizations from the NE banned as terrorist organizations under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act 1967. Seven among this 13 are from Manipur viz. People’s Liberation Army ( PLA ), United National Liberation Front ( UNLF ), People’s Revolutionary party of Kangleipak ( PREPAK ), Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), Kanglei Yaol Kanba Lup ( KYKL ), Manipur People’s Liberation Front ( MPLF ), Revolutionary People’s Front (RPF ) in Manipur. See [http://mha.nic.in/uniquepage.asp?Id\\_Pk=292](http://mha.nic.in/uniquepage.asp?Id_Pk=292)

<sup>22</sup> Also known as the Siliguri Corridor, it is a narrow stretch of land which connects India’s north-eastern (NE) states to the rest of India. This strip of land is only 21 to 40 km in width, with the countries of Nepal and Bangladesh lying on either side of the corridor.

## People and the place

Located at an average altitude of 800 m above sea level, Manipur, with an approximate land area of 22,327 sq kms, shares boundaries with Burma in the East and the South East, Nagaland to the North, Assam to the West and Mizoram to the South West. It has a population of roughly 2.721 million people (Census of India 2011) of various faiths and ethnicities. The entire region is very mountainous, except for a small oval shaped valley in the middle, called the Manipur Valley. At the southern end of the Manipur Valley is the largest freshwater lake in the Northeast India, *Loktak Pat*. Most of the major rivers and streams drain into *Loktak Pat*. The demography is densely distributed in the valley, whereas the hills are sparsely populated. Local people often talk about Manipur in terms of *Ching* (hills) and *Tam* (plains), in reference to both the topography as well as the communities inhabiting them – *Ching Mee* (people from the hills) and *Tam Mee* (people from the valley/plains). Because of the spread of Hinduism in the valley and the historical confinement of Christian missions into the hills (Parratt 2005), *Ching Mee* and *Tam Mee* often map onto to Hindu and Christian. Also, due to the colonial legacy of the British administration hills people are also identified as Scheduled Tribes or simply Tribal. However, not everyone in the valley is Hindu and not all hills people live in the hills anymore. Nonetheless the convention of valley/plains/Hindu versus hills/Christians/Tribals endures like bad habit. In the valley there has always been the *Pangals*, the Manipuri Muslims, the *Mayangs* (Non-Manipuris immigrants, usually from North India) and now the Nepali<sup>23</sup>. Traditionally *Tam Mee* is identifiable with the *Meitei*, the dominant group in Manipur. But not all *Meiteis* identify themselves as Hindus. There are *Meiteis* who vehemently resent the Hindu tradition among the *Meiteis*.

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<sup>23</sup> The Nepalis are most recent immigrants into Manipur Valley. They are believed to be one of the fastest growing minority groups in Manipur.

These *Meiteis* identify themselves as the followers of *Sanamahi*, the revived form of the pre-Hindu spiritual practices in Manipur. Among the hills people, there are many self-identified tribes – Tangkhul, Maring, Kabui, Anal, Mao, Hmar etc. There are 29 Scheduled Tribes officially recognized by the state. The self-identity and ethnicity of the smaller tribes have always been fluid, swinging different ways depending on the prevailing political climate in the region (Singh 2001; Oinam 2003).

### **Purity and Pollution**

*Vaishnavism*<sup>24</sup>, which was embraced and endorsed strongly by Maharaja Bhagyachandra in the second half of the 18th century<sup>25</sup>, introduced a regimented social order of *mangba-sengba* (*mangba* = polluted; *sengba* = pure), a characteristic feature of *Brahminism*. Given the limited scope of this report, I will not be going into the details of the notion of purity associated with *Brahminism* (Louis Dumont 1966) and its implications on the social, cultural and political lives of Manipur<sup>26</sup>. For the present report it is enough to assert that the notion of purity/pollution, a ritualistic concept, introduced through the advent of Hinduism in Manipur created new regimes of exclusion and expulsion (Douglas 1966). Many communities in the valley were declared, by the edicts of the Meitei King, polluted or *mangba*<sup>27</sup>, the people in the hills who were anyway not allowed to convert into *Vaishnavism* were treated as polluting. That created a major rift

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<sup>24</sup> A popular sect of Hinduism, centers around the worship of Vishnu, as the Supreme God. The Vaishnava tradition called Gaudiya Vaishnava which eventually made into Manipur was revived and popularized by Sri Caitanya in Bengal. Dr. Kriti (1988:41) writes about the Vaishnava tradition in Manipur thus, “The largest and best organized community in Manipur is a traditional Vaishnava form stemming from the *paribar* of Narottam Thakur Mahaya of Bengal.”

<sup>25</sup> Dr. Kriti (1988:41)

<sup>26</sup> See Parratt (2005:18-23) for the exploits of Brahminism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Manipur.

<sup>27</sup> In the post Independence India, communities identified as *mangba* were recognized as Scheduled Caste (SC) in the Constitution of India, an administrative category to redress historically oppressed communities.

between the people in the hills and valley, which was reinforced with the introduction of Christianity in the hills. Historically, the mobility of people between the hills and the valley were very fluid before *Vaishnavism* became dominant in the valley in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century (Parratt 2005). In the case of the *Marings* <sup>28</sup>, for example, the few elderly people who have refused to convert to Christianity have religious practices very similar to those of the pre-*Vaishnavite* practices of the *Meiteis* in the valley. The Naga movement<sup>29</sup> has been mapped onto this “rift” between the hills and the valley. The demand of a future “Greater Nagaland” threatens to polarize the rift even further. For example, the territorial boundary of the Greater Nagaland envisioned by NSCN(IM) includes major portions of the hill districts of present Manipur. This is seen by many, particularly the *Meiteis* in the valley, as a serious threat to the territorial integrity of Manipur.

On the other hand, in the valley the prejudice against the *Pangals* or Manipuri Muslims<sup>30</sup> entrenched with *Vaishnavism* and *mangba-sengba*, took an explosive turn with the riot of 1993, when 25 *Pangals* were killed. Following this communal riot, People’s United Liberation Front (PULF), the only other Islamist militant party

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<sup>28</sup> Now identified as one of the Naga tribes of Manipur.

<sup>29</sup> Political demand for the sovereignty of the Naga people in the region, exemplified by the Naga Nationalist Council (NNC), National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) Khaplang (K) and NSCN, Isak- Muivah (IM) etc. The extension of cease fire (on June 14, 2001) between the NSCN (IM) and the Government of India (GoI) “without territorial limits” which means all the Naga inhabited areas, including Manipur, led to wide spread protest in Manipur. On 18<sup>th</sup> of June 2001, 13 people were killed and many injured when the state armed forces tried to disperse the mass protest, which burned down many state offices including the building of the state assembly. See (*Imphal Free Press*, June 19, 2001) <http://www.e-pao.net/epRelatedNews.asp?heading=8&src=190601>

<sup>30</sup> *Cheitharol Kumpaba*, the Royal Chronicle of Manipur records the first settlement of Pangal, or Manipuri Muslims in the 16<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of King Khagemba. The earliest Pangals were prisoners of war with the Mughal army, according to *Cheitharol*. When Hinduism got entrenched in Manipur, the Pangals were considered impure, polluting by the Meitei Hindus.

at the time (in Manipur) was formed<sup>31</sup>. Albeit the prejudices of the *Pangals* by the *Meitei* Hindu majority, their participation in the socio-political system of Manipur has been quite significant. The first Chief Minister of Manipur, when it was given the status of statehood in 1972, was a Manipuri Muslim, Alimuddin. Alimuddin is still revered by many in Manipur as one of the honest and upright politicians. According to a local scholar, Pandit Mayanglambam Gourchandra, there used to be a practice during construction of traditional Manipuri houses to have at least one lump of earth put into the foundation of the house by a *Pangal*, it was considered auspicious. When Prof. Md. Islamuddin, the then Dean of Manipur University was shot dead by KYKL (Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup) in 2009, there were lots of resentment among the Manipuris, fortunately it did not lead to a repeat of the communal riot like the one in 1993.

### **Back in Delhi**

Of course, all these complexities are lost when seen from Delhi, the Center. All one could hear from Delhi, is a cacophony of protests, strikes, bomb blast, burning of office buildings etc. The issues and histories of the NE region are hardly distinguishable from one another. The region is seen as a hot spot of major discontent and rebellion either due to “neglect” from the Center or due to ethnic divisions in the region. “Ethnic conflict”, perhaps of primordial nature, predominantly figures in academic writings (Agrawal 1996; Sharma 2000) as well popular representation of the region. However, scholars from the region have pointed out the links between the emergence of ethnic identities and the colonial and post-colonial experiences in the region (Singh 1988; Oinam 2003).

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<sup>31</sup> The other militant party being the Islamic National Front (INF) which was established in the 1980s. See [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/manipur/terrorist\\_outfits/PULF.HTM](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/manipur/terrorist_outfits/PULF.HTM)

Since the early 2000s a different picture of Manipur, however, is gradually emerging in the national media. The mass protests against AFSPA [Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act], the heroic protest by Irom Sharmila<sup>32</sup> and the “naked” protest by some elderly women in front of the Kangla<sup>33</sup> etc., have caught the attention of the national media and civil societies outside Manipur. However, even the most sympathetic observers of the region often blame underdevelopment, unemployment, neglect by the Center, inaccessibility to the region etc., for the “subnationalism” and “insurgency” in the region (Thomas, Gopalakrishnan and Singh 2001).

Interestingly, this rhetoric of “underdevelopment” as the root cause of the “insurgency” in the North East is clearly reflected in the changing policies of the Indian government towards the region – from the establishment of IIT<sup>34</sup> Guwahati to the creation of mDONER (Ministry of Development of North East Region)<sup>35</sup>. In this changing attitude towards the region, the rhetoric is about making the region a hot spot for trade and investment, thereby salvaging it from its destiny as “periphery” to the Indian “mainstream”. In the vision of India’s Look East Policy, Manipur is seen as the gateway to South East Asia (Baruah 2009, 2004).

Identifying Manipur with the administrative state of Manipur with a fixed physical boundary within the Indian Union runs the risk of reducing a place to its territoriality only. A place is much more dynamic, complex, diverse and fluid than

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<sup>32</sup> This Manipuri woman has been fasting since 2000, demanding the repeal of the draconian AFSPA. She has become the iconic figure of Manipuri struggle against AFSPA.

<sup>33</sup> On July 14, 2004 twelve elderly women stood naked in front of Kangla Fort, the headquarter for Assam Rifles, armed forces of the Indian Army. The shocking images of the twelve elderly women protesting in front of Kangla got wide coverage and circulation in the national media.

<sup>34</sup> Indian Institute of Technology, a premier institute for training engineers in India.

<sup>35</sup> Official website: <http://mdoner.gov.in/>

a certain unit area and the people contained in it would suggest. By “locating” Manipur in India, I don’t mean to suggest that Manipur can only be located as a part of India. On the contrary, the process of “locating” Manipur in India has only exposed the incompleteness of India as a nation (as an ongoing project of nationalism) and the ambiguity of what “Manipur” is. Once we locate Manipur in this ambivalent relationship with India, along with its local complexities and dynamics, it is easier, and perhaps insightful, to locate the issue of the ban on Hindi films. The ban on Hindi films and media imposed by the proscribed Revolutionary People’s Front (RPF) in 2000 had an immediate and deleterious impact on the cinema halls in Manipur (Chapter 3). Given the popularity of Hindi films in Manipur, it is very interesting, an crucial for the report, to note that cinema halls in Manipur was (before 2000) public space where people of different languages, regions, and religions come together to watch a powerful visual media in Hindi, a language foreign to most in Manipur, a language which the militant nationalist organizations in Manipur identify with the hegemony of the Indian state.

### **Cinema Halls in Manipur**

I was born in February, 1981 at Kakching, a small town of roughly 22,000, located 40kms southeast of Imphal. When I grew up the town had three cinema halls – Indrani, Azad talkies and Deepa. Only Indrani and Azad Talkies are functional now. Much of the insights on the cinematic experiences in Manipur, as described here in this report, draw on the experiences I have had with the cinema halls in Kakching. However, the cinematic experiences at Kakching reflect the characteristic patterns of the general cinematic experience in Manipur. The cinema viewership in Kakching is second only to Imphal. One of the main characteristic features of experiencing cinema is, what I might call, “the anxious

encounter with modernity". So, what do I mean by "anxious encounter with modernity"? Anxiety can be very intangible and illusive even to the most keen of eyes. And an attempt to elucidate anxiety "experienced" by a collective through individual experiences could be misleading, at best difficult. Therefore I have relied on popular humor or jokes around the cinema hall, to get a sense of what I mean by "anxious encounter with modernity."

*Some narratives of cinematic encounter:*

- (a) There is a rumor in Kakching about how "Chaokhatpangi Mangal" [Chaokhatpa = development/civilization/modernity; Mangal = light] reached Kakching. It was Madhubala<sup>36</sup>, the story informs. In those days, "cinema hall" used to be not much better than a minimal structure with thatched roofs. When the people of Kakching saw Madhubala on the screen for the first time they were smitten. All the men, old and young, were obsessed with Madhubala, but they knew not what she spoke. They became very curious of the language in which she spoke. So, eventually, some of the more adventurous of them went to Bombay to learn her language, thus began the "awakening" of Kakching.
- (b) Once an *lpa* (though the term literally means 'my father' in Manipur, it is commonly used to referred to any elderly man from the hills by the people in the valley) was watching a film in a cinema hall. And all of a sudden a tiger came out on the screen. Just then, the *lpa* stood up with his spear on his hand shouting, "Alas! People are going to die" and threw his spear at the tiger on the screen.
- (c) Another *lpa* was in town, and wanted to watch a film in the hall. So he asked for the best seat in the hall. They gave him a ticket to the balcony.

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<sup>36</sup> A very popular Hindi film actress in the 1950s and 1960s.

When he found out his seat was in the balcony, far away from the screen, he was furious. He complained to the staff, “Why am I seated at the farthest, when I have paid for the best?” Eventually he was moved to the front row.

- (d) A young couple went to the cinema for a date. The young guy had a very dark skin, but had two sparkling white rows of teeth. During the intermission, he had gone out to use the rest room. The girl had assumed that he had gone to buy some snacks. As the intermission ended the guy came back to his seat, next to his lover. He was so happy and excited that he was smiling from one ear to the other. In the darkness of the cinema hall, besides his dark skin color, all the girl could see was two white rows that looked like thinly sliced coconuts (a common snack). So she reached out to take the “coconut slices”.
- (e) It is said that when the film *Sadma* was played at Deepa<sup>37</sup>, much emotion was invoked among the young audience. The ending of the film, when the heroine (Sridevi<sup>38</sup>), having suddenly recovered from her amnesia, fails to recognize the young lover (Kamal Hassan<sup>39</sup>), mistaking him for some lunatic, and leaves him, provoked anger among the young audience. Apparently, the angry audience, especially the young males, broke many of the wooden seats as they left the cinema hall.

The above stories register certain collective anxieties around the experience of cinema. The narratives presented here are marked and easily recognized as jokes, because of the content as well as the style in which the narratives are performed. These jokes are mostly circulated among the *Meiteis* in Kakching. A

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<sup>37</sup> Cinema hall in Kakching. It has been converted into an automobile workshop since the ban of Hindi films in 2000.

<sup>38</sup> Popular Hindi film actress.

<sup>39</sup> Popular actor from South India.

detailed analysis of similar genres of oral narratives in Manipur is taken up in Chapter 5.

### *Anxiety and Modernity*

The narrative (a) hints at the “arrival” of cinema in the early days of cinema in Kakching; cinema is something that comes from outside and with it brings a world that is far away from here. Narratives (b) and (c) captures the initial awkwardness to the visual effects of cinema. For the people of Kakching, the initial awkwardness may have been adjusted over the years, but the awe of cinema’s visuality has not disappeared. That awkwardness is now transferred to the experiences of those who are supposedly new to cinema, like they themselves used to be many years ago. Thus the subject of the “awe” is now someone from the hills or the hinterlands of Manipur. The cinema halls at Kakching cater to a large audience; many of them come from the surrounding hill villages, smaller towns and villages further south. None of the cinema halls in Kakching have had the unfortunate and unlikely incident of having a spear thrown through its screen. But the story (b) dramatizes the “realistic impact” the visual effects of cinema might have on “simple folk” like the men from the hills. Stories (a) and (b) also reveal certain stereotyping that goes with the people from rural areas. The stories also implicitly acknowledge the cosmopolitan nature of the audience in the cinemas. Thus cinema halls are also sites of spectacle for the urban people who amuse themselves watching the “awkwardness” of the rural folks from the hinterlands<sup>40</sup>. It is very common to see people hanging out around the cinema halls in the beginning or end of the shows, just to watch and comment on the dress, the hairstyles and mannerisms of the patrons from outside the

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<sup>40</sup> The Manipuri term ‘Lawai’ is often used to refer to the hinterlands and also the people who live there. It is often used with derogatory connotations. One often hears people talking about Manipur in terms of “Lawai Imphal”, referring to Imphal as the center/civilized and the rest of Manipur being peripheral/uncivilized.

town. However, these stories only betray the “anxiety” of the townsfolk themselves. The townsfolk of Kakching are themselves very conscious about this “anxiety” when they visit Imphal, the capital city. There are numerous stories that elucidate that “anxiety”. Further, in the similar manner, people from Imphal city feel that “anxiety” when visiting bigger cities like Delhi, Bombay etc. The chain continues till it arrives at North America or Europe, the First World. This “awkwardness” or “anxiety” is not just any experience encountered while negotiating a different place. It is so intimately linked with a sense of “arriving” late on the scene, arriving late in modernity.

In an interview in 2009<sup>41</sup>, Manipuri actor, filmmaker, producer Makhon Mani Mongshaba lamented over the deplorable state of the cinema halls in Manipur. He identified it as one of the main reasons for the decline of cinema in Manipur. He describes how things have changed in the outside world<sup>42</sup>.

We need to develop our cinema halls, also the area around the halls. There is too much confusion, traffic. But in other places [outside Manipur] people get a very enjoyable experience of cinema. Now that things have changed [in the sense of being modern]<sup>43</sup> nobody wants to go to cinema in a crowded/congested place. The halls need to have a quite surrounding, with proper parking lots. For others (those places outside Manipur) there are facilities to book train tickets in the theatre itself, there are medical facilities. But in ours [cinema halls in Manipur] the conditions are such that people might collapse while watching films.

Once again, we hear the “anxiety” of lagging behind in “modernity” in a rhetorical comparison of “us” and “them/others”. This positioning of “us” (underdeveloped) as opposed an “others” (who are developed) is a common rhetoric of modernity

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<sup>41</sup> The interview took place at the residence of Makhon Mani Mongshaba. It was recorded in a video camera.

<sup>42</sup> The expression “Meegi Mapalda” is used to refer to anything outside and beyond Manipur. Literally, Meegi = Other’s; Mapalda = outside.

<sup>43</sup> The Manipuri term “Chaokhatpa” is used here. It invokes being modern, developed, civilized etc.

in contemporary Manipur. Our cinema halls are almost always located in the midst a congested urban space or market. The halls are never well maintained. There are no proper restrooms and the surroundings reek of urine. The walls and the stairways are splattered with red stains of *paan*<sup>44</sup>. Inside the hall, it is very crowded, the seats are made of wooden planks, and it is suffocating with no proper ventilation or air conditioning. The list of how “we” are lacking in many ways compare to the “others” is very long. Thus cinema halls in Manipur are often sites of confirming or reaffirming the experience of being “modern”.

Lastly, another important aspect of the cinema experience in Manipur is the overwhelming presence of Hindi films<sup>45</sup> in the cinema halls before October 2000. For most parts of the year, the cinema halls in Manipur would show Hindi films before the ban in 2000. Hindi films were immense popular, and it continues to be popular even today. The narrative (e) is perhaps an exaggerated image of how Hindi films managed to strike a chord with the cinema audience in Manipur. Except for a small immigrant population in Imphal city and other small towns, Hindi is not the first language for most people in Manipur. Today, there is an increasing proportion of the youth population working or studying in cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore etc.; Hindi is quite accessible to this section of the population. However, for majority of the people in Manipur, Hindi is alien, yet Hindi films were immensely popular. In examining the ban on Hindi films in Manipur, it is absolutely crucial to note that Hindi films were very popular in Manipur (it continues to do so) and the cinema halls were hugely depended on Hindi films before the ban in 2000.

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<sup>44</sup> The chewing of betel nuts is common in Manipur, like in the rest of South and South East Asia.

<sup>45</sup> The first attempt (aborted later) to producing a Manipuri film, *Meinu Pemcha* was in 1948. Ironically the film was to be in Hindi, in considerations of its market prospect. And it was only from the yearly 70s that Manipur began to produce feature films in Manipuri. The production rate was limited to one or two films a year at the most. Thus from the pre WW2 period till 2000, the cinema halls in Manipur heavily relied on Hindi films.

Cinema and cinema halls occupy a crucial space in the Manipuri nationalist discourse. It is here that the encounter with 'modernity' takes place. And the anxiety around this encounter reveals the interplay of two cultural domains – tradition and change. Hindi films are banned but not the cinema halls themselves. It would seem that the concern for the Manipuri nationalist is that modernity should essentially be "Manipuri modernity". It is instructive to examine how Partha Chatterjee (1993) reads a similar concern Indian nationalist had under British colonialism.

The colonial state, in other words, is kept out of the 'inner' domain of national culture; but it not as though this so-called spiritual domain is left unchanged. In fact, here nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a "modern" national culture that is nevertheless not Western. (*Ibid* p6)

If we read the colonial state as India, and add Indian to the Western, the project of Manipuri nationalism does not look very different from that of Indian nationalism in colonial India. With the caveat, perhaps, that in the case of the militant Manipuri nationalist, the question of modernity is not as explicit and emphatic.

### Chapter 3: The Ban and other trends

On September 10, 2000, The Central Bureau Secretary of RPF (Revolutionary People's Front), Captain Mangal dies in the custody of 17th Assam Rifles of the Indian Army.

As a protest against the brutal killing of the Secretary Central Bureau of the Revolutionary People's Front, Manipur by the Indian Occupation Force (17 Assam Rifles) even after his arrest, the Revolutionary People's Front imposed a complete ban on the transmission, screening and viewing of Hindi movies and entertainment connected with Hindi language which are being used as a primary means of Indianization in the course of suppressing the minority communities and the people of Manipur with effect from 12 midnight, Tuesday 12th September 2000 (1730 UTC).<sup>46</sup>

By November of 2000, all the Hindi film distributors had withdrawn from Manipur. No Hindi film has been screened in any of the cinema theatres in Manipur since then. The ban by RPF was very effective. There were frequent reports in the local newspapers of CDs, cassettes containing Hindi songs and films being confiscated and burnt by the cadres of RPF and other militant outfits. There was a sense of fear in the air, around listening to Hindi songs or watching Hindi films in the first couple of years following the ban. The immediate impact of the ban was felt by the cinema theatres; many were closed or converted to shopping malls or automobile work shops etc. Whether motivated by the ban or not, the ban was followed by a sudden popularity of Korean films and Tamil films. It is interesting to note that none of the militant groups put a ban on either Korean or Tamil films. In the meanwhile, the Manipuri 'digital' films proliferated in a very dramatic fashion. Ten years after the ban was imposed I found that Hindi films

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<sup>46</sup> The original statement was quoted from RPF's website which is no longer available. However the declaration of the ban was reported in some local and national newspapers. Here is a link to an online news archive reporting the ban: <http://www.e-pao.net/archives/sep00/A130900.html>

continued to be popular and people managed to watch them with pirated copies of CDs and DVDs in their homes.

### **Singing nation**

*Jana-gana-mana-adhinayaka, jaya he  
Bharata-bhagya-vidhata.  
Punjab -Sindh-Gujarat-Maratha  
Dravida-Utkala-Banga  
Vindhya-Himachala-Yamuna-Ganga  
Uchchala-Jaladhi-taranga...*<sup>47</sup>

We used to sing it every morning in our school. The morning assembly always ended with *Jana-gana-mana*. Every student knew it by heart. One day some *Naharols*<sup>48</sup> came to the school, told us not to sing it any more. We never sung it again. I have no clear recollection of what I thought about it then. When I got a little older I used to hear people say “*Jana-gana-mana* does not mention Manipur or the Northeast India.” Back then, at least for me, it was a song I had got used to, without which the morning assembly felt incomplete. I didn’t know its meanings -- literal or symbolic. It was only much later that I got familiar with the criticisms of *Jana-gana-mana*. Two lines of arguments stand out in this criticism of *Jana-gana-mana* in Manipur -- (a) singing it will make us Indians, and (b) the India described in the song does not include the Northeast, the region and its people, so why sing it anyway. The first argument betrays a fear of seduction, that the body could become Indian if it is constantly exposed to the national

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<sup>47</sup> The opening stanzas of the national anthem of India. It was originally penned in Bengali by the Nobel Laureate, Rabindra Nath Tagore in 1911. The Hindi version (quoted here) was adopted by the Constituent Assembly of India in 1950 as the official national anthem of India. See: <http://india.gov.in>

<sup>48</sup> The local term used to refer to the cadres of any of the militant nationalist groups in Manipur. The literal meaning of the term could be translated as “the youth”.

anthem of India. And the second ‘demands’ an inclusion into India by way of protesting the region’s exclusion in the song. These two moments of anxiety around the *affectiveness* of the body and the politics of inclusion/exclusion is central to the issue of the ban on Hindi films.

### *Singing like Lata*

1997 was the 50<sup>th</sup> year of Indian Independence. That year, Zee TV’s<sup>49</sup> immensely popular *SaReGaMa*<sup>50</sup> was named “SaReGaMa’s 50th Independence Day Special Episode”. There must have been a strong fervor of patriotism throughout the episode. In the final round of the singing contest there was a young contestant from Manipur -- Pushparani Huidrom. She was only 7 years old at the time. And she sang *Aye Mere Watan Ke Logo* (O! the people of my country), a patriotic song originally sung by the legendary singer Lata Mangeshkar in 1963. The song evokes the lives of the soldiers who died in the Sino-India War of 1963. It is said that the first time the song was sung by Lata Mangeshkar, it brought tears to the eyes of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India. Pushparani did not win *SaReGaMa* that year (1997) but she definitely won the hearts of many in India. Overnight she became a musical sensation in Manipur. She became ‘Baby Pushparani’ the Lata of Manipur. She was invited to sing in my town on various occasions. I heard her singing *Aye Mere Watan Ke Logo* over and over again. She had a beautiful voice and sung well, just like Lata.

I wonder how many in Manipur knew, or cared to know, the meaning and the context of the song. For most, I believe, it was the melody of the song and the talent of our very own Baby Pushparani. But the song got stuck to my head for a long time.

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<sup>49</sup> One of the national level TV channels in India.

<sup>50</sup> Popular TV show of singing contest. It was launched by Zee TV in 1995.

“Aye Mere Watan Ke Logo  
Jara Aankh Mein Bhar Lo Pani...”

However, this is not the only Hindi song stuck in my head. Hemant Kumar, Kishore Kumar, Muhammad Rafi, RD Burman, SD Burman, Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle are some of my favorite singers and musicians<sup>51</sup>. I grew up listening and singing to the melodies and tunes of these musicians. In fact, I can sing more Hindi numbers than Manipuri ones. I know so many in Manipur, who may not know enough Hindi to have the most basic conversations (in Hindi) but can sing Hindi songs for hours and hours. Interestingly, Lata Mangeshkar herself had sung in Manipuri too. The song was featured in a Manipuri film, *Meichak*. The production of *Meichak* began in 1980, but it was released only in 2000 after overcoming lots of financial troubles. So even before the film was released, the songs featured in the film were already very popular in Manipur. I remember one game we used to play as young boys, whenever the one song sung by Lata came on the radio. At one point the song goes like, “Nangse eigini eigi” (you are mine, mine) but Lata would sing “Nangte” instead of “Nangse”. Nangse means “you are” but Nangte makes no sense in Manipuri, it sounds funny. So we boys would wait quietly till the point where Lata goes “Nangte...” and then we would laugh. I would often sing “Nangte eigini eigi...” just like Lata did.

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<sup>51</sup> Hemant Kumar, Kishore Kumar, Muhammad Rafi, RD Burman, SD Burman, Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle are some of the esteemed musicians of the Hindi film industry.

## **Manipuri cinema and the ban**

Tamo<sup>52</sup> Sunil became the owner and the proprietor of Azad Talkies, one of the oldest cinema theatres in Manipur, in 1997. The ban in 2000 and the subsequent years have been very difficult for the young proprietor. I got a chance to interview him in the summer of 2009 at his office in the Azad Talkies building. He also happens to be my cousin from my mother's side. So, we had had conversations on the issues of the ban and Manipuri cinema in general on various other occasions. However, as I decided to record the interview that summer day in 2009, the conversation turned out to be more formal and structured. But the interview covered a wide range of issues around the ban and its immediate impact on the cinema theatres in Manipur, and how it affected the Manipuri film industry. Here is an excerpt from the conversation.<sup>53</sup>

Jogendro Kshetrimayum (JK): How many film distributors are there in Manipur today?

Naorem Sunil (NS): After October 2000 [i.e. the ban on Hindi films], there are no film distributors in Manipur. Before the ban there were six to seven distributors, and all of them except for Thongram Haridas (who had rights of distribution of Tristar, Twentieth Century Fox) were from outside Manipur, from Kolkota and Guwahati .. And all the Hindi film distributors were from outside [outside Manipur].

JK: How did the theatre perform in your initial years [when he began in 1997]?

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<sup>52</sup> Honorific term for 'elder brother' in Manipuri.

<sup>53</sup> The interview was conducted in Manipuri. For the excerpt it has been transcribed and translated into English.

NS: The revenue was very good. '97 was good, '98 was good.. The annual turn over was always increasing.. 1999 was the best year. The gross collection was Rs. 22 lakh that year.

JK: What is the reach of Azad Talkies in terms of its market?

NS: It caters to a wide audience, from Thoubal, Sungnu to Chandel.. most people from these places come by bus. It is not like they come to Kakching solely for the purpose of watching films. As they come for business transactions or other activities like shopping ... cinema provides the only form of entertainment as they wait or relax after their work. Even today, cinema is the only form of public entertainment where the whole family can spend some time together.

JK: How was the ban in October 2000 imposed?

NS: Well, we had heard about such a decision or agenda within the RPF before that time [October 2000], from “some” other sources, not an official one but... at the time there was a “feud”<sup>54</sup> between Hindi films and Manipuri films, between the producers. Throughout the year, the theatres are run on Hindi films, the Manipuri film has very limited market.. the quality of Manipuri film is very poor in comparison Hindi films, and the audiences also prefer Hindi films more than Manipuri films... Actually, this restriction on Hindi film started earlier, way back in the late 80s, started with the movements for the demanding inclusion of Manipuri language in the Eight Schedule of the Indian Constitution<sup>55</sup>. Even before 1997, there was already a diktat by KYKL to

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<sup>54</sup> The English term “fued’ was used in the original interview.

<sup>55</sup> A list of languages in India, recognised under the provisions of the Articles 344(1) and 351 of the Constitution of India. Although the initial purpose of the Eighth Schedule was to enrich Hindi by assimilating elements from the languages listed, it serves as the basis for allowing certain administrative privileges like, being able to give exams to public services in any of the languages mentioned in the list.

screen Manipuri films on Theatres for at least two months [sixty days] in a year. They [the militant groups and perhaps some Manipuri film producers too] had marked this thing for a while, they had been waiting for an opportunity. When Captain Mangal of RPF was killed, they jumped on that. The ban was not imposed right after his death, it came two days later..

JK: How did they actually impose the ban? Did they inform you individually?

NS: No, there was no individual intimidation. It came out in the local newspapers. The threat was taken very seriously because the law and order situation at the time was getting worse at the time. There was nothing official about it but it was understood that not complying would mean death. The immediate impact was so quick that all the Hindi film distributors went away in the very first month.

JK: What was the immediate response to the ban?

NS: There was a general belief that some kind of consensus would be reached about Hindi film and that it would be back soon in the theatres again. After the first month there was a drastic reduction in the number of patrons [cinema goers]. We could not even collect 25% of the revenue. Since we didn't get any Hindi films, we ordered English films from Calcutta and Guahati. We could get those films at a cheap price, around Rs. 4000 to Rs. 5000. After taking care of transportation and other service charges, we could not even recover that amount.. the audience turn out was so poor.

JK: Was there any attempts on the part of the theatre owners and the film fraternity to negotiate [with RPF]?

NS: Yes, there was. AMUCO [All Manipur United Clubs Organization] took very serious initiatives on that. But then AMUCO started suggesting that they

would negotiate [with RPF and the other militant groups] if the cinema theatres would contribute certain percentage of the ticket price towards AMUCO. Some cinema theatres even started selling tickets with AMUCO's stamp [meaning extra cost] on them, hoping that they would negotiate successfully. There was lot of pressure on the cinema halls<sup>56</sup>. But nothing really happened.

JK: Was there any official statement on this issue by Manipur Film Development Corporation [MFDC]<sup>57</sup>?

NS: No. There was none. They were completely silent on that issue. They never got involved on this issue. On the contrary, there were inquiries from NFDC [National Film Development Corporation Limited]<sup>58</sup> as to why we had stopped screening the newsreels of Film Division<sup>59</sup>. There was one [meeting] involving the DGP [Deputy General of Police] and the film exhibitioners, but then it was never fruitful because of security reasons. It was impossible to provide protection to all the (cinema) halls in Manipur.

JK: What was the reaction from the state government?

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<sup>56</sup> Cinema theatre

<sup>57</sup> Official name is Manipur Film Development Corporation Limited. It is established under the Department of Art and Culture, Government of Manipur to promote and propagate film industry in the state of Manipur. <http://art-culture.hadrontechs.com/mfdc.html>

<sup>58</sup> It is a public undertaking of the Government of India, and it is the central agency on matters concerning the film industry in the country.

<sup>59</sup> Film Division is the Central Film producing organization of the Government of India under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. It is required to 'meet the statutory requirement of Section 12 (4) of the Cinematograph Act, 1952, i.e. compulsory exhibition of the approved / notified films through cinema theaters in the country'. Refer to the official website for details: <http://www.filmsdivision.org>

NS: It was incredible. There was absolutely no (official) response. Everyone knew about the ban, but ... whether it (the ban) was good or bad, no open debate on that by the government. Even the meeting with the police [the one with the DGP] was nothing official. They invited us unofficially. Some film enthusiasts of CATA [Cine Artists and Technicians Association] and Film Forum<sup>60</sup> did a lot of work documenting and writing in newspapers about the plight and sufferings of the exhibitors, staffs and the workers associated with the cinema halls. But no response from the State government.

JK: What was the particular reason for the ban?

NS: It is still a mystery for us. Basically what they said was that Hindi film was polluting Manipuri culture and it was being used as medium for colonization by India. But then that does not make sense when they cant stop the cable service providers like Dish TV, Star Sky, Airtel, Sun TV etc., there is internet and they cant even do anything about AIR [All India Radio]. It is only the cinema halls that they have effectively banned. It is illogical. See, whatever was released [Hindi film] yesterday it is available today in the open market. Look at the CD copies being sold under the bridge [the newly constructed over-bridge at Khwairamban Bazaar, Imphal]. Everything is available from the old films like *Anarkali*<sup>61</sup> to... everything. .. Cinema halls are a soft target for them, it's a public place. Everyday hundreds of people gather. So there are concerns of security. What they are doing is same as saying that cinema should be shut down, closed.

JK: So, what was the situation like post-2000 [after the ban]?

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<sup>60</sup> Film Forum Manipur, an apex body for filmmakers, producers, promoters, actors and others associated with the film industry of Manipur.

<sup>61</sup> A popular Hindi film released in 1953.

NS: It was very difficult. There was a shortage of films all of a sudden, and that meant shutting down the theatre. The following year, 2001, till July when the “Ceasefire”<sup>62</sup> came out, we had some sixty days out of which we barely had shows for thirty days or so. It was at extreme loss. At that time there were no Manipuri films on CD format, but some in video format, but the quality [of the print] was very bad. It was very embarrassing to exhibit those video films. The quality of the sound and the picture was so down. For a long time I decided not to exhibit those [video films]. From 2001 to 2003 we ran the shows at a loss of nearly Rs. 2 to 3 lakhs annually. I even thought of giving it up. Eventually we started investing on Manipuri producers to produce films. Most of the exhibitors in Imphal were also doing the same at the time. [Between 2001 to 2004] there were hardly 20 cinema halls that were running, out of the 54 or 56 listed in the Manipur Gazette. We [Azad Talkies] tried to keep the show going with English films, Tamil films. In 2001 out of the 365 days, we ran for 181 days, it was a record at the time. None of the cinema halls at that time could put on their shows for sixty days. Even [the theatres at] Imphal had gone standstill.

KJ: Are there some cinema theatres in Imphal that have closed permanently?

NS: Yes. Out of the eleven theatres only three are running [in business].

Some of the major ones [that have closed permanently] are Imphal Talkies, one of the oldest, Victory Cinema, the oldest in Manipur... Shankar, Mini Shankar, and Asha Cinema has been converted to some educational center.

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<sup>62</sup> The existing agreement of cease fire between the Indian Army and the Naga militant group, NSCN (IM), was proposed to extend without territorial limits, which was seen as a threat to the territorial integrity of Manipur. On July 18, 2001, there was a massive eruption of violent protests across Manipur. The following day, July 19, 13 protesters were killed and many injured during the riot.

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[end of the excerpt]

The ban led to the shutting down of many cinema halls in Manipur. It is a clear testimony to the fact that cinema halls in Manipur depended so much on Hindi films. The withdrawal of the Hindi film distributors, following the ban, had a deleterious impact on the functioning of cinema halls in Manipur, thereby affecting the availability of capital for the Manipuri film industry. For most film exhibitors like Tamo Sunil, it is a puzzle why the ban was imposed; if it were about the hegemonic influences of India (as a colonial state) it did not make much sense since nothing has been done, nor can be done, about other forms of media, like cable TVs, AIR (All India Radio) and Internet etc., besides the availability of thousands of pirated CDs and DVDs of Hindi films in the market. Thus the theory that comes out of this interview and others is that the ban was more to do with the “internal feud” within the fraternity of the Manipuri film industry; particularly between the producers of Manipuri celluloid films and the video films. This internal friction emerged as early as the 1980s, with the arrival of the video vista technology in Manipur. So the ban of October 2000 is seen as an attempt to capture the market by the video film producers in nexus with certain elements within the RPF. However, what is equally intriguing to me, and to exhibitors like Tamo Sunil, is the response of the state to the ban. So far the state, both at the regional level (the Government of Manipur) and the central level (The Government of the Indian Union), has not come out with any official statement acknowledging even the existence of the “ban”. On the other hand, the cinema halls are “allowed” to screen films in the video format.

## **Silent state**

Why have the state governments not come out with any official statement acknowledging the existing ban on Hindi films? It would have made perfect sense at various levels for the government to engage with this move by RPF. Before the ban, the cinema halls in Manipur contributed a substantial amount of sum to the state revenue, as amusement tax. This contribution dropped dramatically by 2001, when the cinema halls could no longer show Hindi films. According to an estimate by a local expert (Meghachandra Kongbam, 2007), the total annual tax recovered from cinema halls during the period of 1990 -1991 to 1994-1995 was roughly Rs. 80 lakhs, which peaked to over a crore during the period of 1995-1996 to 1997-1998; by 2001-2002, it could hardly reach Rs. 8 lakh. In a recent report by *Hueyen News Service*, the total amusement tax (for the year 2010) collected from the cinema halls till October 2010 has been a meager Rs. 57, 615. The report further notes that the sharp decline in the collection of amusement taxes is mainly due to the ban imposed on the screening of Hindi films in the cinema halls. For an income deficit state like Manipur, it makes economic sense to counter the ban imposed on Hindi films by RPF.

On the other hand, is it not a direct challenge to the sovereign authority of the state to impose such a ban? By remaining silent on the issue, is the state implicitly acknowledging its limits? Or, is it a matter of security logistics, as Tamo Sunil pointed out in the interview? Given the extend of militarization in Manipur it is hard to attribute the silence of the state simply to a lack of security arrangements for the cinema halls. Besides, the popularity of Hindi films in Manipur and the dependency of the Manipuri film industry on Hindi films are undoubtedly clear. Why, then, didn't the state government draw on the popular support to discredit or counter the ban imposed by RPF? Instead, the state, through the office of the District Magistrate (DM) 'allows' the cinema halls to

screen films on video format. The usual license given to the cinema halls does not permit screening films in the video format. Although there is a separate license meant for video parlors<sup>63</sup> where one could use video format. It is under this tacit understanding between the state machinery, the film producers and the cinema exhibitors that the Manipuri “digital” films are being screened across Manipur. This arrangement has managed to salvage the Manipuri film industry from complete bankruptcy.

This is a curious state of silence. It cannot be that the state authorities are unaware of the ban. Then, should one understand this silence as intentional on the part of the state? However, intentionality requires a subjectivity. And where would one locate the subjectivity of the state? Intentionality, thereby the subjectivity, of the state is identifiable only at the moment of its declaration. It is only with an official statement that one could begin to imagine what the state ‘thinks’ on this or that issue and constituting the state in the process of its declaration. In the absence of any official declarations on the ban, it is only fair to assert that the state is silent on the issue of the ban. But the state of silence also immediately calls into question the nature of the state. For example, the status of the modern democratic states would be suspected if the states were silent on issues of Human Rights, environmental pollutions, nuclear programs and large scale displacement of people etc. So, what kind of suspicion about the Indian state should be aroused by the fact that it is silent on the issue of the ban on Hindi films in Manipur?

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<sup>63</sup> They are meant for much smaller audiences. They are less formal and less regulated than cinema halls.

## **Korean wave hits Manipur!**

By 2003 – 04, there was a general euphoria about Korean films, Korean telenovelas, Korean pop songs etc., in Manipur. Many teenage boys and girls, especially in Imphal, would do their hair in the style of their favorite Korean stars, they would text each other sweet messages in Korean. Many would spend sleepless nights watching Korean telenovelas. Some have attributed this phenomenon to the ban imposed on Hindi media through films and cable services<sup>64</sup>. Though the Korean films are never screened in the cinema halls, they are watched quite enthusiastically in individual households, using DVD and CD players. The CDs and DVDs are easily available in the local video rentals. Almost all of the CDs and DVDs are pirated copies, and they seem to be filtering through the Indo-Burmese border trade, as well as from Calcutta. Besides the CDs and DVDs, the Korean TV channel Arirang is another avenue where people in Manipur ardently watch Korean telenovelas, and other Korean programs.

Whether the ban on Hindi films created a space for the Korean films to fill in or not is still an open question. However the way the Korean wave or Hallyu arrived in Manipur is interesting and its impact on the youth culture of Manipur phenomenal. It has even captured the attention of BBC.

In an episode of the BBC news series Close-up<sup>65</sup>, this “phenomena” was “examined” – it was titled “Close-Up: A little corner of Korea in India.” The episode shows us how Korean films and pop culture have completely taken hold over the young boys and girls in Manipur. The correspondent or the presenter

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<sup>64</sup> See, Kshetrimayum (2008), “Mapping Cultural DiffusionThe Case of ‘Korean Wave’ in North East India” in *India and Korea: Bridging the Gaps*. Edited by Narsimhan, Sushila and Kim Do Young.

<sup>65</sup> “This BBC News series focuses on aspects of life in countries and cities around the world. What may seem ordinary and familiar to the people who live there can be surprising to those who do not.”(17th October 2010) link: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11525715>

wants to “convince” the viewers by showing the inside of a hair saloon, where (apparently) most young boys and girls come to do their hairs like their favorite Korean stars. No doubt Korean pop culture is having a significant impact on the youth culture of Manipur, particularly in the capital city Imphal. However, Imphal is not the whole of Manipur. The fact that young boys go to saloon for doing their hairs (let alone doing it Korean style) is as surprising to me (being from a small town in Manipur) as it might have been for the remote “audience” the Close-Up intends to surprise. I think the presenter goes slightly overboard when he signs off the show with the following,

“Many people here [Manipur?] say they find it easier to relate and connect to the Korean culture, and they believe that they resemble the Korean and East Asians lot more than they do the Indians. The irony of course (is) somewhere along the way the question of what is Manipuri identity and culture may just have got lost.”

During the survey and the interviews conducted in 2009<sup>66</sup> I found that ‘Eecham chamba’ was the term used by most respondents when describing the reason for liking the Korean films and telenovelas. ‘Eecham chamba’ could be translated as ‘simplicity’ or ‘innocence’. Simplicity has a significant cultural meaning in Manipur. If someone is described as ‘eecham chamba’, the usual connotation is that the person described is humble and without pretension. ‘Chamna chaba, chamna setpa’ [Simple eating, simple clothing]<sup>67</sup> is a powerful cultural idiom in Manipur, it emphasizes simplicity as the desired way of life. Mapping out the implications of the cultural value of ‘simplicity’ on the social and cultural life of Manipur demands

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<sup>66</sup> The survey was conducted in Kakching, a town located 40 kms South of Imphal. The sample population ranged in age from early teens to late fifties, and it covered almost equal numbers of males and females.

<sup>67</sup> Literal translation.

a much bigger space than the present report can provide. However, for the present engagement suffice is to say that the cultural value of 'simplicity' in Manipur is significant enough to be the main marker of tradition and identity. The registration of cultural change in Manipur is often associated with a nostalgia of losing a simple lifestyle.

'Aajkaan', 'eethak eerang' are cultural idioms used in contradiction to 'simplicity' as a way of life. 'Aajkaan' could be a linguistic borrowing from the Hindi 'Aaj Kal' or Bengali 'Aajkaal'. Both 'Aaj kal' and 'Aajkaal' convey a sense of 'the world of today'. The Manipuri 'Aajkaan' retains this sense of contemporaneity. However, I will not conflate 'aajkaan' with 'modernity' as some writers have done in the case of the Bengali 'aajkaal' (Mookerjee 2005). The Manipuri 'aajkaan' is not 'progressive' in the sense of 'modernity'. For 'modernity' a different set of expressions is employed -- 'modern' or 'chaokhatlaba matam' [literal trans., developed time] ; and they carry positive connotations. 'Aajkan changba' i.e., being 'Aajkan' is identifiable by the style of clothing one chooses, the way one does his/her hair, or by the way a boy courts a girl etc. In general, 'aajkaan' pertains to behavioural practices which are unidentifiable with the 'tradition'. 'Aajkaan' usually has negative connotations. In its most neutral sense, being 'aajkaan' could be understood as being in tune with the latest fashions. Like 'aajkan', 'eethak eerang' also indices behavioral practices. Someone can be "Eethak eerangda taoba", literally it means "floating in eethak eerang". To float in 'eethak eerang' could mean a range of things like indulging in parties, and going out with girls (or boys) etc. 'Eethak' means waves in the context of rivers, lakes or oceans. If a person is 'eethak thakpa', he/she is superfluous, careless, without focus, not serious. There are two popular usages of the term 'eerang'; first, in the sense of the volatility of law and order situation and second, in the sense of flirting. For example, (a) to have "eerang" in Manipur is to have unpredictable,

tense, political situation in Manipur, and (b) to do 'eerang' with someone is to flirt with someone. Together 'eethak eerang' evokes a complex milieu of movement, anxiety, flirtatiousness, unpredictability, unreliability, and extravagance etc. In other words, 'aajkaan' and 'eethak eerang' can be located in the realm of the exterior -- external influences, and the unbridled passions provoked by it. By contrast, then, 'eecham chamba' could be located in the realm of the interior -- inner self and self restrain. The interplay of the exterior -- modern, glittering, extravagant, corrupting, unreliable, superfluous etc., and the interior -- traditional, sober, humble, calm, self control, reliable, deep etc., is a recurrent theme which is aestheticized over and over again in Manipur films too. I will come back to this theme in more detail in the next chapter. However, for the present argument, I want to highlight that most of the Korean films (and telenovelas) which are popular in Manipur are characterised by similar themes.

Compared to popular Bollywood films, the characters in the Korean films and telenovelas are perceived as 'real', down-to-earth and identifiable by the Manipuri audience. In spite of the tremendous impact Korean pop culture has had on the youth culture in Manipur, the militant groups in Manipur have not had issues with Korean films and telenovelas. On the other hand, some militant groups have strictly censored song and dance sequences, a la Bollywood, in Manipuri song albums. Korean pop culture have definitely found its resonance in Manipur for whatever its worth. However I am intrigued by the tone of disappointment and anxiety evident in the commentary of the BBC presenter of Close-Up. He betrays a sense of nostalgia which is not necessarily shared by most in Manipur. His anxiety vaguely reminds us of Rosaldo's (1989) 'imperialist' who mourns the lost of 'purity' of the colonised/native. The ban on Hindi film, the explosion of Hallyu in Manipur, the emerging youth culture, are all connected in some way or the other to the continuing struggle for the sovereignty of Manipur, an important condition

for cultural self-preservation, which the Indian state will never concede. And at the same time, the commentator who clearly represents the dominant power mourns for the 'lost' of Manipuri culture. However it is not to say that there is essentially a 'pure' Manipuri culture. The ban on Hindi films is a bold attempt to define a 'pure' Manipuri culture and the failure of which (as the present chapter reveals) is testimony to its impossibility.

### **Tamil films in Manipur**

“Southern comfort for Manipur - Tamil & Telugu hits make up for militant-imposed ban on Hindi cinema” reports a correspondent of the Calcutta based newspaper *The Telegraph*, on June 14, 2006<sup>68</sup>.

Another interesting aspect of the film scene in Manipur which became more visible in the aftermath of the ban was the popularity of Tamil films. Tamil film industry is based in Chennai, the capital of the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu is at the southern most tip of Indian and Manipur is in the extreme Northeast. Tamil is a Dravidian language while Manipuri is Tibeto-Burman language. So, in terms of language, cultural practices and historic memory, the two places seem very distant to one another. Also, considering the complete lack of Tamil media and films in North India, it is quite a curiosity that Tamil films and songs enjoy such popularity in Manipur. The popularity of Tamil films was not quite like the euphoria associated with the Korean films or telenovellas. However, there was an enough following, at least in Kakching, that Tamil films were screened after the ban of Hindi films in cinema halls (Sunil also mentioned in the interview above). Though few works are available on the popularity of Tamil films in Manipur and its impact in Manipuri cinema, there is already an influence of

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<sup>68</sup> [http://telegraphindia.com/1060614/asp/guwahati/story\\_6350074.asp](http://telegraphindia.com/1060614/asp/guwahati/story_6350074.asp)

Tamil pop music<sup>69</sup> and Carnatic<sup>70</sup> music in Manipur. Ranbir Thouna, as far as I know, is the first singer who imported and popularized the distinctive style of Carnatic into Manipuri music. Salam Sophia, another Manipuri singer is reported to be working with a Tamil film project, where she will be lending her voice as a playback singer<sup>71</sup>. Names of the southern film stars like Bhumika, Arjun, Siddarth and Veejay are very familiar among the younger Manipuris. But what could be the reason for its popularity in Manipur? Could it be that Tamil films are the natural choice (because of the melodrama and dance sequences) when Hindi films were banned, as the Telegraph correspondent seems to suggest? Perhaps. But what we need to consider is also the fact that there is a large number of young Manipuris studying in many southern cities like Chennai, Bangalore and Cochin etc. I studied the last two years of my high school in Chennai. Because of the prevailing law and order situation education in Manipur have always been very difficult. There are constant disruption in the routine of the school systems. So, parents prefer to send their children outside of Manipur for education, if they can afford it. Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Chandigarh, Chennai, Bangalore and Cochin are the most popular destinations for those who can afford to send their children outside of Manipur. The preference for the southern cities is mostly because they tend to be cheaper and people in Manipur have a notion

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<sup>69</sup> Manipuri CD films are reported to have taken the music of their songs from popular Tamil films. The most well known one is the song “Leeri Leeri” from the Manipuri film, *Dr. Yaima*, apparently an adaptation from a popular musical number in *Boys*(2003), the Tamil hit film.

<sup>70</sup> A classical system of music developed in South India.

<sup>71</sup> She has apparently recorded her songs with SASI Studio, Chennai. See link: [www.e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=news\\_section.Top\\_Stories.Manipuri\\_singer\\_goes\\_southern\\_spice](http://www.e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=news_section.Top_Stories.Manipuri_singer_goes_southern_spice)

that schools in South India have less 'eethak eerang'. Whereas, schools in North India are seen to be flashy, and extravagant. Parents seem to feel safer sending their kids to South Indian schools in general.

Kodambakkam is the heart of the Tamil film industry. During the years (1998 - 2000) of high school in Chennai, I spent a lot of time with the Manipuris who were renting out rooms in Kodambakkam. Some were from Kakching, my home town in Manipur. Most of them were struggling to find jobs at the time. And they used to tell me stories about how agents from the Tamil film industry would often approach Manipuris for cameo appearances in films. Interestingly, one of them even made a brief appearance in the 1992 film *Tahalka*, as a 'Chinese' soldier of General Dong, the main villain who has nefarious designs for India. There have been a significant number of Manipuri students in Tamil Nadu for quite sometime. And this population has been importing Tamil music and films into Manipur even before the ban on Hindi films in 2000.

Finally, it must be noted that there is a significant Tamil population in the Moreh-Tamu region, on either sides of the Manipur – Burma border. It might be worth investigating any possible connection between the Tamil population in this part of the Manipur-Burma border and the availability of Tamil films and music in Manipur.

### **Manipuri “Digital” films**

Also referred to as CD films, “digital” films in Manipur are films produced in video formats using digital video cameras. Manipuri CD films are distinguished from the celluloid films which are associated with the traditional film-making enterprise in Manipur. From 1979, when Manipuri film industry began producing films, to the

1990s Manipuri film market has been dominated by celluloid films. But the production of celluloid films was expensive and took a long time. The celluloid film production in Manipur relied a lot on the technicians and the studios in Bombay and Calcutta. At its most productive phase they could barely manage to release two films a year. So, that the cinema halls in Manipur heavily relied on Hindi films for their daily shows. When the Hindi film distributors suddenly withdrew by the end of 2000, following the ban by RPF, the cinema halls suddenly found themselves without films to screen. Many tried to survive by screening all kinds of films – Hindi, Tamil, Nepali, Bhojpuri etc. However, by 2002 – 03 the cinema halls were flooded with the new Manipuri CD films. Because of its low cost of production and easy access to digital technologies, filmmaker and producers in Manipur were churning out 70 to 80 films (on average) a year by 2005-06<sup>72</sup>.

The CD film trend started in 2001 with the screening of *Lanmei* at the Friends Talkies in Imphal. It was quickly followed by the blockbuster *Lallasi Pal* (July 19, 2002). According to Meghachandra Kongbam (2007), renown scholar of Manipuri cinema, *Lallasi Pal* marked a new phase in Manipuri cinema; after its huge success, most of the Manipuri filmmakers, including the ones who used to make celluloid films, turned to what has come to be known as “digital” filmmaking. In the period 2004 – 2005, the “digital” films could generate Rs. 15.30 Lakhs as amusement tax to the state revenue. This was a significant recovery since the ban in 2000. Thus began a phase of big hope in Manipuri cinema. The growth of the “digital” films also gave rise to “stars” like Kaiku, Olen, Sadanada, Manda, Danny, Kamala etc. However by 2009, by the time I did the interview with Tamo Sunil, proprietor of Azad Talkies, there was a strong feeling of despair. The

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<sup>72</sup> Figure quoted from the interview with Tamo Sunil, film exhibitor.

recovery of revenue could never repeat the relative success of the 2004-2005 period. Parts of the reason for this decline were, Tamo Sunil pointed out, saturation, the lack of variety in the plot of the films, characters, actors etc.

What does Manipuri 'digital' film look like? In form and content it is not so much different from the earlier trend initiated by the Manipuri celluloid films. However the range is wider; from a more subdued, tightly scripted films like *Lallasi Pal* (Lets cross the divide), *Basantagi Nongallamdai* (Dawn of Autumn), *Mami Sami* (Shadowy) etc., which are skillfully embedded in the socio-political milieu of contemporary Manipur, to films which are loud, extravagant, essentially poor imitations of popular Bollywood movies from the 1980s and 1990s. One of the main criticisms labeled on the new 'digital' films has been the 'bad copying' of the song and dance sequences of the Hindi films. When the digital boom began in the early 2000s, Manipur was flooded with video albums which were very reminiscent of the "singing and running around the trees" sequences of popular Hindi films in the 1980s and 1990s. The production of such albums has been prohibited by certain militant groups. Albeit the anxieties about the aesthetics, quality and quantity of Manipuri 'digital' films, 'digital' films have made a niche of its own in the film scene of Manipur.

Reflecting on his experience as a member of the jury of the Festival of Manipuri Cinema, 2007, film critic and scholar, Bimol Akoijam wrote:

Most films are amateurish and have lots of rooms for improvement. Flatness of character and weak characterization and lack of narrative tension in the story are prominent in almost all the films... Technically, in general the lights do not register the "spatio-temporal" reality within which the characters are located, and the sounds do not capture the three-dimension of the represented world. Editing tends to be jarring in most cases while cinematography and composition of shots are often in variance with the motif

of characters and the intentional field of the scene. However, a noteworthy aspect of the films is the boldness in the choice of the theme and subject. It is this aspect that registers a potential to mark out a unique identity of our cinema.<sup>73</sup>

There is room for improvement. There is potential. In this context, the film *Mami Sami* directed by Lancha is worth mentioning here. The film handles the issue of “insurgency” in the region with very creative style of narrative structure, new to most Manipuri audience (I suppose), reinforced by beautiful long shots of *Loktak*<sup>74</sup>, the main setting of the film; and musical scores, interweaving elements of East and West, creating a distinctive “mood” of the locale. The film was well received in Manipur. In the summer of 2009, when I met Lancha, the director of the film, he and his team were working on dubbing the film in Assamese<sup>75</sup>. Perhaps, here lies the promise of the “digital” turn of Manipuri cinema, when Manipuri cinema can finally find a market outside of Manipur.

Sunil, the proprietor of Azad Talkies, thinks that the digital technologies have really leveled the ground for filmmakers in Manipur. The creative enterprise of filmmaking is no longer confined to the big producers, like in the old days of the celluloid films. With the exponential development of digital technologies, better and more sophisticated digital technologies are available at increasingly lower prices. However, Sunil warns, the digital films in Manipur are far from digital in the real sense of the term. In his view real digital films should meet the standards

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<sup>73</sup> From the article “Manipuri cinema: Festival and beyond” in *The Sangai Express*. Webcasted on E-pao (31st January, 2008).

<sup>74</sup> The biggest lake in Northeast India.

<sup>75</sup> Dominant language of Assam, a neighboring state.

set by DCI (Digital Cinema Initiatives, LLC).<sup>76</sup> Piracy, one of the emerging problems of Manipuri 'digital' film enterprise, was largely a result of its failure to meet the standards of DCI, Tamo Sunil observed.

### **Film Forum, Manipur**

With the proliferation of 'digital' films following the ban on Hindi films, Film Forum Manipur, the apex body of Manipuri film industry has come to play a crucial role on issues relating to Manipuri films. The Forum is understood to be a "compromise"<sup>77</sup> (Daisy Hassan, 2010) between the film fraternity and the "interests" representing the militant groups in Manipur. All the films produced in Manipur, including the "digital" ones, have to go through the Forum before it is officially submitted to the Central Board of Film Censorship at Guahati for certification. The Forum seems to have a considerable say on the contents of the films, particularly about "representation" or "misrepresentation" of Manipuri culture or the emulation of "foreign" elements. For example, the presence of "sarees, sindoor, mangal sutra and heavy make-up, exposed ribs and 'vulgar scenes' "<sup>78</sup> are perceived by the review committee of Film Forum as undesirable elements. Because of its "bias" reflecting a strong influence of the militant nationalist groups Film Forum is seen by some as stifling the creative impulses of

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<sup>76</sup> DCI was created in March 2002, as a joint venture of Disney, Fox, Paramount, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Universal and Warner Bros. Studios to "establish and document voluntary specifications for an open architecture for digital cinema that ensures a uniform and high level of technical performance, reliability and quality control" [See DCI website:<http://www.dcimovies.com/>].

<sup>77</sup> Tamo Sunil points this out in the interview.

<sup>78</sup> *Saree* is the traditional dress worn by women in most parts of India. *Sindoor* is the red power worn by married women on their foreheads, a practice associated with North Indian tradition. *Mangalsutra* is the sacred amulet worn by married women in parts of India. Also, Ranjan Yumnam (posted May 8, 2007) , "No sex please, we are Manipuris" on, <http://manipuri-cinema.blogspot.com/>

the filmmakers. The suspicion of Film Forum's association with the militant nationalist groups became more public with the arrest of its Vice Chairman, L. Surjakanta on July 1, 2009, in connection to the arrest (a month earlier) of R K Raghunath, a senior leader of the proscribed KYKL in Delhi.

On the other hand, Film Forum Manipur has been actively promoting Manipuri 'digital' film inside and outside the state. It has been fighting legal battles for the entry of Manipuri 'digital' films into the film festivals of India. Under a ruling of the Guwahati High Court in June 1, 2010, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, has approved the demand of Film Forum, Manipur for the inclusion of Manipuri 'digital' films in the two major national competitions i.e., National Film Awards and Indian Panorama 2010.

## **Conclusion**

If the state is what "binds," it is also clearly what can and does unbind. And if the state binds in the name of the nation, conjuring a certain version of the nation forcibly, if not powerfully, then it also unbinds, releases, expels, banishes.(Butler and Spivak, 2007:4)

As a nation-state the Indian Union constantly binds and unbinds bodies. It binds those that fit the national imagination, India, and unbinds those that do not. The body of Captain Mangal was clearly an insurgent one, a body that had to be unbound and expelled. The state desires to bind Manipur to this imagination called India. But it does not quite fit it. Not yet. So it is put under suspension for the time being. It is called a 'disturbed area'. Which means the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1950 could be enforced. Now the state can identify and remove anyone deemed unfit for its imagination. Of course, it is only temporary, that is, until it is fit to be part of India again. It has lasted only 30 years so far. To

ban Hindi film and Hindi media is an attempt to arrest this imagination. To declare refusal. However, people have not stopped watching Hindi films in Manipur. At the same time the climate of cultural revivalism, and anti-ASFA movements in Manipur have never been so intensified. So, instead of looking at the ban in terms of its effectiveness, it will be productive to examine the discourses and cultural practices it might have provoked in contemporary Manipur.

## Chapter 4: The ban as refrain

There is a territory precisely when milieu components cease to be directional, becoming dimensional instead, when they cease to be functional to become expressive. There is a territory when the rhythm has expressiveness. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:315)

The ban of Hindi films by RPF have long ceased to be functional, so far as stopping people from watching Hindi films is concerned. Pirated copies of CDs and DVDs, cable TV networks, Internet, movement of people, demands of trade and commerce, these are forces too powerful for RPF and other allied militant groups. But the ban continues to reverberate; cinema halls in Manipur cannot screen Hindi films because they are banned, cinema halls are being converted into shopping malls because Hindi films are banned, Manipuri 'digital' films are screened in cinema halls because Hindi films are banned, Hindi films are banned because Captain Mangal was killed by the Assam Rifles, Hindi films are banned because they are polluting Manipuri culture, Hindi films are banned because Manipur should be a sovereign nation, Hindi films are banned because of the vested interest of filmmakers and producers etc. Some people might deny some of it, while others might approve some, and yet some might accept all of it and add some more.

“Refrain is a repetition that underscores, overscores, rescores in a social aesthetics aimed at affect’s moves.”(Stewart, 2010)

As a refrain, then, the ban repeats as it underscores, overscores and rescores, gradually acquiring expressiveness in the process. It has marked a territory which will be invaded, reterritorialized and, again, deterritorialized. Lets explore the topographies of some of these territories, more intimately.

## Being Manipuri

*... Hindi movies and entertainment connected with Hindi language which are being used as a primary means of Indianization in the course of suppressing the minority communities and the people of Manipur...*

In the absence of explicit elaboration of what RPF meant by “Indianization” one can only speculate, from the larger context of the separatist movement in Manipur. Indianization suggests a process through which one becomes ‘Indian’. And becoming ‘Indian’ necessarily involves, if one follows the spirit of the statement, becoming less ‘Manipuri’. Recognizing the potency of film and language in this process exposes a fear of mimesis and the power of alterity inherent in it. Singing the national anthem of India, over and over again, will make you ‘Indian’. Singing Hindi songs will make you ‘Indian’. Wearing *saree*, like an ‘Indian’, will make you ‘Indian’. Watching ‘Indians’ in films will tempt you to mimic the ‘Indian’, thereby become ‘Indian’. Thus, with the ban we see the emergence of a territory of identity--- of being Manipuri.

In resisting the process of ‘Indianization’ an identity of the ‘Manipuri’ begins to crystallize. This emergent ‘Manipuri’ presumes a ‘Manipur’ that is already formed. For many in Manipur, including the militant separatist groups like the RPF, there is one ‘Manipur’. The Manipur that existed since the times of *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba*<sup>79</sup>. The Manipur of Maharaja Bodhchandra<sup>80</sup>. The Manipur that the Indian Union took over without the consent of its people. Much like the nationalist historiography of colonial India, as described by Partha Chatterjee (1993:95), here the identification of country (Manipur) and realm (Meitei Leipak) is permanent and indivisible.

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<sup>79</sup> The first King of the Meiteis.

<sup>80</sup> He is the King of Manipur who signed the merger agreement with the Indian Union in 1949.

This means that although there may be at times several kingdoms and kings, there is in truth always only one realm which is coextensive with the country and which is symbolized by the capital or the throne. The *rajatva* (realm), in other words, constitutes the generic sovereignty of the country, whereas the capital or the throne represents the center of sovereign statehood.” (Chatterjee 1993:95)

Kangla, the most important site for Meitei kings, is also the most powerful symbol of Manipuri sovereignty, and Manipuri identity. However, making Kangla the central symbol of Manipuri sovereignty also generates anxiety among minority groups who were traditionally subjugated or excluded by the Meitei kings. Today, there are many militant groups in Manipur who are organized around the idea of protecting their ethnic interests. In fact, the biggest threat to the territorial integrity of Manipur is the idea of Greater Nagaland, espoused by NSCN (IM) and NSCN (Khaplang). Greater Nagaland aspires to unite all the Naga inhabiting areas in the region under one political entity -- the Naga nation. The Naga movement in Manipur often cites the historical discrimination of the Naga people by the Manipuri kings. Like the Nagas, the Kukis, the Lois and other minority groups in Manipur have different narratives of Manipur which are often drowned out in the nationalist Manipuri history.

Reflecting on the state of postcolonial India, Chatterjee writes:

Unless such time that we accept that it is the very singularity of the idea of a national history of India which divides Indians from one another, we will not create the conditions for writing these alternative histories. (Ibid, p115)

It would seem that the divisiveness of a singular narrative of Manipur has been recognised among the urban populace of Manipur. In the last two decades, there has been a concerted effort, particularly in Imphal, to revive and reinvigorate ‘traditional’ cultural practices which are considered pre-Hindu. In this revivalist movement, there is an attempt to portray unity and harmony between the people

in the valley and the people in the hills before the advent of Hinduism in Manipur. Hinduism is seen as the corrupting force that created division between various groups of people in Manipur. The recent 'revival' of *Mera Wayungba* or *Mera Hou Chongba* is perhaps the best example in this context. When I was growing up, it was one of those festivals that only a few chose to celebrate. I only feature of this festival that I remembered was that a bamboo pole (*wa*) is erected (*yungba*) in front of the house and a live lantern is left hanging at the top end of the pole. The story we were told was this:

Long long time ago, the people in the valley (Tam Mi) and people in the hills (Ching Mi) were brothers. Ching Mi was the elder brother. Everyday they would come down from the hills to work in the valley. In the very beginning most the valley was under water, but as time went by the water level got lower and lower. So that the two brothers could cultivate more and more land in the valley. Eventually it was becoming difficult to go back home everyday. In course of time the younger brother, Tam Mi, ended up staying in the valley permanently. But the younger brother would put up a lantern in front of his house, so that the elder brother can see his location at night. Thus began the festival of *Mera Hou Chongba*.

Today, this festival is celebrated with much pomp and elaboration. Every year on the 15th of *Mera*, which usually falls on the second week on October, *Mera Hou Chongba* is being celebrated with great rigour, particularly in Imphal. The celebration of this festival is still markedly absent in smaller towns, including my hometown, Kakching. The biggest celebration is done in the Kangla, the site of sovereignty for Manipuri kings. This year (2011) it was celebrated on 12th October, and *Huiyen News Service* reported:

The celebration was marked by the exchange of gifts among various people coming from different parts of the state, both hills and plains, in the presence of the Titular king of Manipur Leishemba Sanajaoba.

The symbolic presence of the Manipuri king is very significant. Recognition by subsumption. First we are Manipuris, with Kangla as its symbol of sovereignty, and then we are Meiteis, Pangals, Naga, Tangkhuls, Kukis etc. We lived in harmony and unity in this Manipur, before Hinduism ruined it all. Being Manipuri, then, is to recover that glorious past, that unadulterated Manipur.

To ban Hindi films is an attempt to recover an 'authentic' Manipuri culture, which is inherently different from Indian culture. Manipuri culture and, by solidarity, the cultures of the Northeast region are essentially different from Indian culture. One significant way in which this distinction is established by the Manipuri nationalists is through a certain discourse of sexuality.

### **Manipuri sexuality**

Take for example, the song and dance sequence. Manipuri songs are done very tastefully without any display of tits and bums and that makes it eminently fit to be watched together in a family of three generations without any awkwardness and embarrassments. Elements of sexual titillation are completely absent from the Manipuri cinema, that compared to it, a typical item number of Mallika Sherawat would look like a soft porn stuff. No rain-soaked blouses for the Manipuris. (Yumnam 2007)

Song and dance sequence is, perhaps, the most characteristic feature of Bollywood's influence on Manipuri cinema. The sexualized female body in the song and dance sequences of popular Hindi films becomes an object around which the Manipuri nationalist constructs a Manipuri sexuality. Any popular song and dance number from Hindi films, particularly since 1980s, typically involves sexualized movement and body languages like, gyrating of the hips, revealing

cleavages, heaving of the bosom, suggestive biting or licking of the lips etc. Such sexualized gestures and scenes are deemed 'inappropriate' for public viewership in Manipur. These are read as cultural forms and practices alien to Manipuri culture. Opposite this provocative and seductive body, which is usually gendered, is the Manipuri body which is restrained, calm, simple, and austere. Some militant nationalist groups in Manipur have been actively involved in 'policing' the younger generations, based on this idea of the Manipuri body (more details in Chapter 4). The kinds of sexualized movements and body languages described here are markedly absent in Manipuri films. However, the aesthetics of dance and body movements are changing very quickly in the emerging Manipuri 'digital' films. Hence the anxiety around the involvement of the militant nationalist groups in Film Forum Manipur (Chapter 2). The construction of the Manipuri body, often the female body, which is simple, austere and without desire as opposed to the Indian body which is marked by excess of -- desire, movement, sensuousness etc., is also racialized in the Manipuri nationalist discourse. The markers of Manipuri sexuality is often extended to the 'Mongoloid' people of the Northeast India, South East Asia, Korea etc. In chapter 2, I have alluded to this extension in the context of the Korean wave in Manipur. Many Manipuris enjoy Korean films because the characters are "eecham chamba". The Korean films and telenovelas that are popular in Manipur do not contain explicit sexual gestures or acts, the female protagonists are soft spoken and austere, the films often glorify the simplicity of rural life etc. So, the Manipuri nationalist seems to be saying, we Manipuris are more like the Koreans and the other Mongoloid nations; and we Manipuris are culturally very different from the Indians.

Besides the issues of idealizing heteronormativity and masculinity in the nationalist discourse of Manipuri sexuality, it gets complicated with the cultural subtext of the Hao Nupi or Tribal Nupi (women of the hill people). In the popular

lores and jokes, Hoa Nupi is often depicted as sexually provocative and promiscuous. In contrast Meitei Nupi (Meitei Women) is often depicted as austere and devoid of sexual desire. On the other hand, the female body from the Northeast, including Manipur, is racialized, and sexualized as promiscuous and provocative by the locals in Delhi. Perhaps, because of such tensions and contradictions the Manipuri nationalist is deeply invested in the recovery and preservation of a distinctive sexuality of the Manipuri women. In the discourse of sexuality by the Manipuri nationalists one could see, what Begona Aretxaga saw in the context of Northern Ireland:

... the attempt to hold social control through the control of women's bodies; an attempt to dispel political ambiguity... Women's sexuality becomes then a material and symbolic arena of political demarcation, and a political battleground." (Aretxaga 1997:153)

We notice the emergence of another territory here.

## **Sovereignty**

No, there was no individual intimidation. It came out in the local newspapers. The threat was taken very seriously because the law and order situation at the time was getting worse at the time. There was nothing official about it but it was understood that not complying would mean death. (Sunil 2009)

Hindi films are banned because watching them could mean death, screening them could mean death. There was no personal intimidation. No official statement. It was in the air. Everyone left it. So the Hindi film distributors left. Cinema halls went bankrupt. All because of the fear of death. Anything can happen. The form of power encountering here is not the disciplinary kind. It can strike out of nowhere and disappear into nowhere. It exercises the sovereign right to take life whenever it wishes. In Chapter 4, I will discuss in more detail how this form of

power permeates the everyday life in Manipur, and how it constantly contests the state powers. This contestation of powers often exhibits itself by exercising the sovereign right to kill on the Manipuri bodies. Thus we are running into the limits of the sovereign defined in terms of legality. What I find useful in this context is Mbembe's (2003) reading of sovereignty by way of George Bataille:

By treating sovereignty as the violation of prohibitions, Bataille reopens the question of the limits of the political. Politics, in this case, is not the forward dialectical movement of reason. Politics can only be traced as a spiral transgression, as that difference that disorients the very idea of the limit. More specifically, politics is the difference put into play by the violation of a taboo.

Sovereignty of the state is inviolable, it is sacred. In other words, only the state has the sovereign right to kill. And to challenge this right is to violate the ultimate taboo. This is precisely what is happening when Hindi films are banned on pain of death. Yet, the state is silent. Not a word betrayed. Rather, cinema halls are allowed to screen Manipuri 'digital' films under 'illegal' license. Manipuri film industry survives as Manipuri 'digital' films proliferate. And then, the Film Forum Manipur demands admission of Manipuri 'digital' films into National film festivals. Finally, the law admits it. The limit of legality is redrawn. Perhaps this is politics.

### **Conclusion:**

Pulling you this way and that, mimesis plays this trick of dancing between the very same and the very different. An impossible but necessary, indeed an everyday affair, mimesis registers both sameness and difference, of being like, and of being Other. Creating stability from this instability is no small task, yet all identity formation is engaged in this habitually bracing activity in which the issue is not so much staying the same, but maintaining sameness through alterity. (Taussig 1993:129)

The fear of alterity (or the lack of it) seems to be at the heart of most nationalist projects. The Manipuri nationalist is afraid that the Manipuri body might become complicit and conform to the desire of the Indian nation. Hence the ban of Hindi films, to stop the magic of mimicry, perhaps. On the other hand, the Indian nation-state is afraid that the Manipuri body might refuse to change. And that this refusal could potentially derail the project of nation building. Hence the AFSPA. Hence the military. What if alterity is not simply a matter of dialectic transformations?

## **Chapter 5: Manipur as a “contested space”**

The tension implicit in the statement, “Hindi films are banned in Manipur” registers a resistance to a dominant cultural form. A closer examination of the ban (chapters 3 and 4), however, quickly revealed that this “resistance” entails control over bodies, spaces and practices. In other words, “resisting” “Indianization” with the ban of Hindi films necessitates “Manipurization” on the bodies, spaces and other cultural symbols. Thus, following the trajectory of the ban on Hindi films quickly leads to a place where one begins to see such claims and counter-claims over bodies, places, and symbols everywhere and everyday. As I have alluded to in the introductory chapter, I have identified two dominant forms of powers whose interplay of claims and counter-claims constitute the very bodies, places and symbols which they seek to claim/counter-claim – the Indian nation-state and the militant Manipuri nationalist.

In conceptualizing Manipur as a “contested space” I have referred to the controversial history of the Merger Agreement of 1949, the extension of Arms Forces Special Powers Act (1954) to Manipur, and certain diktats enforced by the militant nationalist groups (particularly KYKL). In order to get a sense of how people are negotiating these contesting forces, I introduce, towards the end of the chapter, humors and jokes that came out of this contestation. Such negotiations through humor and jokes, is a reminder that power is not always totalizing (completely), and that the “contestations” does not necessarily polarize power into, say, two cardinal points. Thus, theoretically I lean towards the notion of power as diffused and fragmented. However, in this report I am using the terms “contestations” or “contested space” strictly in the sense of the political question of the sovereignty of Manipur – whether Manipur should remain as regional state within the federation of the Indian Union or should it exist as an

independent nation-state? “Contestation” here does not refer to just any contestation between different power centers. The distinction is crucial for the thesis of this report, especially when we are talking about a place where more than 30 armed groups are operating and exercising powers with absolute authority. Most of these 30 or more armed groups converge at one central issue, the sovereignty of Manipur, and they share a common resentment – the merger of Manipur into the Indian Union.

Thus, when RPF imposed the ban on Hindi films and any other forms of Hindi media in Manipur, the rest of the militant nationalist groups actively supported the ban, and none opposed it. This is the case also with other diktats issued by KYKL or UNLF, some of which will be discussed briefly in this chapter. Since, the “contested space” here is modeled around the issue of the political sovereignty of Manipur, I would spend some time revisiting the “history” of this “contestation”.

### **The “merger” of Manipur**

The relationship between Manipur and the Indian Union has been quite complicated from the very beginning. Politically, Manipur was administered as a princely state during the British rule in India. Manipur became a part of British India rather late, compared to other princely states, only after the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891. From 1891 to 1947, i.e. till the independence of India, the British administered Manipur through the office of a Political Agent in the royal court of Manipur. Depending on the personality of the political agent and the prevailing political wind of the time the office of the political agency had varying degrees of influence on the internal affairs of Manipur. By the end of 1947, the office of the political agent has been replaced by that of the *Dewan*, under the interim rule of the Indian Dominion. From 1947 to 1949, Manipur had a brief existence as a sovereign state, which ended with the signing of the Merger Agreement in the

Oct of 1949. There have been questions about the legitimacy of the Merger Agreement. Some historians have pointed out that the Maharaja might have signed the Agreement under duress. Because of the controversial nature of the Agreement, it has been the main source of resentment for most guerrilla nationalist groups (Parratt 2005:119). Another very crucial issue is whether the Maharaja represented the sovereign will of the people, because an elected Legislative Assembly existed during the time of the Agreement. The issue of the sovereign authority of the Maharaja was complicated further by the socialist movement sweeping across Manipur in the 1930s and 1940s (Sanajaoba 1988; Parratt 2005). Thus a dramatic stage was set in 1949 for a half-a-century long “contestation” of political sovereignty in Manipur.

The question of the merger of Manipur to the Indian Union and the related issue of sovereignty, however, predates the fateful agreement of 1949. Manipur in the 1930s and 1940s was a very tumultuous period of social and political movements. Mostly inspired by the Indian nationalist movement, there was a strong move to reform various social and cultural institutions which were considered exploitative. These reformist movements took a radical turn by the end of the Second World War. Civil societies and political organizations at the time were pushing for a “responsible” government. *Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha* (NMM) under the leadership of Hijam Irabot played a pivotal role in this. By the early 1940s the need for an elected government had been acknowledged among the princely states. In fact, in January 1946 the Council of Princes recommended the establishment of popular elected governments in the princely states (Parratt 2005:93). In the April of the same year the then Maharaja, Bodhchandra had announced his wishes for an elected government. Subsequently the Manipur State Constitution Act of 1947 was passed, which paved way for an elected government based on adult franchise. Polling began for the state assembly on

11<sup>th</sup> June 1948. When the results finally came out, Manipur State Congress (MSC) had won 14 seats, Praja Shanti<sup>81</sup> 12, and the Krishak Sabha 6, while the remaining 18 seats were filled by the Hill member (those seats were reserved for the Hill areas). Praja Shanti was invited to form the government in coalition with the Krishak Sabha and the Hill members. While the Manipur State Assembly was clearly a big success, albeit conflicts, for the political mobilization in Manipur, the actual nature of relationship between Manipur and the Indian Dominion was never, perhaps, fully understood or discussed by the Assembly. The MSC, formed in a failed attempt to unify the political parties in the October 1946 (Parratt 2005:96), had already come under the sway of the Indian National Congress, advocating for complete integration with the Indian Union.

One faction of the MSC openly espoused India's plan to form a "Purbanchal Pradesh," which would have consisted Cachar, Manipur and Tripura with Bengali and Manipuri as its languages. (Parratt 2005:103)

Even though MNC didn't get to form the government, the result of the 1948 election shows that its advocacy for integration into India Union must have been very effective. So, there was already an internal pressure for the merger, besides the tactical moves by the Indian Dominion to absorb the princely states.

When the Maharaja went to Shillong on the September of 1949, to meet the Governor of Assam, to seek clarification on the position of the *Dewan*<sup>82</sup>, people in Manipur were already concerned with a possible merger agreement (Parratt 2005:116). For some reason, however, this matter was never discussed (at the time) in the state assembly. As soon as the Maharaja reached his residence in Shillong – the Redlands – he was completely cut off from any communications by

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<sup>81</sup> Name of a political party.

<sup>82</sup> An official position appointed in the place of the political agency of British India.

the security forces of the Indian Union. After two days of “isolation” the Maharaja finally gave in and signed the Merger Agreement on 19<sup>th</sup> September, 1949. But it was announced officially on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1949, the Manipur State Assembly and the Council were dissolved on the same day, leading to the complete take over of the state administration by a Chief Commissioner, under the Indian Union.

Thus the “contestation” of sovereignty of Manipur in post-independent India has a complicated history, going back much before the fateful agreement of September 1949. However, the merger agreement did mark a turning point in this “contestation” in the sense that the “contestation” took a militant form after 1949. By 1951, Red Guard, the military wing of the Communist Party of Manipur, had started training in guerrilla tactics. On November 4<sup>th</sup> 1964, the first major militant group fighting for an independent Manipur – United National Liberation (UNLF) – was formed. In 1978, People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the armed wing of (later) Revolutionary People’s Front (Manipur) was formed. Many other armed groups have been formed since then, however UNLF and RPF remains the two major valley-based militant groups fighting for an independent Manipur. The image of the Maharaja being “forced” to sign the Merger Agreement on the 21<sup>st</sup> of September 1949 is often invoked and re-emphasized, as the one singular moment defining the loss of sovereignty of Manipur, in the rhetoric of the valley-based militant groups. For the Manipuri nationalist, that event has come to symbolize the “deceit” and the “treachery” of the Indian Union.

### **Contestation over time, place and bodies**

As with most projects of nationalism, there is a constant pressure to define the “nation”, in spite of the fragmentations, conflicts and tension inherent within it. The militant Manipuri nationalism of the post-1949 Manipur faced a great challenge of defining (or redefining) a “Manipuri Nation”. And “India” often found itself in the

antithetical position of a dialectic construction (or imagination) of a Manipuri nation – in this dialectics, “India” is the “deceitful”, “corrupting”, external force, against which the “purity” and the “simplicity” of the Manipuri should be preserved. The diktats issued by the guerrilla groups often convey a sense of “cleansing” or “purification” of the Manipuri society, more often than not from the “corrupting” “Indian” elements. The struggle of sovereignty for Manipur got intricately embroiled with the “purification” of Manipur. What has ensued consequently is a half-a-century long contestation of power between the Manipuri militant nationalist groups and the Indian state over time, space and bodies. This contestation has defined the social, cultural, political and economic topography of Manipur for a long time.

## **Time**

### *Black Day: 14<sup>th</sup> October*

Imphal, October 14, 2010: Rebel organisations of Manipur will observe Black Day tomorrow as a mark of opposition to the annexation of Manipur to Indian union in 1949. As done every year, various insurgent organisations have called for general strike or public curfew tomorrow... The banned People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) has also announced that it would observe Black Day on October 15 and announced public curfew tomorrow. Publicity In Charge, PREPAK, Aheiba Angom appealed to the people to stay indoors and not to venture out in the streets, and not to use any kind of vehicle including bicycle. (*Hueiyen News Service*)<sup>83</sup>

“Black Day” is often used in the rhetoric of the militant groups as well as civil bodies in Manipur. It is a reminder of a tragic event. In the case of the October 15, as a reminder, it is also a refusal of the “linear” progression of history of post-colonial Manipur. For it was the day when Manipur lost its sovereignty. The curfew imposed by the guerrilla on this day is always very effective; schools,

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<sup>83</sup> For all reports from *Hueiyen News Service*, visit:  
[http://e-pao.net/epPageExtractor.asp?src=news\\_section.archive.html..](http://e-pao.net/epPageExtractor.asp?src=news_section.archive.html..)

markets, and roads remain closed and empty in most parts of Manipur. The State authority often finds itself quite helpless in the face of this curfew.

#### *Independence Day: 15<sup>th</sup> August*

Imphal, August 14, 2010: ... On Friday afternoon, a 5 kilogram IED was recovered by the security forces personnel along the Tiddim Road in Bishnupur district of Manipur. The IED was reportedly being planted by a bomb expert of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), a prominent militant outfit based in Manipur. It is worth noting that in the last few days security forces personnel have been keeping strict vigil in and around Imphal and other suspected areas of the state. Frequent frisking of people and conducting combing operations have been the routine affairs in the last few days. These measures are compelled by the fact that various militant organisations of the state have announced to boycott the Independence Day celebrations in the state. (*Hueiyen News Service*)

Every year, 15<sup>th</sup> of August is a day of intense anxiety for many in Manipur. Even though the State government manages to organize the Independence Day celebration it is often bereft of popular audience. The lack of enthusiasm for the celebration of Independence Day in Manipur could be linked to two major factors – the boycott by the militant groups and the complete dismal of the state of affairs felt by the people of Manipur. While the boycott by the militant groups is very real, often very explosive, the tone of the Indian Army on this day is increasingly marked by the rhetoric of “reconciliation”, peace and development. Maj Gen DS Hooda, GOC, Red Shield Division, on the occasion of the 64th Independence Day said this in a public function:

May Almighty bless the people with sagacity and courage to facilitate Manipur ushering into a new era of reconciliation so as to facilitate all round development which the State richly deserves.

#### *Patriot's Day: 13<sup>th</sup> August*

Governor Gurbachan Jagat, who was chief guest of the function, observed that this day (August 13, 1891) will ever remain etched in the memory of

the people, reminding them the supreme sacrifices made by Bir Tikendrajit, Thangal General, Niranjan Subedar, Kajao and Chirai Naga in their service of the motherland. Their sacrifices shall be written in golden letters, not only in the history of Manipur, but also in the history of India, the Governor added. He also called upon the people to resolve to stand together, shoulder to shoulder, and face all threats, internal and external, however, strong they may be, for the unit and integrity of the country. (*Hueiyen News Service*)

This is an interesting example of how the state appropriates the local narratives of martyrdom, patriotism and sacrifice within the national narrative of decolonization and the formation of the Indian nation. Interesting because, the same martyrdom is also the very source of inspiration for the militant nationalist movement in Manipur.

### *Kangla*

Located at the heart of Imphal city, this is the historical site and symbol of Manipur's sovereignty. According to most historians, it has been the site of Meitei royal power since as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. After the defeat of the 1891 Anglo-Manipur War, Kangla was occupied by the armed forces of British India. When India got Independent in 1947, the Garwal Rifles, later the Assam Rifles of the Indian Dominion took over Kangla. It was only in 2004 when the shocking images of a group of elderly women protesting nude against the rape and brutal murder of Manorama<sup>84</sup>, in front of the Kangla, reached the national media did the Indian government seriously considered handing over Kangla to the people of Manipur. Finally, on 20<sup>th</sup> of November, 2004, Kangla was officially handed over to the state government of Manipur. Kangla is now a cultural heritage site, in accordance with the Kangla Fort Ordinance, 2004.

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<sup>84</sup> For a detailed account and analysis of this event, see Parratt 2005: 229-243; also, Vajpeyi (2009) "Resenting the Indian State: For a New Political Practice in the Northeast" in Baruah 2009.

*Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 (AFSPA)*

The section 4(a) of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (amended 1972)<sup>85</sup> states-

Any commissioned officer, warrant officer, non-commissioned officer or any other person of equivalent rank in the Armed Forces may, in a disturbed area, if he is of the opinion that it is necessary to do so for the maintenance of public order, after giving such due warning as he may consider necessary, fire upon or otherwise use force, even to the causing of death, against any person who is acting in contravention of any law or order for the time being in the disturbed area prohibiting the assembly of five or more persons or the carrying of weapons or of things capable of being used as weapons or firearms, ammunition or explosive substances.

Further, section 6 states -

No prosecution, suit or other legal proceeding shall be instituted, except with the previous sanction of the Central Government against any person in respect of anything done or purported to be done in exercise of powers conferred by this Act.

In practice “except with the previous sanction of the Central Government” means a long bureaucratic process which renders any judicial inquiry impossible. The impunity granted to the Indian Armed Forces by this act has become notoriously popular with the Human Rights discourses in Northeast India (Parratt 2005:149-160)<sup>86</sup>. Many scholars have attributed the escalating violence and the dismal state of affairs in the region to the AFSPA. In spite of persistent demand by individuals, civil societies, and various other organizations within and outside the state, the Act has not been withdrawn from Manipur so far. From the perspective of the Indian state, it (the Act) is imperative to safeguard the internal security and

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<sup>85</sup> The amendment conferred power to declare ‘disturbed area’ to the central government which was originally limited to the regional government only.

<sup>86</sup> Also, see Human Rights Watch’s report “These Fellows Must Be Eliminated”, September 15, 2008.

integrity of the country. For the militant Manipuri nationalist groups, it is the evidence of Indian colonialism.

*“Operation New Kangleipak”*

On August 17, 2002, KYKL launched “Operation New Kangleipak”, with an objective of “cleansing” the education system of Manipur. It started off with a drive to implement dress codes in schools and colleges. Women students, including non-Manipuris in Manipur were required to wear the traditional *phaneks*<sup>87</sup> in schools in colleges according to the new directive. Under this operation KYKL took some strong measures to ensure fair exams in schools and colleges, and gave “punishments” to many in the education department found guilty of “corruption”. Following is a list of some of the “actions” taken by KYKL under the Operation<sup>88</sup>:

2003

March 3: KYKL terrorists ‘expels’ three students for ‘examination malpractices’ reportedly with the approval of Council of Higher Secondary Education, Manipur (CHSEM) during the examinations at Pole Star College, Wabagai. The outfit also rebukes two invigilators for ‘negligence’ during the examinations.

November 24: The KYKL shoots six examination investigators in their legs at an undisclosed location in Imphal city for having encouraged students to indulge in malpractices in a school-level examination.

2004

November 24: The KYKL shoots six examination investigators in their legs at an undisclosed location in Imphal city for having encouraged students to indulge in malpractices in a school-level examination.

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<sup>87</sup> Manipuri sarong.

<sup>88</sup> The list here is not exhaustive, and it has been reproduced from the South Asia Terrorism Portal ([www.satp.org](http://www.satp.org)) which is a web based portal maintained by the Institute of Conflict Management, Delhi. The reports presented in the list have been compiled from news reports.

December 17: N Bijoy Singh and R K Ranjan, Vice-Chancellor and Registrar of the Manipur University, are released by the KYKL after being shot in their legs. According to a KYKL statement, both are 'punished' for flouting rules in the appointment of the Director of the Audio Visual Research Centre in Manipur University.

2008

June 8: The Operation New Kangleipak team of the KYKL parades six senior teachers of the Manipur University before a group of media persons in an unspecified location in the Thoubal district. The senior teachers reportedly take moral responsibility for the irregularities in selection of candidates for PhD research work for 2008.

2009

May 26: The KYKL outfit in a press release claims responsibility for publicly executing the Manipur University (MU) professor, Mohammed Islamuddin, in broad daylight in the university campus on May 25, saying that the slain academician was the ring leader of a clique within the MU which was usurping all powers of the University and using it to their selfish ends.

### **Foreign body: *Mayang***

It is the generic term for the "non-manipuri" body, the quintessential "outsider" often exemplified by the "Hindi" speaking North Indian "type". The terms "Bhaiya<sup>89</sup>" and "Bhabi<sup>90</sup>" are often used to refer to the male and female *Mayang* respectively, irrespective of their age in respect to the age of the addresser. The "merger" of Manipur to India was immediately followed by waves of immigration from the North and the East of India. From the perspective of the militant nationalist in Manipur, *Mayang* could be broadly classified into two categories – the rich traders and the poor laborer. Both types of categories have been a scorn for the militants. The first group, comprising mostly of *Marawari*<sup>91</sup> traders and

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<sup>89</sup> Hindi for brother.

<sup>90</sup> Hindi for sister-in-law.

<sup>91</sup> Most *Marawaris* trace their roots to Rajasthan in North West India.

Sikh businessmen, controls a major portion of the market in Imphal. Thus reinforcing the idea of the Hindi speaking “outsider” exploiting and profiting at the expense of the Manipuris. Most of individuals in the second group come from the poor populace of urban and rural Bihar and Orissa. They earn their living in Manipur working as shoe-shiners or *Muchi* (in the local parlance), *Hajam* (Barber), or by working in hotels, retail shops and construction sites etc.

The rag to riches story of the ‘*Mayang* who came with nothing and became rich’ is often told and retold, sometimes admirably and often with scorn. The *Mayang* body has often been the target of the “liberation” rhetoric of Manipuri nationalist. With the economy of Manipur doing so bad and the numbers of restless, educated, unemployed youth increase, the anxiety around the *Mayang* only makes sense. There is a constant pressure on the *Mayang* to get out of Manipur with extortion, threats of extortion, kidnapping and death. There have been waves of “Mayang Tanba” (Drive away the *Mayangs*) drives initiated and enforced by the militant groups in Manipur.

However, there has been a change in the rhetoric of some of the militant groups around the body of the *Mayang*. A distinction has been made between those who came before 1949<sup>92</sup> and after. Also, there has been a “call” for solidarity with the poor *Mayangs*, mostly from rural Bihar and Orissa, by indentifying them as “victims” of the Indian State.

### **Speaking back to powers through jokes**

Apart from the newspapers, official records and reports, the “contestation” of sovereignty in Manipur is registered and circulated as rumors, jokes and humors

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<sup>92</sup> The year of Manipur’s merger into the Indian Union.

etc. The stories are often about people's encounter with the Indian Armed Forces or the militant groups. And these encounters are almost always at the expense of the physical comforts of the individual involved. The texts of the narratives are tragic. But the fact that these narratives are circulated and performed as jokes is very intriguing. In analyzing the "whitemen" jokes among the Western Apache, Basso (1979:37) frames jokes thus,

Acts of joking convey messages that are not conveyed when the acts they are patterned after are performed unjokingly and for this reasons jokes are not intended to be taken "seriously".. in the event they are [taken literally], [they] stand open to interpretations...the social consequences of such interpretations may be sharply disruptive...

In the jokes I have analyzed below, the butt of the joke is often always an abstract, impersonal third person. When the joke is taken literally, the story is tragic – in the sense that the text usually ends with physical injury of the central character. Since the butt or object of the joke is an abstract third person the 'disruptive' consequences that Basso alludes to hardly arises, however the joke may cease to be a joke when taken literally. In cases where the object of the joke overlaps with the listener, thereby the listener becoming the butt of the joke, it might give rise to a tense situation between the narrator and the listener.

More than the content (the text) of these jokes, I think, it is structure and context of the narrative that makes it identifiable as a joke. The "historic" setting of the event (referred to in the joke) and 'contextualizing cues' (Gumperz 1992) are very crucial parts of the joke. The narrator usually starts with the recounting of the "historical" situation, often with the approving acknowledgement from the listeners that the event "did" happened, in which the particular event he is narrating 'occurred'. Once this initial "setting" is accomplished, the narrator proceeds to tell the particular event, usually after a brief pause. The event described is usually about an encounter with the third person and the personals of the Indian Army or the cadres of the militant nationalist groups. The individual

members of the Indian Army as well as the militant nationalist groups are always referred to by collective nouns, *Army* and *Naharol*<sup>93</sup> respectively. The encounter between the *Army* or the *Naharol* with the butt of the joke leads to some kind of a confrontation, leading to the final act when violence is “inflicted” on the body of the butt. Sometimes the act of violence is explicit in the text, and at other times it is either “understood” or completed with extralinguistic signs like gesturing the hand “as if” slapping the butt of the joke, or simply making the sound of the “slap” or both simultaneously. When the narrator takes the role of the *Army*, the *Naharol* or the butt, there is marked switching of language, tone and accent. The *Army* always “speaks” in Hindi and the *Naharol* has a sarcastic tone of “respect”<sup>94</sup>. In both cases the pitch of the voice is higher, assertive and authoritative. The butt “speaks” usually matter-of-factly (flat intonation) or submissively.

(i) *Rambo*

Context: The initial *Rambo* trilogy was very popular in Manipur in the 1980s and 1990s, and it still is. When I grew up, the iconic picture of *Rambo* – a muscular, half naked *Sylvester Stallone*, with a big gun, his eyes looking menacingly into the camera, and his long hair<sup>95</sup> falling down the shoulder – could be seen posted in many houses, especially in men’s rooms. And this particular story came out of

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<sup>93</sup> A collective noun referring to the youth; *naha* = young (man or woman), *lol* = all; *naha+lol* = *nahlol/naharol*. The term is often used to refer to the members of any militant groups in Manipur.

<sup>94</sup> In the jokes, when the *Naharol* encounters an “older” person, which is usually the case, the *Naharol* refers to the butt of the joke as “*Tamo*”, the honorific term for elder brother, yet that does not stop him from, say, shooting the butt at the thigh. This sarcasm associated with the *Naharol* in his encounter with the people is a common feature of popular lore and jokes.

<sup>95</sup> Long hair with men has two basic registers in contemporary Manipur, and in India generally – (a) religious, like the *Sikhs* or *Sanamahi* etc., and (b) secular; unruly, rebellious, western music = morally corrupt etc.

the many frequent encounters with the Indian Army during “combing operations.”<sup>96</sup>

Narrative: During a combing operation, the Army found this young man, with a long hair, in his room and the room had a picture of Rambo. So the Army caught hold of his hair, saying in Hindi, “Kya Rambo banta hai?”(So you wanna be Rambo?) [At this point it is usually assumed that the young man gets a slap or a kick. Sometimes that is made explicit in the narration and at other times it is unstated]

(ii) *“Human barometer”*

This one does not quite fit within the genre of joke, in the sense that it does not tell any particular story as such. Rather, it is expressed reflectively upon a situation created by the Combing Operations. The Combing Operations following an attack or an ambush by the militant is often very intense and brutal. It usually involves lining up the men in the vicinity and beating them with sticks, or with boots or the butts of the guns. And because market centers are often the targets of urban guerrilla warfare, the men in and around the market area get a regular share of the beatings from the Army. At some point in the late 1990s people started humoring themselves about how the bodies of those, who has had a regular share of Army beating, have developed certain sensitivities (as sensations of body pain and ache) towards the change in atmospheric pressure – the body begins to ache at different parts as the clouds gather to rain or something like that.

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<sup>96</sup> Refers to the security sweeps the Indian Army undertakes, “combing” (like combing hair) certain areas of settlement for “insurgent” bodies.

(iii) *Pheiganda nongmei maru (Bullet in the thigh)*

Context: The militant nationalist groups have declared been numerous “wars” on drug and drug abuse. Part of the drive was to clean up the Manipuri society by getting rid of the delinquent bodies (for example, “Operation Kangleipak”). One common “punishment” for drug abusers/addicts was to shoot at the thigh, usually preceded by verbal warnings.

Narrative: There was a young drug addict, who had already been shot (on the left thigh) after repeated warnings by the *naharols*. He was barely recovering from the wound when he was caught using drugs again. Before he could be told anything, he points to his right thigh and says, “Here, the left one has been shot.” Meaning they could shoot him on the right thigh.

(iv) *Longdao (Backstroke)*

Another common “punishment” for drunks, especially the ones found loitering in the streets at night, was to make drunk guys take a dip or swim in the local ponds. One such “swimming” session was going on one night. It was getting late, so the *Naharols* told the drunk swimmers to come out of the pool and go home, warning them not repeat (the drinking) again in the future. Everyone came out one by one, except for one. So the *Naharol* told him, “Ok, come out elder brother, time to go home.” But he won’t come out, instead he shouted back, “I would rather do another round of backstroke.” Well he was pulled out of the pond and shot at the thigh for trying to be so smart.

(v) *Khudai*<sup>97</sup>

1990s was a period of intense and frequent Combing Operations in Kakching, my hometown. The rumor at the time was that wearing *khudai*, because it is mostly

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<sup>97</sup> A traditional dress that men wear, something like the *dhoti* or the *lungie*.

worn only in and around the house, was a good alibi to “prove” your innocence during the operations. So that if you were found wearing a *khudai* during the operation, you are more likely to be drawing less scrutiny from the Army. Jokes were around at the time about how someone or the other is always in his *khudai*. It is taken as a sign that the person is too sacred to go anywhere.

(vi) *Kya tera mera?*

Random security checks in the middle of the road are a permanent feature of everyday life in contemporary Manipur. One such security check surprised a man name Mera<sup>98</sup>, a common name in Manipur, coming from a village called Tera<sup>99</sup>.

“Tera naam kya hai?” (What is your name?)

“Mera”

“Kahase aa rahey ho?” (Where are you coming from?)

“Tera”

[By this time the Army explodes with anger]

“Kya tera mera?” (What “your”, “mine”?!!)

The joke usually ends here with the unstated understanding that Mera, the guy, gets a beating from the Army guy.

(vii) *Mayang Tanbada Yaoba*

A while ago I have described how the figure of *Mayang* becomes the target for the militant groups. There has been certain instances of *Mayangs* being physically evicted, threaten to leave, and even killed. “Mayang Tanbada Yaoba” refers to someone who was evicted as part of the “Mayang Tanba” (Drive away Mayang) associated with such threats. The butt of the joke is someone who

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<sup>98</sup> Sounds like “mera” in Hindi meaning mine/my.

<sup>99</sup> Sounds like the Hindi “tera” meaning your.

“resembles” a *Mayang*, particularly bearing characteristic physical features like dark skin color, pointed nose, curly hair, hairy body etc., features not associated with typical ‘Mongoloid’. It is almost always addressed to a male. There are different versions to this expression often improvising on the “circumstances” in which the butt of the joke might have been “rescued” from the *Naharols* who were trying to physically evict him as *Mayang* despite his protest that he was not.

### **Conclusion**

I see these jokes and humorous narratives as not just registers of people’s encounters with the two dominant forms of powers in the everyday lives but also as a “social commentary” on the lived experience under the two power regimes. In this sense of resisting powers (by speaking back), these narratives could be read as ‘expressive resistance’ –

Such expressive resistance is more likely to be diagnostic of a situation than prognostic of change. It at least testifies that the writ of an alien presentation of self does not run unchallenged, that the hegemony of bureaucratic order is actively mocked. But such forms of expressions may be forerunners of change and need to be considered in that larger context. (Hymes 1979)<sup>100</sup>

In other words, these narratives are “good to think” about the lived experience of the people under the shadow of two dominant power regimes “contesting” over spaces, bodies, symbols etc. The Indian Army or the militant nationalist groups are not exactly an “alien” in the sense of the “West” presenting itself in a “non-Western world”, the context in which Hymes has referred to the term “alien” here. However, if we “reduce” both these dominant power regimes to their basic logic – the logic of the nation-state – Hymes’ words begin to fit better. Then, I think, it is nationalism – as the logic of nation-state – that is being mocked at in the

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<sup>100</sup> In the foreword to Basso (1979)

humorous narratives presented here. The mockery is, perhaps, about the tragic absurdity of the “normalizing” practices that nationalism necessitates.

Terms like “Mayang”, though a common usage signifying a difference, cannot be codified as a “foreign” body, distinct from the “local” (becoming legible to logic of the nation-state), thereby lending itself to be removed, without the risk of removing parts of the “local”. Perhaps, this is what joke (vii) is hinting at. On the other hand, in jokes (i), (ii), (v) and (vi) we are reminded of the absurdities of defining “insurgent” bodies and “civil” bodies, and the meanings often lost in translations. The resentment implicit in the “apparent” complicity of the “disciplining/punishing” doctored by the *Naharols* to “cleanse” Manipuri society of delinquent bodies and practices is captured well in jokes (iii) and (iv). These narratives are not just “good to think” about, but everyday practices, “kind of micro-sociological analysis”(Basso 1979:17) engaged with a “complex” situation of living.

Thus these narratives are cues to understand why the nationalist claims (by both the Indian state as well as the militant nationalist groups) over history (The “merger”), space (Kangla, Shaheed Park, cinema halls), time (Black Day, Patriot’s Day etc) and bodies (“Operation New Kangleipak”, AFSPA) are frustrating and absurd. It is in the midst of these ambiguities, frustrations and absurdities vis-à-vis the “contestation” of power regimes that the ban on Hindi films in Manipur, and its trajectories, could be best situated. In the logic of the nation-state commercial film is seen as a powerful means of production of cultural forms and desires. This recognition motivated RPF and others to ban Hindi films, seen as a means of *Indianization*. However, what is interesting is that the state refuses to engage “officially” with the issue, it has seemed to compromise its powers with “tacit” understandings. On the other hand, the militant nationalist groups have not been successful in stopping the people in

Manipur from watching Hindi films either. The resistance of the kind “emerging” from the analysis of the “expressive resistance” is not exactly subversion of or adaptation to the power regimes. I find it useful to bring in Raymond Williams’ (1977:113) reading of “hegemonic” to give a sense of what I am hinting at here.

One way of expressing the necessary distinction between practical and abstract senses within the concept [hegemony] is to speak of the ‘hegemonic’ rather than the ‘hegemony’, and of the ‘dominant’ rather than simple ‘domination’. The reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society. We shall need to explore their conditions and their limits, but their active presence is decisive, not only because they have to be included in any historical (as distinct from epochal) analysis, but as forms which have had significant effect on the hegemonic process itself.

It is in the spirit of this “hegemonic” that Manipur has been conceptualized as “contested” space, not contested space or contested place. Because contestation without qualifying it with “ ” betrays a sense of a priori, static worldviews, therefore totalizing. Similarly, place sounds more (relatively) pronouncedly marked than space. I also feel that “contested” space also allows possibilities of alternative politics from within, by granting intelligence to the “oppositional” movements, which the term “durable disorder”(Baruah 2005), I think, obscures.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

What if it is not a system, but a nervous system, like Taussig (1992) says? Any gaze of reason makes it very nervous. To conclude is to hold it still, under the gaze of reason. It is extremely nervous now. An explosion of neurotic impulses reverberates, threatening to unsettle the settled as it spreads. What is an MA report? It is disturbed. "An MA Report is usually thinner than an MA Thesis" fellow graduate students inform me, in a jest. It is a document then. Perhaps, thickness as measure of seriousness or gravity. Like a sign, whose signification rests on an unsteady array of difference, "MA Report" is placed next to "MA Thesis". What demands "MA Thesis" be thicker than "MA Report"? Maybe the clue lies in the terms signifying the difference between the two -- *report* and *thesis*. Usually, a *thesis* demands a proposition, a reasoned argument, whereas a *report* reports. Often, the credibility or the validity of a report depends on the apparent withdrawal of reasoned argument. Hence the irony of concluding a report. Hence the nervousness.

Maybe I have taken a jest too seriously. But the term 'report' excites me. I want to dwell on the nervousness it incites a little longer. News reporters are supposed to report events 'as they are'. The ability to report things 'as they are', unadulterated, unaffected by the circumstances, is idealized in the world of reporting. Ethnography is deeply entangled with reporting. Describe the native thick. Lets hear what the native actually said. We are drowning out the voices. Let all of them speak. Yes, I tried to include all the voices in the report. I tried and I failed. It is hard to realize the ideal. But my sincerity and honesty must be evident from the report. There is an intimate link between the reporter and the report. A bad report casts suspicion on the very person of the reporter. He could be lying or (because) he does not know the truth. Or, he did not report 'X'

because he does not have the moral courage to do so. He is unreliable as a person. I have tried very hard to establish the authenticity of my report. I have provided dates, references, direct speeches, links, photographs etc. After all the reputation of my integrity is at stake here. On the other hand, it is because I am the native and I have the training (say, as an anthropologist) that my report should be credible. A report is then a testimony of credibility. Credibility is a matter of life and death. Many reporters have been shot in Manipur.

Again, unlike a thesis, which seems to stand on its own, a report is always a report to someone. That is, to report is to implicate in a power relation. The reporter reports to the editor. I report to my supervisor, to the advising committee. I report to the University of Texas at Austin. It is also a report back to the people in Manipur. As I write this report I am constantly thinking of what people back home will say about it. Was I honest? Have I given the true account? To report, then, is to surrender to a higher order. From a less knowledgeable to a higher intelligence. Unconscious to Consciousness. Chaos to Order.

This is a report in the sense that I have tried to give an account of what happened and what happens. What happened in 1949? What happened in 2000? What happened when Captain Mangal was killed? What happens if Hindi film is banned? What happens when the state attaches itself to a nation? In a way I have reported some 'happenings'. But then, how does one define a 'happening'? Like the nervous system, it is nervous again. I have reported events 'as they happened'. "Captain Mangal was killed by the soldiers of the Indian Army on September 10, 2000" I wrote. It happened. The newspapers reported so. People say so. And I say so. Perhaps, then, it is in repeated saying that 'happenings' are established. Again, what is happening today in Manipur is 'crisis'. The newspapers say so. The writers write so. And people say so. To say

what happened and what happens is to mark a territory via refrain, an intense repetition that underscores, overscores and rescores. The ban of Hindi films is a refrain. It provokes questions about sexuality, sovereignty, modernity, identity etc. As refrain it continues to affect bodies in Manipur.

The report is refrain. Sometimes it comes in my dream, clear, coherent and lucid. Only to find it incomprehensible when I woke up. Sometimes it comes when I am awake, in the middle of cooking, drinking, watching or something. Now I have to write it down before it goes away. Like the thin films of water bubbles, burst and gone into nothingness. Sometimes, it just flows like a pregnant river, sweeping me away in its dizzy currents. Then it was over. Leaving on its trail, expressions, words, sore muscles, piles of books, coffee mugs, cigarette buds, dried foods, beer bottles and deadlines. Many words have been crossed out, thrown away. Many parties I have missed. I have lived through different worlds. The report is a *worlding* refrain.

The ban of Hindi films, AFSPA, *Naharols*, the armed conflict, they are all *worlding* refrains. They all constitute the worlds that people live in. But the worlds and the bodies that inhabit those worlds are neither rigid nor fixed. To demand fixity is to invite frustration. Military occupation, armed conflict and nationalism are often symptoms of this demand. And they have always been there.

“Hence the sardonic wisdom of the Nervous System’s scrawling incompleteness, its constant need for fix.” (Taussig 1992:3)

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