

India: Women's bodies, disinformation and nationalism in Manipur

Sunday 27 August 2023, by [MURTHY Laxmi](#) (Date first published: 7 August 2023).

Sexual violence in conflict has a long and terrible history - and its combination with disinformation and nationalism in Manipur makes for an especially ominous mix

Women's nude bodies have been central to two tumultuous events in Manipur separated by almost two decades. Home to the Imphal Valley-dwelling Meitei and the predominantly hill-dwelling Kuki-Zo and Naga tribes, Manipur has with varying intensity witnessed ethnic conflict, armed insurgency, separatist movements and militarisation ever since its merger with the Union of India in 1949. A flashpoint in 2004 and now another in 2023 have drawn global attention to Manipur's simmering cauldron of deprivation both real and perceived, its human-rights violations, ethnic hostilities, land conflicts, violence and breakdown of governance. At both times, women's bodies have been the canvas on which nationalistic projects have been etched.

However, the difference between the two events could not have been starker. In one, Meitei women dramatically disrobed in public as a powerful protest against abuses by Indian security forces; in the other, three Kuki women were stripped and paraded naked by Meitei men, and two of them were gang-raped in public, to humiliate an entire community.

On 15 July 2004, 12 middle-aged Meitei women stripped naked in front of the Kangla Fort in the state capital of Imphal, then the headquarters of the paramilitary Assam Rifles. These women - part of the Meira Paibis, or "torch bearers", who have intervened in social problems in Manipur since the 1970s - were protesting against the rape and murder of a young woman by the security forces. "Indian Army Rape Us" screamed the banner they held aloft as they defiantly displayed their bare bodies. It was this event, which came to be known as the "naked protest", that finally drew the attention of mainstream India to this long-neglected corner of the country and set off a powerful campaign against the draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, which gives free rein to the security forces in "disturbed areas".

Fast forward to 19 July 2023, when a video surfaced of two Kuki women being paraded naked and groped by a hundreds-strong mob of Meitei men in the village of B Phainom, in Kangpokpi district to the north of Imphal. Another woman, off camera, was also stripped and paraded. Two men from the village's small group of Kuki residents were killed - the father and brother of one of the two women who was raped. The incident took place on 4 May, a day after violence erupted in Manipur following a massive protest by the hill tribes against a Manipur High Court order opening the way for the state's majority Meitei community to also gain special "tribal" status, which would allow them to claim numerous benefits currently reserved for the minority tribes. Militant groups led the widespread burning of homes and businesses in addition to murderous attacks and sexual assaults, causing eviction of Kukis from the Imphal Valley and of Meiteis from the hills. There were also numerous cases of the burning and destruction of churches, sacred to the predominantly Christian Kukis. According to an analysis by Reuters, the death toll near the end of July stood at 181 killed - a disproportionate share of them Kukis, who form roughly a sixth of Manipur's population but almost

two-thirds of the dead. Other reports of violence – for instance, of Kuki youth being beheaded or bludgeoned to death – have not provoked as much outrage as the 4 May video has done. Sexual violence against women, it would seem, is far more emotive than murder.

“A flashpoint in 2004 and now another in 2023 have drawn global attention to Manipur’s simmering cauldron of deprivation both real and perceived, its human-rights violations, ethnic hostilities, land conflicts, violence and breakdown of governance.”

The graphic and shocking video raises many questions. Among them: who filmed it, who released it, and how and why was it suppressed for so long? The occurrence of sexual violence in itself is sadly not surprising, since it is shockingly common during incidents of communal unrest. Even before the video surfaced, some academics and journalists had pointed to the silence around rape in Manipur’s current unrest. Hoineilhing Sitlhou, a sociologist at the University of Hyderabad, wrote in early June about the rapes of Kuki women as retribution for alleged wrongs. She quoted a survivor of the 4 May incident as recalling that one of the attackers said, “Your people have raped and killed our people in Lamka [another name for Churachandpur], so we will do the same to you.” The journalist Sonal Matharu, in an article published on 12 July, provided further details of the “revenge” rape in B Phainom following “fake news” alleging that Kuki men had raped Meitei women.

When asked how the mob could assault Kuki women, Sinam Surnalata Leima, a Meira Paibi leader in the area where the assault occurred, was quoted as saying, “It was grief and revenge for the Meitei women who had been attacked by Kuki men.”

The deliberate circulation of disinformation adds a disturbing new facet to the old strategy of using rape as a weapon in conflict, especially during instances of ethnic or communal violence. This was only compounded by the Manipur government’s decision to impose an internet shutdown in the state as the crisis escalated – a tactic governments are increasingly using to try and control areas of unrest, with Kashmir another prime example. While ostensibly meant to contain the spread of incendiary information, in practice the ban also meant that it was difficult – including for the media – to check and call out widely circulated misinformation and potentially provocative content. Activists have said that it also made it difficult for victims to alert authorities to rights violations, especially those against women – and, more importantly, for them to seek help.

Deadly disinformation

One photo shared widely during the conflict purportedly showed the body of a Meitei nurse killed by Kukis in Churachandpur district, the epicentre of the violence. Accompanying hashtags like #SaveMeiteiHindus and #MeiteisvsKukis served to polarise the issue on ethnic and communal grounds. But the photo was revealed to actually be the photo of a young girl from Delhi killed by her parents in November 2022 over an inter-caste marriage. In fact, the father of the Meitei nurse supposedly killed had gone on television on 6 May, soon after the violence broke out, to debunk the rumours and confirm that his daughter was safe.

On 5 May, a widely shared claim that the bodies of 37 Meitei women who had been raped, as well as the body of a child, were lying in Shija Hospital in Imphal awaiting post-mortem sent emotions and tempers flying. Hospital authorities, however, clarified that this was not true.

Despite such clarifications, fake news continued to fuel anger and ethnic hostility. In late May, Meitei protesters in Delhi carried a banner with a photo that they claimed was of a Meitei woman assaulted by Kukis. Though the image turned out to show a victim of domestic violence from Arunachal Pradesh, the narrative of rampaging Kukis violating Meitei women was steadily strengthened.

“It was this event, which came to be known as the ‘naked protest’, that finally drew the attention of mainstream India to this long-neglected corner of the country and set off a powerful campaign against the draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, which gives free rein to the security forces in ‘disturbed areas’.”

On 18 June, a video showing armed men torturing and shooting a bound and blindfolded woman was widely circulated with the claim that it was from Manipur. A day later, fact-checkers showed that it was a video of an execution by members of an armed resistance force in Myanmar. It took more than a month for the Manipur cybercrime police to register an FIR in the matter. “Attempt is made to identify and arrest the accused persons for spreading false news with intent to disturb public tranquillity, incite riot, and create serious breach of law and order in the state,” the Manipur police tweeted on 24 July.

The stream of such disinformation continues, as do the attempts to communalise incidents of violence. As recently as 27 July, Boom Live debunked a claim that a Christian woman was brutally murdered by a Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh mob, circulated with a gruesome video and the inflammatory caption “O My GOD: Pray for Manipur Christians? Killing Christian woman in Manipur.” The video turned out to show a woman in Brazil hacked to death by a criminal faction.

The news agency Asian News International misreported that a Muslim man named Abdul Hilim was arrested in relation to a viral video of two women being paraded naked and sexually assaulted by a mob in Manipur’s Thoubal district. It was later confirmed that Hilim was a cadre of the People’s Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak-Progressive and had been arrested in connection with some other crime.

Taking stronger steps to curb disinformation, the government issued a notification on 31 July to warn that spreading misinformation would amount to sedition.

While Manipur burned

The failure of the state and central governments to quell the violence has been as shocking as it has been clear. For it to continue for three months as it has is impossible without the collusion of the political class and the law-enforcement apparatus. Police officers have themselves earlier observed that a riot cannot continue for more than 24 hours if the government has the political will to stop it.

The public disrobing and rapes in B Phainom occurred the day after violence broke out in Manipur, on 3 May. A police complaint about the incident was filed on 18 May, but a First Information Report (FIR) was registered at the relevant police station only on 21 June. This was a telling and typical delay.

The shocking video from B Phainom surfaced a day before parliament was to open in Delhi. This timing perhaps presented the right opportunity and optics for the prime minister, Narendra Modi, to finally break his silence on the months of unrest in Manipur, which is currently ruled by a government headed by Modi’s own Bharatiya Janata Party. This he did, but nothing changed on the ground, especially since Modi has allowed his party compatriot, N Biren Singh, to stay in power as the chief minister of Manipur even as he faces allegations of partisanship and worse, including collusion in the violence. A day after the B Phainom video surfaced, Biren Singh, who is Meitei himself, said that “hundreds of such incidents” had taken place, but he offered no explanation for his government’s inaction on complaints.

“The deliberate circulation of disinformation adds a disturbing new facet to the old strategy of using rape as a weapon in conflict, especially during instances of ethnic or

communal violence.”

A complaint by two women activists and the North American Manipur Tribal Association, emailed to the National Commission for Women (NCW) on 12 June, made an urgent appeal to “address and condemn sexual violence against Kuki-Zomi tribal women by Meitei vigilantes in the Manipur conflict.” The NCW merely forwarded this complaint, which mentioned the B Phainom gang rape and five other incidents of sexual violence, to the Manipur government, which did nothing. After coming under fire for her casual attitude, the chairperson of the NCW visited the state and met some survivors of sexual violence in late July.

Of nations and women

The role of the Meira Paibis in the current crisis bears particular examination. Nationalism as a project of constructing ethnic identity involves loyalty, pride and honour. Notions of femininity and masculinity are tested and challenged in times of conflict – which constitute what the feminist sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis calls “nationalist projects”, when the construction of nationhood involves specific notions of both “manhood” and “womanhood”. It is perhaps this impulse that makes Meitei women incite perpetrators from their community to inflict violence and sexual assault on members of the “other” group, in this case Kuki-Zo women. The labelling of Kukis as “foreigners”, “outsiders” and “infiltrators” further bolsters the construction of them as aliens who have no place in Manipur, and especially in the Imphal Valley. Even as Kukis are demanding a separate administration for the hill districts where they are in the majority, the Meitei are vehement about preserving the “territorial integrity” of Manipur. Meiteis’ anxieties over the hill territories are already high due to the long-standing demand of the Nagas for a “unified” Nagalim.

The Meira Paibis – also called “Imas” or “Mothers of Manipur” – have constructed their activism around notions of honour, and derive their moral legitimacy through the projection of protective motherhood. They earlier garnered much admiration when they fought the Indian security forces that abducted, tortured, raped and killed their young folk with impunity. Fiercely guarding their territory and community and donning a militant motherhood, they overcame shame and stigma to disrobe in public to make a powerful point in the “naked protest” of 2004. They are now to be seen fearlessly – even aggressively – blocking the movement of security forces in Manipur, interrupting their relief convoys, confronting them and demanding to check their credentials. It is probably this same nationalistic fervour that impels them to instigate violence and rape against those who do not fit into their imagined nation. In a war-like situation, then, sexual violence against the enemy – in this case Kuki women – can be shrugged off or even condoned, as a Meira Paibi told Deutsche Welle in an interview.

This hostility towards Kukis is the other side of the micro-nationalism that has infused the activism of the Meira Paibis, which flourished in the backdrop of movements for self-determination and autonomy. Moralistic overtones in their campaign against alcoholism and drug abuse (nishabandh) and vigilante justice were justified in the service of the nationalistic project, which endorses the militancy of Meitei chauvinist groups that have now found renewed legitimacy among the Meitei community.

In a 4 May attack on a nursing institute in Imphal, Meitei women led the way by demanding to check the identity cards of hostel inmates to single out Kukis. One of the survivors, aged 19, said that as she was being kicked and punched by the mob, the Meitei women incited them: “Why are you still keeping them alive? Rape them, cut their bodies into pieces and burn them alive.”

Numerous Kuki survivors have recounted how Meitei women participated in and sometimes led assaults, beating and kicking their targets and sometimes cutting off their hair. In chilling first-

person testimony given to the journalist Karan Thapar, 29-year-old Nancy Chingthianniang recounted the horrific events of 4 May, when her mother-in-law and husband of five months were beaten to death by a mob and she was hammered unconscious and left to die. The young survivor said that Meira Paibis participated in beating all of them and did not spare even a one-year-old baby. They also reportedly instigated male attackers and gave them the “right” to rape her. Though Chingthianniang was not raped, the act of legitimising sexual violence on a Kuki body evidences the visceral ethnic hatred towards a community that Meiteis consider alien to their notion of a Manipuri nation.

An 18-year-old woman who was abducted, assaulted and gang-raped in Imphal on 15 May approached the police on 21 July. According to the FIR in her case, a group of women, whom the complainant identified as Meira Paibis, reportedly said, “Your tribal boys have killed us Meiteis and so we will not save you.” The survivor said the women handed her over to four armed men wearing black, who proceeded to assault and rape her. These men were most likely from the Arambai Tenggol, an armed extremist Meitei group that has been implicated in much of the recent violence along with the Meitei Leepun, another radical group, whose leader Pramot Singh has been making inflammatory anti-Kuki speeches with impunity. These armed groups, seemingly endorsed by the chief minister himself, have deepened fissures between the two communities, and the binary construction of Hindu Meiteis versus Christian Kukis has been deliberately drummed up to simplify a far more complex reality.

“The failure of the state and central governments to quell the violence has been as shocking as it has been clear. For it to continue for three months as it has is impossible without the collusion of the political class and the law-enforcement apparatus.”

The theatrics around Biren Singh’s supposed resignation on 1 July, when a purported resignation letter was “snatched” and torn up by a Meitei woman, further reinforced Meitei women’s allegiance to an openly anti-Kuki and pro-Meitei ruling regime. There has been documentation of their participation, along with extremist Meitei groups, in raiding police armouries and forcefully releasing militants from army custody.

After the furore when the B Phainom video went viral, the area’s Meira Paibis handed suspected perpetrators of the assault over to authorities. They also burned down the house of the first suspect arrested and banished his wife and children from their village. This seems to have been prompted not by anger at the crime itself, but by a sentiment of protecting collective honour, as the assault on the Kuki women by Meitei men was deemed to dishonour the whole Meitei community. After authorities began combing operations to apprehend suspects in the video case, Meira Paibis resisted them – reverting to their long-standing practice of protests against security forces, but in this instance seemingly for misguided reasons.

Sexual violence against Meitei women in the current conflict has not been officially documented. This could be because there is great shame in speaking about such violations. According to civil-society organisations, Meitei women have chosen not to speak out about “violations” as they believe that the focus should be on the killings and displacements rather than on sexual violence.

Seeing and unseeing

The wide circulation of the 4 May video has brought sexual violence into public discourse in a society that heaps shame and stigma upon victims rather than perpetrators of such violence. Nonetheless, it opened a space for victim-survivors to speak out, and many more instances are coming to light. The mother of an 18-year-old who had been abducted, gang-raped and left to die told the BBC that she was prompted to file a police complaint after the video emerged. “I thought if I

don't do this now, I won't get another chance," she said. "I will always regret that I didn't even try to get my daughter's attackers punished."

"The labelling of Kukis as "foreigners", "outsiders" and "infiltrators" further bolsters the construction of them as aliens who have no place in Manipur, and especially in the Imphal Valley."

A particularly horrific incident, which occurred on 4 May but only came to light much later, involved the gang-rape, torture and murder of two young Kuki women targeted at a car-wash facility where they worked. The perpetrators, according to an FIR filed in the case, were members of groups such as the Meitei Youth Organisation, Meitei Leepun, Kangleipak Kanba Lup and the Arambai Tenggol.

A Kuki woman abducted, tortured and gang-raped on 15 May was able to escape and make it out of the state. She managed to file a complaint only on 21 July.

On 19 July, the journalist Barkha Dutt interviewed Gladys Vaiphei Hunjan, a rights activist from the Kuki community, who said she would "choose death" if she had to put herself in the place of the women in the video. She had apparently watched the video early on and fervently hoped it would not surface and be watched by millions of people. Once seen, it cannot be unseen, re-traumatising survivors, their families and communities.

In her ground reports from Manipur, the journalist Greeshma Kuthar interviewed Kuki women leaders who expressed anguish at the repeated attempts by the media to speak to the victims. The victims' privacy should be respected, the women leaders felt, since the contents of the video are well-known by now. "Everyone has seen it," one of them said, "everyone knows." Having been through a nightmare, the leaders felt, the victims and their families don't owe anything to anyone.

They felt that crucial context was missing in media coverage that spoke of "women from Manipur" raped by "miscreants", obfuscating the reality of ethnic targeting and the fact that Kuki women were mainly subjected to sexual violence by Meitei men. Labelling all Kukis as "militants", "poppy growers" or "narco terrorists", or as "infiltrators" and "refugees" – an ongoing practice in the Meitei-dominated English-language press published out of Imphal – creates a narrative that is unsympathetic to victims.

"The wide circulation of the 4 May video has brought sexual violence into public discourse in a society that heaps shame and stigma upon victims rather than perpetrators of such violence. Nonetheless, it opened a space for victim-survivors to speak out, and many more instances are coming to light."

As important as it is for instances of sexual violence to be known of and talked about in order that victim-survivors get justice, it can lead to severe social stigma and re-victimisation. Exposure and public discussion can also increase the vulnerability of those affected since the process of justice-seeking takes place in the very same context in which the crime occurred. Securing witness testimony, carefully preserving evidence and constructing a strong case against perpetrators is never easy, but it is that much more challenging in situations of ethnic conflict, particularly when the state apparatus is partisan.

The task now is to create a safe atmosphere for victim-survivors of sexual assault to come forward and record their testimony. Even as the case of the viral video was handed over to the Central Bureau of Investigation on 27 July – ostensibly to conduct a non-partisan probe – survivors opposed the agency's takeover of the inquiry. Additionally, concerns remain over all the other instances of sexual violence that are still to be officially reported.

This seems like a tall order when barricades now separate the Kuki and Meitei communities, and mortar shelling, arson and other attacks punctuate daily life in Manipur. More than 60,000 have been displaced, thousands are stuck in poorly-resourced relief camps, and 142 are dead from the violence according to the Manipur government. Many bodies are still in morgues in the Imphal Valley as families are too frightened to claim their dead, and attempts to bury loved ones are met by violent opposition. Rallies organised as recently as late July by the Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity calling for the elimination of Kukis (slogan raised included “All the Kukis must be killed” and “Kukis cannot stay in Manipur”) can hardly engender trust. Given the hostile, majoritarian state apparatus, the struggle to reestablish Kuki citizenship, as well as women’s rights and justice for victim-survivors of sexual violence in Manipur, is a huge challenge.

Laxmi Murthy heads the Hri Institute for Southasian Research and Exchange and is a Contributing Editor with Himal Southasian. She is currently working on a project titled “Challenging visual depiction of women and sexual violence in Southasia”.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Himal South Asian

<https://www.himalmag.com/women-disinformation-nationalism-manipur-conflict-sexual-violence-imphal-meitei-kuki-zo-meira-paibisi/>