

India: How Manipur's ethnic violence ripped a queer friendship apart

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The collapse of a deep Meitei-Kuki friendship shows how Manipur's nascent queer movement is fraying, threatening its hard-won gains in the violence-torn Indian state

The ongoing civil war in Manipur, in India's Northeast, had been raging for three months when I called my friend Bom in July. She had had a very public falling out with a close friend, Suman. I was calling to check how she was doing. They were from different communities - Bom belongs to the Kuki tribe and Suman is Meitei - but when they first met they bonded over their shared childhood trauma of growing up queer in Manipur.

On 3 May, when violence broke out in Manipur between Meiteis and Kukis, Bom and Suman found themselves confused and enraged. Both felt the need to stand up for their own communities by becoming keyboard warriors and fighting what they saw as misinformation. Their friendship was abruptly over. They blocked each other on Instagram and cut off all contact.

As Bom and I began talking about the conflict and its ramifications on her personal life, she recalled how her friendship with Suman had always "felt like home". "It was probably the epitome of queer sisterhood," said Bom, who lives in Mumbai now.

Whenever one of them was feeling low, the other would help out. "If I was sick, she would come to my apartment and cook me food. If I was feeling hopeless and anxious, she would take me out to eat in restaurants to cheer me up. I did the same for her." Bom recalled fond memories of getting drunk with Suman and play-fighting over who would get to smoke the last cigarette. "At the time, it felt like meeting a long-lost family member," said Bom. Her voice was somber.

The conversation with Bom stayed with me. As a Naga from Manipur, it made me think about how ethnic identities can sometimes overpower friendships. I called Suman about a month later to talk about how she felt about her strained relationship with Bom. Suman mostly lives in Delhi. She echoed the same joy in her recollections of their relationship, describing how they would cook together and bond over their shared longing for Manipuri food. "Bom was extremely supportive and was always there for me," she said.

Even far away from the violence, the relationship the two of them had nurtured with love and compassion revealed itself to be a mere illusion. The war back home had opened a seemingly unbridgeable divide between them.

Coming of age

Bom was effeminate as a child and the kids in Lamphel, her neighbourhood in Imphal, mocked and unflatteringly imitated her. "Growing up, my family members would advise me to act more masculine. I thought I had to be masculine," said Bom, who is non-binary. At school, teachers would tell her to walk like a man and stop being friends with girls. Students would say hurtful things like

"Homo lak-e!" - "A homo is coming" - whenever she walked past them.

But being Kuki in Meitei-dominated Imphal was more painful for her. Although she had more Meitei friends than Kuki ones, her Meitei classmates often showed their disgust whenever she opened her lunch box. They would mockingly ask whether she had brought pork or snakes or wild animals. Slurs were often thrown her way - like *"lawai macha"*, or *"uncivilised"*, and *"hao"*, which some hill tribes use to describe themselves, but that some Meiteis use against hill tribes derogatorily. In the eighth grade, her classmates, most of whom were Meiteis, would sing songs with offensive slurs like *"haothu naithu"* to annoy the few tribals in the class. *"Haothu naithu"* is an unflattering reference to tribal women's anatomy.

Despite the reduction in violence over the last decades, Manipur remained a divided society. Just as Manipur's nascent queer community was finding its footing, these old fault lines threaten to undo the progress it has made.

Bom only had a couple of queer friends during her school days. Both were Meitei. The first of those friendships, with Tomba, was filled with the joys of self-discovery and "being homo together." The first time Bom met Tomba, she recalled being fascinated at the sight of Tomba wearing a *phanek* - a lower body garment akin to a sarong, typically worn by women. But they lost touch when Tomba changed schools. The second friend, Ronit, would gang up with other Meiteis and call her *"haothu"* frequently. Bom felt hurt but couldn't respond.

When Bom started her undergraduate studies at Delhi University's North Campus in 2018, she quickly became active in her college's Northeast Cell and made a lot of new queer friends. In June 2021, during Pride Month, members of the Northeast Cell decided to create awareness about queer rights in their home states. Bom helped organise an interview with a transgender model from Manipur - Suman.

Bom knew about Suman, who is about five years older than her, because the two had studied at the same school in Imphal. They had never talked much in school, but Bom knew Suman by reputation. Suman and a couple of other trans kids had a gang of their own, which helped them stand up to the bullying by cis-heterosexual students.

In Delhi, they lived in the same neighbourhood, in Safdarjung. They started hanging out often and soon became close friends. Whenever Suman got anxious about her upcoming photo shoots, Bom would reassure her, help her groom herself and speak confidently. She would help Suman write emails for her modeling gigs and make her social media captions more effective. Bom and Suman would spend hours on the phone, talking about their crushes and dates. After every bad date, they would rant about the horrible experience and express sentiments like, *"Homo bu kanana pamdoino?"* - Who would want to date a "homo"?

"We shared our deepest pain and hopes with each other," Suman told me.

It is only in the last decade or so that finding community has become a real possibility for Manipur's queer people. Pavel Sagolsem, a member of The Chinky Homo Project (TCHP), who identifies as a non-binary femme person, attributes this possibility to the "semblance of peace and progress" in Manipur during this period, until the brutal violence of this year. THCP collects stories of queer and trans folks from Northeast India. "Queer people have become more visible," Sagolsem said, and they have "sought out each other and bonded over unique, diverse yet shared trauma and victories."

In Manipur of the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, violence was the norm. Many militant outfits were

engaged in fighting, demanding greater autonomy for Manipur or complete independence from the Indian state. The aspirations of these movements often clashed against each other, resulting in riots, murders and displacements. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which grants carte blanche to the Indian military in “disturbed areas,” was [enforced](#) in the state in 1980. Arbitrary arrests and state-sponsored human-rights abuses were talked about in hushed tones. The people of Manipur were in survival mode.

When word got around of Bom’s social media posts, people texted Suman to complain, referring to Bom as one of Suman’s “angang”, or children – common terminology among Manipuri trans women to refer to younger queer and trans folks.

During this time, a women’s movement against alcoholism that had taken root in Manipur in the 1970s expanded to try and protect men from the abuses of state forces and from militant groups. But as noted by the researcher Ditilekha Sharma in her paper ‘Nations, Communities, Conflict and Queer Lives’, these Meira Paibis, or “torch bearers”, eventually evolved into guardians of “social morality”, operating largely within a patriarchal framework. “Since queerness is based on ideas of sexual desires, bodily autonomy, and self-determination of one’s gender and sexual identity,” Sharma writes, “it is not surprising that the women’s collectivization could not lay the path for the collectivization of queer women.”

The struggles of queer people were relegated to the sidelines. In the last two decades or so, a lot has changed, according to Sagolsem. “Discourses around women and queers have evolved and a powerful feminist movement has mushroomed among the youth,” Sagolsem said. “Networking and community-building within the queer community has happened across the state, across districts, and across communities.” This work and visibility stands on the shoulders of organisations like the All Manipur Nupi Maanbi Association, Maruploi Foundation, Empowering Trans Ability, All Transman Association – Manipur, Meetei Leimarol Sinnai Sang and Nirvana Foundation. These groups worked persistently for decades with the most marginalised sections of society, including the trans community, partners of trans men, women sex workers, women whose husbands died of HIV infection, and women who inject drugs. In recent years, organisations like Ya_All, Matai Society and The Chinky Homo Project have been leading much-needed conversations surrounding feminism, queer emancipation and mental health.

Friends to foes

As the current violence shows, despite the reduction in violence over the last decades, Manipur remained a divided society, with deep cleavages along religious, ethnic, geographic and socioeconomic lines. The Imphal Valley, which hosts the state capital, is dominated by Meiteis, who practice a syncretic faith that draws from Hinduism and the indigenous Sanamahi tradition. Close to 40 out of the 60 seats in the state assembly are from Meitei-majority constituencies, giving the Meiteis a dominant position in political power and access to resources. The hills are inhabited by Nagas and Kuki-Zomi tribals, who are primarily Christians. Until the outbreak of violence, a delicate balance had been struck between the two communities, but each group continued to feel aggrieved. Meiteis have long resented the fact that they are barred by law from owning land in the hills, while the hill tribes are unhappy about poor socio-economic development in the hills as compared to the valley.

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The queer Meiteis who were part of Bom's circles never attacked her personally. She had the affluent sheen of having studied at one of Delhi's most reputed colleges, and she also passed as Meitei due to her fluency in Manipuri. But prejudice was perhaps always lurking under the surface.

As the former friends took their activism online, they faced hordes of online trolls attacking their gender expression, sexuality and bodies. "We are divided by communalism and yet united by transphobia."

During casual conversations, Bom often heard Suman imply that "Hao homos" - queer and trans tribals - were "cheap" and somehow less than Meitei queers. Knowing of Bom's reckless spending, Suman once jokingly asked her whether her father gets his money from poppy cultivation, playing on a derogatory stereotype implying that all Kuki-Zo tribals are involved in the drug trade. Though Bom could sense the communal nature of these remarks, she ignored them.

In early May this year, Bom said, as news spread of violence against Kuki-Zo people in Imphal, she felt betrayed by queer Meiteis in her circle, people she once considered close friends, who let their bigotry loose. She watched as they, including Suman, started making remarks on social media like "*Kuki khoi di lam munba khoi ne*" - Kukis grab other people's lands. Bom was enraged at how queer friendships had been forgotten because of communal politics. She began to use a Facebook meme page that she ran, which was popular with Meitei youth for its posts on Manipuri pop culture, to call out Meiteis who, according to Bom, were spreading hatred against Kuki-Zo people.

When word got around of Bom's social media posts, people texted Suman to complain, referring to Bom as one of Suman's "*angang*", or children - common terminology among Manipuri trans women to refer to younger queer and trans folks. Suman told me that she ignored the posts because she understood that they came from a place of anger and helplessness, not from the heart.

When online trolls asked her to reveal Bom's address and contact details, she refused, knowing how dangerous an angry mob can get.

Bom was doxxed anyway. She had been labeled anti-Meitei, which left her shocked and hurt. With her contact details floating around on the internet, she began to receive a barrage of hate mail. Some people body shamed her. She had to flee her apartment in Delhi when strangers turned up outside.

When Suman heard that the house of one of her Meitei trans friends was burnt down in the violence, she started a crowdfunding campaign. Suman felt hurt and shocked when Bom, in her social media posts, accused her of "stealing" from mainland Indians for "false" relief purposes.

As the conflict escalated back home, their friendship disintegrated.

As the former friends took their activism online, they faced hordes of online trolls attacking their gender expression, sexuality and bodies. "We are divided by communalism and yet united by transphobia," Thoi, a close friend of both Bom and Suman, told me. Bom had met Thoi, who is non-binary, at a party hosted by Suman in Delhi, and Thoi quickly became close to both of them. Before the current violence, they were like a family, a bastion of warmth. It was disheartening for Thoi to see her two close friends fight over communal politics - and face the same age-old transphobia and fat-shaming from online trolls.

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“However, I made sure I wouldn’t fight. I have been provoked but I chose not to fight.”

Thoi is Meitei. She grew up in Kolkata and Darjeeling, and works as a model. Her “neutral” stance on the conflict made her a target of criticism too: she was accused by Meitei friends and acquaintances of not taking her own community’s side, of not caring enough for them. Thoi told me that she had decided to choose compassion and act as a mediator between the warring sides.

Even as strains developed in many of her friendships with queer people across the two communities, seeing Bom and Suman’s relationship sever was the worst fallout of the conflict for Thoi. “There were some tensions between queer friends, but they resolved them with varying levels of success,” she said. “They talked it over and tried to understand their friends’ feelings and perspective.”

The conflict has altered many queer relationships in Manipur. “Even I lost some friendships, some conversations just became difficult,” explained Kumam Davidson, a queer activist from Manipur and the founder of the Matai Society. “However, I made sure I wouldn’t fight. I have been provoked but I chose not to fight.”

Towards the end of this May, Loi and Chakpa villages in Manipur’s foothills were attacked by militants, allegedly from the Kuki-Zo community. Though Loi and Chakpa people are seen as part of Meitei society, they have a complicated relationship with the Meiteis of Imphal. “We remain marginalised within Meitei society and are also derogatorily called ‘hao’,” said Robert, a gay man from the Chakpa village of Leimaram. Loi and Chakpa people are classified by the Indian government as Scheduled Castes, recognising them as a historically oppressed and marginalised community. Earlier, Lois and Chakpas had their distinct rituals, customs and even language, but these are fading and the language is nearly extinct, with only a few elders able to speak it. It is said that with the mass conversion of Meiteis to Hinduism in the 18th century, Lois and Chakpas were pushed to the [margins](#) as impositions were brought in on inter-community dining and marriages.

“Though Chakpas and Lois did not participate in ethnic rioting against Kuki-Zo people, our villages were harmed the most by the militants,” Robert lamented. He felt let down when his Kuki-Zo queer friends never condemned the violence by Kuki-Zo people against Meiteis. When Robert posted a WhatsApp status condemning the violence against everyone regardless of their ethnic identity, a queer Kuki friend from Churachandpur who lives in the same hostel as Robert started attacking him for claiming that the atrocities being committed by both sides were equal in intensity. They haven’t talked since.

“Even within queer friendships, stereotypes about different tribal groups persist,” Romik Sai, a researcher from Arunachal Pradesh, told me. Romik has studied how queer people are forming their own safe spaces for self-assertion. “During violence, such cracks can lead to deterioration of queer friendships,” she said. “It boils down to which identity do we give more importance to – tribe or queer?”

Common ground

Though the friendship between Bom and Suman is damaged, Thoi still maintains close relationships with both of them. “It feels so weird that I found a loving friend in Bom through Suman and yet they’re not friends anymore,” Thoi said.

Kumam, the queer activist, who has been doing relief work through the Matai Society, spoke of how heartbreaking it is to see friendships broken by this civil war. “It takes a lot to build friendships,

which are crucial support systems for queer and trans folks who are shunned by society,” he said. When the conflict ends, the people of Manipur will start to rebuild their lives. But, Kumam worries, in that process queer and trans lives might be invisibilised again. Ending this conflict “doesn’t take us anywhere closer to queer-trans emancipation. Our struggle is simply a different one and we can’t let it be sabotaged by a communal conflict. Otherwise, we’ll be starting from square one.”

Kumam said he hopes to eventually participate in a reconciliation process for estranged queer and trans friends, but he also noted that queer solidarity has been severely lacking during the conflict. “Solidarity is an overused word,” he explained. “There hasn’t been much of a helping hand from queer trans networks and organisations from mainland India to those of us severely affected by the conflict. What’s stopping queer trans leaders and organisations from reaching out to Manipur I wonder – even after four months of the conflict?”

Some queer people I talked to about the idea of solidarity expressed similar sentiments. “Regardless of ethnic lines, queer people should stand up for their friends,” Bom said. “Queer people will remain marginalised again when the conflict ends. This kind of politics is for cis people to fight.” Robert announced defiantly over the phone, “We are still ‘homos’ at the end. All of us should unite despite differences.”

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Amid the despair, there are also signs of hope. Pavel Sagolsem told me about a WhatsApp group called “Manipur LGBTQ Group”. Before the violence, the group was always abuzz. After the violence began, conversations abruptly stopped because people were preoccupied with their survival and providing help to the affected. But the group is now slowly returning to life. “The messages have started to trickle in,” Sagolsem said. “Maybe it isn’t as enthusiastic as before but it’s resumed its course – I think that’s where queer resilience lies and how it will flourish.”

Bom met Thoi recently in Mumbai. Though the civil war was the proverbial elephant in the room, they didn’t talk about it. They walked along the beach together and ate smoked pork at a restaurant run by a Naga from Manipur. Their friendship had survived the conflict. “See you on the other side,” Bom said as they parted, alluding to demands by the Kuki-Zo community for a separate state in response to the Manipur government’s failure to protect them amid the unrest. They laughed helplessly.

When I asked Bom if she could ever forgive Suman, she replied, “I’ve seen their bigotry. The harm is done and the blood has been spilled. There’s no going back.” In July, she got a text from Suman that she thought felt like an apology, but she didn’t care to respond.

Suman told me that she had gotten drunk at a party and texted Bom to ask her how she was doing. “Even now, I believe we’ll go back to being friends,” she said. “We queer and trans people need to stand for each other. I won’t remove pictures of us on my phone because I will always cherish those good times.”

Thoi finds it hard to accept that their queer family has disintegrated. She hopes that both Bom and Suman are able to forgive each other. “After all, forgiveness is key to our queer sisterhood,” she said.

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This story has been reported and produced by queerbeat, a collaborative journalism project focused on covering the LGBTQIA+ community in India.

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