NATIONS, COMMUNITIES, CONFLICT AND QUEER LIVES

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NATIONS, COMMUNITIES, CONFLICT AND QUEER LIVES

Some memories remain etched in your mind. Sometimes memories come to define certain places, certain people or certain contexts. Sometimes we do not notice conflicts in the everyday till something remarkable takes place. Sometimes our perception of certain things changes when we learn new things about ourselves. Sometimes we imagine and re-imagine things when we do not find narratives which fit into our own. These imaginations and perceptions sometimes become part of our memory, and part of our being.

I remember vividly the images on television of the Mother's protest in Manipur in 2004. It was probably the first time that imagery of violence and conflict left a mark in my memory.

Growing up in the 1990s in Assam meant violence and conflict was a normal part of our lives. Stories of abductions, bombings, bandhs, police frisking and random arrests of neighbourhood boys did not cause too much excitement. When we went on vacation in larger cities, strangers we met often asked how people lived in the Northeast

considering it was so unsafe. My father's standard reply was 'People have regular homes and regular lives.' Until I became part of the Save Irom Sharmila Solidarity Campaign in 2011, I was not aware of the fact that there existed a dreadful law like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), and that it was enforced in Assam as well.

I came to realize that even in the abnormal times of conflict, people live 'normal' lives; but perhaps the meaning of normal changes, and new normalities are constructed. People can and do negotiate within the context of high surveillance. Even as the idea of a normative life itself is challenged, non-normative genders and sexualities continue to negotiate.

My friend Sadam, who is a queer activist from Manipur and the founder of Ya-All, a Queer and Allies Youth Network[1] writes that, 'in regions of conflict there is so much focus on the violence that we often forget to look at the everyday lives of people who live in the region. About their negotiations, about their desires, about finding love, about forming families and about their daily struggles of livelihood. For those born and raised in the border-conflicted state of Manipur, there was negligible focus on queer issues. The state had bigger issues to deal with like insurgency, substance abuse, the outbreak of HIV/AIDS and youth unemployment. There was neither an inclusive support system for queers who openly guided queer youths on their understanding of sexualities, nor did the government or society show any interest in discussing it.'

In this essay, I want to explore certain quotidian realities of people living 'queer' lives in the state of Manipur.

What is so significant about Manipur?

Why queer lives?

Apart from the fact that this region has had a long history of nation-state conflict with the Indian nation, it has also had a very interesting history of women collectivising around the issue of the 'Nation'. Elsewhere in the world, we have seen that women's collectivizing and queer collectivizing have had interesting relationships with each other. Lesbian activism grew out of and against the norms of the

women's movement. However, as I learnt, that has not been the case in Manipur. Despite several decades of the women's movement and collectivization, the queer woman remains invisible.

This region has also had a long history of transgender visibility and collectivizing, the narrative of which is unique to the South Asian context. There are several ways in which transwomen have been able to collectivize, be it through the Shumang Leela[2] groups, the HIV/AIDS intervention programmes or through the beauty industry. In most parts of India, the collectivization of gay men in the 1990s has happened through the HIV/AIDS intervention programmes, and the leadership in these NGOs has been that of the gay men. However, in Manipur, gay men too have been largely invisible, and transwomen have taken the leadership in non-governmental organizations (NGOs). I have not been able to explore the reasons behind this.

Along with visibility, there is a certain kind of co-existence of the transgender community with the heterosexual family. Unlike other traditional transfeminine communities in India that have formed their own gharanas or households, the transwomen in Manipur usually live with their biological families and have engaged in livelihood options in the beauty and glamour industry or small entrepreneurial ventures. However, the stigma and discrimination attached to the community still exists.

These narratives of queerness are what drew me towards this region. But as I delved deeper into it, I came to realize their individual complexity as well as their interconnectedness.

MANIPUR AND NARRATIVES OF NATIONALISM

The conflict in the north-eastern region started pre-Independence when the hill communities were bought under different territorial administrations and introduced to territorial politics in order to bring about 'administrative convenience.' Post-Independence, several

ethnicity-based militant groups arose, and clashes emerged due to 'fears' of being assimilated into dominant groups; and the region saw much social unrest (Shimray 2001).

Manipur has over 35 indigenous communities and ethnic groups with distinct sociocultural practices. These groups can be divided into hill and valley communities. The communities in the valley which consist of over 65 per cent of the population are mostly Meiteis, Pangans (Meitei Muslims) and immigrants from other states who are recognized as non-tribal groups. The hill communities mostly consist of groups recognized as tribals who are broadly categorized as the Naga groups and Kuki-Chin-Zomi groups. The highest population is that of the Nagas, who constitute about 18.72 per cent of the population. The Meitei community, with over 50 per cent of the population, remain the dominant ethnic group in Manipur.

The region has seen several armed movements of ethnic assertion since the 1980s. Language, control over natural resources and ethnic territoriality have played a major factor in these movements. The government has also propagated certain ethnic issues (Shimray 2001).

Bora (2011) writes that the Inner Line Regulation established by the colonial state prevented contact between people in the hills and the plains, thus laying grounds for conflict. Kikon (2009) writes that while the demand for self-determination increased, so did militarization. Then, the government introduced the AFSPA in 1958, which later got linked with development projects like hydro-electric dams and mines. This led to the region being marked as a 'disturbed area,' and its inhabitants being seen as dangerous people.

Daniel, a queer activist from Manipur told me in an interview that the 'Meitei narrative', which to a large extent became synonymous with the 'Manipuri Narrative', was that Manipur became part of British India in 1891 after the Anglo-Manipuri war. Post-Independence, the Manipuri king was put under house arrest and coerced into becoming part of India in 1949. It is this forceful annexation which led to dissonance amongst the people, leading to conflict and the formation of several armed groups.

This history of annexation led to the formation of a few anti-state groups that wanted liberation from the State of India. The first separatist faction, the United National Liberation Front was formed in 1964, and since then several other groups have joined the war.

The AFSPA was first enacted in the northeastern region in 1958 in the Naga Hills to contain the growing movement of Naga nationalism. It was later extended to other states and in 1980 extended to Manipur, as the conflict continued after the formation of a separate Manipur state in 1972. While this was introduced as a temporary measure to contain the armed groups, the provision continues till date by several armed groups.

NATIONALISM AND GENDER

Nationalism and gender have always had a close connection. Feminist works like those of Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1999), Lata Mani (1999), Uma Chakravarti (1999), to name a few, talk about how gender gets invoked in the making of national identity. The way that women's identity gets constructed and represented marks the identity of a community, and women becoming symbolic to the construction of nationalism.

In Manipur, women have always played a very strong role in fostering the idea of nationhood. In popular narratives, Manipuri women have been active in the economic and political sphere. Women have been active participants in running the economy since the sixteenth century when the Ima Keithel or Mothers' Market was established. The market was established because of an ancient forced labour system that sent away male labourers to cultivate lands. Women controlled the local economy, and the market became a system of Meitei culture. When the British administration imposed aggressive economic and political reforms on the region, the women came out in opposition; and the famous Nupi Lan or Women's War took place in

1904 and 1939 (Amador, 2011). Dolly, an academic working on the Maira Paibis (torchbearing women who are in the forefront of much protest in Manipur) told me in an interview that post-Independence in the 1970s, some women organized as a vigilante group called the Nisha-Bandh against alcohol abuse and the menace created by drunken husbands. They wanted to protect their husbands and sons from alcoholism.

People in Manipur were at the receiving end from both sides. As AFSPA sanctioned complete impunity for the military, they could take into custody and/or kill young boys and men on the mere suspicion of being associated with unlawful activities. On the other hand, underground anti-state groups would also kidnap young boys to train them to become part of their cadre. Thus, the role of the women now expanded, and they formed the Meira Paibis or the women torch-bearers who would safeguard their neighbourhood from both groups. The naked mother's protest against the Indian Army caught the attention of the world, and these women created a unique discourse by using their bodies as weapons of protest against a violent and marginalizing state while talking about the pride of the Manipuri nation.

Dolly said that in time women's groups also became the guardians of social morality, and thereby started collectivizing against pre-marital and extramarital affairs. Since the idea was to protect men, it often became about punishing women, for instance, through Kaina Karpa or forceful marriage. Several feminists in the recent times have been critical of what has now been termed as 'Phanek[3] Feminism'. Davidson (2018), a queer feminist activist from Manipur, writes that while this act of stripping the Phanek has been a popular means of resistance for the women and is often celebrated as a powerful act of both resistance and humiliation, it does not question the taboos associated with it. Since the Phanek is considered untouchable for the men, throwing it at the police or the armed personnel is a symbol of robbing them of their masculine power and feminising the State and its institutions.

Davidson goes on to write that while this was an attack on the men, it did not question patriarchy or the problems with masculinity.

However, in all this collectivizing, the question that needs to be asked is: where is the subjectivity of the women? While women did become symbols in the making of the valorous Manipuri nationhood against a violent Indian State, and women's bodies came to be used for the nation; their bodily autonomy, their desires and choices of sexuality were given no agency. Since queerness is based on ideas of sexual desires, bodily autonomy and self-determination of one's gender and sexual identity, it is not surprising that the women's collectivization could not lay the path for the collectivization of queer women.

Under such circumstances, what happens to queer person, and which bodies come to be seen as queer ones?

Santa Khurai, a prominent transgender activist from Manipur said, 'Transwomen existed, but these people did not call themselves transpeople. There were people who performed the role of female characters in cultural occupations like Nupa Amaibi, which means local priestess. The male shaman used to take up the role of the female in their ritual occupation at the temple. Our community mobilized on these people who act female. This ritual was found in the Meitei community only, among the valley people in Manipur. What came next was the Leela, the Shumang Leela. Shumang means the courtyard. It is a play that used to take place in the courtyard only on special occasions. If there was something happening there, they used to call a team on payment who performed the Leela. The performance included a social play. It was about the cultural context followed by the political situation of the time. The people who played female characters in such plays are the Nupi Sabi. The Maibi history is very old. It has been present since time immemorial, but there is no evidence of these practices in written history. So, it's very difficult to say when it started. But we have some oral sources and some photographs taken by the British and some nobles who used to work with the royals. After the Leela, we, the Nupi Manbis came into the picture. At the time, nobody spoke about their sexual or even gender identity. What people think is that People think

of it simply as their occupation. When they participate in the event they act as females, but when they are not working, they act like actual men; they get married and everything. But when they interact with the community like with me, their sexuality is the same as ours. So, they wanted to have sex with men. These types of anal sex practices are not new in Manipur; it's from a long time ago.'

She also adds that apart from the existence of gender-variant people in the ritual and cultural sphere, there has also been the prevalence of homosexual and homo-romantic relationships.

Santa says, 'I wanted to highlight here that it's very difficult to bring out this issue in a report or an academic paper because the words Ita and Marup were already there. Ita means the relationship, sexual or non-sexual, and the bonding between two women. It talks about the understanding, the intimacy between them. It is not so prevalent now, but earlier people used to practice it a lot. If I have an Ita relationship with you, it means I have a very close relationship with you. Even if you get married and pass away, I might be the one who will take care of your children. Itao means the relationship between two men. Even hill people practised it. It used to be practised between hill and valley people also. The terms for them were Chingi Itao and Tambi Itao. Ching meaning he who lives in the hills and Tam meaning he who lives in the valley. My grandfather had an Itao relationship with a tribal person. So whenever he received information that his tribal friend was coming, my grandfather used to say, "My Chingi Itao is coming", and the whole family prepared for his visit. The whole family accepted it. These two people see themselves as actual men and actual women. It's like a husband–wife relationship. Today it is very different from the past. Today we are aware of our sexuality; what kind of relationship we have with a guy and what are the other things involved. So, there is some hindrance and disapproval. Society cannot force those involved to immediately end the relationship. But there is stigma attached.'

It is perhaps due to this cultural history that gender-variant identities have been able to gain visibility, particularly in the Meitei society, mostly through a ritualistic and cultural framework. Since

in recent times, transgender women have made their space in the Shumang Leela, which showcases the proud cultural heritage and promotes the nationalism that several of these armed anti-state groups and the nationalists propagate, they have been able to coexist within the context of violent nationalism. However, what happens to them when they do not live according to these nationalist ideals?

This research paper is an attempt to capture narratives of queer negotiations, desires and aspirations within the context of violent nationalist assertions.

HOW DO I THEN UNDERSTAND 'QUEER' IN THE CONTEXT OF MY WORK?

The concept of 'Queer' has been defined in academic and political space in multiple ways. However, according to Morland and Willox (2005), 'Queer' is a political strategy that arose in the 1980s as a hybrid of issues raised by the lesbian and gay civil rights movements, the sex wars on censorship and pornography by feminists and the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. Diana Richardson (2000) looks at the word as not just an identity but the political defiance of the normative and dominant gender/sexual identity system.

I would like to understand queer as a politics of difference. It is a challenge to the hetero-patriarchal norms and deviates from the binary notion of gender and sexuality. Although I had gone looking for self-identified queer people, queer is an identity that I rarely encountered during my interactions with the people in Manipur. I acknowledge that both as an identity and as politics, queerness may not be accessible to many people who may be otherwise living non-heterosexual and non-normative lives. Hence, I started looking for people who are outside the heterosexual binary–gender paradigm. I found that Nupi Manbi[4] is an indigenous word that the Meitei transfeminine community uses for itself. However, they often use it interchangeably with transgender,

transwoman, TG and sometimes even MSM (men who have sex with men). The terms transgender and MSM have come to be used commonly because of the prevalence of the HIV/AIDS interventions in the region. Both male to female and female to male transpeople use the identity of transgender. The Meitei word for transman is Nupa Manbi,[5] but most people I met used the identity of transman. Gay or queer are usually used as an identity by younger men today who have moved outside the state for education. Sometimes people also identified themselves as sissy or effeminate boys. There was high invisibility of queer women. But I interviewed partners of transmen to get some narratives of the negotiations of women who live queer lives.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this research, I conducted formal, unstructured interviews and semi-formal conversations with persons who live non-cisgendered heteronormative lives. I also interviewed people who have been part of women's movements and indigenous people's rights movements to get a perspective of the context there. Most of the interactions, especially with the queer people, have been beyond formal interviews. But I had informed the participants about the research and took their permission to use their narratives. I have spent about twenty days in the month of August 2018 in Manipur interacting with them about their personal lives and struggles. Some of the interactions as part of this research had taken place through telephone conversations outside of the time I had spent in Manipur, and some others took place during the times I met queer and transgender activists at various events. While some of the people I met have been a part of queer organizations, others I met through snowballing or while informally hanging out with them at their homes, places of work or during performances. I also visited the sites mentioned in the stories to observe them.

One of the biggest problems was that I am not from Manipur, and I don't understand or speak the language; so I constantly had someone translating for me. There have been times when I wish I knew the language. However, I hope I have been able to express the emotions of the people who have shared their stories. The translators have read the stories to fill in the gaps. In the process of translation, I may not have been able to uncover the silences. And as queer lives are as much in the silences as in the stories told, this may be a significant loss.

It has also been an ethical dilemma whether I can represent the voices of a community that I do not necessarily completely belong to. I was also asked why I didn't work in Assam or Mumbai. They also informed me that researchers come to them to extract information but do not give any support to the community when they require it. However, some of them agreed to talk to me because I was accompanied by people whom they trusted.

One big advantage of not being from Manipur and being an outsider was that I was not perceived to be part of any 'camp'. For this reason, I could talk to people from different groups who were at loggerheads with one another. These camps were usually created either because of internal differences among members of organizations who later separated to form new organizations, or because of differences in ideologies and also which organization was funded by whom. Thus, I was able to gather different perspectives. I learnt to appreciate my outsider status more when a friend from Manipur, who is also a researcher, shared his inability to get entry into certain queer spaces because he had worked with some other queer group.

Even as I say that I have been able to talk to people from multiple differing perspectives, I certainly don't claim to be a representative of all experiences. The narratives I have had access to were only of Meitei people from in and around Imphal Valley. Although I was conscious of this, I could not meet or talk to any non-Meitei queer person. The reasons for the invisibility of non-Meitei queer persons from Manipur as well as my inaccessibility to them are manifold. Some of the narratives from activists I spoke to were that the long

history of conflict between the Meitei and the non-Meitei has led to a lack of communication and any sense of solidarity or trust between them. Also, the influence of religion and faith, which is strongly anti-homosexuality, made it more difficult for people to come out and speak about it.

The narratives that I heard during my research have been presented as stories. Among the several stories that I heard and read about, I picked up some which I felt were relevant to the research. I have fictionalized and dramatized real-life stories and presented them as stories through first-person accounts, poems and illustrations of eight different characters. The characters are fictional but are based on the people I met in Manipur. The story narrated by each character may not be the story of a single person only but similar experiences of multiple people that have been put together to build one story. All of the stories begin with an introduction of my interaction with the characters, followed by a first-person narrative from the character themselves. The first-person narratives of the characters are not directly translated from how the stories were told to me but remain true to the essence of the transcriptions of the interviews and conversations.

This medium of telling the stories in a fictionalized way has been chosen because of the precarious nature of these narratives and the location of the people to whom these stories belong. I had to take utmost care to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. Even while building the characters of the stories, while I have tried to capture the spirit of the persons to whom these stories belong, I have kept their location broad so that they are not identifiable.

SECTION 1: MEN OF PRIDE, BODIES OF SHAME

I first met Nachaobi (who identified as a Nupi Manbi) at an evening get-together of transpeople at Til's house. She initially strongly objected to giving me an interview as she stated that countless people

had come and gone after asking questions about her life. She went on to exclaim in utter disappointment that no one really cared about the lives of the transwomen after their work was done. Nachaobi, however, added that if I was really interested in talking to her, I should hang out with her over a drink; to which I agreed. First came the drinks, and then she started cooking chicken which Til had freshly cut. As Nachaobi had her first few drinks, she started talking about her life and her family. As the night ended, she asked me to come to her house two days later if I wanted to interview her. Two days later, when I went to Nachaobi's house she spoke to me and told me several stories of her life in the most entertaining way. She would change the modulation of her voice or burst into song or start enacting a scene from a Hindi movie or serial. As the evening progressed, accompanied by alcohol, delicious chicken made on a woodfire by Nachaobi and delightful conversations about her lovers, she decided to give the interview I had proposed earlier but on condition that it be paired with alcohol. The following poem and first-person account are a dramatization of Nachaobi's interview and they detail her experience as a sex worker and the internal conflicts she must deal with every day.

On one side of the city
Forted by men in black
Stood the Pride of the Nation
Which Nation, you may ask.

But to me, it didn't matter
All that mattered was
That the night was young
And my thighs glistened with rhinestones.

Twenty years I had fought
To be the woman I was
And it was he who finally
Made me feel like one.

He picked me up
With his big broad shoulders
Fornicated to his heart's content
And shoved a wad of notes.

They say, he kills my people
He shoots my brethren.
But my love he was 'cause he saw me like none did.

'It was during the early 2000s. I must have been in my early twenties when I borrowed my first dress from a friend. It was a bright green dress with rhinestones stuck to it that glistened as I swayed my hips. My first dress – how happy I was when it adorned my body! For the first time, I could gather the courage to be myself outside the confines of my home.

'That night two of my friends and I decided to dress up in all our finery and head off to the polo ground of Imphal. My friends who had been there before told me that I would definitely have a 'nice time'.[6] But I didn't know what exactly that meant; so I was curious to know more, and it gave me a reason to dress up!

'The polo ground and the park near it were surrounded by young and dashing military men. As we walked past them, a group of men called us and we joined their group. One of them lit a cigarette and offered it to us. With cigarettes in our hands, we flirted away with the soldiers. One of them asked if I wanted to take a walk with him. We walked a few yards and came to a spot behind the trees. He took hold of my hand and removed the hair off my forehead. He pulled me close to him and unzipped my dress. Picked up my slender body and penetrated me. Touched me, for the first time like no one had. His touch made me feel like a complete woman. He loved me for what felt like hours. And when he was done, he stuck a wad of notes into my hands. "Have fun!" he said.

'That night and every night for months after that, my friends and I went to the polo ground. For years this ground and those men were

the only witnesses to the woman I was. Night after night, one of the armed men took me into the dark, and I returned with a wad of notes. With these, I bought my own clothes and make-up. In time, I set up my own little business: a beauty parlour.

'Though these nights were some of the best I spent with the military men, a chilling image from my childhood used to haunt me every day. The image of a woman who everyone claimed was a porn star. She was a woman who took money in exchange for sex. One day, some of the men who belonged to underground groups[7] caught hold of that woman. She was paraded naked across the streets of Imphal and shot by the men. They said it was to serve as a lesson to anyone who indulged in "corrupt activities". This woman had brought shame upon the Meitei community and was corrupting the minds of the youth of Manipur. This woman did not fit the standard of the "good woman", according to my people. This was the only punishment fit for such a "loose woman" and anyone else who indulged in such activities. I feared daily that this would be my fate once the people of my community came to know about my visits to the polo ground. The people of my community didn't like these army men I had sex with. They said that these men picked up our boys and killed them. They raped our women. Our community wanted these men out of our state. These protests continued for years and years, and so did my relationship with these men. These men gave me what none of my own people gave, recognition for who I was. They saw me as the woman I felt I was! For that validation, I kept going back to these men who killed my people but who also knew me better than my own people.'

SECTION 2: PATRIOTISM AND HONOUR

I first saw Nash when I went to watch her Shumang Leela performance on 13 August in Imphal. The thirteenth of August is an important day for the people of Manipur. They celebrate it as Patriot Day to honour

the Kangeilpak soldiers who lost their lives in the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891. The Manipur State Shumang Leela Council organizes a function in the palace compound every year to mark this day. For the past five years, a play is exclusively performed for this occasion. It is based on the real-life story of the soldiers and the heroics of the brave Meitei King Kulachandra, who was killed by the British. As the play ended and the artists were leaving the stage, the audience's standing ovation reverberated through the hall. Some people went to the side of the stage to meet the artists and congratulate them. The transwomen who had acted in the show were being showered with extreme love and appreciation. Twenty-seven-year-old Nash was one of the transwomen who has been part of the yearly function for the last two years. She was gracious and enthusiastic to talk to. She had been part of the Shumang Leela group since she was a teenager. A trained nurse, she went on to work at the NGO which worked on HIV/AIDS interventions because she could not find a job as a nurse in the hospitals of Imphal. Nash spoke very candidly about her experience of being a Shumang Leela artist, her family, her partners and her sex life. She spoke about her experience of working with HIV/AIDS interventions and emphasized the lack of knowledge about safe sex among people of the community. When I asked her about the prevalence of sex work among the transwomen in Manipur, she said, 'We do not indulge in "dishonourable work",' a narrative which was different from those of the older transwomen I had spoken to. In the creation of this narrative of respectability, the stories of the earlier generation of transwomen who fought for visibility working as sex workers unfortunately now remain invisible. The following poem and first-person narrative of Nash's interview which details her experience as a theatre artist and her discovery of herself as a transgendered person are presented, as understood by me.

Years gone by
Histories get written,
Unwritten, Rewritten.

Stories of patriotism and pride emerge.
I who was not allowed on the streets
Become the honour of the stage.

But honour awaits me
As I climb the proscenium
To present stories of martyrs.

As I perform
Tales of national pride
Amidst roaring applause.

Amidst accolades and acknowledgement
Remains buried many a story
Of recognition and dishonour

'I started performing when I was very young, when I must have been around sixteen or seventeen years old. In the older days, the directors of the play would go looking for 'effeminate men' to play the role of women in Shumang Leela performances. This trend has continued to this day, and I too was discovered by one of the directors at a very young age. Today the troupes are dominated by transwomen.

'I used to be an effeminate guy. I liked female attire even as a child. I used to "walk like a girl" and used to perform the female roles in my school plays. Was I bullied in school by the boys for playing female roles? Of course I was, but I was good at studies and talented, so I managed to acquire female roles with the support of my teachers. Playing female roles on stage made me very happy. I always felt like a girl.

'At that time, I didn't know what 'transgender' is, I just knew I wanted to be a girl. The director of one of the theatre groups spotted me in one of the school plays and asked me if I wanted to be part of a theatre group to play female roles. I didn't know much about Shumang Leela then, although I had seen a few performances. I agreed

to become a part of the group because I loved playing female roles. Initially, there was no support from my family. They did not approve of me doing female roles in public. But when I started performing in public arenas, my performance received a lot of appreciation from the audience. My neighbours and friends started saying good things about me, and my family started to accept my work. I had gone to study nursing outside Manipur for a year and became aware of the word 'transgender'. I started identifying as one. Slowly I started growing my hair and wearing female clothes, and my family has been okay with that as well. Although my parents are fine with the way I live, they still do not treat me as a woman. I keep trying to tell them that I am a girl, but they want me to get married to a woman someday. No matter how much I talk about my attraction towards men or about my boyfriend they do not seem to hear me. Although earlier there was an appreciation for transwomen as Shumang Leela artists, there has been a lot of discrimination on the streets. The most common reaction that people would have on seeing us is "ngasidi doa yaaroi", "dao yadou mandebu" or "mangol oiroi" that literally means, "the day is all over; my luck won't strike today". The name-calling still continues. Guys on the streets call us homo, Thekoi- Nakoi[8]. However, as visibility and awareness among the public has grown, they have become more accepting otherwise as well.

'Today even Meira Paibis are coming in support of the transgender people, because in Manipur we are doing good work and are empowered, compared to other states. We are not doing "bad things" to earn our living. In India, the transgender people beg and do sex work to earn their livelihood. In Manipur, we have never been involved in sex work. We are all doing respectable work. We are serving the society and our families through our jobs. We are promoting the rich culture of Manipur. Of course, we will be accepted.'

SECTION 3: OF HEROES AND DESIRES

I travelled to Kakching district, which is about 40 kilometres from Imphal, to meet a transman named Aditya. Aditya lives in a small village on the outskirts of Kakching town. We met at a restaurant by the highway to conduct the interview. Twenty-four-year-old Aditya proudly claimed that he was one of the first transman from Manipur to have had top surgery. He said that he knew from a very young age that he was a man, and he had to do something to change his body. He started working hard and saving up for his transition for the past eight years. He worked as a newspaper boy, wrote letters for people, worked in farms as a labourer while continuing his education. After completing his graduation, he established a meat shop and used the leftover meat from his shop to make momos. Over the years, his momo business expanded, and he discontinued his meat business. When I met him, he was the proud owner of a restaurant, and he courteously fed me momos from his shop. Aditya told me about his life, his struggles and his desire to join the paramilitary forces. I was very surprised to hear that quite a few transmen in Manipur had the desire to join the forces and that several of them were already working in them. Through my interactions with these transmen I learnt that it was perceived as a good livelihood option by them as it provided them with a stable income and the opportunity to wear the clothes that they wanted. Aditya added to that narrative by sharing his dream which is captured in the illustration and the poem created by me.

Those Men in Black
How manly they stood
Look at their eyes
How they pierce through you.

The gun in their hands
Sends shivers down

The criminal's spine
Such is their power.

The fitted uniforms
On their ripped bodies
Will one day adorn my
Rectified body.

They help the needy
They protect lives
They kill the bad
They save the world.

These are heroes of mine
The man I want to be
The man I shall become.

'Growing up in a small village, in a fatherless home, I did not have a man in my family that I could look up to. The only men I saw and admired were the ones in uniform who patrolled our village. They looked smart and powerful and soon became my role models. I told my family that I was a man when I was in school. My mother who already had too much on her mind trying to bring up five of us, did not fight too hard when I insisted on wearing pants to school in ninth standard. She, however, did not address me as her son at the time. The local school authorities did not resist as they did not want to lose a good student as the attendance dwindled. I became the star student when I won the National Championship for Martial Arts. The teachers, however, definitely made their disapproval of my 'boyish' ways clear but would tolerate me because I was good at so many things. My mother started accepting me as her son when I started doing odd jobs and earning. Working on fields, running errands, taking up private tuitions and then finally securing the Ambedkar Scholarship; I ensured that there was always food on the table. I know many transmen who are not manly. They do not fulfil their responsibilities and instead while away their

time drinking and fighting to prove themselves as men. I believe that real men are the ones who fulfil their responsibilities towards their family and society. I have managed to do my top surgery, but I will not be at peace till I completely have the body of a man. Every day I live with the regret of existing in a 'disabled body'. I cannot enjoy bodily autonomy. I used to stay silent and not retaliate to the comments of the policemen who used to check me and call me laba.[9] I could not confront them because I was powerless.

While the people in the police are rude, the men in the active services are much nicer. They are educated and understand different things in the world better. They do not mistreat me. For me, these men in the active services are symbols of masculinity. The uniform has been a dream since childhood and those men my role models. They invoke power; they can do great deeds for society. I wish to become a change-maker. I wish to become that man. I want to apply for the active services as a man without having to disclose my gender. The people in the active forces have a lot of power and social status. Applying for the services is not a livelihood option; it is a passion for me and a test of my masculinity.

SECTION 4: LOVE OF A STRANGER

I had a chance-encounter with Namoinu when I was visiting the house of a friend in Imphal. She had dropped in to have a drink at a friend's house after her day-long work as a beautician. She was also accompanied by Grace, whom she referred to as the daughter she had adopted. Namoinu identified herself as a Nupi Manbi. She was a make-up artist, and Grace was training under her. Younger transwomen in Manipur often referred to older transwomen as mothers or aunts and learnt the skills of a beautician from them. Namoinu was jovial, loud, cracked a lot of jokes and, on several instances, burst into song. She was in her late thirties and kept joking about her age as she appeared

to be much younger. She had been a dancer and performer in her late teens and early twenties, but she gave it up as the income wasn't enough to sustain herself and her family. When I met her, she also owned a fisheries business while working as a beautician. She was the sole breadwinner for her family which consisted of her mother, sister-in-law and nephew. Namoinu narrated her story with much humour, and I realized her humour was the result of having faced a lot of pain, suffering and rejection. Her story has been captured in the personal narrative below.

In humour I drown my sorrows
In songs I hide my tears
Under my make-up I hide the scars
That the whips of my brother gave
My sister in law
She thought me untouchable
Threw away the food
That I had touched
I cursed her womb
And it bore a child like me
Unwanted and unclean
Such is the circle of life you see
The friends I made I called them sisters
Together we danced
But finally, we went our ways
In trying to look for love
In my near ones
I never found
But that outsider
Was my lover.

'I have learnt that the easiest way to cope with my sorrows is to laugh them off. No one wants to make love to a teary woman, no

matter what your films may show. Who wants to kiss a woman with tears flowing from her eyes and snort running from her nose? Just because I don't show you my tears doesn't mean that I have forgotten any of the hurt. But I would rather make a joke about my suffering and give you a good laugh.

I remember my brother, who is now deceased, dragging me home from the stage and scarring my back with his whip because I used to dance like a girl at local functions when I was young. My parents stayed silent through all this and took his side. I remember my sister-in-law throwing away food because I had touched it. During one of these tussles, I angrily wished that she would give birth to a child like me. Little did I know that I had the power to make wishes come true.

'Her son now completely adores me and walks, talks and wants to dress up like me, and his mother can't do a thing about it. Damn! I wish I had known this earlier. I would have wished for much nicer things. I never found love in my family. Now, since I am the only earning member, they respect me or maybe tolerate me. And I can't imagine leaving them. I completely adore my nephew. If I leave them, they would have no one to take care of them. I did leave them when I was younger and reckless. I ran away to the city and found many sisters like me who taught me to sing and dance. When I came back after two years, I found six friends, who were like sisters and very similar to me. All of them were rejected by their families. We formed a group and danced on the stage together. We got money and many accolades. But shortly after forming the group, we had to part ways since the money from stage performances was not enough, and the accolades could not feed us. After my stage career came to a halt, I started working as an independent beautician. I got lucrative contracts because I could do late-night shifts. People here prefer us Nupi Manbis over women beauticians, because we can do shifts later in the night. Not like late nights are any safer for us. Every night when I used to return from home, one of the military guards used to follow me. It would scare the life out of me. But, finally, one day I gathered courage, and I used my "man-voice" and shouted back at him. Hearing my voice, he realized

who I was, and that I was not a woman. From that day on he stopped following me. He spoke to me kindly and even became my lover. I wanted to be loved by people who knew me. I have looked for love in my near ones. But I found a lover in the stranger from faraway lands. I found love in the loneliness of the soldier. The soldier who lived away from his own loved ones craved love just the way I did.

SECTION 5: OF DIASPORA, DESIRES AND DEJECTION

This is not the story of one person but is inspired by the stories of several gay men from Manipur. Even though transgender people are visible in Imphal, gay men there live completely closeted lives. Because of the situation in Manipur, several young people move out in pursuit of better education. Gay men, on one hand, find moving to big cities liberating as they can explore their sexuality and live more openly. But at the same time, there is a sense of alienation that they face in the city because of racial discrimination, cultural differences, language, food habits and such. There is also, sometimes, an exoticization of the northeastern body. Dating sites and apps for gay men are often very hostile. Anyone who doesn't fit the beauty standards is subjected to abuse and humiliation. Under such circumstances, what do these young Manipuri men face when they try to find love in the bigger cities? The following first-person narrative, poem and illustration speak about that experience.

For years lay stifled
My desires.
My sins
As I was told.
That I was a man
And loved another
Made me lesser

Of a man.
Every night
I dreamt of leaving
Going to the city
City of dreams
To find a man
Who would love me
For who I am
And as I am
At 20 I did reach
The city of my dreams
Only to realize soon
That it was a nightmare
No fatties No femmes No Chinkys

Said many profiles
As I thought it couldn't get worse
One said 'No Kashmiris, Manipuris and anti-nationals'
Little did I know
That love came
With so many
Conditions applied
Little did I imagine
Politics of nations
Would one day
Enter my bedroom

'As a child, I had seen some of my seniors call their classmate "homo" because he had dared to give a flower to another boy. That day itself I learnt that I had to hide my desires. It was a sin to love another man, is what the fathers at my school taught. If a man desires another man, then he is less of a man, is what my friends thought. I was sixteen when I found the word "gay" through the internet. I also read that in

big cities like Delhi, Bombay and Bangalore, men could live with other men as lovers.

The city became my dream, the motivation that gave me the strength to live a frustrating life of secrecy.

I made new friends who showed me the cool queer scene. Coming to the big city was, however, a roller-coaster ride of elation and alienation. Happy to escape the secret life of not being able to share my feelings with anyone and yet alienated in the new life of the city which told me constantly that I didn't belong. It did not help that I did not fit into the stereotype of the cool guy from the Northeast. I did not play music, wasn't what you would call fashion-forward and did not have the 'hot body'. I was chubby and femme. I could not become the exotic creature from lands afar.

'My friends introduced me to dating apps. Between no fats, no femmes and no Chinkys wanted, my desirability quotient did not go very high. With every rejection, the city of my dreams became a little less dreamy. Every time someone blocked me, I tried to cover my loneliness and prepare for a new beginning but failed. Just when I thought it couldn't get worse, I saw a profile that said, 'Anti-Nationals, Kashmiris and Manipuris can fuck off. True Indians can suck my cock.' Between a nation that doesn't want us and nationalists who despise us, my bedroom continues to witness my loneliness.'

SECTION 6: EXCOMMUNICATED

The ensuing poem and story are inspired by an incident where one of the Manipuri anti-State groups banned the Nupi Manbis from wearing the Phanek in public places. They released a diktat in the local newspapers regarding this, and transwomen activists were given death threats if they disobeyed orders. It was prompted by a complaint about a few transwomen celebrating a birthday party with music and alcohol which made some locals upset. The locals said that such incidents are

making the area unsafe for women and "corrupting" the Manipuri culture. Most civil society groups across India refused to support transwomen openly after the death threats were given. It was only after a few feminist activists got together to protest the moral policing of women and transgender people by the vigilante groups that it gained traction with a few activist groups.

Our traditional values
They claim to safeguard
What are these values I wonder?
My values, my life
My dress, my identity
Did not match their standards
They said
They issued letters,
Diktats of threat
To my life if I "cross-dress"
They wrote
And all that for what?
Because a girl wanted
To let her hair down
To start life anew

'We were celebrating one of our transwomen's birthdays. It was the weekend. We had all gathered at a friend's backyard to throw a party. It was late at night, we were down a few drinks, and we were dressed in our finest clothes, wanting to dance through the night.

A few days later, one of the underground anti-State groups put out an open diktat in the local newspaper that said men who are found dressed in women's clothes would be killed. Earlier as well, some of my sisters had received threatening calls telling them to stop cross-dressing and corrupting our culture. They accused us of obscene behaviour because we were dressed in revealing clothes and were

drinking and dancing. They, however, added that men who dressed as women on stage to perform Shumang Leela would be exempted from this punishment.

These groups claim to fight for the sovereignty of our "Manipuri nation" from the hegemony of the Indian nation. These groups claim to uphold our indigenous cultures and values of the community. They called us corrupted by Western culture. They blamed us for the increasing sexual abuse of women. No one blamed the men for being the abusers. They want to lock us up for dressing up like women, but who locks up the men? When we dressed up as women and performed on stage and remained objects for their pleasure and producers of the "nationalism narrative", we gained respect. The moment we did it with our own agency, it no longer fit into their traditions.

'What are these traditions, I ask? Whose culture do they claim to safeguard? Do we not belong to the community? Are we not Manipuri? Are we not women? Does our right to feel safe within the community end because we dress in clothes you do not approve of? Who are you to become the moral protectors of the community? Don't we deserve respect even if we don't live by your rules?

'We are transgender people. Our own families and communities shun us. We are Nupi Manbi. Even though the Constitution of India recognizes transgenders, we remain invisible. We are left with no nation, no community and no family.'

SECTION 7: CHANGING SYMBOLS

This story is a collation of the stories I heard from queer men who use the area around Kangla Fort and Bir Tikendrajit Park as a cruising spot. Queer men are largely invisible in Manipur, and hence cruising spots become significant parts of the story when we try to understand queer desires. Kangla Fort, BT Park and the polo ground are in close proximity to each other and heavily populated by the armed forces.

The presence of the Indian Army in the area, the occupation of the fort by the Assam Rifles, as well as Kangla's historic association with the Manipuri nation, all make it an important site of nationalism for both the Indian State and the Manipuri/Meitei nationalism struggle. The Mother's protests had also taken place in front of the Kangla Gate. Hence, the locals see it as an important site for the Meitei nationalist struggle. However, the meaning of this site changes for the queer person from Manipur for whom it is a sexualized site where men who were sexually interested in men meet each other. I had read about this area being a cruising spot, and I asked my queer friends to take me there. One of my gay friends took me and narrated his experience of the space as given in the personal account below.

I met him near the site
Which was the symbol
Of Manipur nationhood
Today it stands occupied
By guards of another nation
Dressed in black
With guns in hand
He came from behind
And rubbed
His hand lightly
On mine
With hand in hand
We walked inside
Past the vigilant eyes
Of the guards in black
They looked at us
Perhaps in lust
Or in disgust
As we tainted their pride.

'My friends from the big city had come to my hometown and wanted to go site-seeing. Crossing the Ima Keithel, we drove towards the famous Kangla Palace. I had grown up listening to stories about the Kangla which used to be the seat of the past Meitei rulers of Manipur as well as a religious site. We were taught about the heroic acts that had taken place during the Anglo Manipur War and how it led to the conquest of the Kangla Fort, then occupied by the Assam Rifles until 2004. Since then it has been developed into an archaeological park and has become the symbol of Manipur nationhood. Right next to it is the Bir Tikendrajit Park. This was the ground in which Meitei warrior Bir Tikendrajit was hanged by the British during the Anglo-Manipur War of 1981. It houses the eleven-metre-long tower called the Shaheed Minar. The polo ground is located close to it. We used to go to BT Park during the day, when we bunked school. But evenings were strictly out of bounds because only "classless" people go there. I did not know what that meant. As we reached BT Park that day, it was getting dark. My friends wanted to hang out for a while. As we walked around the park, a shy smile met my eyes. He passed by and slightly brushed his hands against mine. It was a touch of passion and a smile of recognition. I had never been gay in this city. Of course, I had known I was different growing up. When all my friends were crushing on the new young female science teacher, I was crushing on the middle-aged but very fit male maths teacher. While my friends stood under the staircase watching the girls walk up, trying to get a peek of their legs; I was peeping across the urinal at the boy peeing next to me to get a glimpse of his junk. I didn't realize I was wrong till one of the boys noticed and screamed, "Go away, you homo!" I was marked as a "homo" for a few days till I found a girlfriend. I was, of course, different from Bidyut. Bidyut found boys hot too, but he wanted to be a girl. He liked growing his hair and nails and wearing make-up. He said he would become a Nupi Manbi soon. I, like most of my friends and family, thought that gayness is the transit phase between being a man and becoming a Nupi Manbi. Gay! Oh, that's a word I learnt in my early twenties when I went to college. I hadn't met anyone gay back

home. But I did come to identify as gay soon after, as I fell madly in love with my roommate. I did not know until that day that BT Park was, in fact, a cruising spot, a place where men came to meet other men. The touch of that stranger's hand opened a new world for me. The place which I had always associated with patriotism, I started associating with desire. I looked around and saw a glimpse of recognition in many eyes. The balding middle-aged man who smiled back lustfully, the young man in the lawyer's suit who pretended to stare at his phone, the very anxious boy who looked like he was barely out of his teens; all their stories seemed to have something in common. Perhaps all of them were trying to live dual lives, coming here for a few hours to live their desires. As I was about to leave, I saw the man who introduced this new world to me. He seemed to have found a partner. Hand in hand, they walked through the Kangla Gate, past the guards. I can only imagine what the guards would do if they knew the relationship between the men.'

SECTION 8: UN-NORMAL AND UNACCEPTED

During my visit to Manipur, I had met several transpersons and a few gay men. However, the stories of queer women were largely missing. I was only able to speak to two women who identified as lesbians and were in a relationship with each other. It is not unknown for queer women's narratives to be missing. When I discussed it with my friends, they suggested that I should talk to the partners of transmen if I wanted to hear the narratives of queer women. Which is how I started having detailed conversations with partners of transmen.

I met Mimi who was Tama's partner, at their house. While Tama was shy and hesitant to speak, Mimi was outgoing and eagerly chatted with us. Mimi said that she identified as a woman but had never thought about how to identify her sexuality. She, however, shared that she had met Tama when she was about twenty-seven and had never been attracted to a man before that. She had not wanted to get married

before she met Tama. Even though Mimi may not identify as queer, her struggles with her family and society around her resonated with the lives of queer women. She was perceived by people around her as queer for being in a relationship with a transman and did not receive the rights that her community offered to other married women.

Mimi shares her life and the struggles she had to face for choosing to be with Tama in the following account.

Twenty-five years passed
Since we met,
He and I,
At the village crossroads

He was the shy one.
He still is.
I walked ahead, and
Asked him out.

I was the one to run
And come to his place.
To profess my love
Everyone thought it was a phase.

Twenty years later, to them
It's still a phase.
Asking me to marry
A true man.

They refuse to give
Us a house number
That will ensure us
Community space.

Real couple we aren't
In their eyes

Maybe because their marriage
Is not as nice.

'He and I met about twenty-five years back. I had heard about him, the one who was 'man-like', from my friends. He was a sports person and had gone to big cities to play sports. The stories about him excited me. I expressed my desire to meet him. Somehow word reached him, and he came to my village to see me.

'He waited at the village cross roads with his friends. At first, he mistook my sister for me. When he finally saw me, he hid behind his friends, too shy to meet my eyes. I walked up to him and asked him to take a walk with me. We went to a roadside hotel to have tea. We kept meeting regularly and fell in love.

'My father passed away when I was a child, and my mother was worried about my marriage. She knew about our love but was worried that since we could never have a child, there would be no one to take care of us in the future. I somehow managed to convince her and came to live with him. Initially, Tama's family and neighbours did not accept it; but once when his parents fell sick, I took care of them, and they realized my importance in his life. Since then, no one has opposed our relationship. I had fulfilled my responsibilities and proved to everyone that I was a worthy wife and daughter-in-law for their son, who they still treated as their daughter but were bound to accept, as their own sons had left them to live their independent lives. A few months later, we got married though our customs.

'While no one today opposes my staying with him any longer, they keep insisting that I should get married. I am over fifty years old, and I have lived with him and loved him as my husband for the last twenty-five years. How can I even imagine getting married to someone else?

'We have our own rice factory which the two of us and another friend run together. We clean the grain and package and market it. We have adopted Tama's brother's son. We live happily in our own small world.

'However, the people of the community still do not accept us as a real married couple. I am not allowed to participate in the rituals of married women. We live in a house built on the common village land. But the villagers have not let us become a member of the Shinglup.[10] But our love for each other has allowed us to survive.'

CONCLUSION

All the stories were chosen because they reflect some of the daily struggles and negotiations of the queer people of Manipur. There are innumerable stories of queer people surviving abuse, finding livelihoods and gaining acceptance from family and society. They also reflect the aspirations and desires of queer people – dreams of finding acceptance, love and intimacies. These stories are also about surviving the hostility of living in an area of conflict and complicate the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed.

The queer people in Manipur are at the receiving end of both Indian nationalism and the multiple nationalist conflicts in the region. On the one hand, they find some acceptance among their communities while they propagate the values of the nationalists. However, as a result of this form of violent nationalism, their articulation of sexual desires outside of the reproductive paradigm has not taken place. When they express their desires outside of these values, such as the desire to dress up the way they want and the desire to have sexual and romantic relationships, they are either disapproved of and unacknowledged, and sometimes they have to face violence. On the other hand, the Indian nation-state, in order to prove its progressiveness towards certain queer identities, has passed the National Legal Services Authority vs. Union of India Judgement 2014, giving recognition to the third gender and has decriminalized homosexuality by reading down Section 377 in 2018. But it continues to criminalize and demonize certain other

identity assertion laws, such as the AFSPA, and thereby expels certain other populations.

This is a reflection of what Puar (2013) calls 'homonationalism'. Puar writes that the nation-state gives citizenship rights to certain queer identities to produce a narrative of progressiveness and modernity at the expense of the delimitation and expulsion of other populations. Thus, in the process of homonationalism by the Indian State, the State projects itself as being progressive by passing queer-friendly judgements.

Morgensen (2010) writes about how US Queers become complicit in State violence through homonationalist participation in the war on terror because they are promised citizenship for leading and promoting national values. While the foreigner is the terrorist, the colonized is viewed as the savage, sexed and monstrous other, thus justifying imperial control. While there is a violent sexual regulation of the native people, the settler subjects become the agents and beneficiaries of modern sexuality. The 'queer Indian' becomes complicit in practising settler-homonationalism. The indigenous Manipuri is seen as the warmongering savage that needs to be controlled through violent bodily and sexual control while providing for sexual rights for the 'Indian' citizen.

Even as the "racially other" queer person is excluded from this idea of the nation, they also become the other in their community. Gloria Anzaldua (1987), a Mestiza feminist writes that culture puts the rights of the community over those of the individual. Culture becomes necessary for the survival of the tribe, especially when they are fighting off intentional genocide – the queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe's fear of being different, being the other therefore lesser and therefore sub-human, in-human, non-human. As the ethnic groups of Manipur fight off genocide, they view the queer people in their community with fear, and hence need to exclude them.

Within human rights discourse, sexual and gender violence come to be seen as a humanitarian crisis, while desire takes a back

seat. Amongst other desires, the queer people in this research paper have expressed desire towards the military personnel who become representatives of the oppressive Indian State. This desire is both sexual and aspirational; sexual as expressed by the homosexual man and the transgender woman and aspirational as expressed by the transman who wants to join the military. Kuntsman (2009) writes about how the journey of the colonized land can be imagined not only through the subordination and feminization of the colonized, but also through homoerotic adoration of the colonizer. They further write about the "national feeling of love and hate as also framed within the queer discourse of the army as masquerade and of the uniform as sexual fetish". The relationship of the tortured and the torturer is also marked by physical violation or the fantasy of it.

This research was, thus, an attempt to look at queer lives within the context of violent nationalisms.

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NOTES

1. '#LettersfromQueeristan: 4 LGBTQ individuals pen their hopes for the future', sourced from the Godrej Cultural Lab blog.
2. A traditional art form which is performed by an all-male crew; discussed in detail later.
3. A traditional dress worn by the women of Manipur. It is a sarong or a wrap around skirt.
4. One who is like a woman
5. One who is like a man
6. People usually did not openly refer to sex but used such words to refer to it.
7. The locals referred to anti-state militant groups by this name.
8. The one who can't walk straight.
9. Referring to a male animal.
10. Shinglup or the firewood association is an important institution in the Meitei community. Every Meitei household in a Leikai (locality) is a member of a Shinglup. In the past Shingup was a mechanism for the resolution of conflicts within the locality. It is also a mechanism to meet the socio-economic needs of the locality during deaths, sickness, droughts, and so on. Shingups are also responsible for the development of the locality, such as the construction of roads, digging of wells and tanks and protection of the forest.