WOMEN BRINGING ‘OUTSIDE’ HOME: IMPHAL AND ITS RETURNING YOUNG WOMEN MIGRANTS

JULIANA PHAOMEI

ZUBAAN
128 B Shahpur Jat, 1st floor
NEW DELHI 110 049
EMAIL: contact@zubaanbooks.com
WEBSITE: www.zubaanbooks.com

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WOMEN BRINGING 'OUTSIDE' HOME: IMPHAL AND ITS RETURNING YOUNG WOMEN MIGRANTS

'She has changed so much after staying *outside*,' is a common comment made about young women who have lived in the cities. For people in Manipur, the English word 'outside' serves more like a noun that means 'anywhere outside Manipur', especially the metro cities of India. There is also a negative connotation of this word, with the underlying understanding that elements from 'outside'—identities, ideas, knowledge, and markets—are mostly alien, unsuitable, and harmful for an individual and society. There are definitely many things from 'outside' that are integral to the way we live and plan for the future as individuals and communities, but these complexities are not always studied and understood in depth.

Because of this, among other things, there has always been a concern for the moral character of a young person who goes outside. While parents and elders' concern for their sons is their career and future in general, for their daughters the focus has always been on their

physical appearance and their relationship with other people. This is reflected in the way women are seen and treated by society over and above their own personal struggles with their studies, careers and future. This gendered issue forms the basis of this research.

Migration to the cities is a household phenomenon in Manipur, and the experience is similar in the entire north-eastern region of India. Karlsson and Kikon (2017) termed this phenomenon 'wayfinding' by indigenous migrants. This wayfinding has been integral to the production of culture in the destination cities and towns, and in this cultural production, identity creation seems to be the most prominent. A clear picture was painted by McDuie-Ra (2016) in his examples of 'adjacent identities', one being a shared North East identity in response to racism, and the other being a broader ethnic inclusion based on shared cosmopolitanism. The former has further complicated the 'outsider-local' discord (Sengupta and Purkayastha 2016), while the latter has done the work of shaping indigenous migrants into global citizens.

My interest in the wayfinding of indigenous migrants started when I was researching my community's livelihood transitions. One issue that came into question was the 'contemporary migration' of many youth to cities, which left everyone in a dilemma, asking what actual 'good' had come out of this migration (Phaomei 2018). For the people in the hills, this dilemma was and still is one reason why communities as a whole have almost no one they can trust to open and run natural resource-based companies from which the entire community can benefit. This issue has its roots deep in the socio-political history of the state. Deka (2019) encapsulates it when he says that along with decades-old issues of insecurity, violence, and failed governance, there are newer sets of issues around infrastructure and development which most affect the youth.

As I came back home after finishing my masters in 2018, I noticed that many of these 'wayfinders' were finding their way back home, like I was. My adjacent identities came home with me, like they did for my

peers. Being a young woman with conflicting identities in a conflict zone, I constantly observed and experienced gender biases in the process of what is supposed to be a normal societal clash in lifestyles and ideals between the younger and older generations. Intertwined with this social phenomenon in this decade is the coming up, or rather popping up, of new elements like cafés and restaurants, home-grown food and beverage brands, fashion houses, event managing groups, centres for recreation and entertainment, literary circles, youth groups, and so on. All these constitute the idea of a 'developing and better Imphal city' for many of its dwellers.

A significant number of these new and modern establishments are owned and run by women who have come back home. Their efforts resound their vision of filling the gaps in the economy and identity. The rest of the returned young women are actively and even naturally involved as consumers of these products and services and also as members of these circles and groups. Thus, young women who have returned home from outside are actively involved in the cultural production of the urban space that they live in, and each has her own unique experiences and opinions. There also exist commonalities in these experiences and opinions which are vital for understanding the overarching issues of this phenomenon.

Keeping all this in mind, I came up with the research objective of bringing out a holistic and gendered understanding of cultural production and socioeconomic realities by studying the experiences and involvement of young women migrants who had returned home to Imphal. This proposed objective was very vast, as it involved heavy themes like gender, urban spaces, migration, culture, and development. It did make the formulation of the interview questions a difficult task in the beginning. But what I wanted to find out in this research involved all of these themes, and they could not be studied singly. So with much thought and observation, I finally prepared a few simple questions[1] to ask young women in the age group of 21–40 years who had returned home in the last 10 years to stay for an uncertain period

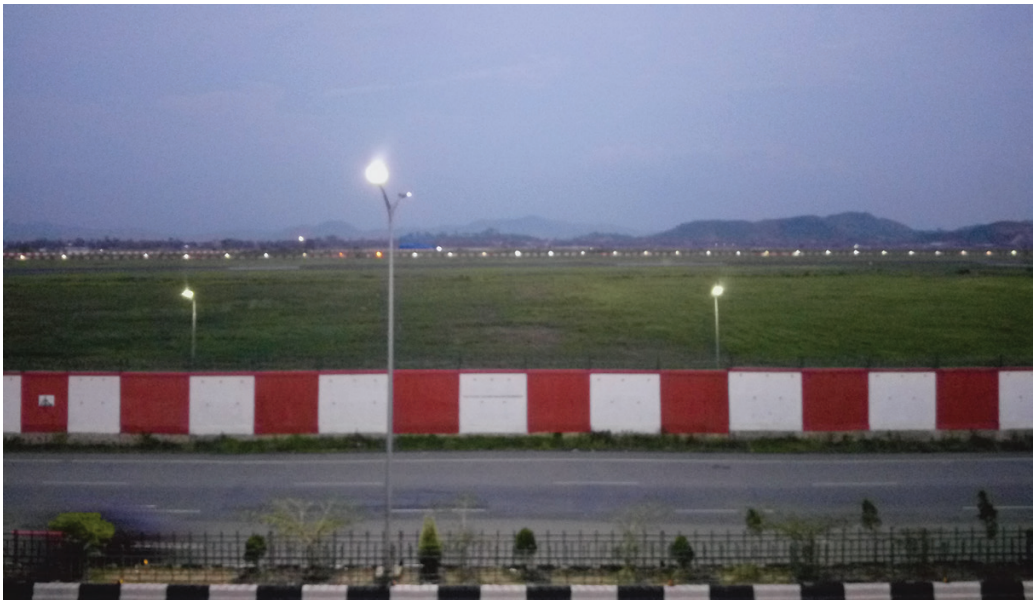
of time. I carefully chose and categorised 14 young women according to their current pursuits, communities, and financial status. This was my attempt at including different kinds of people who represent the demographics of Imphal city.

Unlike the simplicity of the interview questions, the interviews were long hours of good conversations where all the young women freely talked about their childhood, their memories of college, their stories about coming back home, and even their wildest dreams. A few were my good friends with whom I shared moments of laughter, hopelessness, and even anger at where the world is heading in all fields. To focus on the purity of their experiences, some of their names have been changed.

My data collection did not end there. I consciously marked a certain week, sometime in mid-August after our methodology workshop, as the week I would start walking and taking mental notes wherever possible, observing the city and my experiences as a young woman who had returned home from the 'outside'. I also took notes in this period about what irked people in my life just because I am a young woman with certain experiences and opinions.

This research method borrows elements from phenomenology, autoethnography and walking ethnography since I was studying a phenomenon that I was also experiencing in my city along with the research participants. However, the writing style of this paper is majorly non-academic and more like a collection of experiences and opinions of us women, the young returning migrants. The paper has three main sections: leaving and returning, navigating Imphal every day, and our love for our home.

LEAVING AND RETURNING



Imphal airport as seen from Fika Kitchen & Studio.

'When did you leave Imphal?' was the question I asked 14 women to start the conversation for this research, all the while with the picture of Imphal airport in my mind. Every person from the area who has

migrated to the cities knows this airport well. For the people of Imphal, after a right turn from the airport exit the smell tells us we are home.

One of the participants had left the earliest in 2005. Except for two of them who left the latest in 2017, everyone else had left in the years following 2005; more women left in the first few years of this decade. This is substantiated by a 2011 study that found that migration saw a 12–fold increase between 2005 and 2011 (Chandra 2011). Only one of them did not leave; this was because she was born and brought up outside.

'College?' was the usual question I asked after the first one. College it was for 10 of them, and school for one. Surprisingly, there were only two who had gone out in search of work. Almost all of them had grown up in Imphal, breathing its air and seeing their hometown slowly turning into a city.

Two of them who had left much earlier returned in 2012 and 2013. Five young women returned in 2018. The rest had come back a few years before them. Two had just recently returned earlier this year (2019), beaming with ambition and enthusiasm for finding a job.

Whenever I noted a long gap between their college graduation and their return home, I inquired about their pursuits in the city. A few had worked, while most had continued their higher studies. The timeline of their leaving and returning can be given more meaning when we look at how the Government of Manipur imposed a blanket ban on direct recruitments of government employees starting from 1999. It started lifting the ban department-wise in 2008.[2] This paved the way for youngsters to return and work at home. But the actual stories behind why they came back home and how it has been since are rich with lessons and emotions and can never be condensed into generalisations.

This section starts with the stories of those of us who had the privilege to choose whether or not to return home. It also discusses two return stories that deserve a complete narration, because they are about two young women who did not have any plans of coming back and navigating Imphal as they are doing now or they did not want

to come back this early. These stories focus on how much they were compelled to come back due to unforeseen circumstances that they had no control over. This section also discusses the personal stories behind the success of the entrepreneurs who formed a part of this research.

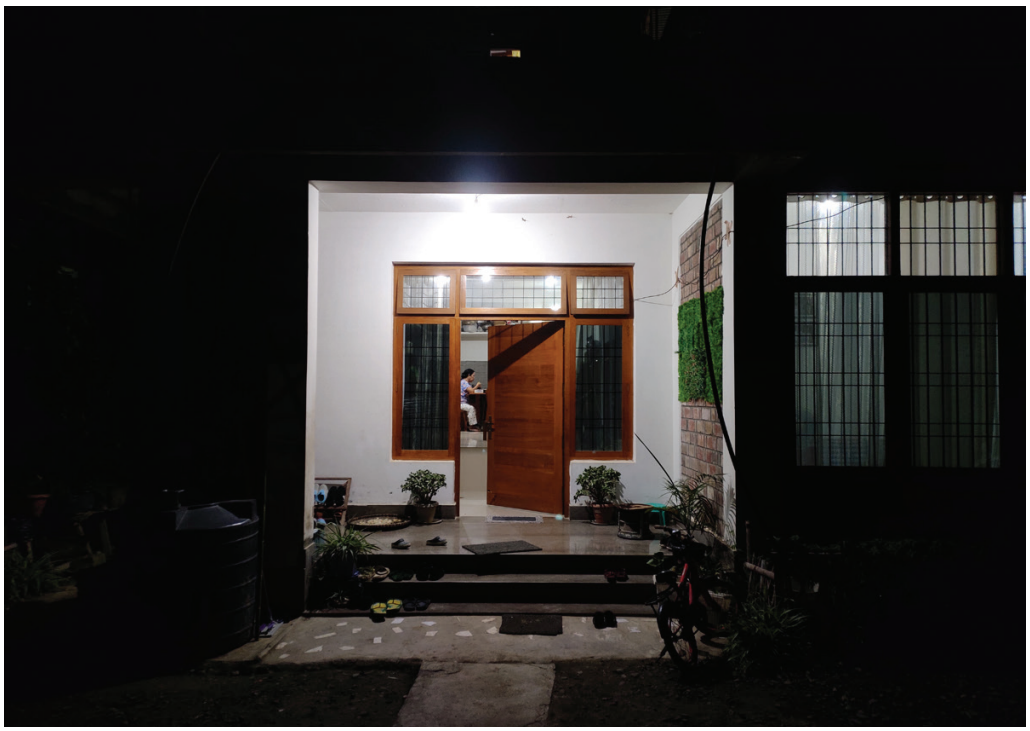
AN EASY RETURN

Karlsson and Kikon (2017) wrote how, being indigenous migrants, the youth are 'torn between the desire to move out into the world and responsibilities towards family, community and ancestral lands' (*15*). This was what happened to me when it was time to decide where I wanted to be after my post-graduation. I chose to stay home for a year and see what I could do after that. I came home for all the good things that home had to offer: clean air, good food, free shelter, slower days, and nostalgia. Five years of intensive field-based coursework had drained me mentally. All I wanted was some mental rest and time to work on my passions. I did not want to be a part of the rat race for a job, let alone give my all to get into the best organisations. Having a safety net of a research scholarship which I could use anytime, and with my father still earning, however meagre the amount, I had the privilege of choice. After almost two years I have decided to stay home for the same reasons why I returned in the first place, a desire to be with my parents in their old age, to help save their money, and also be available at home to help out in whatever is necessary for the household.

My friend Ritu had the same reason for returning home. She said it was because she 'needed to change her way of life.'[3] She was exhausted and tired of living the way she had been, always rushing in a fast-paced life. Not only that, she had reached a point where she wanted to try her best to live a life which was sustainable, totally different from how she had lived a great part of her life in the big cities. 'That decision itself was rebellious,' she said, 'but I say it with much embarrassment

because it is a privilege to say such things. If it were not for my parents who could still support me, I would have looked for a job like many of our peers.' Apart from both of us, all the others had come back for reasons either closely or partly related to their identity as a woman whose home was in Imphal.

BECAUSE SHE HAS A WOMB



The door of the first interviewee's house.

I wondered how my interview would go as I walked in through a big front door into a house whose interiors looked different from the usual houses around. The friend who had arranged this interview looked pretty much at home, and that gave me comfort. Little did I know that this interview would set the standard for the others to follow. This young woman, a freelance architect, sat down with me to answer just a few questions. But she ended up recollecting her childhood in

Imphal and memories all the way to what was happening in her life at that moment. I remember feeling very blessed as I listened to her and the way she entrusted the story of her life to a stranger like me simply because I was a fellow woman.

The first conclusion I could not help but draw about her was that she was one of India's finest architecture students. From passing in her first attempt at AIEEE, and that too at the first position among the students from North East India, to winning gold medals in both her undergraduate and postgraduate levels, her career was set. She had endured opposition from her family, terrible climate, bad infrastructure, and regular health problems to get where she was. She had almost given up, but she 'chose this career for myself, it was my decision, so I had to keep moving.'[4]

Her first big step-back happened after she got her first job in Mumbai. She recalled how much she loved her work there, how her company's most difficult clients worked with her, and how much she was understood and supported by her boss and higher-ups. But she developed a spinal problem, a lapsed disc in her spinal cord, a result of the extreme hard work she put in during her college. She left the firm in January 2014 and came back home, where she was suggested physiotherapy and not sitting up so much. Architecture requires a lot of sitting, so to have a more flexible working situation she decided to stay home and do freelance work. She spent 2014 in Imphal taking up various small architectural projects.

But staying in and looking at her friends progressing and going places, she started asking herself, 'Why are you not doing more in life?' She felt she was way behind everyone. Hence, she applied for her master's course abroad and even got all her required documents ready. She had also applied to one of the top Indian schools of architecture just to be on the safe side. But when she got through to the university abroad, she had to reconsider her plans to go because being closer to home was a better option due to her health.

Her course in Delhi started in 2015, but it was not what she had expected. She had expected that masters would be more laidback with

a lesser workload, but it turned out to be double the work, especially because she was studying Industrial Design. She found it even more difficult because she was then diagnosed with fibroids in her womb. 'I used to lie on bed unconscious once the pain started,' she recalled. Because she missed classes and assignments on such days, she could not afford to spare even two to three hours during weekends to hang out with friends.

The 2016 demonetisation affected campus placements, and she did not put in much effort since Industrial Design was all about products. However, she got selected by Infosys Bangalore. She had to quickly shift from college to work, 'I didn't even have quality time with my family.' She had her college best friend with her at Infosys, and that made her feel better. 'I didn't find satisfaction in the work even though the pay was good. Also, come to think of it, the pay was just enough to live in an expensive place like Bangalore, and I could not save anything.'

She did not care so much about her fibroid problem till she started getting terrible pains and had to endure them at work because a one-day leave meant a salary cut of ₹2,000. 'I was lucky my cubicle was near the bathroom, I could always go there and struggle with the pain,' she said. She went to a doctor in Bangalore, and the ultrasound showed that the fibroids had become 4–5 cm thick and had to be taken out as soon as possible. She was in a big dilemma. She consulted her family, especially her brother. 'My brother had been really understanding and caring ever since I was a kid. He was the one who told me to go back home for my health. I had to decide between passion and money, or say, having a job.' When she gave in her resignation letter, her boss was willing to give her three months' leave, something that was very rare, which he was willing to overlook in her CV later when she left her job, so that it would not affect her work experience. Even when she insisted that she wanted to leave, he told her to send in her resignation only after the surgery so that she could wait till then to take a decision. She had to leave for her surgery, and even worse, stay home after that.

After the surgery, she was in a bad mental state. 'Those first three months I was really depressed.' Thankfully, both her undergraduate and postgraduate college convocations happened in that period, and she was awarded a gold medal in both. She was also awarded her department's prestigious award. Those encouraging events helped cheer her up when she was feeling stuck at home because of her health. So at her family's suggestion, she decided to continue freelancing as a way of resting and recovering. She kept asking herself, like she still asks herself even now, 'Why do I have to go through all this?' She still planned to go out again, but since projects kept coming one after another, she is still at home as a freelance architect.

'If I was from a rich family, being a woman may not have affected me a lot, but it really did affect me,' she said.

BECAUSE SHE IS THE 'WEAKER' SEX

'Forget about 10 years, I came back in a few months,' said Likla, laughing, because her initial plans were of returning home only after working for around 10 years outside the state; these failed completely. All through her higher education, her family supported her decisions, whether it was her choice of college or her move to another city. 'It was always a family decision,' she said.[5]

With confidence in her family, she put in a lot of effort for one interesting job during the campus placements toward the end of her Masters in Social Work course. Deserving as she was, she got the job, not knowing that this time her family would strongly oppose her decision. They could not imagine their daughter working in an interior rural part of Jharkhand, with all the uncertainties and risks associated with the place. She said that they would not have objected if it had been Mumbai or Delhi. Safety was what they were concerned about. 'My parents tend to go by stereotypes and their assumptions, and they

decide what is safe for us.' She also recalled that their main concern was her health, and that is where even her usually supportive brother supported their parents. To top it all, when she went to start work, she was dropped by her uncle and brother. 'Just imagine, somebody my age being dropped off by an uncle and brother, that too for joining work?' she asked me as we both giggled.

Despite all the uncertainties and challenges, she knew that she was going to learn a lot in the job. She remembers feeling really comfortable and at home in her field. She understood the people and their struggle with development, saying that they were 'making eco-friendly products by hand using natural resources like leaves or mud, and I was concerned about how all these could be substituted by so-called modern products like plastics.' She still remembers how at night there would be complete darkness, and she could see the stars shining. She felt at peace there. She was filled with optimism and was enthusiastic about work.

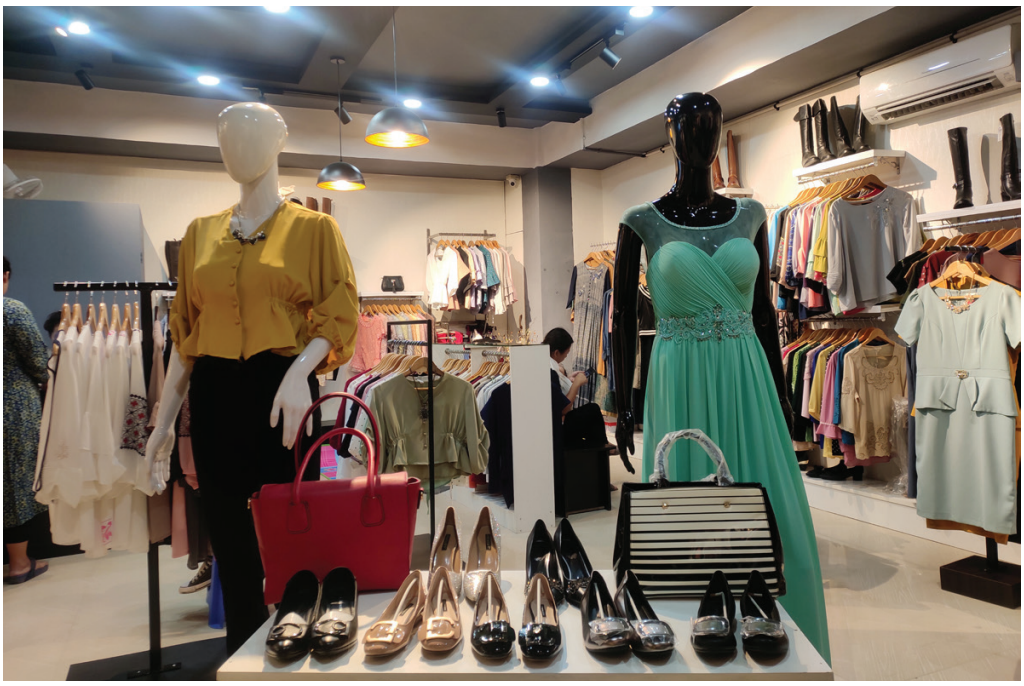
But a few weeks later, her family finally took the decision to call her back home, regardless of how it would affect her career and even more importantly her dreams. Having been her classmate too, I had heard from her and others about how she had to leave the job and come back just because her family did not want her to work there.

'It was disheartening because it was a job that I really liked,' she said. I noticed the reduced amount of frustration as compared to when she had come back home and had told us the same thing. She went through a very rough phase right after coming home, dealing with everything and everyone and her ideals just thrown off like that. She had a hard time adjusting, something that would have been easier if it had not been forced on her.

'I was trying to reason. Their reasons were valid. It was not their selfish interests. Fear about my safety was the reason they were imposing their decision on me because I am a woman,' she said. A lot of this reasoning every day and a job at home as a professional social worker are helping her understand both sides of the story. Even though she is my friend and university classmate, I could not help but sit back

and observe how she had the most calm and peaceful aura around her when she explained that there were a lot of differences between that time and now. She is 'living in the realities of whatever we learned at university,' she said.

THE STORIES BEHIND THE SUCCESS STORIES



Boutique in Olympia Shopping Complex, Imphal. Owned by Neihlaliu.

Three young, beautiful, and successful women. One was born outside the state, one left the state during her school, and one grew up in the beautiful hills away from Imphal. But all three are now in Imphal and own successful businesses that cater to health and fitness, food and beverages, and clothing. All of them are doing what they love as their jobs. They followed their dreams and worked hard with passion. It is as if they are following their hobbies as their jobs, which many of us may never get to do. They do not regret the choices they made that led them here. But each one of them had to leave a part of the woman she

was; they had to leave the idea of the women they wished to become. The women that they have now become has much to do with the place they live in and the mindset of its people.

Veronica (name changed) had to leave a high-paying job abroad to follow her dream of doing something good at home. She saved up every month so that she would be able to invest in her food and beverages enterprise. 'I wanted to create opportunities here at home, but not many people see this as a good career move.'[6] She also said that this was understandable because people here still saw such entrepreneurial work as 'not respectable', as compared to civil services or other secure government jobs. She also had to face difficulties, a constant one being finding 'good talented staff'. She was 'so optimistic and very adventurous' in the beginning, but her first year was very bad, leading to depression. 'It has been a lonely journey,' she said, realising how she fought a one-woman battle every day which may look audacious to the world, but which took a toll on her because she handled the burden all by herself. Also, even at her age with her kind of work, she is still pressurised to come home from work early because she is a woman in an 'unsafe place' like Imphal. On top of that, she faces a lot of pressure from her family elders to get married and settle down for all the reasons obvious to them.

The other two had to come back home leaving the jobs that they really loved for marriage.

Neihlaliu, hailing from the hills of Manipur, went to a metro city and started her life there with an open mind and an enthusiasm for exploring the world outside. She said she was visiting her relatives in the city and eventually found a well-paying trainee work opportunity in the field of skin care. She was trained well, so she had the opportunity to work in India's well-known skin clinics for around eight years. She met her husband in the last few years of her stay outside, who was then looking for a central government job. His employment was the green light for their wedding. Her husband was not even posted in Imphal then, but she had to quit her skin clinician's job to come home and start a business more feasible for living in Imphal because skin clinics

are too expensive for Imphal. 'I regret that I started this career pretty late,' she said.[7] 'I even had the chance of being promoted and working abroad. I would have done that and enjoyed life and seen the world, but it would have affected my entire life. At one point or the other, we women have to get married; it is the best option for us.' I could observe how she said the last sentence with a tone of helplessness and familiarity, yet with love for her new family. However, she is content with the rewards of choosing this option, which is being physically close to her family and friends.

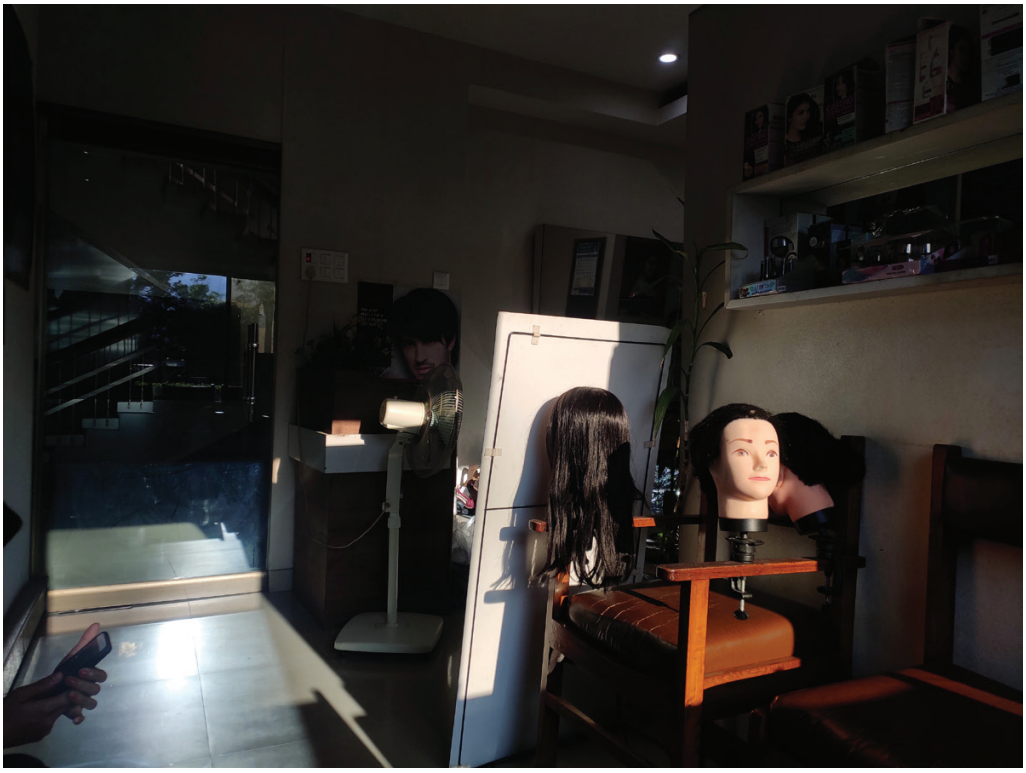
'Manipur was never part of the plan,' said Alexandra (name changed); she was born and lived her entire life outside Manipur till she came to live in Manipur.[8] After her wedding, she worked in the city for a year while her husband worked in Manipur for the state government. Her mother had started asking her to leave her job as she and her husband were living in different places right after the wedding. She had to listen to her mother and she understood her too. 'Our parents are realists. They know our society,' she said. Even when her boss and colleagues begged her to stay back by offering to revoke her resignation at the last minute, she decided to go back home to her husband. She added, 'It is important to be rational all the times and to think things through.' Although coming home was her decision, she still remembers how 'resigning from the place I loved a lot was a big heartbreak.' She did not seem to care much about how revered her husband's job was. What mattered to her was how much her job meant to her and her passion. She knows and is convinced that her present enterprise only worked out because of her marriage to her husband. But she admitted that she did sometime asks herself, 'Is a boy worth all that sacrifice? Why does the girl have to leave her job and not the guy?'

UNCONSCIOUSLY FOR THE FAMILY

For the others, there were no such strong differences with their families. They did not have to fight their families that much for the jobs they

wanted; they were not pressurised due to unavoidable circumstances that brought them home. I was surprised when analysing the interview data I realised that more than half the women had come home by choice. A couple of them came because their parents called them back, but those were situations where they had their say and could have stayed back if they had fought enough. All of them are content one way or the other being in Imphal and with where they are in life, whether they are working or studying or unemployed. However, it is not always sunshine and rainbows at home; most of us have our own set of complex problems.

Let us take a look at Chon (name changed), one of my friends. She is my childhood friend; I grew up with her in the same campus, a girl whom I shared everything with, who was the world to me. Our friendship was defined by uncontrollable laughter, spontaneity, teenage despair, and delirium. Things, however, changed when my family moved away and high school came to an end. It was then that Chon's father, the only earning member in her family, passed away. She and her four siblings had to make a lot of adjustments. It affected her preparations for our board exams, making her lose a year and stay home while her batch mates went outside. She finally left home for studies in 2014 'because of obvious reasons', and chose Shillong because it was the nearest.[9] 'Obvious reasons' were what she and I understood about almost everyone going outside Manipur after finishing their 12th standard for further studies or finding jobs because of the socio-political situation in Manipur. She came back in 2017 right after she graduated because being the eldest in her family she never had any plans of continuing with her education. She did not talk about the financial factors because this was understood. She told me how she and her close college friend had actually decided to come home and start a small business together on a whim. She recalled that decision now with regret, saying that they thought they could take their time and figure it out, but they never did. That friend eventually left for Delhi and is now working there. But Chon is back at home, appearing for random exams for government jobs and just being someone who is staying at



Naomi's workplace

home. She also bears the burden of emotionally and physically taking care of all her younger siblings, especially her only brother who is so disobedient that 'it's another story.' Looking back now from where I am, I realised that families in risky situations make up more than half the population of Imphal.

Thinking for one's family becomes the automatic guiding force when with low educational qualifications one has to feed your family. The oldest one among the participants, Naomi was trained as a beautician. Looking for better opportunities, she left home to go to Bangalore in 2012, but her salary was very unsatisfactory since she had to pay for her rent, food, and clothes. 'Who'd survive when you have to buy everything from head to toe, plus food too?' she asked.[10] With a low salary and the pressure of maintaining a certain kind of appearance, she could not provide for her family. That was why after only a year or so, she came back home to work in the beauty parlour

she had trained in. It was easier here because living expenses were lower, but she is still struggling to pay her *marup*[11] instalments on time. Even without *marup*, she cannot afford some things. Trying to make sense of such a situation, she said, 'When you don't have money, you just don't have it.'

Boicy's (name changed) plan when she finished her Masters was to live in Delhi to prepare for the civil services exam because she was in a better financial position. But when she came home to rest for some time while preparing for the exam, she realised that her staying in Delhi would only be a 'waste of time and money.'[12] Also, since all her brothers were outside either working or still studying, she thought that 'someone should be there at home', for her parents. Also, since 'preparing for the civil services exam is more of a personal effort and not a compulsory institutional obligation', she decided to stay home and do self-study.

Another young woman Rin (name changed) stayed back in Delhi for preparing for the civil services exam. But since this was not her passion, she did not attend coaching classes regularly and found them unnecessary. She was also shifting from one house to another, and found that she was not doing anything productive. 'No proper reason, I had nothing to do there,' was what she said first.[13] But as we sat for some more minutes laughing about our common struggles, she started talking about the real reasons why she came back home. Her eldest sister got married in 2017, when she was 'wasting time' in Delhi. Her other sister is doing her PhD there. Her younger brother is studying culinary arts, which is a very expensive course. Also, since the beginning of her college, she was funded by her eldest brother, who works in a bank. 'I felt guilty making him spend so much on me. You know five years is not a short time; just imagine the amount of money,' she said. Seeing all this, she decided to be the one who would stay home with her parents. In that way, she would stop burdening her brother too.

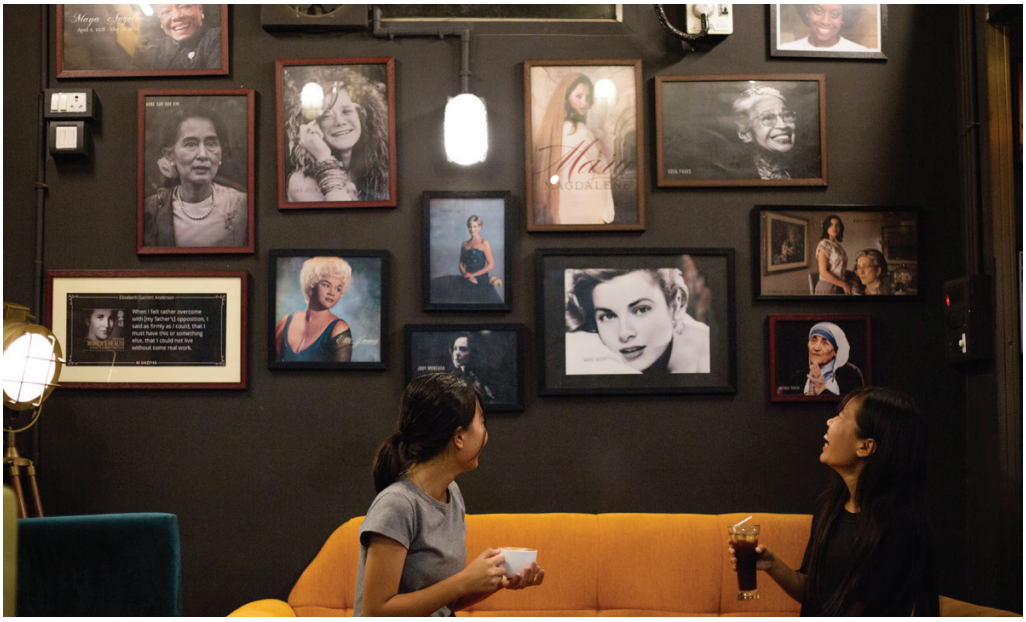
Natali, a working woman, came back home mainly for her brothers as well. She had two younger brothers to educate and feed. That

was why when her parents called her back home to 'settle down and find a job, particularly in the government sector', she understood the urgency.[14] Although she enjoys her work in Imphal, she was disheartened that she had to leave a city full of opportunities and an environment conducive for her passion to write. She had to come home knowing the huge difference between physical presence and just providing financial help.

My college senior Archana came back home because her father wanted her to come back home after 'having been outside for too long', and she 'needed to settle down here at home.'[15] She also thought about it and agreed because of her plans and dreams of working with children back home. Therefore, even for people like her and the two of us who had easier returns, family was an important point we considered.

The need and desire to be physically present with our parents or family 'after having gone so long' was strong, and came naturally to us as their children. From my experiences and the stories of these women, it became clear that this thought did occur to many of our male counterparts. But the actual act of returning for family was much more common among women. This is also because of external factors like the timeline created for women by society regarding their careers, marriage, and childbearing. This is true for my family, where my elder brother, who is much older than me and is in fact at an age where he should be 'settling down', is still studying outside without any pressure. The difference is clear.

NAVIGATING IMPHAL EVERYDAY



1985 Retro Coffee Shop, Imphal (Photograph by Richard Pao)

The wall covered with photographs of famous women in the Retro Coffee Shop in Imphal may mean different things to different people who walk into the café. But to me, it is symbolic of women from the

'outside' being very prominently present in our lives, being role models in their own ways for young women at home.

Navigating, according to one of the definitions in the Cambridge Dictionary, is 'to lead a company, activity, etc. in a particular direction, or to deal effectively with a difficult situation.' I chose this word because we, young returning indigenous women migrants with dual identities, face complex situations daily. We are constantly trying to navigate our way through situations as effectively as possible, literally and metaphorically. Harcourt and Escobar (2002) state that the conflicts that women experience in different domains (body, home, environment, and the social public space) usher in new forms of cultural and political relations (13). Therefore, the way we navigate Imphal is at the core of cultural production. It also sheds light on the socioeconomic realities and struggles of most young women in the city.

This section revolves around women's experiences, including mine, of how we navigated Imphal after we returned home from the cities. This discussion involves stories about the difficulties in the transitional phase, how we live with our families, the factors that influence our career paths, the struggles we face as women, and everything we learned through all this.

IN THE BEGINNING

'Having to live with the family after living outside for so long, after being so independent, was difficult,' said Natali, who came back home to support her brothers. The first two years after she came back were tough because her father had just retired, and she could not find a job. Even then, since she had reached what is popularly known as a marriageable age, there were expectations of settling down, of 'being an adult in the sense of the word as we understand here.' Her family also faced some financial issues because of which she had to find immediate

work. She did freelance writing for her previous clients whom she was in contact with till she finally got a job in the government.

Depression is a common experience that all of us faced as we settled into our returned lives. As mentioned earlier, it was more difficult for the two women who were forced to return home. Both the social worker and the architect lived through months of frustration and depression, questioning themselves and why everything had to happen after all the sacrifices and hard work they had put in to reach their goals. For the architect and for two other social work graduates it was their insufficient grasp of Meiteilon, the lingua franca in Manipur, which restricted their work to only certain clients or communities. The successful entrepreneurs were also not immune to feeling defeated and disappointed in themselves and the market they were associated with. Not finding work after leaving her dream job, Alexandra felt she had come back following her husband. It gave her sleepless nights. Even for Rin who came back home to reduce her brother's financial burden and get some peace of mind herself, things changed in such a way that she felt suffocated. Since she did not know what she wanted and neither could she find anything to do, the state of feeling 'jobless' led to more depression. This confusion of not knowing what to do was a major issue for my childhood friend Chon because what she wanted was not feasible with the resources she had. Also, due to her family's financial condition, her family members wanted her to pursue only government jobs. She is now stuck between her family and her dreams, but cannot afford to rebel.

Friendlessness is another issue that aggravated the depression and loneliness. Our dual identities created cultural diversity and global homogenisation, and thus affected our psychology as migrants and also that of the others around us (Ward, Bochner and Fur 2001). Natali credits her contentment with living here to her 'huge friend circle' that she made after coming back. However, for most of us, our good friends whom we 'vibe' with are still outside, while most of the friends here at home have become distant as we have stayed apart for so long and also because of the differences in our life experiences. We find it difficult

to bond with most of our old friends, especially if they have not experienced living outside. This is not because those who have lived outside have seen more, but rather it is the difference in worldviews which creates a huge gap between us. This issue is very real for the ones who are continuing their studies here in Imphal. 'People here are really lazy,' one of them said, complaining about her classmates and professors, meaning the slow life here. Another said she could not get their jokes and they in turn could not handle her demeanour. Most of the students have prejudices against those who come back from outside. Therefore, loneliness is caused by this classism between those who have lived outside and those who have not.

DON'T COME HOME LATE

These four words are my family's anthem. Even when translated into my dialect, it is still four words—*Kai guang nian rio*. Even more hilarious is how it is still four words when it means 'come back early'—*Guang dat zay o*.

For the first seven months, every meet-up, every lunch date, and every gig had to end by 6 pm, or at the most 7 pm if there was someone to drop me. From the eighth month after I started working till 6 pm taking the car with me, the timing extended to 7 pm or 8 pm. That went on for six months, and I took whatever little opportunities I could after work to roam the city's streets and cafés by myself or with friends. Even now when I do not have to go to any office, those 13 months paved the way for me to negotiate better with my family. But even so, like it has always been, the minutes leading up to the curfew time are filled with phone calls from my mother, or sometimes even my father who is supposed to be the cool one. My brother also joins in on certain days and occasions. Missing even one call from them makes them paranoid and furious. It was understandable earlier because then I lived in a remote area in the city where line auto rickshaws run their

last trip between 6 pm and 6.30 pm. It also shows the Imphal they knew not long ago, the small town trodden with armed men who could come ransack your house or rape your women anytime in the name of keeping you safe from insurgents.

When I asked my friend Rin who is continuing her studies here about what has changed since she came back home, she quickly answered, *'Pura hong e keino!'* (Of course everything has changed!). Hers was probably the most light-hearted interview because of her one-liners and to-the-point statements. She, with her sarcastic expressions, said she had been downgraded from a 'free bird to a caged bird', talking about how free and open her lifestyle was in Delhi, and how boring and restricted it is here. She cannot go out even in the early hours of the night because of, in her words, 'safety issues' and 'women's honour'.

Interestingly, the only ones who were still frustrated with this issue were Rin and me. When I asked a working woman older than us about this, and she said she had, 'learned to work my way around it.' Having financial independence as a woman really changed her role and say in her family, and even in society. 'Parents have been very understanding of me. I can go home late also. They are not overprotective,' she said; she can go and come any time as long as she informs them where and with whom she is. Her friend who was also with us during the interview shared her own story about the drama in her family many years ago when she came back home late from a gig. Her brother screamed at her from upstairs at that hour waking up the entire neighbourhood, calling her those famous Meitei terms that mean 'slut,' all because she came home late doing 'things unbecoming of a girl'. But she said that such things do not happen at home anymore. She concluded saying a woman can also try her best to navigate through such situations wisely.

It is even more interesting that all the other returned women I talked with did not care about this issue as much, whether they were unemployed, still studying, working, or running their own businesses. It seemed to me that they had given up a long time ago. They must have become used to the lifestyle here and had learned to adjust to it.

I could also adjust, no doubt, but it has reached a point where it feels like I am waging a war on this entire mindset. One of the young women, even though she came home only recently and used to enjoy nightlife outside, said, 'Adjusting is not so hard… doesn't matter much.' The others did not like going out at night or otherwise, and so they did not have to go through the painful process of asking permission or receiving phone calls with loud music playing in the background. This shows the different ways in which women have readjusted to the lifestyle at home after having adjusted to the lifestyle in the cities. This helps explain the dual identities we have to deal with and navigate everyday according to the time and space we are in.

DOUBLE TROUBLE: EXTRA LABOUR

'That's the most annoying thing, making us cook when we come home after a long day,' said one of the women. I was telling her how angry I would get whenever my family called me at work telling me to cook dinner after I came home, which would be after 7 pm.

It is always women who are expected to cook the meals, serve the meals, get up during the meals to serve extras, clean everything up post the meals, do a thousand extra chores, take an inventory of all household requirements, and still go to work on time or submit a report before midnight. All this while the men in the family read the newspaper or sip green tea and comment on the current political affairs. This extra labour, not to be confused with the term 'emotional labour',[16] drains a person mentally, physically, and consequently emotionally. This issue clearly shows how much women contribute to the family's economy, especially in our society where sexual division of labour has been the norm since time immemorial. But in this age, with formal jobs or informal livelihoods to focus on, it becomes very difficult for women to be effective and healthy in such conditions.

Even for someone singlehandedly running an enterprise, this burden of extra labour is a reality. One entrepreneur said that her family

did exempt her from household chores and that 'it really helped me in my career.' But when it comes down to it, as the daughter, is expected to be there for the family in crucial times. Her aunt recently fell sick and was in hospital, but out of everyone in her family, she was the one who slept in the hospital. A lot of her work slowed down because of those few days. The same goes for the owner of the boutique, who had to talk with me while doing multiple things. She was nursing her young baby, paying off her *marup* amount, and entertaining customers even as she said that she had to go home and cook dinner.

It is all the more problematic when the ones labouring are unemployed women because the family tends to use a woman who 'does not have any work' to do most of the household work while taunting her for being 'unproductive' and 'jobless'. This was a shared experience of all the women who formed a part of this research who were and are still unemployed.

This may explain only physical labour, but extra mental labour also has an equally bad impact. For instance, Chon's only brother, young as he is in his mid-teens, loafs around with the wrong company and also dropped out of school. Her worry and concern for her brother is also mentally taxing.

The same can be said of all women who have made sacrifices by coming back and earning for their families or being the caregivers for the elders in their families. Even though this is 'out of love and concern', they are pressured on a daily basis to 'act like a woman', stay physically fit, look pretty, get a job, and get married.

MARRIAGE, THE ULTIMATE GOAL

The stories of sacrificing for husbands and marriage have been shared. The rest of the 12 ladies who took part in this study are single and almost all of them are not in any relationship. But the question of marriage has either brushed or struck all of them.

The woman it struck the hardest is the architect. She opened up about getting marriage proposals and also how she was not sure of any man or even of marriage. She did not want to get married because she has worked for only one year, and if she left her family for marriage now, she would not have been able to help them financially. Added to this, because of her womb-related problems, people are careful about asking for her hand in marriage. Her family and relatives also tell her to 'marry as soon as possible before she becomes barren.'

When I asked the woman who is continuing her studies here whether being a woman affected her decisions she said that it definitely had throughout her life. More than her decision regarding freedom of mobility, she said, the question of settling down and marriage put more pressure on her in whatever decision she took. A young working woman complained about how people always told her to finish her studies before marriage. She was assured that any woman can study even after marriage 'but her husband should also understand.' Even an unemployed woman felt this pressure, 'spoken or not', of getting married and settling down soon, and she even felt that this would perhaps make her family feel at peace. As mentioned earlier, even the entrepreneur with so much work to handle was pressured to get married and settle down without any thought given to her enterprise.

Marriage is probably the most difficult thing for women in our context. Before anything, one has to consider some things about the potential husband—community, religion, neighbourhood, clan, political views—over and above his character or career or interest in the woman and vice versa. Even with so many communal prejudices and personal differences in goals and careers, women are still expected to 'find one soon'.

Women are even accused of wanting 'too much' in a man and that men are not able to meet the standards they bring from 'outside'. Perhaps we should heed only one advice, given by the woman who had to leave her dream job for her marriage: 'Don't ever give up something you love for marriage.'

UNLEARNING AND RELEARNING

'You know, I'm learning to see things from all angles, and I think this is what maturity is,' said Likla, who was once burning with frustration that she had been forced to come home leaving a job she really liked.

She brought up her brother's marriage because we both share a similar experience of our brothers getting married in the past few months, our families' first marriages. Having studied Women Centred Practice as her major in university, she tends to be critical of things related to traditional ways and values in weddings, marriages, and so on. But she had to unlearn and newly learn so many things. The most important was learning how to treat her sister-in-law as a fellow woman, 'while also not completely going against the traditional values of her role as an in-law in her new family, because there are also older generations living together so we cannot completely go against them, right? We also have to compromise a little bit from our end to have that harmony in our family.' Talking about her sister-in-law and the dynamics of roles and duties in a marriage, she said, 'I don't want my family to have high expectations of her because she is a woman, but also to share her roles and responsibilities with her as a person.' She also explained how in this way she is trying to do away with certain western ideas of feminism that are not suitable in our context.

She looked at how her family's lifestyle, especially of older relatives like her late grandpa, is eco-friendly and sustainable. She illustrated this with an example of her grandpa always cutting the puja candles into little short sticks so that they could use one candle for many days. She had thought then that her family was 'stingy'. But remembering everything, she said that she respected and valued this lifestyle. Likewise, in matters of religion and god, she is seeing more views and is open to learning more. She is reading, taking in all she can, and being grateful.

Every day I wake up to cope with your absence, the fact that you're gone.
And I sleep with utmost gratitude for I could be a part of your life, sharing a special bond.
This weak wrinkled hand had built lives, touched hearts and raised generations.
The skin and bones you see was a life that lived 98 years, a life that had witnessed history and had unfathomable wisdom.
Loving you was immensely powerful.
Just the feeling of strongly loving you wholeheartedly was enough to inspire me to embrace your values and
to be kinder, more loving and helpful, more patient and efficient in every aspect of life, just like you.
I loved you tirelessly, Bubu.
—Photograph and caption by Likla

'I have grown as a person, become more evolved as a person,' said Natali, who has a government job but who is better known among the city's literary circles as a good poet. She said living here helped her understand realities more and made her more mature than she would be if she were still living outside. She can also do the things she is passionate about, like reading and writing. 'I have been able to read so much,' she said. Below is a beautiful poem she agreed to contribute to this research, about the relationship between her and poetry.

The two roads diverged
in a yellow wood—I
had faced three times,
and taken the one
silent of footfalls.
It was never a poem to me,
nor were the daffodils.
On the first day, there was
a man who loved a star.
She was the navel.
The limbs smelled
of cinnamon;
in the eyes, you could see
white phosphorus burning.
The lips whispered
about rooms that echo
with Michelangelo.
I walked, half-blind,
as the sky above me twisted.
Intoxicated with love,
I drifted into unseen shores,
swam beside alien suns.

Inside me, a matchstick flared.
A *ngari*-seller lit
her Navy Cut, smoked
above smoked fish, laughter
caught in her aged throat.
Here, she said, we devour flowers.

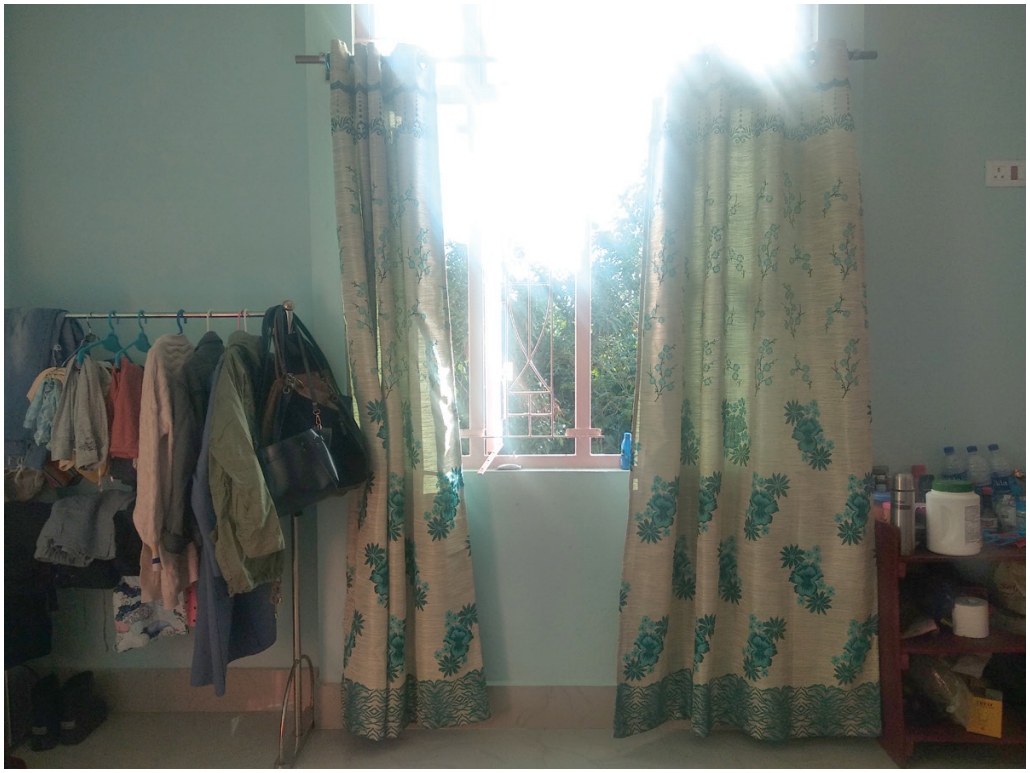
Your limbs and navel
smell of earth.
Women talk of armours,
not art.
Love fills your chest
like giant, bloody plums,
while your hand—
this hand—
writes after it has known
the rage of waxing fires.

—*An Origin Story*, a poem by Natali Ningthoukhongjam

My friend and classmate Boicy, who gave up her plans of preparing for the civil services exam in Delhi to be at home for her family, took a huge step after coming back home. Even though she and her family have a house in Imphal, she moved away and now lives in her own rented place. In a clean little room tucked away among a thousand concrete buildings, she is living out of a suitcase. Yes, it was her decision, she said. 'I am learning to do everything on my own … it was because I felt I was too dependent on my parents.'

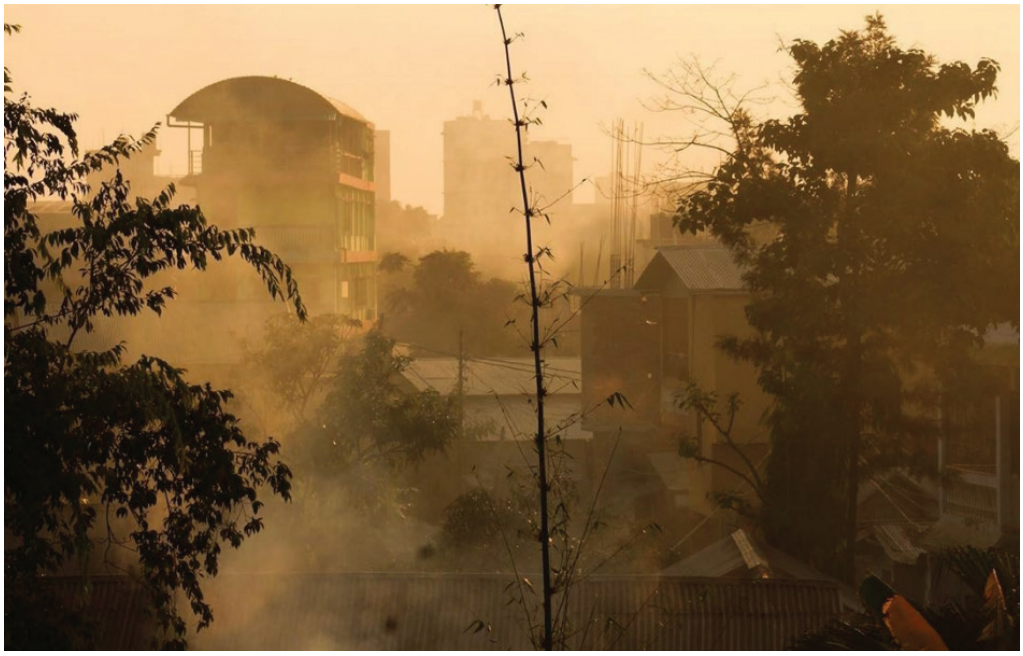
The kind of adjustments that Patricia, the founder/instructor of Broken Barriers Fitness Studio is making are also quite reflective of how women silently negotiate with the society they are part of. I asked her if her 'tight' and 'revealing' clothes, which are totally normal for a fitness instructor, led to any talk in Imphal. She said she had heard from the grapevine that 'her clothes were too sexy', but had not had any direct comment yet. 'As much as I want to be rebellious about it, I try to maintain a certain image.' So, during classes, she covers herself up properly. She wears the skimpier clothes only when no one else is there in the studio. This is also because she and her husband are from families who are supposed to be good examples for everyone. 'We are still subjected to societal norms,' she sighed.[17]

The young and enthusiastic Ritu, who came home to change her way of life, had more to say on what she learned after coming back home. 'I am even trying to grow my own food and see to what extent



Boicy's new personal space: A tiny rented room all for herself

I can "rebel" against this capitalist system,' she said. Last year she did a lot of introspection about herself and the life she was living till then. With much conviction and wisdom, she told me, 'I learned that we always have to stop and think and review ourselves, to check our lifestyle, what we are consuming, how we are living. If not, we remain in that dumb and selfish place our whole lives, and that's not done.' Apart from that, she is constantly experiencing being a woman among fellow women and with male co-workers. She sees even educated liberal women still toning down and not speaking up and not calling out some misogynist behaviour, and a lot of men not being able to take a young, tiny woman with her own views. But she has learned to have confidence that is completely her own and which is not attached to anyone. 'And I'll keep it that way,' she said.



Neighbours smoke in the early morning light, the budge of a lone standing bamboo, crisp air until the sun scorches, distant barking of dogs, birds chirp all day long, and a night in between until a new day sets about in the same manner. Coming of winter at home, and my celebration of mundanity.

—Photograph and caption by Ritu Konsam

MY PERSONAL LESSON—THE COMMUNITY VERSUS THE INDIVIDUAL

Only two cities in India were my proper home, and another one I frequented during vacations. Coming from a place surrounded by hills, getting to call villages in the mountains my ancestral home, feeling the clean fog and soft sunshine quite often—Indian cities brought out the worst in me. Therefore, I romanticised the idea of home, I swore I wouldn't have traded it for the world. Only after I returned home to stay for more than the usual vacation did I realise that 'home' had its own kind of mess that was sometimes dirtier than the pollution in the cities.

The word 'freedom' started meaning a different thing here. For me freedom was associated with only certain things till then. The political freedom that my community and many others in the north-eastern region were demanding. Social freedom from racism and casteism for communities. Economic freedom for people from the margins against the forces of mindless capitalism and the interconnectedness of all these freedoms. But for a long time, I had forgotten the freedom of the individual.

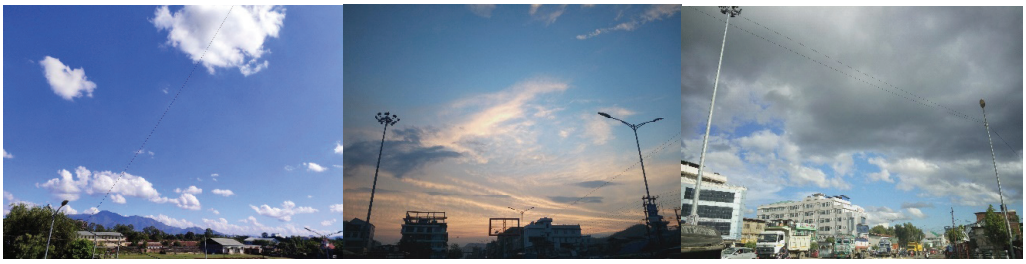
The 'individual' was never given much importance historically in the society of indigenous peoples. Such a setup focused on 'community' and how it was suitable for the way of life of our foremothers and forefathers, but this did not negate that society itself was built on patriarchy. Therefore, when women like me returned home, it was like we were thrown into a burning maze. Every day, we had to go through the process of negotiating and drawing the line between the community and the individual. With all I have seen, learned, and experienced in the cities, coming back home to a place and society straddling the old and the new completely enhanced my idea of freedom.

Freedom to me became as basic a thing as getting to come home at night as late as the men. It became getting to wear all the pretty clothes I owned. It became sleeping in instead of having to wake up to clean the house. It became getting to sit down and relaxing right after meals like the men did. It became getting to speak my mind without being shut up and labelled disrespectful. It became getting to love a person without being asked to stop because of his community. It became getting to drink alcohol outside without being publicly stripped and shamed.

I reached a point when I started valuing the freedom of mobility, anonymity, and individualism that the cities gave me more than ever. But all the while, I was also learning more about my roots, especially through my intense studies and travel researching my community's traditional clothing. I formed a close relationship with the *pheysuai*, the traditional wraparound for ladies and the story behind each motif

and pattern. I started reading much more than before, and started focusing on my passion for writing and music. The realities I saw and experienced at home became my inspiration for all the creative things I focused on. They became my source of wisdom needed to live in a place and society transitioning from the old to the new.

OUR LOVE FOR OUR HOME



Imphal skies, summer 2019

What's not to love about Imphal? This is a question I frequently ask people who grew up in this town. Even with all the dirty mess because of the failure of the state and looming communal issues, Imphal is loved by all its dwellers. Maybe it is the climate, or the dancing clouds changing their patterns and colours every hour, or the view of the blue hills surrounding the valley: The little lights in houses and villages on those hills, looking like fireflies, the cafés popping up, the *imas* on the roadside throwing in *bora* ingredients into hot oil, and the strong native accent and wrong English grammar. The way people create humour out of the littlest of things. The way people negotiate and navigate wisely out of what could turn into hatred and bloodshed. Maybe it is hope that still remains in people after all these years.

This is why the city's young returning women migrants had something to say about the place they grew up in. This section discusses what the women had to say about Imphal and the way it is changing—what they love, what they hate, what they would like to see, and what good they think can be done collectively. All for the love of a place which gave us an identity, showed us the world, and brought us back home.

A CHANGING IMPHAL: A LOVE-HATE AFFAIR

All the women involved in this research said that the changes they saw in Imphal were in food, literature, music, entrepreneurship, and sports. They focused on how people were now 'becoming job creators instead of job seekers', and how government jobs were becoming less important for people. That is why people were shifting to hospitality, the food and beverages industry, event management, health and fitness, fashion and clothing business, videography and photography, and social media.

Employment, equal work opportunties, easier mobility for women, and accessibility to more products and sevices constituted the 'good things' brought from outside as the women explained. To illustrate this, Nahli, one of the youngest working women in this research, shared the story of a woman in her village who studied and lived outside for quite some time and then came back with leadership skills that turned her into a respected woman leader. She also shared how encouraged she was to see her classmates in college outside continuing their studies even when they had children.[18]

From the perspective of artistic and creative minds, the present cultural changes are good because 'people are coming out and showing their talent in their own fields,' stated Natali, whose poem is used in this study and who also speaks out a lot for the LGBTQ community. Mention was also made of the LGBTQ initiatives in Imphal, like the

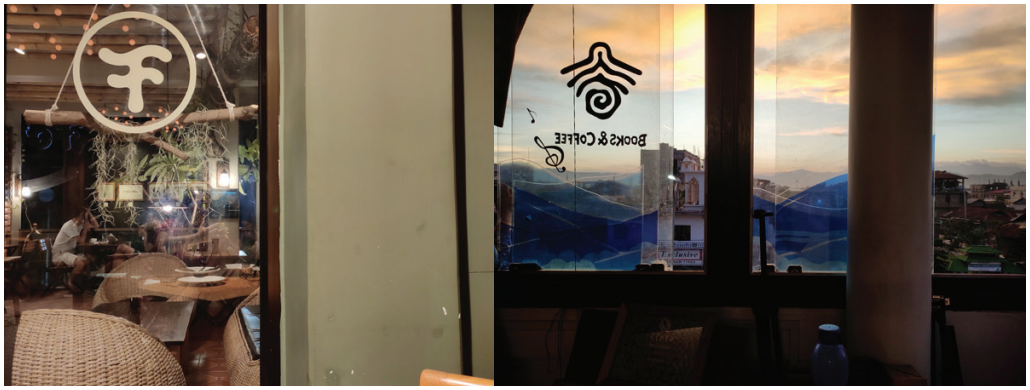
Ya_All initiative. 'It may not lead to Pride rallies and all that, but at least there is a platform and a space to discuss,' remarked Natali. I learned much later after the interview that there were LGBTQ initiatives even before Ya_All that have been functioning very well and doing a lot for the community, and have been organising Pride rallies since 2014.[19] What should be noted here is that the prominence of Ya_All shows how the newer intiatives can be more popular with help from social media, and also how older and newer initiatives in all fields need to collaborate more.

According to the architect's view the cultural changes in Imphal were worse than in cities, even cities like Delhi. 'Food prices in restaurants, for example,' she said. She believed that they only catered to a certain class and widened the rich-poor gap even more. ACs were also useless in a place like Imphal, and people had them only to copy the cities, 'because there is something called passive designing, where you can make the place cooler in indirect ways. Whosoever is designing also does not seem to understand this concept. People here only want flashy stuff.' She also complained how there were no regulations on building houses and maintaining green parks, unlike in Delhi even if it is much more polluted. 'Because of bad design, every household will soon live in gated communities.'

When I asked Natali if the current café culture was widening the rich-poor divide, she said she did not see it as a cause but as a symptom. 'It is not like the café culture is the cause, or the only cause, of why some people are becoming richer and some poorer. It is just the most visible phenomenon, so people think like that.' She discussed how the rich-poor divide was actually like a chain creation, giving the example of Classic Hotels. 'The rich-poor divide is increasing, and only the rich can afford their services, but the hotels are also giving employment to the poor, so the poor are able to enjoy a bit of the rich people's expenses. There is a bit of compensation there.'

However, Ritu had a different view. As a Social Sciences major, Ritu gave an answer that showed that she had done a proper analysis of this phenomenon. She said that we, the returning migrants, wanted to

come home and be rooted, but at the same time we also wanted to do this in our own convenient ways. 'We don't want to let go of our urban ways that we have absorbed and inculcated. So this understanding of culture by the youth, our generation or people who have come back, is almost like we are using culture as a utility, as an identity mark only in terms of the market and not necessarily really embodying it.'



Books & Coffee (L) and Forage Cafe & Restaurant (R), two of the common places where people hang out

Archana, doing her PhD in Education, commented on the quality of education in Imphal, saying that Imphal has schools that mentally and physically torture students just for good marks. She also brought up the culture of materialism among the people in Imphal, which she felt was brought from 'outside'. She was also wary of the intentions and influence of certain organisations and initiatives that people who had come back from outside brought with them, because 'ours is a very complex society.' All these are interconnected to the kind of education we are providing.

Social media was also mentioned by several women. They focused on the fact that our culture now was 'held by social media'. People in creative fields were happy with the way social media was bringing connections between everyone, especially fellow artists and people working in similar fields. But Natali did say that most people used social media as a 'tool for repression' and so we should be careful. She gave the example of the Utlou incident (Sitlhou 2019), saying that if

not for people making it so viral on social media, it would not have been such a big issue. 'We are becoming more liberal but also more repressive,' she added.

Archana also pitched in on this topic, and expressed concern about how people were looking up to certain people on social media, which was very unhealthy because those certain people promoted a lifestyle which was 'superficial' and all about a glamorous life. She was saddened at how young people's lives were steered by social media and the need to look good online.

It was very empowering for me to see all the young women come together to speak against the gender-based violence that happened in the Utlou incident. Ritu said, 'It showed how people outside Imphal hate people from Imphal, and rightly so; because they are so uprooted, they are in a different *hawa*,' (meaning a different air or atmosphere). She meant to describe the growing class differences in our society and was not applauding mob violence.

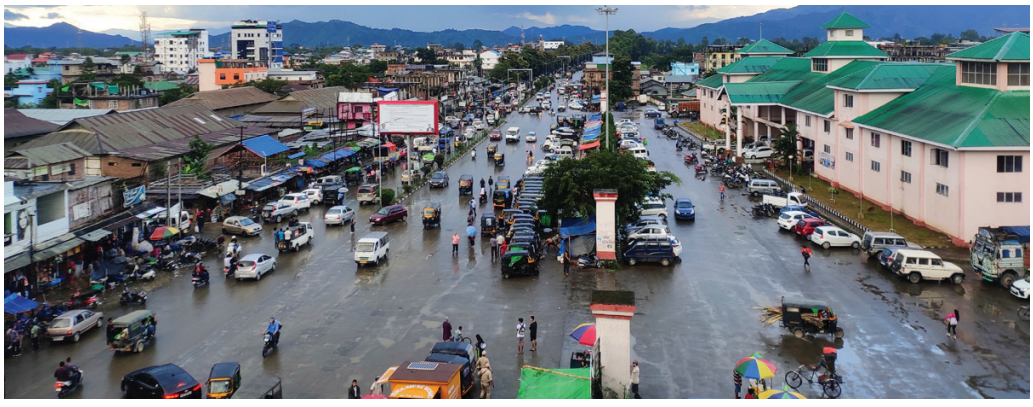
Half of the working women shared the same idea when they talked about how the change in work ethic was one of the best changes happening in the work culture at home. But the other half was still struggling with bosses and colleagues who were not professional. This included the culture of bribery for government recruitments, which is a known social evil in the state. But Natali, who is a government employee and knows the difficulties in curbing it, brought another perspective to corruption. She said that if we looked at the brighter side, the bribery system created private enterprises which were giving non-corrupted satisfying jobs.

Only one of the women mentioned good clothes as one of the 'good' things brought from outside. It was interesting because Worpha, with all her knowledge about social work, focused on clothing and its importance in our society. She said, 'Fashion is important because fashion was once upon a time a distinguishing factor between classes, but that culture has become old-fashioned.'[20] Neihlaliu, the owner of a boutique added that she thought that she was playing a role in providing quality clothes to 'women who want to dress up and feel

good about themselves.' It is my observation that for the last few years, all girls and women from all financial backgrounds have access to fashionable clothes via second hand clothes and thrift stores, which is to be applauded for its contribution in closing the loop in terms of sustainable fashion.

Some women gave their personal views on the state's socio-political situation. Natali brought up the issue of Manipur having too many civil service organisations (CSOs), especially because 'they are using their power to repress the women and not to work on more basic problems.' She gave the example of CSOs taking up rape cases and steering them according to their own will, creating many narratives that were in fact patriarchal and sexist. She believed these problems started with the government. Since the government had not done its work well, CSOs had come up; and now since the CSOs were also corrupt, people had nowhere to turn to. Adding to this Ritu said that it was hard to see any positive change coming in Imphal because the city 'was completely bought off by people with large pockets', and that all the *huranba* (thieves) will become politicians. All of these led to difficulties for common people when it came to choosing a way of life that was equitable and sustainable.

THE IMPHAL WE ENVISION



View of Dingku Road and Imphal ISBT from Olympia Shopping Complex, Dewlahland, Chingmeirong

> 'To be this young, to be this old. To be in the beginning years of seeing and feeling things from so many perspectives. Moving back to the place where I spent the last five years of the previous century, I'm seeing the kind of changes and feeling the way the changes are showing and taking all of us on this adventure. And it is a dangerous adventure of a lifetime. It was overwhelming looking down from this building—a shopping complex of the new age, a symbol of modernity—at things and lives of people around me. I don't know where we all are going on this adventure. But I hope it is love and respect that are guiding us. No matter how young or old, no matter how much we know, those two things actually make a huge difference in everything that's happening.'

This photo and caption are from an Instagram post I uploaded on 27 September 2019. The motivation to choose the theme of women and space arose from the way I unconsciously ended up relating and connecting myself with the things happening in the place I am in. In any social place, there are residents who use the place to satisfy the essential needs of life, and entrepreneurs who strive for financial returns by putting their properties to intensified use. There is more conflict between use and exchange values in cities, and this conflict closely determines the shape of the city, the distribution of its people, and the way they live together (Logan and Molotch 1987). It is my firm belief that a lot of things can be made easier for many people when women take the lead, when women use their knowledge and experiences to do something. According to their age, experiences, and expertise, women can contribute with either their suggestions or their actions. Here are some of the visions and suggestions that the participants of this research shared.

'I want to drink and smoke openly without any tension,' said Rin, the expert of one-liners. Connected to that are also the changes in the food and hang out culture. So when I asked what she saw in all that, she said, 'People's minds should also change like how *bora* and *shingju* are changing to café and restaurant food.'

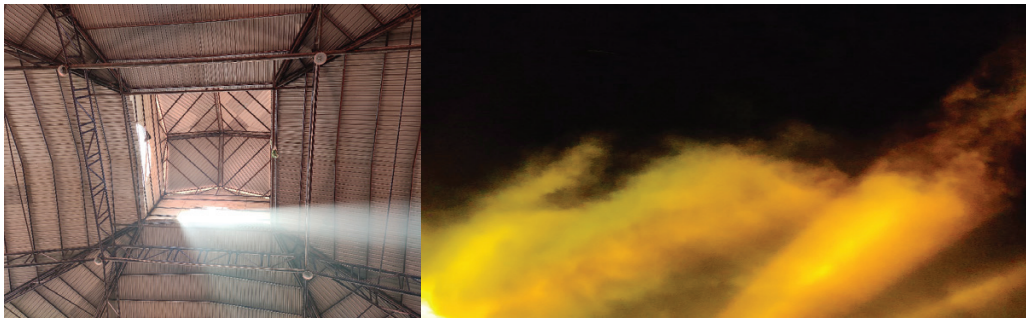
Natali gave a more detailed version of her vision. 'I want people to be able to live accepting their identity, and with good medical care, education, and employment.' In fact, she was the only one who was daring enough to dream of all the communities in the state respecting each other. She said that the entire scene of entrepreneurship, jobs in the private sector, the café culture, and queer discussions were slowly but definitely contributing to the realisation of this vision.

Both Likla and I shared our vision of carrying out grassroots gender sensitisation starting from the neighbourhood level. We started an important conversation about how we as graduates in social work can team up in the next few months to work with employees of waste trucks in the Imphal Municipal Area, so that the findings could lead to effective state-managed waste management.

Archana, as she works in the field of education, hopes to create modules for school teachers where she can incorporate the values and practices of quality learning and teaching.

Coming to the infrastructure part, she suggested that there should be more recreational places where everyone can read, hang out, and where even children can do their homework in case their homes are not conducive for that. 'Maybe the Meira Paibees can be the overseers at such places rather than moral policing,' she added. She also suggested that autos be replaced by small canters employing the same drivers so that there are proper parking spots and not chaotic parking like what is happening at present. She would also like more 'reserved' autos so that one can reach anywhere he or she wants.

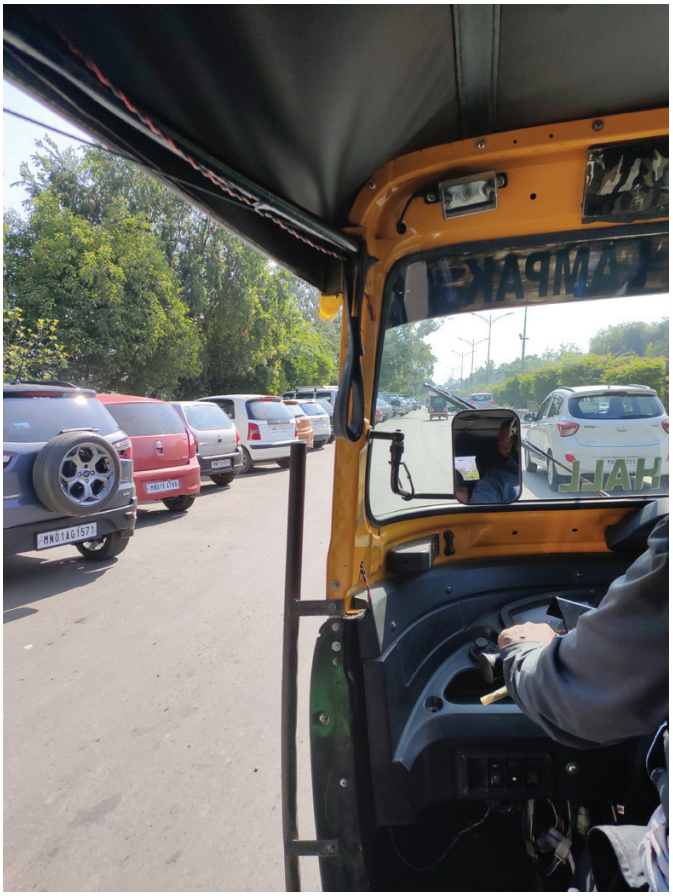
Patricia, who founded Broken Barriers Fitness Studio, wished for everyone in Manipur to be healthy and fit. She informed me that the people of Manipur are becoming very stressed at workplaces, and therefore she hoped that her fitness studio can provide a place of escape from all kinds of stress. When discussing what could be done in Imphal in the future as a fitness entrepreneur she said that she wanted to bring back physical education classes in schools and have innovative collaborations with other entrepreneurs.



L: The roof of the Manipur Trade and Expo Centre, Lamboi Khongnangkong, which is a common venue of state festivals and other popular events
R: Stage lights from the arts and music festival 'Where Have All The Flowers Gone?' 2019

For this research, I dined at numerous eateries and attended art, culture, literature, and music events and festivals. They all belong to the new wave of popular culture, all started or organised by returned migrants. They need to be praised and appreciated for giving the people of Manipur a place to socialise, learn new things, and have fun. However, I would end up being critical of certain approaches at most of the places or events, and be concerned about the kind of effect it may have on the general public. The main issue is that there seems to be a revival of indigeneity and the native identity, but contradictory to that way of life, capitalistic consumerism guised as 'eco-friendly' or 'homegrown' seems to be at the core of it.

My friend Ritu shared my views and articulated this well, saying that coming back to Imphal did not mean a positive change but rather made it worse, that 'you are making this place exactly like the place you wanted to get out of.' She added that our rootedness was shown only at our convenience 'as if our rootedness can only be completed if you wear a *phanek* or anything like that at events or whatever.'



In the auto of Laibi Oinam, the lady auto driver from Meena Longjam's 2011 documentary film 'Auto Driver'

All our conversations were centred on trying to find the middle path for everything—from governance to schooling to businesses. Those were very important conversations because they are reflective of the future we are creating. There are already extreme ends of the spectrum in the way we perceive development and culture. From studying people's indigeneity in terms of resistance to and integration with the neoliberal project, it is seen that rise in gender divisions is assisted by neo-colonist modernity (Altamirano-Jiménez 2013). We would not want to see any more increase in gender divisions than there already are. We would not want any more public shaming of women,

rape cases, or demonising of our mothers. We want to have safe night outs, good employment opportunities, and clean air. We want to learn how to inculcate the equitable and sustainable values of our foremothers' time as well as the contemporary times.

We want an Imphal where everyone is constantly working and navigating, to whatever extent they can, towards a better home, a better city, a better planet.

NOTES

1. Open-ended interview questions used for data collection:
   i) When did you migrate to the city and why?
   ii) When did you come back and why?
   iii) How did you end up doing what you are doing now?
   iv) How much was your family involved in taking these decisions?
   v) What is your experience as a woman after you came back?
   vi) What kind of culture and/or development would you like to see or create in Imphal?
2. The Government of Manipur imposed a ban on direct recruitments in 1999 after facing a severe liquidity crunch. The government fell in February the next year. It was only after almost a decade in 2008 that the ban on recruitments was lifted and various vacancies started getting filled. See T. Haokip's article in *The Statesman*, June 24, 2019.
3. Ritu Konsam, in conversation with the author, Imphal, 23 October 2019.
4. Tingneilam Khongsai, in conversation with the author, Imphal, 6 September 2019.
5. Likla Ningombam, in conversation with the author, Imphal, 24 September 2019.
6. Veronica (name changed), in conversation with the author, Imphal, 25 September 2019.
7. Neihlaliu Kamei, in conversation with the author, Imphal, 23 September 2019.
8. Alexandra (name changed), in conversation with the author, Imphal, 14 September 2019.

9. Chon (name changed), in conversation with the author, Imphal, 22 October 2019.
10. Naomi Phaomei, in conversation with the author, Imphal, 9 September 2019.
11. *Marup* is a traditional saving and lending institution of the Meiteis and is a common informal financial system in Imphal Valley. There are different kinds of *marups*, for example, traditional clothes and expensive utensils where group members can save every month and acquire that product instead of paying cash.
12. Boicy (name changed), in conversation with the author, Imphal, 18 October 2020.
13. Rin (name changed), in conversation with the author, Imphal, 20 October 2019.
14. Natali Ningthoukhongjam, in conversation with the author, Imphal, 11 September 2019.
15. Archana Potsangbam, in conversation with the author, Imphal, 18 September 2019.
16. 'Emotional labor, as she conceived it, referred to the work of managing one's own emotions that was required by certain professions,'—this is Julie Beck's summary of what Arlie Hochschild meant by the term 'emotional labour'. See Julie Beck's article 'The Concept Creep of "Emotional Labor' in her interview with Arlie Hochschild, the sociologist who coined the term. The Atlantic, November, 26, 2018.
17. Patricia Buhril, in conversation with the author, Imphal, 14 September 2019.
18. N. Nahli, in conversation with the author, Imphal, 28 September 2019.
19. The first Pride Rally in North East India was held in Imphal on 15 March 2014. Available at: http://e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=3..160314.mar14. Accessed on 13 July 2020.
20. Worpha Shimrah, in conversation with the author, 28 September 2019.

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