VIOLENT SACRIFICES: REWRITING WOMEN'S RESISTANCE IN EARLY 2000'S MANIPUR, INDIA

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgement is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

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Signed – Chitrangi Kakoti

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses modes of self-sacrificial resistance mobilized by gendered insurgent subjects at India's borderlands through the study of two women-led protests against militarism that occurred in the early 2000s in the state of Manipur in Northeast India – Irom Sharmila's hunger strike from 2000 to 2016, and the *Meira Paibis*' naked protest on 15 July 2004. The author makes a departure from the dominant reading of these protests within Indian feminist scholarship as non-violent modes of gendered resistance against a militaristic state. Through critical analysis discourse of news and reportage in three major English-language newspapers in India, the author argues that violent material conditions at 'exceptional territories' necessitate the production of gendered subjectivities that weaponize their lives to reclaim control over life, death, and violence from a patriarchal and colonial state. Through the weaponisation of their lives, the gendered insurgent subject becomes a site of 'counterconduct' to the sovereign's violence. The author further argues that in both protests, the women negotiated agency by conforming to but also rewriting patriarchal scripts that attach meanings of sacrifice, honour, shame, and purity to women's bodies. Thus, the aim of the thesis is to engage with how the gendered insurgent subject operates as both object and subject of the sovereign's violent control and thereby, disrupt and destabilize the Indian state's biopolitical regime at its borders through violent sacrifice.

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AFSPA	Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
HRA	Human Rights Alert
HRW	Human Rights Watch
NSCN	National Socialist Council of Nagaland
PLA	People's Liberation Army
RPF	Revolutionary People's Front
TADA	Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act
UG(s)	Underground armed rebel Group(s)
UNLF	United National Liberation Front

INTRODUCTION

The early 2000s witnessed two momentous events of women's resistance against militarism and armed conflict in the Indian state of Manipur, situated in Northeast India. Triggered by separate incidents in 2001 and 2004, Manipuri human rights activist Irom Sharmila and the *Meira Paibi* (Women Torch Bearers) respectively mobilized their lives and bodies against the culture of militarism and violence that had become a part of everyday life in Manipur (and the region overall) due to decades-long armed conflicts between 'insurgent' groups and the Indian state. It is often civilians who are caught in the violent crossfires of the conflicts. One such incident was the Malom Massacre when on 2 November 2000, personnel of the Indian paramilitary force, the Assam Rifles, open fired at nine civilians at a bus stop in Malom – a town in Manipur. Two days later, Irom Sharmila embarked upon a hunger strike that lasted for sixteen years until 2016.[1] Another incident occurred on 11 July 2004 when 32-year-old Thangjam Manorama Devi was arrested from her house on unproven allegations, and then later raped and murdered.[2] This triggered the organization of a naked protest by the *Meira Paibi*, a local women's collective in Manipur with a history of activism against social injustices. On 15 July 2004, twelve women of the *Meira Paibi* stripped naked in front of the Assam Rifles headquarters in Imphal (the capital city of Manipur).[3] Both protests were against violence perpetrated by military personnel against civilians and women took the centerstage in the resistance against a juridico-political order that supports militarism and protects the armed forces of the country. While Manipur has had a history of women's activism against social

[1] Esha Roy, "Irom Sharmila to end 16-year-old hunger strike on August 9, will get married, fight elections," *The Indian Express*, 27 July, 2016, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/irom-sharmila-fast-manipur-elections-afspa-repeal-2937072/.
[2] Teresa Rehman, *The Mothers of Manipur: The Twelve Women Who Made History* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2017): xxvi-xxvii.
[3] ibid.

causes, these two protests were momentous because for the first time, militarism in Manipur became a part of national political discourse as a direct result of the women's resistance.

The aim of this thesis, therefore, is to understand how gendered insurgent subjects navigate spaces of extreme militarism and violence where citizens are often stripped of their legal rights through the establishment of a juridico-political order that grants special powers and impunity to the military. Why did Irom Sharmila and the *Meira Paibi* resort to extreme modes of resistance such as hunger strike and naked protest? How do these gendered subjects negotiate agency within their specific material conditions to disrupt and destabilise the sovereign's authority through the weaponization of their lives and bodies? The thesis attempts to answer these questions through critical discourse analysis of news reports, articles and opinion pieces published from 2000-2005 in three Indian national newspapers – *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express* and *The Times of India*. I analyse how, by virtue of female bodies being concomitant sites of power and resistance, gendered insurgent subjects enact agency to disrupt the biopolitical regime of the modern nation-state of India that attempts to silence them. The thesis further analyses how women engage in creative but self-sacrificing modes of resistance to reclaim control and ownership over their lives, deaths and bodies in spaces that provide limited opportunities for resistance. I argue that these protests transform the gendered insurgent subject into violent 'counterconducts' that deploy the self-sacrificial female body to challenge the sovereign's modalities of power. Furthermore, I assess the effectiveness of these protests as gendered modes of resistance against sovereign power, particularly in the peripheries of the nation-state that are 'exceptional territories.'

In the following section, I contextualize the protests of Irom Sharmila and the *Meira Paibi* within the contentious political history of Manipur, and the history of women's social activism in Manipur. A discussion of the political history of Manipur is necessary to understand

the ubiquity of militarism and conflict that allowed (and continues to allow) the imposition of 'exceptional' juridico-political systems in Manipur as a tool of disciplining and surveilling a certain segment of the population that the Indian state categorized as 'insurgents.' Then, I discuss the history of women's social activism in Manipur to provide a brief overview of the spaces and material conditions that women of Manipur – especially married women – negotiated to participate in political and social action against the social injustice and violence in Manipuri society. This history influenced the spaces and modes of resistances that Irom Sharmila and the *Meira Paibi* were able to access when they demanded the repeal of AFSPA in their protests.

Political History of Manipur

The present juridico-political system in Manipur that created the conditions of an 'exceptional territory' and the cycle of insurgency, militarism and violence can be traced to the post-colonial nation-building project of India. The modern political history of Manipur is tied to the broader history of Northeast India, a term used by the Indian government to refer to the region that consists of eight administrative states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. The region has been perceived as vulnerable to India's geopolitical security by the Indian state since most of the region's borders are international – Bangladesh to the south, Burma (Myanmar) to the east, Bhutan to the northwest and the Tibet to the north (see Map 1).[4] This security anxiety is reflected in the merger of the state of Manipur into Indian territory in 1949, in its establishment as a fully-fledged State in 1972, and in the declaration of the state as a 'disturbed area' in 1980 under the Disturbed Areas (Special Courts) Act, 1976. Under this Act, an area is categorized as

[4] Google Maps, "Northeast India," *Google Maps*, accessed 2 June, 2021. https://www.google.com/maps/place/Northeast+India/@25.6311631,88.2141654,6z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m5!3m4!1s0x374f651182a461ab:0xd8b5c2e1f67bebf0!8m2!3d25.5736012!4d93.2472565.

'disturbed' if there is an "extensive disturbance of the public peace and tranquility due to difference and disputes between members of different religious, racial, language or regional groups or casts or communities…"[5] The conflict in Manipur, although a national liberation war at its core, also has a dimension of ethnic conflict due to the ethnic diversity in the state. Manipur is home to the Meiteis (the dominant ethnic group), the hill tribes such as the Nagas and the Kuki-Chin-Mizo, and other sub-tribes such as Liangmai, Mao, Maram, Maring, etc.

Map 1. Map of Northeast India. From Google Maps.

The Northeast region of India, including Manipur, was a part of British Imperial India's 'frontier system,'[6] which was a fractured and ambiguous project in bordering and territory-marking.[7] The hill tribes of the Northeast were perceived as "wholly savage,"[8] who needed to be contained and dealt with for the smooth expansion of the British Imperial rule. However, Manipur was never annexed as a part of British territory. The postcolonial Indian state inherited

[5] "THE DISTURBED AREAS (SPECIAL COURTS) ACT, 1976," *Parliament of India*, Act No. 77 of 1976, https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/A1976-77.pdf.
[6] Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and its Northeast* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020): 2.
[7] Thomas Simpson, "BORDERING AND FRONTIER-MAKING IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH INDIA," *The Historical Journal*, 58, 2 (2015): 513-542.
[8] ibid., 514

these contentious borders. Manipur was initially established as a constitutional monarchy in 1947,[9] with its own legislative assembly, constitution, and the *Maharaja* (king) as the executive leader. However, due to security anxieties of the Indian state,[10] the Indian state incorporated Manipur into Indian territory through the Merger Agreement, signed by the *Maharaja* on 21 September 1949, allegedly under coercion[11]. It was established as a Part C state, which allowed the Central Government of India to directly administer it.

The merger was opposed and rejected by the Manipuri people, leading to unrest in the state. The conflict formally began in 1964 with the establishment of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF). Subsequently, armed groups such as the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) and other underground armed groups (referred to as UGs) were established throughout the 1970s. These groups demanded the liberation of Manipur through armed struggle. In fact, in 1968, a government-in-exile was established at Sylhet in modern-day Bangladesh.[12] Meanwhile, the Nagas and the Kukis demanded secession from Manipur to create separate independent states, thus increasing the complexity of the conflict.

It is due to this political situation that the Indian government granted Manipur the status of statehood in 1972 to appease the insurgent groups. However, as the armed struggle continued, the government responded in 1980 by declaring Manipur as a 'disturbed area' under

[9]Shukhdeba Sharma Hanjabam "The Meitei upsurge in Manipur," *Asia Europe Journal*, *6*(1) (2008): 157-169, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-007-0167-6.
[10] The anxiety to secure India's territorial borders can be accorded not merely to the ambiguous nature of the borders and territories it inherited from its colonial masters but also to the Partition that divided the Indian sub-continent into Pakistan and India.
[11] According to Sanjib Baruah, the *Maharaja* was virtually imprisoned in his residence in Shillong, situated in neighbouring Meghalaya, as it was surrounded by soldiers; hence, he signed the agreement without being allowed to consult his advisors, the elected officials of the assembly, or the public opinion of the Manipuri people. This is the popular narrative within the public discourse of Manipur. See, Sanjib Baruah, "PostFrontier Blues: Towards a New Policy Framework for Northeast India," *Policy Studies* no 33, (Washington: East West Centre, 2007). https://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/PS033.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=32179
[12] Hanjabam, ""The Meitei upsurge in Manipur," 160.

the Disturbed Areas Act and imposing the contentious Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA) in the entire state. The AFSPA is an extension of a colonial law – the Armed Forces Special Powers Ordinance of 1942 – which was enacted to suppress the Quit India Movement.[13] Under the Act, personnel of the Indian armed forces have the right to arrest without warrant, to enter and search any property and person without warrant, to fire upon or use force (to the point of death) after issuing due warning – all for the purpose of maintaining law and order. The Act, furthermore, grants any personnel acting under the Act protection from "prosecution, suit or other legal proceeding"[14] unless such proceeding is sanctioned by the Central Government. Although the Indian state and the Indian Army claims that the Act has been effective in curbing insurgency in various 'disturbed areas' in the country, regions under the AFSPA has seen a continuation of armed conflict, violence, and militarism. An extensive report on the AFSPA published by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) in 2008 stated that the AFSPA has facilitated human rights violations in the forms of arbitrary arrests, torture, kidnapping, murder, rape, encounter killings, and so on in the regions where it is imposed, leading to further escalation of conflict, and acting as a motivation for civilians to join armed insurgent groups.[15] One of the most noteworthy case of extrajudicial executions in Manipur was "Operation Bluebird" in 1987, which was carried out as a retaliation against the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) at Oinam Hill Village in Manipur's Senapati District in 1987. Wide-scale human rights abuses occurred during the Operation including torture, rape, extrajuridical killings of the members and leaders of the village community that continued for

[13] The Quit India Movement was launched in 1942 to demand an end to British rule in India. The movement faced severe repression from British administrators, including the arrest and imprisonment of thousands of political leaders, some of whom were imprisoned till 1945; ibid., 161.
[14] "ARMED FORCES (SPECIAL POWERS) ACT, 1958," Parliament of India, 1958, http://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/A1958-28.pdf.
[15] Human Rights Watch, "Getting Away With Murder: 50 Years of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act," *Human Rights Watch*, 2008. https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/2008/india0808/india0808web.pdf.

three months.[16] Although a writ petition was filed against the Assam Rifles at the Gauhati High Court on 5 October 1987 by the Naga People's Movement for Human Rights, it remained pending in court for nearly three decades and was disposed of in 2019 due to missing evidence.[17]

Therefore, it is usually innocent Manipuri people who get caught in the crossfire between the state armed forces and the UGs. Counterinsurgency efforts by the state have been directed towards disciplining the Manipur people through intimidation, fear, and gross violation of human rights. Any recourse to justice is obstructed by the state and its institutions that include the armed forces and the judiciary. There have been relentless demands to repeal the AFSPA and resistance to militarism in the state, and women have often been at the forefront of this resistance and peace-making efforts between the UGs and the state.

History of Women's Activism in Manipur

As studied by Manipuri scholars like L. Basanti Devi, KSH Bimola Devi and Laishram Jitendrajit Singh, [18] Manipur has a long history of women's social activism that can be traced to the *Nupi Lan* (Women's Agitation) Movements in 1904 and 1939 against colonial social and economic policies,[19] and the anti-liquor and anti-drugs *Nishabandh* (which literally translates as 'Stop Intoxication') movement in the late 1970s. With the rise of alcoholism and drug abuse

[16] Amnesty International, "India: "Operation Bluebird" A Case Study of Torture and Extrajuridicial Executions in Manipur," *Amnesty India* (October 1990), https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/ASA200171990ENGLISH.PDF.

[17] Nandita Haksar, "Manipur killings, 1987: Charges against Assam Rifles disposed of – though evidence has gone missing," *Scroll.in*, 16 July, 2019. https://scroll.in/article/928469/manipur-killings-1987-charges-against-assam-rifles-disposed-of-though-evidence-has-gone-missing.

[18] KSH Bimola Devi, "Women in Social Movements in Manipur," in *Social Movements in North-East India*, ed. Mahendra Narain Karna (New Delhi: Indus Publishing, 1998): 75-81; L. Basanti Devi, "Meira Paibis: Forms of Activism and Representation of Women in Manipur," in *Women, Peace and Security in Northeast India*, ed. Åshild Kolås (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2017); Laishram Jitendrajit Singh, "Understanding Women's Activism in Manipur: The *Meira Paibis* Movement," *International Conference on Women's Empowerment, Laws, Feminism, Gender Discrimination, Gender Space and Women's Leadership: Issues and Challenges in 21st Century* (2019): 58, https://www.krishisanskriti.org/ijbab.php?Id=749

[19] The first *Nupi Lan* movement in 1904 was against an order of forced labour issued for Manipuri men by the colonial administration. The second *Nupi Lan* movement of 1939 was against the creation of an artificial famine due to colonial policy on paddy exports and hoarding that led to excessive shortage of rice in Manipur.

in the state, women took on the responsibility to address these issues as they were affecting their marital lives and families.[20] The *Nishabandh* movement especially saw Manipuri women resisting the rise of gender-based violence such as wife-beating due to an increase in alcoholism and drug addiction which created social disorder in the state.[21] Their campaigning against alcoholism was supported by the PLA and the Manipuri government; in 1991, Manipur was declared as an alcohol-free state. During this movement, Meitei women formed voluntary groups to maintain night vigils and patrol in their neighbourhoods to maintain social order. As violence under militarism and the AFSPA escalated in the 1980s, the women of the *Nishabandh* movement began to conduct their nightly vigils to protect their husbands, sons and daughters from harassment and violence of the state police and the paramilitary forces.[22] As they would carry flaming torches during their vigils, the women came to be known as the *Meira Paibi*. Manipuri women's activism during the *Nishabandh* movement and subsequently, as the *Meira Paibi*, meant that by the time they stripped naked in front of the Assam Rifles HQ in 2004, there had been a history of women's political mobilization in public sphere, albeit within the constraints imposed by militarism and other state machineries.

Although the women did not proclaim themselves distinctly as a women's movement addressing gender issues[23], the *Meira Paibi* deployed gendered rhetoric in their activism, particularly foregrounding their status as *Ima* (mother) [24]and have intervened in marital and family disputes which make women vulnerable to gender-based violence. As L. Basanti Devi notes, the central principle for organizing for the *Meira Paibi* is "*Meira Paibi* movement is for the society"[25] – a motherhood that protects the Manipuri society. There has also been a shift

[20] Singh, "Understanding Women's Activism."
[21] ibid.
[22] ibid.; Devi, "Women in Social Movements in Manipur."
[23] Singh, "Understanding Women's Activism," 58.
[24] See Chapter III.
[25] Devi, "Meira Paibis."

from socio-economic activism to political activism due to the escalation of political conflict and violence in the state. The *Meira Paibi* are present in every locality and neighbourhood in Manipur, and their efforts are directed towards the protection of their families and society, maintaining social order and justice, and taking necessary action against injustice. At a state-level, the organization is loosely structured, and leaders are often women who are literate, and can persuasively articulate the demands of the *Meira Paibi*.[26] In a way, married women of all Meitei households participate in the *Meira Paibi* in their roles as mothers who safeguard the children of the community from militarism and social injustice.

While the activism of the *Meira Paibi* is often localized and targets specific social issues, the history of women's movements in Manipur has allowed for the creation of a space where women can access public spaces and engage in political activism. Their activism has also gone largely unnoticed in national discourse, media, and literature on feminist movements in India.[27] As shall be explored in the analytical chapters of this thesis, this historical context becomes important to understand modes of resistance that both the *Meira Paibi* and Irom Sharmila were able to access while challenging the authority of Indian state and its repressive machinery.

Methodology

As shall be discussed in the literature review,[28] the scholarly literature on the conflict in Northeast India, and the protests of Irom Sharmila and *Meira Paibi* has consistently emphasised the significance of the two protests in breaking the silence regarding violence in Manipur within national discourse and in drawing the attention of national media. There has been reliance on diverse sources for their research – ethnographic research, auto/biographical

[26] Devi, "Women in Social Movements," 80.
[27] See Literature Review.
[28] ibid.

accounts, interviews, letters, and films. Newspaper articles have been scarcely used as primary sources because of the focus on the silence in national media regarding the conflict and violence in Manipur. However, it can be argued that an analysis of the silences and gaps in national media as well as the information it chooses to present is productive for understanding the conditions that the Indian state maintains through the creation of 'exceptional territories' at its borders.

This understanding lies at the core of my analysis of gendered resistance of Irom Sharmila and the *Meira Paibis* against a militaristic state. I have, hence, relied on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of newspaper articles as my primary sources. According to Norman Fairclough, CDA is a method of critical research that relies on a "systematic analysis"[29] of texts (that include visual imagery and body language) to interrogate, assess and understand the inequalities and imbalances produced through the relationship between discourse and social processes. While CDA is multifarious, at its core lies an analysis of the relations of power, ideology, hierarchies, and sociological categories such as gender, race, class, religion, etc. that are present and/or produced in texts.[30] CDA is productive to my research as one of the many functions of CDA is to situate language in relation to the power relations and social conditions that dictate (are also influenced by) how texts are produced, interpreted, received, and impact society.[31]

For this research, I have used relevant news reports, opinion articles and editorials regarding Manipur and the protests that are available in the digital archives of three English-language national dailies – *The Hindu, The Times of India*, and *The Indian Express* – from the

[29] Norman Fairclough, "General Introduction," in *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London & New York: Routledge, 2010): 11-12, PDF.
[30] ibid.
[31] John E. Richardson, *Analysing Newspapers: An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): 26-7.

years 2000 to 2005. I chose this period for my analysis because Irom Sharmila began her hunger strike in November 2000 and the *Meira Paibis*' protest occurred in July 2004. Thus, an analysis of media reports from this period allows us to understand the immediate contexts and conditions that necessitated the women's protests and the nature of agency that they had to negotiate for effective resistance.

My choice of the three newspapers is also strategic. It is difficult to ascertain the circulation rates of each newspaper was in the early 2000s due to lack of accessible data online, according to the 2018 Audit Bureau of Circulations' report on circulation of newspapers in India, *The Times of India*, whose headquarters are in Mumbai, is the highest circulated English-language national daily with a main readership of 2,315,717 people between July-December 2019.[32] Founded in 1838, it is also one of the oldest newspapers in India. The next English-language newspaper in the list is *The Hindu*, founded in 1878 and headquartered in Chennai, with a main readership of 1,317,804 people in the same period. It must be noted here that these newspapers are known to lean pro-government and center-right respectively. Therefore, I chose *The Indian Express*, which was founded in 1932, and was known prominently as an anti-establishment newspaper. Nevertheless, the difference in ideologies of these newspapers has allowed me to analyses the gaps and the slippages in the narratives to understand how narratives regarding Manipur are constructed and maintained. The analysis of these newspapers reveals the information and knowledge that its target audience receive. This is critical because being leading English-language dailies, these are read by the English-educated upper-class sections of Indian populations, who predominantly form civil society organisations and groups that participate not only in public discourse, but also in policymaking.

[32]Audit Bureau of Circulations, "Highest Circulated Daily Newspapers (language-wise)," *Audit Bureau of Circulations*, 2019, http://www.auditbureau.org/files/JD2018%20Highest%20Circulated%20(language%20wise).pdf, accessed 3 March 2021.

These newspapers are privately owned by media conglomerates and industrial families. The standard practice in the Indian print media industry is the generation of revenue through paid news, or advertising. The amount paid decides the size and prominence of the advert, and often also ensures positive coverage of the payer in the newspapers' columns and news features, if so desired.[33] This practice is most prominent in *The Times of India*,[34] but the other newspapers also engage in such practices. Thus, due to this matrix of economic transaction and funding, there is a nexus of political and economic interests and corporatization that make the boundaries between news content, editorials, and advertising indistinct and also heavily skews reportage in the favour of payers or other back-channel negotiations.

Limitations

The major challenges that I faced during my research was the haphazard maintenance of the digital archives of the newspapers in the early 2000s. While *The Indian Express* has maintained a digital archive since 1996, the other newspapers have maintained a digital archive only since 2000 (*The Hindu*) and 2001 (*The Times of India*). It is also uncertain the extent to which *The Hindu* and *The Times of India* have digitally archived their print archives, as on some dates their archives are blank. Nevertheless, I have tried to use these gaps productively and further, analyse the decision to digitally archive certain materials, and not others.

Another limitation in the research is the non-inclusion of regional newspapers. This is another result of the lack of digital archives of newspapers and other media until recently. *The Sangai Express*, which is the largest circulated newspaper in Manipur, started maintaining a digital archive only from 2019. Newspaper reportage from earlier years is not digitally archived. Therefore, I have relied on secondary literature and reports from human rights

[33] Ken Auletta, "Citizens Jain: Why India's newspaper industry is thriving," *The New Yorker*, 8 October, 2012, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/08/citizens-jain.
[34] ibid.

organisations such as HRW and Amnesty International that have documented these events and interviews that journalists and scholars conducted with Irom Sharmila and the *Meira Paibi*.

A note on my positionality

I have also taken care to be sensitive to the complexities of ethnicities and power relations within Northeast India, and my position as a researcher vis-à-vis my research topic. I grew up in Assam, and I belong to the most dominant and privileged socio-ethnolinguistic groups in the region. While Assam was also under AFSPA and military rule during my childhood, the presence of the military was always in the periphery of my childhood. When my relationship with my mother changed in my 20s, she told me stories of members in my immediate and extended family being 'raided' and arrested by military personnel upon mere suspicion at the height of insurgency and militarism in Assam in the 1980s and 1990s. I also heard stories of the women in the family having to hide from military personnel due to fear of sexual violence during these 'raids;' they had to hide in relatives' houses for days. These experiences were not entirely different from those of the Manipuri people, and other communities that continue to live under AFSPA.

Hence, while not entirely an 'outsider' within the broader socio-political context, I am an 'outsider' in the specific context of Manipur and the Meitei women, who are the subjects of my research. While these concerns are primarily highlighted during ethnographic research,[35] this insider/outsider positionality has been a methodological and ethical concern for me throughout this research as my thesis is chiefly interested in understanding the motives of Irom Sharmila and the *Meira Paibi*. My approach to navigating these concerns as a *mayang* (Meitei word for an outsider) has been to be mindful of my positionality to my best ability and not

[35] Aparna Parikh, "Insider-outsider as process: drawing as reflexive feminist methodology during fieldwork," *cultural geographies* Vol.27(3) (2020): 437-452, https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474019887755; Beverley Mullings, "Insider or outsider, both or neither: some dilemmas of interviewing in a cross-cultural setting," *Geoforum* Vol 30 Issue 4 (1999): 337-350, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-7185(99)00025-1.

impose my assumptions regarding the nature of agency that Irom Sharmila and the *Meira Paibi* felt compelled to exercise. Hence, I have relied heavily upon interview quotes in biographies and compilations, as well as well-researched reports by the HRW and Amnesty International to establish the fragmented and contentious 'truths' of the protests and their contexts.

Thesis Overview

As mentioned at the beginning of the introduction, this thesis is invested in understanding the ways in which gendered resistance subjectivities negotiate agency in militarized 'exceptional territories' through the weaponization of the female body and life. It is divided into the introductory chapters – the Introduction, and the Literature Review and Theoretical Framework' – and three core analytical chapters. Each of the core chapters are titled after titles of Irom Sharmila's poems and lyrics; during her long imprisonment, one of her only channels of speech was lyrical poems. Each title highlights the dimensions of violence that Sharmila witnessed her people facing due to militarism and insurgency in Manipur.

Chapter I, titled "'That Cane of the Policeman!': Understanding the Biopolitics of Violence in Manipur," is a bridging chapter that contextualises the biopolitical regime of the Indian state within which Irom Sharmila's hunger strike and the *Meira Paibis*'s naked protest occurred. I analyse the (re)production of Manipur as an 'exceptional territory' at the borders of the sovereign's territories, and the bordering practices that further ensures the (re)production of its inhabitants as racialised and sexualized insurgent subjects. I argue that it is a triadic modality of power constituting of the Indian state as the sovereign, the Indian army as its disciplinary technology, and the Indian national media as its regulatory technology that ensures the maintenance of Manipur as an 'exceptional territory' and its inhabitants as 'bare life.'

Chapter II, titled, "'Unbind Me': The Self-Violence of the Female Hunger Striker," analyses the hunger strike of Irom Sharmila from 2000-2016. I present her protest as a violent and self-

sacrificial mode of resistance that transforms the gendered insurgent subject into a site of 'counterconduct' to the sovereign's violence. I argue that it is not merely modalities of power that produces this gendered insurgent subject, but also relations of violence that operate to silence insurgent subjects. Furthermore, I analyse how Irom Sharmila accesses agency that conforms to but simultaneously challenges patriarchal and nationalist notion of the self-sacrificial woman, and how the threat of martyrdom compels the sovereign to inflict further violence upon her.

Chapter III, titled, "'Mother Will Be Ragged No More': The Spectacle of Violent Motherhood," analyses the naked protest of the *Meira Paibi*. Within a framework of political motherhood, I read the naked protest as a violent spectacle of female nakedness and grotesque emotions. Apart from breaching the silence imposed upon narratives from Manipur by the sovereign, the naked protest also served to challenge the notion of 'grievable life' within nationalist discourse. I argue that similar to Irom Sharmila, the *Imas*' sacrifice of their sought to rewrite patriarchal and nationalist scripts that attach notions of communal honour to the female body.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will provide an overview and analysis of the literature on Irom Sharmila's hunger strike and the *Meira Paibi*'s naked protest and present the theoretical conceptualization of the thesis. The literature review focuses on the work of Indian feminists who have contributed to the foregrounding of the protests within feminist discourse in India. The review highlights the gaps in feminist scholarly works that have predominantly framed these protests as non-violent modes of resistance, wherein the 'frail' female body confronts the patriarchal and militarized state machinery. As I shall argue in subsequent chapters, this framing of the protests negates the women's agency in weaponizing their bodies against the violence in Manipur, which inscribes a violent meaning into their modes of protest. The literature review further highlights a lack of nuanced understanding of the conditions that produced gendered insurgent subjectivities that weaponized their female bodies to create spaces of resistance.

The theoretical framework draws upon theories of biopolitics to offer a framework for understanding how inhabitants of borderlands that have been reduced to 'bare life' by relations of power and violence. Drawing from Nick Vaughan-Williams' work, this framework understands borders as 'exceptional territory' where specific bordering practices by the sovereign is enacted through the racialised and gendered bodies of subjects deemed as 'dangerous' or the 'Other.' The theoretical framework then draws from Banu Bargu's concepts of 'weaponisation of life' and 'counterconduct,' and Naminata Diabate's 'naked agency' to conceptualise possibilities of resistance within sovereign's power wherein subjects reduced to 'bare life' resort to self-sacrificial and self-destructive methods such as naked protests and hunger strikes.

Literature Review

Although there had been some attempt to highlight the gender-based violence under militarism in Northeast India within Indian feminist scholarship in the 1990s,[1] it was not until the late 2000s and early 2010s that Indian feminists began to seriously look at the relationship between the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), militarism, state, gender, and violence in Northeast India. More broadly, feminist scholars,[2] political theorists,[3] and human rights activists[4] focusing on the conflict in Northeast India identified AFSPA at the core of the military regime in the region. They have also identified the provisions of the AFSPA as responsible for the cycle of violence (including sexual violence) and human rights violations that has been ongoing in the region for decades. AFSPA has been viewed as a disciplinary tool used by the colonizing Indian state against a population of people who exist outside the imagery of Indianness and have resisted incorporation within the Indian nation-state.

A prominent feminist publishing house, Zubaan, which is based in New Delhi, has been at the forefront of publishing fictional and academic literature on gender and violence in the region. 'Sexual Violence and Impunity in South Asia' (SVI project) was a massive project undertaken by Zubaan, and supported by the International Development Research Centre, that aimed to study the relationship between sexual violence, silence, and impunity within contexts of militarism and conflict in South Asia.[5] Under this project, several books were published

[1] Manjushri Chaki-Sircar, *Feminism in a Traditional Society: Women of the Manipur Valley* (Delhi: Shakti Books, 1984), PDF.
[2] Deepti Priya Mehrotra, Dolly Kikkon, Namrata Gaikwad, Swati Parashar, Uma Chakravarti, V. Geetha, to name a few.
[3] Duncan McDuie-Ra, Sanjay Roy, Sanjib Barua are few of the political scientists who have researched extensively on the political histories and structures of Northeast India.
[4] Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, especially the latter, has conducted various studies on violence and militarism in Northeast India. HRW's report on the 50-year history of AFSPA is particularly extensive as it discusses the imposition of AFSPA in each state in Northeast India, and the human rights violations that have occurred under it. See: Human Rights Watch, "Getting Away With Murder."
[5] Zubaan Books, "Project Objectives," the SVI project: DOCUMENTING SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND IMPUNITY IN SOUTH ASIA, *Zubaan Books*, https://sviproject.org/about-this-project/project-objectives/

which offered the first, and so far, only large-scale research of the culture of sexual violence and impunity during conflict in Northeast India and in other parts of India and South Asia.

Publishing under this project, V. Geetha (feminist activist and historian) and Uma Chakravarti (feminist historian and filmmaker) highlight the lack of focus on an analysis of gender, state, nationalism and militarism within Indian feminist scholarship and activism during 1970s and 1980s.[6] Chakravarti particularly critiques the lack of political theorizing on the functioning of the Indian state and its military in highly militarized zones, noting that postcolonial political scientists have failed to focus on the colonial mechanisms of the postcolonial Indian state in its border regions. Both Chakravarti and Geetha recognize that violence within the context of militarization is an extension of the endorsement and normalization of gender-based violence and impunity granted to men in the patriarchal societies of India, which is often couched in the language of tradition and culture. Geetha specifically argues that a security rhetoric is deployed justifying sexual violence wherein the state authorizes its own citizens' death to protect the integrity of the nation-state and its borders;[7] resistance is often deemed as seditious or traitorous. Drawing upon Nasser Hussain, Chakravarti identifies these militarized regions where juridico-political structures support the "elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens"[8] as 'states of exception' that allow the suspension and volition of the Indian judiciary system.

Geetha further notes that the state inscribes notions of national security, patriarchal honour, integrity, and sovereignty into women's bodies.[9] Resistant female bodies (female cadres of the Naxalbari movement in Central India, female UG members in Nagaland and

[6] Uma Chakravarti, "Introduction: The Everyday and the Exceptional: Sexual Violence and Impunity in Our Times," in *Fault Lines of History: The India Papers II*, ed. Uma Chakravarti (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2016); V. Geetha, *Undoing Impunity: Speech after Sexual Violence*, (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2016).
[7] ibid., 264.
[8] Chakravarti, "Introduction," 8.
[9] ibid., 118.

Manipur, female civilians in these regions) are perceived as possible political threat to the nation. The Indian state's attempt has been to discipline these bodies through regulation and surveillance of their sexuality; one of the methods used is rape.[10] What Geetha fails to highlight in her analysis of the institutionalization of this culture of sexual violence and impunity in militariazed regions is that a majority of victims are women of communities that are usually excluded from the imagery of Indian(ness) and are perceived as threats to the national integrity. These include *dalit* (term of self-description by those previously known as the "untouchables") women, *adivasi* (tribal) women, Kashmiri Muslim women, and indigenous women of the Northeast. The impunity offered to the perpetrators in most cases of sexual violence and lack of punitive action against them indicates towards the state's complicity in the use of sexual violence as a disciplining and surveillance tool in its 'exceptional territories' – especially the borderlands – where militarism has become normalised. Similarly, Chakravarti fails to develop her discussion of the militarized zones as 'states of exception' any further. She instead changes her focus (like Geetha) to the lack of feminist scholarship in India that address sexual violence and impunity under militarism. This thesis, thus, attempts to develop this biopolitical framework in Chapter I to analyse how structures and processes within India's biopolitical regime that perpetuate a culture of sexual violence and impunity are predicated upon the (re)production of these territories and its populations as the racialised and sexualized dangerous 'Other' – the insurgent – who either cannot be, or resist, integration into the conceptualization of Indian(ness).

Other essays published under this project analysed the violence faced by female cadres of UGs in Northeast India,[11] the multiple ways in which women cope with trauma caused by

[10] ibid., 128.

[11] Roshmi Goswami, "The Price of 'Revolution': Who Determines? Who Pays? Women Combatants and Sympathizers in Northeast India," in *Fault Lines of History: The India Papers II*, ed. Uma Chakravarti (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2016): 35-68; Dolly Kikkon, "Memories of Rape: The Banality of Violence and Impunity

mass violence,[12] the banality of violence in militarized regions,[13] the mechanisms that grant impunity to military personnel,[14] and caste violence.[15] Gazala Peer, focusing on militarism in Jammu and Kashmir, argues that not only does the state obstruct access to justice and redress, but it is also complicit in the use of rape and sexual violence against Kashmiri women to punish the 'defiant' Kashmiri people.[16] Peer further argues that a culture of militarism, the security framework and 'special' laws enable a structure of impunity.

The SVI project was significant in bringing attention to the institutionalization of the widespread culture of sexual violence and impunity across South Asia, including India. As aforementioned, it was also the first large-scale study on sexual violence under militarism with Northeast India as one of its focus regions. The project produced a significant repository of scholarly work and research regarding the state structures that perpetuate human rights violations and obstructs justice and redress in the region. However, apart from a brief discussion by Geetha and Chakravarti, the SVI project did not address the ways in which women actively negotiate agency within the constrained political space produced by militarization of a region. Moreover, both scholars read the *Meira Paibi*s' and Irom Sharmila's protests as non-violent modes of resistance – as women "speaking out"[17] in a "renaming and talking back gesture"[18] against/towards a violently masculinist state. While I similarly argue

in Naga Society," in *Fault Lines of History: The India Papers II*, ed. Uma Chakravarti (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2016): 94-126.

[12] Sanjay Barbora, "Weary of Wars: Memory, Violence and Women in the Making of Contemporary Assam," in *Fault Lines of History: The India Papers II*, ed. Uma Chakravarti (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2016): 69-93; Sahba Husain, "Breaking the Silence: Sexual Violence and Impunity in Jammu and Kashmir," in *Fault Lines of History: The India Papers II*, ed. Uma Chakravarti (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2016): 127-171.

[13] Kikkon, "Memories of Rape."

[14] Gazala Peer, "Collateral Damage or Regrettable Causality? Sexual Violence and Impunity in Jammu and Kashmir," in *Fault Lines of History: The India Papers II*, ed. Uma Chakravarti (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2016): 172-210.

[15] Jayshree P. Mangubhai, "Violence and Impunity in a Patriarchal Caste Culture: Difference Matters," in *Fault Lines of History: The India Papers II*, ed. Uma Chakravarti (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2016): 257-290; Pratiksha Baxi, "Impunity of Law and Custom: Stripping and Parading of Women in India," in *Fault Lines of History: The India Papers II*, ed. Uma Chakravarti (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2016): 291-334.

[16] Peer, "Collateral Damage."

[17] Geetha, *Undoing Impunity*, xxix.

[18] Chakravarti, "Introduction," 2.

that both protests are acts of speech, I argue that these protests were violent in nature as naked protests and hunger strikes constitute forms of self-directed violence. Reading these protests within a framework of violent self-sacrificial resistance provides a better understanding of how gendered insurgent subjectivity enables the weaponization the female body to disrupt the very power system that produce it.

The themes of performative acts of resistance, sacrifice of the female body, the naked protest as a shaming tactic, and reclamation of the female body from the violence of the state are dominant in the existing feminist research on the Sharmila's hunger strike and the *Meira Paibis*' protest across disciplines. Both protests are studied conterminously by Indian feminist scholats due to the similarities in their contexts and goals, and as prominent case studies of women's activism in India. Irom Sharmila's hunger strike has been largely read within the history of civil disobedience and non-violent movements in India. Deepti Priya Mehrotra, a political scientist who wrote a biography of Irom Sharmila and her hunger strike, states that Sharmila was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's tactic of hunger strike as part of civil disobedience movements during India's struggle for independence.[19] She also identifies Sharmila's protest as a critique of the lack of economic development in Manipur,[20] despite the development paradigm that is used by the Indian state to explain its militarism in the region.

Sharmila's hunger strike has also been analysed within frameworks of spirituality, religion, and sacrifice. Mehrotra, drawing from Vaishnavite culture of religious fasting, argues that Sharmila's fasting is an act of suffering, of self-disciplining and purification, that uses non-violence as an active and powerful force of resistance.[21] This reasoning follows Gandhian

[19] Deepti Priya Mehrotra, "Restoring Order in Manipur: The Drama of Contemporary Women's Protests," in *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's Northeast*, ed. Preeti Gill (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2010): 217-230; Deepti Priya Mehrotra, *Burning Bright: Irom Sharmila and the Struggle for Peace in Manipur* (Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2009), Kindle.
[20] ibid.
[21] ibid.

principles on using fasting as a force of resistance. Namrata Gaikwad, a feminist anthropologist, uses the religious/spiritual framing to understand Sharmila's own reasonings for choosing to fast – as "[consecrating] her body to the divine."[22] She further argues that Sharmila's protest is an act of 'haunting,' and by refusing the let her die, the state has elevated her to "the realm of the sacred"[23] because she defies death even as she refuses to eat. There is a certain romanticization of her imprisonment – a focus on the strength of her mind and soul, despite the weakness of her body. Nandita Haksar, human rights lawyer and writer, has criticized this romanticization and near-deification of Sharmila's protest and imprisonment. Haksar argues that putting her on a pedestal trapped her in the image of a lone and frail woman fighting against the state. Haksar further contends that the focus on Sharmila's protest invisibilised the numerous struggles and histories of sufferings of the Manipuri people from the national collective memory.[24]

Feminist scholarship on the naked protest has tended to overwhelmingly focus on its significance and impact. Deepti Misri, Deepti Priya Mehrotra, Pamela Philipose, Paromita Chakravarti, Mina Basnet have argued that the naked protest was a turning point where Manipur and its political situation garnered national as well as international attention after decades of disregard and indifference within national discourse. These scholars, however, do not address how the culture of silence has been maintained within national discourse – a gap that this thesis aims to address by analysing newspaper articles and reportage.[25] The decision of the *Meira Paibi* has also been called an "unprecedented move," [26] "climactic," [27]

[22] Namrata Gaikwad, "Revolting bodies, hysterical state: women protesting the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958)," *Contemporary South Asia* 17:3 (2009): 308, https://doi.org/10.1080/09584930903108986.
[23] ibid.
[24] Nandita Haksar, "Irom Sharmila's Struggle against Military Repression: A Critique, " *ANTYAJAA: Indian Journal of Women and Social Change* 1(2) (2016): 169-181, https://doi.org/10.1177/2455632716681112.
[25] See Methodology.
[26] Paromita Chakravarti, "Reading Women's Protest in Manipur: A Different Voice?" *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* Vol. 5 No. 3 (2010): 49, https://doi.org/10.1080/15423166.2010.305597731461.
[27] Ibid., 53.

"extraordinary"[28] within women's activism in India. Mehrotra states, "It was the first time in recorded history that women collectively used their bodies in this manner."[29] This is by no means true since there is scholarship on the long history of women's naked protest, especially in pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial African societies.[30] It would be more precise to state that it was the first instance of collective deployment of female nakedness as a mode of resistance *in India*. Nevertheless, Mehrotra rightly argues that by using nakedness, the *Meira Paibi* not only asserted the right of women to their bodies, but also to non-violation and safety; the violation of one woman became the symbolic violation of all Manipuri women rather than as symbolic of dishonour to the woman, the family, and the community.[31] The women, by baring their bodies, turned back notions of shame and honour attached to them back onto the state and the military.[32] As Basanti Devi notes, by baring their bodies, the *Meira Paibi* challenged patriarchal notions that perceive rape as inflicting shame and dishonouring the families and communities of victims.[33]

There has also been focus on the use of political motherhood by the *Meira Paibis*, as the women called themselves mothers of Manorama and thus, have situated their protest within patriarchal understandings of women's roles.[34] The use of the rhetoric of motherhood also

[28] Mehrotra, "Restoring Order," 228.
[29] ibid.,224
[30] See: Naminata Diabate, *Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020).
[31] Mehrotra, "Restoring Order."
[32] ibid.; Pamela Philipose, "Introduction," in *The Mothers of Manipur: Twelve Women Who Made History* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2017): xiii-xxv.
Rehman, *The Mothers of Manipur*.
[33] The notion of using rape and sexual abuse as a punitive tool within patriarchal and nationalist frameworks will also be discussed in Chapter I of this thesis. L. Basanti Devi, "Meira Paibis: Forms of Activism and Representation of Women in Manipur," in *Women, Peace and Security in Northeast India*, ed. Åshild Kolås (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2017).
[34] Minu Basnet, "Disrobed and dissenting bodies of the Meira Paibi: Postcolonial counterpublic activism," *Communication and the Public* Vol.4(3) (2019): 239-252, https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047319871022; Deepti Misri, ""Are you a man?": Performing Naked Protest in India," *Signs*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Spring 2011): 603-625, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/657487; Rehman, *The Mothers of Manipur: The Twelve Women Who Made History* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2017); Devi, "Meira Paibis."

allowed the women to claim respectability, which helped to legitimize their protest.[35] Analysis of the naked protest have also noted that their age and status as mothers allowed the *Meira Paibi* to reclaim the female body from the colonizer's commodifying male gaze,'[36] and instead served to 'unman' the "masculinism of state violence"[37] and question the logic of masculinist protection of the state[38] as well as to incite horror[39] as these bodies turned disruptive in a public space; Minu Basnet frames this as 'counterpublic activism.'[40] In these analyses of the naked protest, the *Meira Paibi*'s protest is also interpreted as challenging not just a patriarchal and militaristic state but also the patriarchal society of Manipur. However, as Devi notes, the *Meira Paibi* identify themselves as the mother of all Manipuris, and as protectors of the sons and daughters of Manipur. The aim of their protest was primarily directed at the Indian armed forces and the Indian state.

Within this literature, there have been few attempts to study both protests through a biopolitical framework. As stated above, Uma Chakravarti identifies the military regime in Northeast India and Kashmir as a 'state of exception' but does not analysis the naked protest or the hunger strike through this framework. Gaikwad argues that the creation of a 'state of exception' through the imposition of AFSPA explains the "wild and desperate protest"[41] of the *Meira Paibis*, which is marked by "an *excess*, a madness"[42] that cannot be coherently understood or explained. She reads Sharmila's protest as similarly beyond the grasp of rationality. This language is, however, extremely problematic which is surprisingly considering that Gaikwad identifies the Northeast as a 'quasi-colony' of India. By framing the protests as

[35] Misri, ""Are you a man?"" 620; Chakravarti, "Reading Women's Protest," 54.
[36] Chakravarti, "Reading Women's Protest," 55; Gaikwad, "Revolting Bodies;" Mehrotra, "Restoring Order;" Misri, ""Are you a man?""
[37] Misri, ""Are you a man?"" 621.
[38] ibid.; Iris Marion Young, "The Logic of Masculinist State Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State," *Signs* 29, no.1 (Autumn 2003): 1-25, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/375708.
[39] Gaikwad, "Revolting bodies."
[40] Basnet, "Disrobed and dissenting bodies."
[41] ibid.,306
[42] ibid.,

irrational, excessive or madness, Gaikwad is using precisely the same language that is often used by colonial discourses to refer to tribes and ethnic groups of the Northeast. While Gaikwad's intention may have been to subvert this language, nowhere does she indicate this intention. Paromita Chakravarti has also used 'state of exception' to describe the conditions that is created under AFSPA. She argues that the naked protest was the enactment of "the spectacle of … 'bare life,'"[43] and "[t]he shock value … exposed the extraordinariness of the 'state of exception.'"[44] These engagements with biopolitical theoretical frameworks are, however, brief. Beyond an identification of the creation of 'state of exception' in militarized regions or a brief reference to how the naked protest exposed this 'state of exception' as the rule, the literature does not further this theoretical framework, and nor does it attempt to understand how this 'state of exception' produces distinctly gendered resistance, and how agency is negotiated within it.

As discussed, feminist scholarship on the two protests in Manipur have analysed the multiple ways in which Manipuri women have challenged Indian state's militarism and its juridico-political order that shows disregard for human life and basic human rights. Both the *Meira Paibis* and Irom Sharmila are widely celebrated within the literature as symbolic of the agential power of the female body to non-violently resist and challenge the patriarchal and masculinist state. There is emphasis on the image of the 'frail' bodies of these women resisting the state machinery, who despite repression by the state, asserted their right to justice and to life. Most scholars have, in fact, contributed to the deification of Irom Sharmila. This is most noticeable in Mehrotra's writing of Sharmila's protest and in the use of terms such as "goddess"[45] to describe the role that Sharmila played in the Manipuri imagination. However, this kind of an approach negates the women's own accounts of using their bodies as weapons,

[43] Chakravarti, "Reading Women's Protest," 55.
[44] ibid., 56
[45] Philipose, "Introduction," xxiv.

which inscribes a distinctly violent meaning into their protests as necessitated and produced by the violence that is perpetuated by the armed forces in Manipur. There has also been no consideration of these protests, especially the *Meira Paibis*' naked protest, as modes of political mourning in a public space where such mourning has been denied by the Indian state. Moreover, although there is an emphasis on the silencing of narratives from Manipur (and the Northeast), the literature does not analyse the role that Indian media has played in maintaining the biopolitical regime in the region.

There has also been a lack of considerations as to how the material conditions and surroundings of the women influenced, or even dictated, the ways in which they negotiated agency within a space that has been under 'exceptional laws' that severely restrict political participation. Even if traditional modes of protest such as sit-ins and marches become ineffective, what explains this nature of extreme gendered resistance that chooses to lay bare one's body, and in Irom Sharmila's case, self-destruct oneself? My thesis, therefore, analyses the ways in which sovereign power and its apparatuses dictate life and death at borderlands particularly over women's bodies, which in turn necessitates the nature of distinctly gendered resistance that is formulated within this 'exceptional territory.'

Theoretical Framework

As stated in the introduction, my thesis is interested in understanding how gendered subjects inhabiting 'exceptional territories,' or borderlands, negotiate agency to create spaces of resistance, and the nature of agency and resistance that is necessitated under these conditions. Therefore, central to my thesis are the concepts of borders as 'exceptional territory,' agency, and the notion of a gendered subjectivity that weaponize the female body to access resistance. My thesis draws upon three primary theoretical concepts within theories of biopolitics – Nick Vaughan Williams' conceptualization of borders as 'exceptional territory,' Banu Bargu's

'weaponization of life,' and Naminata Diabate's 'naked agency.' These concepts themselves draw from traditional biopolitical theories of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Achille Mbembe, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and others. Due to the scope of my thesis, however, I will be primarily focusing on the three concepts that are outlined below.

Borders as 'Exceptional Territory'

Nick Vaughan-Williams, a scholar of critical security studies, draws upon theories of biopolitics to reconceptualize geopolitical borders of modern nation-states as biopolitical, which makes it possible to identify the use of specific bordering practices in contemporary politics and complicates the idea of borders as merely geopolitical. Drawing from Carl Schmitt's logic of norm/exception, Vaughan-Williams argues that to define the 'normal' territory of juridical-political order of the nation-state, an 'exceptional territory' is required.[46] Vaughan-Williams' relies on Giorgio Agamben's oeuvre of work on biopolitical understandings of the spatial dimensions of sovereign power in modern politics to develop what he calls 'generalised bio-political border.' He defines 'generalised bio-political borders' as an understanding of borders "not as fixed territorial borders located at the outer-edge of the territorial state but infused through bodies and diffused across society and everyday life."[47] Within this framework, borders and bordering practices are "performative self (re)production of [a] juridico-political order"[48] that is predicated upon the suspension of the law whereby a zone of indistinction is created, thus allowing for the production of 'bare life' in an 'exceptional territory.'[49] This allows for the production of a subjectivity that is the "politically qualified

[46] Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Border Politics: The Limits of Sovereign Power* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009): 73.
[47] Nick Vaughan-Williams, "The generalized bio-political border? Reconceptualising the limits of sovereign power," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2009): 732-33, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40588071.
[48] Vaughan-Willimas, *Border Politics*, 132.
[49] 'Bare life' is conceptualized as lives that are excluded from legal systems and its protection, thus making them vulnerable to violence and death, usually with impunity. See: Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

life"[50] – the 'proper' political subject, or the citizen – against which 'bare life' is defined. It is this understanding of borders as dynamic and self (re)productive that is imperative to my research. It allows for an analysis of the multifarious ways in which sovereign power (re)produces diverse political subjects, whose corporeal existence makes the sovereign's bordering practices apparent. Thus, borders and 'bare life' no longer remain abstract concepts, but involves the experiences, the bodies, the lives, and deaths of people.

Moreover, the centering of bodies in the production of subjectivities allows for a critique of Agamben's homogenizing and universalizing conceptualizing of 'bare life' where all subjects are "(virtually) *homines sacri*"[51] as the 'state of exception' becomes less of an anomaly and more of a permanent characteristic of modern politics. As Vaughan-Williams notes, scholars like Judith Butler and William Connolly have critiqued Agamben's understanding of political subjectivity. Butler has argued that the universalizing theories of Agamben fails to consider the ways in which "power functions differentially"[52] wherein certain sections of the population are more likely to be produced as 'bare life than others. Elsewhere, Vaughan-Williams, along with Victoria M. Basham, has argued that "some bordering practices are … made possible by certain operating logics that are always already both highly gendered and racialised"[53] This is done through the labelling of certain populations as 'dangerous,' heightened surveillance of these bodies, and through certain constructions of racialised femininities and masculinities. Basham and Vaughan-Williams argue here that "such tropes permit, legitimize and further necessitate the sovereign striation of global space in ways that enable the (re)production of some subjects as … 'bare life' against which the 'normal' citizen-

[50] Vaughan-Williams, *Border Politics*, 133.
[51] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 111.
[52] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004): 68
[53] Victoria M. Basham and Nick Vaughan-Williams, "Gender, Race and Border Security Practices: A Profane Reading of 'Muscular Liberalism,'" *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 15 (2013): 510, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2012.00517.x.

subject is perpetually defined."[54] Therefore, this framework of understanding borders as 'exceptional territory,' wherein sovereign tactics of bordering practices are not merely limited to physical spaces or at the line of demarcation between the inside/outside of the sovereign territory, but enacted through gendering and racialised bodies of certain populations is extremely useful in understanding the Indian state's militarism in Manipur as a specific bordering practice. More importantly, it also provides a way to conceptualise how political subjects, by either embracing or denying the status of 'bare life,' can potentially destabilize the biopolitical system from within, and make it inoperative. Thus, the very subjectivity that is at the foundation of the maintenance of sovereign power can also be its downfall.

Resistance performed through the acceptance and/or denial of 'bare life' occurs when the subject rendered as such acknowledges its status but also demands recognition of its subjectivity as nothing but 'bare life.'[55] In such a mode of resistance, the subject lays bare the violent excesses that the sovereign power inflicts through the infliction of violence on the self. To further explore this, I turn to Banu Bargu's 'weaponization of life'[56] and Naminata Diabate's concept of 'naked agency.'[57]

Weaponization of Life

Modes of resistance that embrace the subjectivity of 'bare life' rely on relations of violence,[58] as the production of 'bare life' itself is a violent process. Vaughan-Williams argues that relations of violence operate through the "technologized administration of sovereign biopolitics"[59] This administration of sovereign power has been famously studied by Achille

[54] ibid., 510
[55] Vaughan-Williams, *Border Politics*, 142.
[56] Banu Bargu, *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).
[57] Diabate, *Naked Agency*.
[58] Vaughan-Williams, *Border Politics*, 140.
[59] ibid.

Mbembe, who opened a third dimension to modalities of power – the necropolitical.[60] Mbembe identifies necropolitical spaces such as the slave plantation, colonies and in the modern era, territories under occupation. In these spaces, lives are rendered disposable (bare life) through the logic of maximum destruction, thus creating 'death-worlds' where "populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*."[61] Mbembe's conceptualization of necropolitics allows us to conceptualise death as a form of resistance. According to Mbembe, one encounters the logic of survival and the logic of martyrdom in these 'death-worlds.' The former relies on the destruction of the enemy while one survives, offering satisfaction and security to the survivor.[62] The latter, represented by the figure of the suicide bomber, relies on a mode of resistance that annihilates the self as well as the enemy. The body becomes a weapon whereby "resistance and self-destruction are synonymous."[63]

It is this production of self-destructive resistant subject that weaponizes its life as a way of resisting that is at the center of Banu Bargu's *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons*. The book studies the struggle of political prisoners in Turkey against the introduction of high security prisons by adapting self-destructive practices. Bargu offers a nuanced and complex analysis of the weaponization of life as a mode of resistance by political prisoners, immigrants, refugees, and asylum seeks in detention centers, camps, and prisons. Banu defines weaponization of life as a "corporeal, existential, and total resistance and refusal to participate in one's own dehumanization,"[64] which uses a series of self-destructive tactics that may be non-lethal (self-mutiliation) or lethal (self-immolation, indefinite hunger-strikes, self-killing, forms of suicide attacks) to make a political statement or to achieve certain political goals.

[60] Mbembe defines necropolitics as "contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death;" See: Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15(1): 39, muse.jhu.edu/article/39984.
[61] Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 39.
[62] ibid., 35-36.
[63] ibid., 36.
[64] Bargu, *Starve and Immolate*, 13.

Bargu's focus is on the weaponization of 'life' and not the 'body,' as she contends that self-destructive modes of resistance concern themselves with the worthiness and meaning of life under violence or extreme repression. Nevertheless, there is recognition that the body is the tool through which self-destruction as political resistance is performed – the body becomes an agent in this performative political expression. Within this understanding of self-destructive modes of resistance, there is a conceptualization of a form of political agency where "corporeality and relation to death are occasioned not only as a response to sovereignty but also as directly enabled and conditioned by biopolitics and its valorization of life."[65]. In short, the nature of resistance responds to and is produced by the nature of biopolitical systems that govern death (and life) in these 'exceptional territories.' Bargu further draws from Michel Foucault's notion of resistance as 'counterconduct'[66]

Across Foucault's philosophy on power and contentious politics is the idea that despite the pervasiveness of power, resistance and dissent is inevitable. Resistance is, in fact, a product of power and power, resistance, and liberation are interrelated and mutually interdependent. Further, identifying governmentality as an attempt to regulate the 'conduct of conduct,'[67] i.e. the shaping of actions and norms by invested actors and institutions, Foucault develops the notion of 'counterconduct,' which he defines as "struggle"[68] against processes of 'conduct.' The notion of 'counterconduct' is a way of defying, or resisting, a particular forms and processes of governmentality. Therefore, self-sacrifice through the weaponisation of life becomes a mode of 'counterconduct' as the resistant subjects willfully refuse to obey forms of governmentality at the cost of their lives (and death).[69]

[65] ibid., 343.
[66] Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Vol.1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, Pantheon Books, 1978): 95, PDF.
[67] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007): 87-110. PDF.
[68] ibid., 201.
[69] Bargu, *Starve and Immolate*, 69.

Banu's framework becomes relevant to Chapter II because contrary to the existing literature that has celebrated Sharmila's hunger-strike as a non-violent sacrificial resistance, 'weaponization of life' makes it evident that hunger strikes are, in fact, not non-violent. It is a "defensive form of weaponization of life"[70] that inflicts violence on the self. While Bargu does not explore the gendered dimensions of 'weaponization of life.' this framework nevertheless allows for an analysis as to how gendered subjects are transformed to sites of insurgency,[71] and the ways in which women's agency is negotiated within asymmetric power systems that govern life and death in Manipur. To further explore the gendered dimensions of the sacrificial resistant subject, I look at Diabate's conceptualization of naked agency.

Naked Agency

The concept of gendered subjectivity and agency has been an important theoretical consideration in feminist discourses. One of the central works of feminist discourses has been to analyse the ways in which gendered subjects (as individuals and collectives) access their capacity to *act* within specific material conditions to counter and challenge dominant discourses, even as they remain subjected to them.[72] Feminists of colour and from the Global South have demonstrated that agency is not merely a matter of binary categorizations such as active/passive subject/object, presence/absence, as assumed within Western liberal conceptualization of agency.[73] Agency, much like resistance, is multitudinous and fractured - it is not merely gendered, but intersects with class, sexuality, race, religion and other socio-

[70] ibid, 15.
[71] ibid, 85.
[72] See, for example, Kalpana Wilson, "Reclaiming "Agency", Reasserting Resistance," *IDS Bulletin* 39(6) (2008):83-91, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2008.tb00515.x; Lois McNay, "Agency, Anticipation and Indeterminacy in Feminist Theory," *Feminist Theory* 4(2) (2003): 139-148; Lois McNay, "Subject, Psyche and Agency: The Work of Judith Butler," *Theory, Culture and Society* 16(2) (1999): 175-193, https://doi.org/10.1177/02632769922050467;
[73] See, for example, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, ""Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles," *Signs* Vol. 28, No.2 (Winter 2003): 499-535, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/342914; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Fontera: The New Mestiza* (San Franciso CA: Spinsters/Aunt Lute Press, 1987).

cultural dimensions within specific material conditions. Agency accessed and enacted by the gendered subject, therefore, does not necessarily have to be revolutionary or purely liberatory. Especially in spaces like the 'exceptional territory,' where resistance occurs at the cost of one's life and death, the agency that is enacted by gendered subjects negotiate or strategically adhere to patriarchal scripts to effectively mobilize resistance. It is within this understanding of agency produced as multitudinous specifically by the material conditions that gendered subjects inhabit that Diabate formulates the concept of 'naked agency.'

Diabate conceptualizes 'naked agency' within the context of the history of naked protests by women across Anglophone and Francophone African countries. While located within the African context through readings of various modes of 'genital cursing' in African societies, Diabate states that she offers 'naked agency' as both a concept as well as a reading praxis to understand how the female body bares – how women negotiate agency through the instrumentalization of nakedness and its precarity. She defines 'naked agency' as an "incessant negotiation of power relations between the women and their targets and other stakeholders"[74] through the mobilization of their naked bodies within the women's specific societal and cultural contexts. In this understanding of 'naked agency,' Diabate situates women's naked protest within a biopolitical framework by exploiting mistranslations of Agamben's *la nuda vita*, which she chooses to read not as 'bare life' but as 'naked life;' she argues that 'bare life' suggests "milder degrees of exposure"[75] and hence, does not capture that "confrontational, shame-inducing and death-producing"[76] of disrobing and naked exposure of the female body.

This framework for understanding naked protests is extremely helpful because Diabate offers it as a concept to understand multiplicities and diversities in the contexts where naked

[74] Diabate, *Naked Agency*, 29.
[75] ibid., 7.
[76] Ibid.

protests occur. There is also a critical analysis of women's agency as Diabate disavows a liberal understanding of women's agency, and calls attention to cultural and geographical specificities in understanding agency, as well as to people who have been marginalized or excluded in theorizations of agency. There is also recognition that exercise of agency is often limited under biopolitical regimes where sovereign power is often totalizing and so is violence under it; there is no distinction made between civilian and insurgent, between the public and the private. The framework of 'naked agency' allows us to analyse the extent to which naked protests are effective as a mode of gendered resistance by allowing women to exercise agency through negotiation of social structures such as the privileging of motherhood and social notions of gender and sexuality in their respective societies.

Conclusion

These theoretical frameworks demonstrate that borders, at the limits of the sovereign's control become 'exceptional territories' where specific disciplinary and surveilling technologies are deployed to produce the racialised and sexualized 'bare life.' However, the same modalities of power also produce specific forms of resistant subjectivities that either embrace or defy their status as 'bare life' within 'exceptional territories.' Hence, the nature of agency that gendered subjects negotiate within 'exceptional territory' as resistant subjects are distinctly produced and influenced by the material conditions where the sovereign's violence enables the 'maximum destruction' of an entire population. Self-sacrificial modes of resistance such as 'weaponisation of life' (hunger strike) and 'naked agency,' thus, offer two modes of gendered resistance that necessitate the violent sacrifice of the gendered subject by exposing the female body to its death to (temporarily) destabilize the biopolitical system from within. The self-sacrificial gendered subject, therefore, becomes a site of 'counterconduct' to the sovereign's deathly violence.

I. 'THAT CANE OF THE POLICEMAN!': UNDERSTANDING THE BIOPOLITICS OF VIOLENCE IN MANIPUR

> *India belongs equally to all her citizens and communities, not more to some and less to others. At the same time, all citizens and communities have an equal duty to strengthen our national unity and integrity, and to contribute to the nation's progress. In recent times, there has been a tendency to focus more on one's rights, and less on one's duties. This must change.*[1]
>
> – Former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

To understand how gendered insurgent subjects weaponized the female body as sites of resistance against militarism in Manipur, it is imperative to analyse the broader context that necessitated such extreme measures of gendered resistance. As briefly indicated in the introduction, the counterinsurgency operations of the Indian state at its borderlands are supported by the imposition of laws like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act in 1980 that provide impunity to the sovereign's apparatus – the Indian armed forces – to inflict violence upon a population of its subjects that it has identified as 'insurgent.' Manipur becomes a space akin to Achille Mbembe's 'death-worlds'[2] as a direct result of the bordering practices of the Indian state, which has produced fractured centers of power in the region – the Indian state, the Indian armed forces, the numerous underground groups (UGs) – with each resorting to violent measures to maintain control over the region. This chapter, therefore, discusses the racialised and gendered aspects of biopolitical regime at India's borderlands that nourishes violence and

[1] Atal Behari Vajpayee, "Call of the New Year: Clear Vision, concerted action," *The Hindu*, 3 January, 2001, https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-miscellaneous/tp-others/call-of-the-new-year-clear-vision-concerted-action/article27908703.ece.
[2] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15(1): 40, muse.jhu.edu/article/39984.

the marginalisation of indigenous populations caught in the crossfire of insurgency at the peripheries of the sovereign's territory.

The aim of the chapter is to analyse how sovereign authority is maintained at the borderlands through a matrix of constructed narratives that produces the Manipuri people as an insurgent population against whom the good and peace-loving Indian subject is defined. I argue that this is made possible through a triadic modality of power with the Indian state as the sovereign, the Indian army as its disciplinary technology, and the Indian national media as its regulatory technology. Furthermore, due to the centrality of contesting notions of nationalism that have become integral part of this biopolitical regime, I focus on how the gendered and sexualized subject transforms into sites where these violent power struggles are played out.

Normalising 'Exceptional Territory' and 'Exceptional Law' in Manipur

The excerpt at the beginning of this chapter comes from the then Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee's article that was published across all newspapers to usher in the dawn of the new millennium. A new millennium called for a new beginning, and new vision of nation-building. Vajpayee called for all communities to develop "a strong national mind,"[3] stating that it was necessary to embrace India's diversity – "to strengthen the awareness that we are one people"[4] – to strengthen the continuous process of nation-building. The sentiment expressed within the PM's article is indicative of India's postcolonial nation-building project. While there is celebration of India's diversity and a desire to embrace the multitudes of cultures that inhabit its geopolitical territory, there is also strong emphasis on the need to become one people by forsaking individual rights and duties. Thus, to be a good Indian citizen and by extension, a

[3] ibid.
[4] ibid.

loyal subject, is to be committed to the preservation and protection of India's geopolitical, social, and cultural integrity.

Such a conceptualization of the good citizen/loyal subject automatically creates the bad citizen/unruly or insurgent subject against whom the good citizen is defined. In exchange for security and protection, the good citizen pledges their loyalty and deference to the subject unquestioningly, thus renouncing their natural rights while the sovereign retains all its rights; this is the foundational contract between the sovereign and its subjects.[5] This contract is inherently violent and yet, the loyal subject acquiescence to it as the sovereign *performs* the role of the protector. However, such blinding deference to the sovereign's protection is disrupted at the borders where the sovereign's authority reaches its geopolitical and juridical limits. Borders constitute an indistinct zone of inside/outside and not completely within the grasp of the sovereign's authority. Hence, borders incite anxiety, which intensify in contexts like India where the creation of the borderlands is already contentious and fractured. This anxiety is further heightened by the fact that these borderlands are inhabited by populations that are racially and ethnically different than what constitutes 'Indianness.'

'Exceptional Territory' at the Sovereign's Borders

The obscure circumstances under which the Merger Agreement was signed in 1949 lend a fertile ground for contestations over the legitimacy of the Agreement, and the incorporation of the state of Manipur into Indian territory. As mentioned in the introduction of the thesis, the merger of Manipur was perceived as forceful and against the wishes of the Manipuri people. The emergence of multiple ethno-nationalist movements and secessionist movements in the Northeast, each claiming sovereignty over the region, resulted in the

[5] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1998): 106.

proliferation of sources of sovereign power. The fledgling postcolonial Indian state, already reeling from the aftermath of a bloody Partition at both its Northwestern and Eastern borders and subsequent communal tensions,[6] had to consolidate its rule across all its frontiers to prevent further conflict and violence. Therefore, the Indian state imposed a series of laws in the Northeast which did not suspend democratic institutions *per se*, but severely limit access to the exercise of democratic rights. As secessionist movements like the UNLF, the PLA, the RPF became militant, the Indian state strengthened its sovereign power by strengthening its security apparatus through the imposition of the 'exceptional' AFSPA to counter insurgency. Manipur was transformed into an 'exceptional territory' where the 'rule of law' was suspended due to the special powers and impunity granted to the state armed forces. Under AFSPA, people were essentially stripped off their rights and where death became routinised and normalized.

Militarism, founded upon a security-development paradigm, legitimizes the sovereign's power and control of its territory, as well as allows it to govern the everyday lives of its citizens with minimal resistance[7]. The culture of 'excessive militarism'[8] becomes particularly distinct in border regions, where it is deployed against a people who pose a threat to the national integrity and internal security of the nation-state, as well as to the homogenizing idea of India as one people with a singular goal towards nation-building. Borders are located at the juridico-political limits of sovereign power. They also mark life that exists within the sovereign's territory and life that exists outside of it, with the former signifying where reason and civilization exist.[9] Border regions, therefore, mark a liminal space between the two as a territory at the margins of the sovereign's authority but distinctly within it. Thus, one finds a

[6] See, for example, Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Urvashi Butalia, *Partition: The Long Shadow* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2015); Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
[7] Swati Parashar, "Discursive (in)securities and postcolonial anxiety: Enabling excessive militarism in India," *Security Dialogue* 49, no.1-2 (2018): 125, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010617746527.
[8] ibid.
[9] Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Border Politics: The Limits of Sovereign Power* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009): 54.

form of parliamentary democracy in border regions such as Manipur – a signifier of 'democratic' India. Legislative Assembly elections are held every five years, and the Manipuri citizens vote in the Indian General Elections, sending two representatives to the *Lok Sabha* (Lower House) of the Parliament of India. However, borders are also spaces where national identity and notions of inside/outside become ambiguous, which can serve as a justification for violence in the name of national security. Based on the logic of norm/exception, borders constitute the 'exception' to the norm that is the juridico-political order of the nation-state. Nick Vaughan-Williams writes –

> [The characterization of state borders as exceptional territory] also resonates with images of state borders as sites of exceptional measures, practices and rules…Understood as exceptional territorial sites, borders between states mark a threshold between the inside and the outside, the normal situation and an exceptional situation, where these distinctions become impossible to maintain.[10]

Vaughan-William further argues, based upon Agamben's notions of 'state of exception' and 'inclusive exclusive,' that in the zone of indistinction produced within the 'exceptional territory,' that is the border in this case, "exceptional practice … become routinised."[11] The limits of sovereign power in the 'exceptional territory' or Agamben's 'state of exception,' also constitutes a security practice wherein certain lives are deemed worthy, and others expendable.[12]

Manipur, located at the eastern border of the Indian nation-state, therefore becomes a site of 'exceptional territory' – "excluded from the normal juridical-political territory of the state, but nevertheless an integral part of that juridical-political territory (in fact, the very

[10] ibid., 73-74
[11] ibid., 114
[12] Ibid., 116

condition of its possibility)."[13] In Manipur, this is further complicated by the history of its incorporation into the nation-state which continues to be deeply contested by its people as well as historians.[14] One could argue that violence lies at the very core of the creation of Manipur, which further exposes the violent foundations of the establishment of India as a nation-state. The status of Manipur of as an 'exceptional territory,' whose label of 'Disturbed Area' is continuously extended, justifies the imposition of exceptional laws like the AFSPA, the Disturbed Areas Act, and the heavy presence of the Indian armed forces. The Indian Army and militarism have become the foundational core of administration, judicial framework, and the State Assembly to ensure a strong relationship between this border state and the centre, as well as to regulate and discipline its inhabitants and their bodies, which cannot be easily assimilated into the body politic.

The Racialised and Sexualised Insurgent at the Borders

Borders further allows for the creation of notions of 'us' versus 'them,' and also affirms the existence of a political community that is compelled to identify itself with the sovereign's idea of the nation.[15] The 'them' in this division is produced as 'bare life' – an expendable, disposable form of life – as a foundational function of sovereign power in India's biopolitical regime.[16] Manipur, located at the frontiers, is where 'bare life' is produced. This production of the Manipur as 'exceptional territory' and the Manipuris as 'bare life' is closely tied to the nationalist and colonial discourses regarding Northeast India.

In nationalist discourse of post-independence India, the indigenous people of Northeast emerged as the racial and ethnic 'Other' of what constitutes as Indianness; it was the inability

[13] ibid., 73.
[14] Shubh Mathur, "Life and death in the borderlands: Indian sovereignty and military impunity," *Race and Class* Vol 54(1) (July 2012): 36, https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396812444819.
[15] ibid.
[16] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*

of the postcolonial Indian nation-state to grasp the diversity and differences of the numerous tribes that inhabited the entire region of Northeast.[17] With their distinct cultures, histories and laws that had no affinity with what came to be constituted as 'Indian,' the populations of the Northeastern tribes and indigenous communities resisted assimilation into the modern Indian nation-state. This was intensified by the nature of merger into the nation-state, which was perceived as forcible and a violation of the people's right to self-determination. The UGs, in fact, made use of this very rhetoric of cultural, racial, and ethnic difference to lay claim on sovereign power in the region. Due to the resistance to fully assimilate into the idea of Indianness, the population of these tribes and communities are marked as 'dangerous' by the Indian state. This nationalist and colonial discourse legitimizes the striation of geopolitical space (the 'mainland' and the 'Northeast'/border) to (re)produce the 'Other' as 'bare life.'[18] Juridical framework such as AFSPA further indicates that the 'normal' laws that protect civilians in other parts of India are not accessible by the Manipuri people. Hence, the Manipuri people can be read as "de-subjectified subject[s] banned from conventional juridical-political structures,"[19] who are produced as marginalized and "undifferentiated"[20] populations. No distinction is made between the rebel and the civilian[21] thus, categorizing all people inhabiting this zone as 'insurgents.' The pre-emptive marking of the Manipuri people as insurgents justifies much of the violence that the Indian armed forces commit in Manipur. Violence is not entirely a product of the suspension of law but rather a product of the juridico-political order, or of "aggressive hyperlegality"[22] instituted in this 'exceptional territory.'

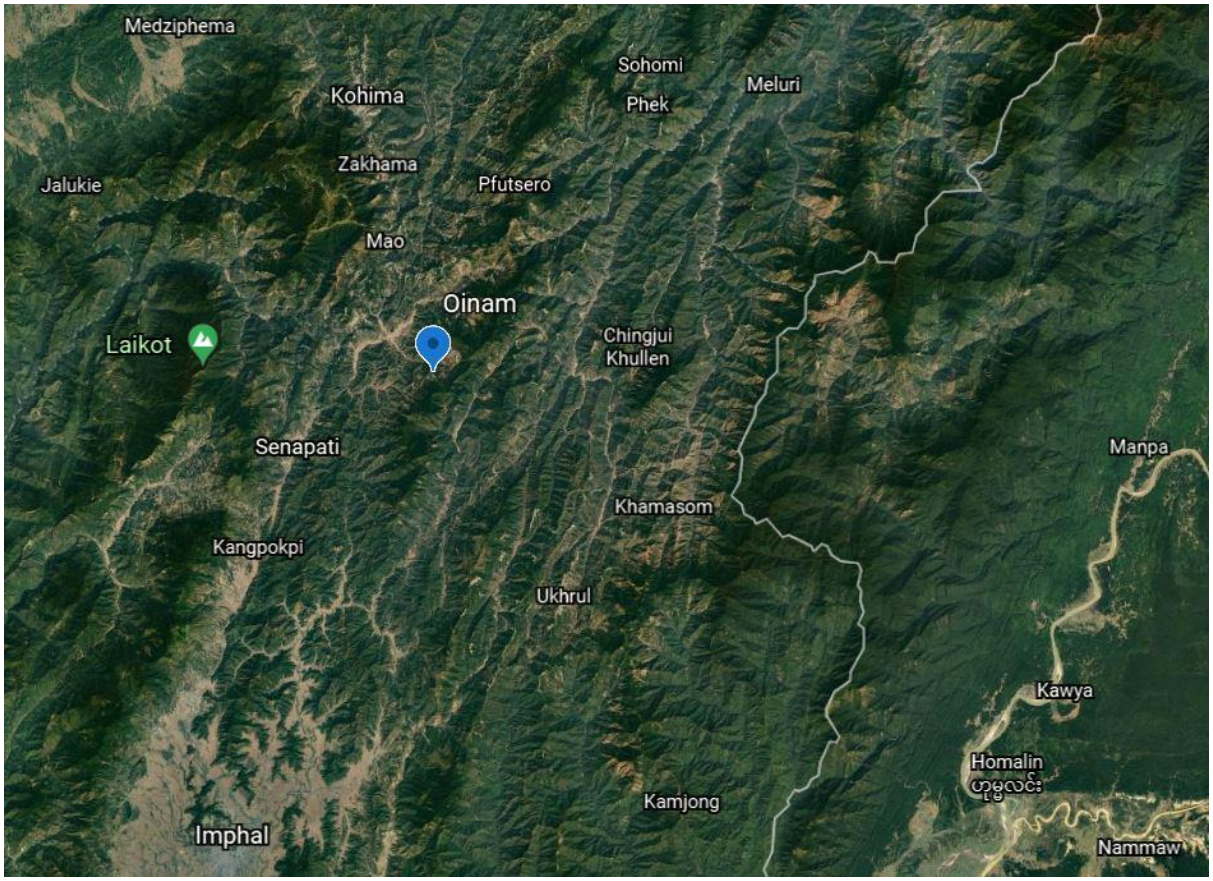
[17] Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and its Northeast* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).
[18] Vaughan-Williams and Basham, "Gender, Race," 2.
[19] ibid., 5.
[20] ibid.
[21] Mbembe, "Necropolitics."
[22] Jinee Lokaneeta, "Sovereignty, Violence and Resistance in North East India: Mapping Political Theory Today," *Theory & Event*, Volume 20, Number 1 (January 2017): 80, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/646844

Entwined as is the (re)production of 'bare life' with nationalist discourse, it is through the indigenous woman's body that power struggles are played out in Manipur. Feminist scholarship on gender, nationalism and the nation-state have dwelt upon the roles of women within nationalist discourse and the ways in which patriarchal nation-states target women sexually to dehumanize and emasculate their enemies.[23] As biological, cultural, and ideological (re)producers of their communities, women become signifiers of ethnic and national differences.[24] The insurgent body, therefore, is disciplined and punished through the bodies of its women. While there are numerous accounts of Indian armed forces torturing, molesting, sexually harassing (while frisking, or while in custody) and sexually abusing women, I wish to draw attention to the human rights violations that occurred during 'Operation Bluebird,' which I mentioned briefly in the introduction to this thesis.

As mentioned, 'Operation Bluebird' was carried out against a village community in Oinam, which is inhabited by Nagas in 1987. It was alleged that on 9 July 1987, a group of members of the NSCN attacked an Assam Rifles post located at the village, killing nine soldiers, and injuring three others.[25] The insurgents also took arms and ammunitions from the camp. From 11 July onwards, the whole area was sealed off and 'combing' operation began across twenty Naga villages to supposedly recover the looted arms and ammunitions. What ensued was murderous retribution against the inhabitants of the villages. In a 93-pages report published in 1990, Amnesty International detailed the human rights violations that occurred during the Operation. These violations ranged from torture and killing to "inserting chilli powder into sensitive parts of the body,"[26] electric shocks, and being buried up to the neck.

[23] Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, "Introduction," in Woman-Nation-State, ed. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval Davis (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 6-11; Jennifer Turpin, "Many Faces: Women Confronting War," in *The Women and War Reader*, ed. Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin (New Yorik: New York University Press, 1998): 3-18.
[24] Anthias and Yuval-Davis, "Introduction," 9-11
[25] Amnesty International, "Operation Bluebird."
[26] ibid., 6

Other 'punishments' included entire villages being detained in the open or in churches for twelve hours a day, for several weeks. These were illegal detainments, and none of the villagers were brought in front of the magistrate within 24 hours, which is required by Indian law.[27]



Map 2. Location of Oinam[28]

Amidst these human rights violations, women were particularly targeted by the armed forces. Amnesty International reported pregnant women being beaten to the extent that they had to have forced abortion later due to the distress caused by the intensity of the violence. Three women reported being raped, and others being sexually harassed. Nandita Haskar, one of the lawyers who helped the villagers file a case against the Assam Rifles stated that military personnel also forced two pregnant women to give birth in front of them.[29] The report

[27] ibid., 6-7.
[28] Mapped on Google Earth by author. All project files can be found at https://bit.ly/3y7MyP3.
[29] Nandita Haksar, "Manipur killings, 1987: Charges against Assam Rifles disposed of – though evidence has gone missing," *Scroll.in*, 16 July, 2019, https://scroll.in/article/928469/manipur-killings-1987-charges-against-assam-rifles-disposed-of-though-evidence-has-gone-missing.

explicitly stated, "Those particularly vulnerable to abuses were women whom the security forces said had relatives in the NSCN."[30] Thus, it was specifically upon women's sexualized bodies that that state chose to carry out its punitive and disciplinary measures.

'Operation Bluebird' indicates towards the violent operation of the sovereign power of the Indian state. The callousness and impunity with which the sovereign maims, kills, tortures and rapes the insurgent body indicates the precarity of its life - the disposability of its life. The sovereign further encloses this population (in the case of 'Operation Bluebird,' quite literally) within highly militarized zones – created through imposition of 'exceptional laws' – to control, punish and expose it to death.[31] Women's lives become specifically precarious and disposable as they are singularly targeted by a patriarchal sovereign that inscribes nationalist scripts of honour, dignity, and reproduction into the female body. Manipur is produced as a 'death-world,'[32] wherein technologies of death proliferate and specifically target women, thus producing gendered subjectivities.

The deployment of the armed forces as disciplining apparatus is not sufficient to understand this production of the Manipuri people as 'bare' or 'disposable' life. I contend that the production of Manipur as an 'exceptional territory,' and the insurgent body is further ensured through popular support of such juridico-political order in India's borderlands. In the next section, I discuss the role those national media narratives play in garnering this support, usually through controlling narratives emerging from the state.

[30] ibid.
[31] Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 39.
[32] ibid., 40.

National Narratives of Violence in Manipur

> *It's not a city under siege. That's what I thought when reached Imphal [sic].*
>
> - Manraj Grewal, on her first impression of Imphal.[33]

> *The night is dark...We come here with fire to light it, and chase away the Army...We don't want them to arrest our boys and molest our girls.*
>
> - Members of the *Meira Paibi*, in dialogue with Manraj Grewal.[34]

While news about Manipur is not entirely absent from Indian national media, journalistic reporting often presents a forked narrative of the state and its people. This forked narrative obscures, and in fact, represses, narratives of the Manipuri people. I discuss and analyse this forked narrative through a article published by Manraj Grewal – a journalist at *The Indian Express* – on her travels to Manipur in 2000. Writing in the style of a travel diary rather than a journalistic piece, Grewal recorded her observations and interactions in Manipur. Her first observation of Imphal was the 'normalcy' of the city. Coming from 'Mainland India,' which is how Northeasterners refer to the rest of India, Grewal's tone was that of surprise towards the normalcy that she encountered. She painstakingly articulated to the readers that Imphal was not besieged with barracks, army posts, or other signs of the presence of the Army in every corner of the city. She referred to the heavy police presence at the National Festival of Dance as "of the non-obtrusive kind."[35] Yet, at around 9pm one night, she encountered some members of the *Meira Paibi* who were keeping a vigil to protect their children from the armed forces. Grewal was clearly discomfited by this –

[33] Manraj Grewal, "Dateline – Imphal," *The Indian Express*, 29 January, 2000, https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/dateline-imphal/.
[34] ibid.
[35] ibid.

> Before coming here, I had read some human rights reports about the atrocities perpetrated by soldiers, but that was in the distant past. I thought our Army was above all this, I mumbled loudly, seeking affirmation from my companion. But no, he was equally against it. He was not the only one. In the next few days, no one I met had a kind word to say about the Army or the Armed Forces Special Powers Act which, they claimed, gave it a license to do as it pleased.[36]

Grewal's article highlights the conflicting narratives that existed (and still exists) in national media regarding Manipur. Grewal arrived at an Imphal with the belief that militancy was on the decline; a city where there is *some* police and armed forces presence but not like in Punjab where "there was a CRPF post every few hundred yards."[37] Grewal also articulated her discomfort with the criticism of the army and the AFSPA, stating that human rights violations may have been perpetrated by the army in the "distant past"[38] and the Army was now above such atrocities. Grewal displayed a certain anxiety to assure her readers that the political climate in Manipur was peaceful. While she wrote that she comes from an army background[39], which might explain some of her discomfort, there is a disjunct between the reality of the political situation in Manipur and her idea of it. In fact, a mere week before on January 21, 2000, *The Indian Express* had published a news report on PM Vajpayee's plans to focus on security and progress in Northeast India. This plan emerged amidst an approaching election season in the state and a call issued by eight UGs to completely boycott Republic Day celebrations on January 26, 2000. The report explained that the process of "diverting Assam Rifles troops from … neighbouring areas to Manipur had already started."[40] Rather than

[36] ibid.
[37] Grewal, "Dateline – Imphal."
[38] ibid.
[39] Grewal's father, grandfather and brother were/are in the armed forces.
[40] Ajay Suri and Samudra Gupta Kashyap, "PM to focus on security, progress in N-E," *The Indian Express*, 21 January, 2000, https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/pm-to-focus-on-security-progress-in-n-e/.

indicating a non-obtrusive presence of state armed forces in Manipur, this report indicated towards their increasing and pervasive presence. Moreover, in her eagerness to defend the army, and by extension the counterinsurgency operations of the Indian state, the stark difference between Grewal and the Manipuri people is highlighted. Grewal represents the 'loyal' subject inhabiting 'mainland' India against whom the unruly subject is constructed.

This forked narrative is further constructed in narratives of violence that emerge from Manipur. National media narratives often portray this violence being perpetrated by cadres of insurgent groups, or unrest being triggered by civilians, against which the security forces are compelled to take stringent action. A series of headlines from July 2001-August 2001 in *The Times of India* (TOI), which is notorious for being pro-state, constructed a careful narrative regarding a series of demonstrations in Manipur against the Central Government's talks with the NSCN regarding the extension of an existing ceasefire. The narrative read as thus: The people of Manipur were protesting the extension of a ceasefire that would have political implications for the ethnic fabric of the state.[41] The central government's response was to discuss the potential of imposing President's Rule in the state, to impose curfew, arrest protestors, and deploy security forces in large numbers.[42] Meanwhile, TOI portrayed the government's militaristic and repressive approach to the protests – indicative of the Indian state's usual approach to any resistance from the Manipuri people – as necessary for the

[41] "Thousands of women protestors lay siege around Imphal," *The Times of India,* 7 July 2001, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/thousands-of-women-protesters-lay-siege-around-imphal/articleshow/1258871704.cms; The Times of India News Service, "People may not allow Manipur Govt to function," *The Times of India*, 9 July, 2001, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/people-may-not-allow-manipur-govt-to-function/articleshow/108258278.cms; "Massive sit-in protests in Manipur," *The Times of India,* 12 August, 2001, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/massive-sit-in-protests-in-manipur/articleshow/112411327.cms.

[42] Nirmalya Banerjee, "Manipur faces political uncertainty," *The Times of India,* 9 July, 2001, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/manipur-faces-political-uncertainty/articleshow/835180158.cms.

maintenance of law and order in the state.[43] None of the reports explained the history of the conflict, the complex ethnic composition of the people, the long history of resistance against the Indian state's approach to the conflict, or interviewed any of the protestors. Instead, there was an emphasis on the angry Manipuri people, laying siege upon the capital, impeding the Indian government's efforts at peace and against whom the armed forces guard the peace of the nation. The narrative was constructed and controlled from a position of power, as evidenced by the absence of any Manipuri voices in any of the reports. As the most widely circulated national daily in the English language, the negligence on part of TOI demonstrates that absence of careful analysis of the situation can be dangerous. Subsequent chapters will portray how even in the immediate aftermath of each case study, only cursory attention was paid by TOI in covering the protests and the violence that triggered them.

In this section, we see two ways in which national narratives about Manipur (and the Northeast, in general) are constructed. Although both narratives come across as contradictory, they both allow the state to (re)produce Manipur as 'exceptional territory' and the Manipuri people as 'bare' or 'disposable' life. This is done through narrativizing Manipur and its people's experiences from a position of power that serves to produce silences. On one hand, Grewal's narrative silences the violence – militancy, and hence, militarism is declining; the accusations of human rights violations against the armed forces are in the past. We encounter Grewal's anxiety to assure her readers of 'normalcy' in Manipur. In fact, in a later article in the same series, she describes Imphal as, "…the safest place to be in if you are a woman travelling alone."[44] Yet, there are the national media narratives that seem to relish in constructing Manipur as a conflict-ridden state, with the blame placed chiefly upon insurgent groups, or

[43] "Curfew, prohibitory orders in Manipur districts," *The Times of India*, 13 August, 2001, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/curfew-prohibitory-orders-in-manipur-districts/articleshow/1961230151.cms.
[44] Manraj Grewal, "Dateline," *The Indian Express*, 17 February, 2000, https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/dateline-4/.

civilians, who attack the agents of the state (MLAs, the armed forces). TOI's narrative justifies the status of Manipur as 'exceptional territory' as necessary for internal security of the nation at the cost of the basic rights its citizens. These various forms of silences accommodate the efforts of the sovereign to exert control upon bodies it deems suspicious or threatening.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the biopolitical regime of the Indian state at its Northeastern borderlands are (re)produced through the maintenance of borders as a 'exceptional territory' whose populations – the racial 'Other' within India who defy assimilation – are reduced to 'bare life' or insurgents. One of the ways that the Indian state ensures its sovereign authority over the region, especially amidst the existence of multiple sources of power (the UGs), has been to militarize the region in the name of national security and development. This has allowed the Indian state to legitimize a juridico-political order in Manipur that enables the sovereign's deadly violence against a certain segment of the nation's population that the state has deemed disposable. Laws such as the AFSPA ensure that legal protection that is otherwise offered to citizens of the nation is not offered to the 'disposable' population. In fact, the juridico-political order allows the Indian armed forces – the Indian state's disciplinary technology – to unleash violence upon this insurgent population to discipline and surveille it, thus creating 'death-worlds' at the borderlands.

I further discuss how nationalist discourse is entwined in this (re)production of 'exceptional territory' and the Manipuri people as 'bare life.' Manipuri women, as (re)producers of their insurgent communities, become the signifiers of the ethnic and racial differences between Manipur and India. Hence, the female insurgent body becomes the site where the Indian state inflicts (sexual) violence to discipline the insurgent community. One of the most prominent cases was 'Operation Bluebird' during 1987 when military personnel

specifically targeted women for their relation to alleged insurgents as punitive and disciplinary measures. I argue that the targeted violence towards Manipuri women by the Indian armed forces indicates that female insurgent subjects' lives are particularly precarious and vulnerable. This is due to the nationalist and patriarchal scripts of honour, dignity and reproduction that are inscribed into their female bodies; hence, the sovereign, through its violence, produces distinctly gendered subjectivities.

Furthermore, I argue that the biopolitical regime in Manipur is also ensured through the control of narratives emerging from the region in national media. A forked narrative of the conflict and violence in the state creates contradiction. On one hand, Manipur is constructed as a peaceful state inhabited by a peaceful population; the state armed forces only exist in the background or in the periphery. On the other hand, Manipur is depicted as space of instability, of angry mobs laying siege upon government buildings, and threating the sovereign's agents. The forked narrative produces silences that can be manipulated by the media and the Indian state to best serve its interest. As discussed in the methodology, as Indian newspapers rely on paid advertising to generate revenue, it becomes easy for state actors and agents to construct the desired narrative(s) in national media. Therefore, I argue that it is a triadic modality of power constituting of the Indian state as the sovereign, the Indian army as its disciplinary technology, and the Indian national media as its regulatory technology that ensures the (re)production of 'exceptional territory' in Manipur and the reduction of its people to 'bare life'/insurgent.

The insurgent subject, however, also opens a second interpretation – the possibility of violent resistance against a violent sovereign. As it is the gendered Manipuri subject that suffers the "maximum destruction" of the violence unleashed by the forces of the sovereign, it is precisely this form of subjectivity that becomes resistant. Due to the destructive violence of the

sovereign that renders life and death banal, the gendered insurgent subject, therefore, becomes a site of 'counterconduct' to this violence by transforming into a self-sacrificial body (as conceptualized in the theoretical framework). The subsequent chapters, through an analysis, of Irom Sharmila's hunger strike and the *Meira Paibi*'s naked protest, demonstrates the diverse ways in which these gendered insurgent subjects negotiate agency through violent sacrifices.

II. ‘UNBIND ME’: THE SELF-VIOLENCE OF THE FEMALE HUNGER STRIKER

> *BARE and basic. That’s the first thought on entering this hospital room. It takes some believing that the ‘‘patient’’ occupying this nondescript room, at the Jawaharlal Nehru government hospital’s security ward, is Manipur’s most high-profile prisoner — a woman who is mentioned in the Guiness Book of World Records for the ‘‘longest protest on a social cause by a single individual anywhere in the world’’. A Nobel Peace Prize 2005 nominee. A woman whose death the Manipur government is too scared to think of.*[1]
>
> - Kartyk Venkatraman, commenting on the Special Ward where Irom Sharmila was imprisoned.

From November 2000 to August 2016, a Manipuri woman was confined in solitary in a hospital room for hunger striking against the imposition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) in Manipur. When Kartyk Venkatraman, then a leading Columnist at *The Indian Express*, visited this “bare and basic”[2] hospital ward, it had already been five years since she had begun her fast. Venkatraman describes the conditions that had become the entirely of Sharmila’s physical environment since 2000 and would continue to be so until 2016 when she decided to break her fast.

When Irom Sharmila began her fast against the indiscriminate killing of ten civilians at a bus stop in Malom, situated ten kilometers from Imphal (see Map 3), she quickly became a

[1] Kartyk Venkatraman, “Fasting and protesting in Imphal,” The Indian Express, 4 September, 2005, https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/fasting-and-protesting-in-imphal/
[2] ibid.

local icon in Manipur. However, her protest languished in obscurity during the initial years of her fast, receiving little to no media attention, national interest, or response from the Central Government. It was only after the *Meira Paibi*s' naked protest in 2004[3] that her protest gained national prominence and demanded the attention of the state and its citizens. Sharmila became a symbol of peace and non-violent resistance.

In this chapter, I depart from the dominant reading of Sharmila's hunger-strike as a non-violent mode of resistance in Indian feminist literature. By drawing upon Banu Bargu's understanding of self-sacrifice as 'counterconduct' that weaponizes human life, I argue that hunger strikes are a mode of self-sacrificial resistance where the gendered insurgent subject enacts agency through self-directed violence in the forms of starvation and sacrifice. This reversal of violence towards the self allows the gendered insurgent subject to negotiate agency to disrupt gendered notions of violence/peace, visibility/invisibility, and speech/silence. Furthermore, the chapter analyses the productive use of patriarchal notions of sacrifice and martyrdom to create space for resistance within an 'exceptional territory,' and how the threat of her martyrdom prevented the Indian state from allowing her to die.

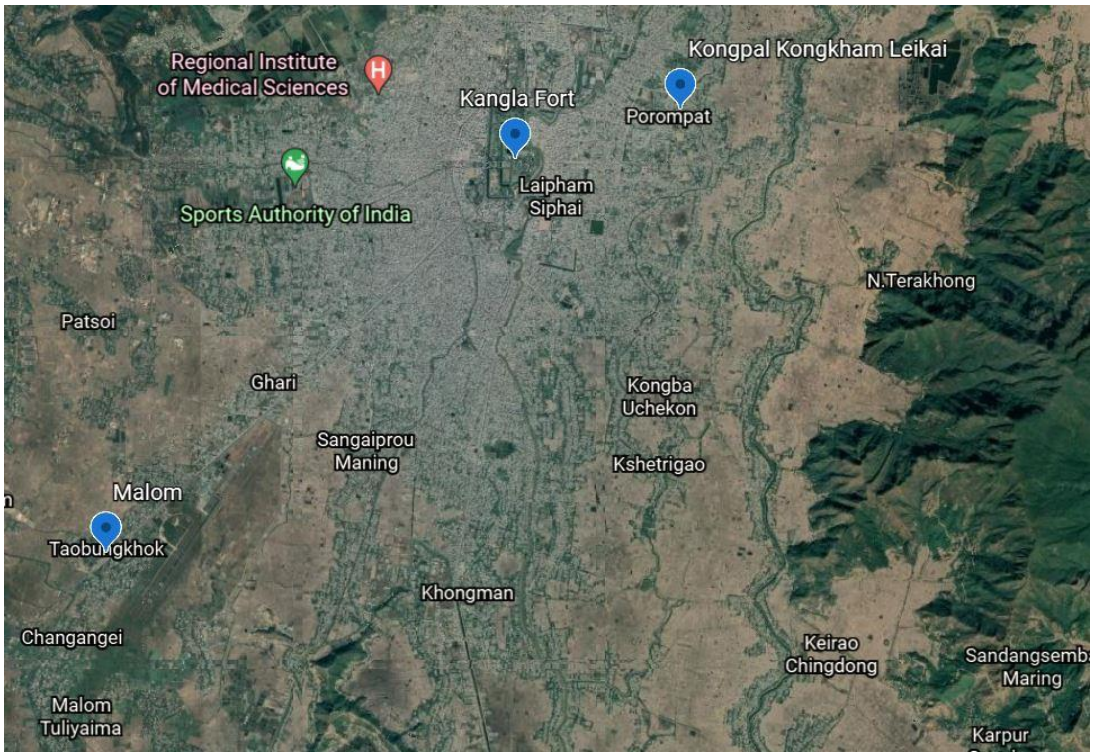
The Trigger: Massacre at Malom

> *I am protesting against the atrocities and excesses committed by the security forces under the Act against the civil population.*[4]
>
> – Statement issued by Irom Sharmila at the beginning of her hunger strike

On 2 November 2000, personnel of the Assam 8 Rifles open fired at a bus stop in Malom in response to a bomb attack on an Assam Rifles envoy by an unknown underground

[3] See Chapter III
[4] Press Trust of India, "Woman launches fast unto death," The Indian Express, 7 November 2000, https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/woman-launches-fast-unto-death/

militant group. Ten civilians at the bus stop were shot dead in the firing; this incident is now known as the Malom Massacre. An indefinite curfew was immediately declared by the Manipur state government to prevent further escalation of violence. Irom Chanu Sharmila, then a 28-year-old volunteer with the Human Rights Alert (a Manipur-based non-governmental organization), decided to visit the victim's families when the curfew was relaxed for a few days. However, she was prevented from meeting the victim's families by military patrol. Sharmila had already been fasting when she went to meet the families as followers of Hinduism, particularly women, fast on Thursdays for good fortune, good health, and removal of obstacles. Sharmila, being a Meitei Hindu, used to follow this fasting ritual every Thursday. So angered she was by the indiscriminate killing at Malom that upon returning home, Sharmila decided to prolong her fast after seeking her mother's permission. She decided to launch an indefinite hunger strike, or "fast unto death,"[5] to demand the repeal of the AFSPA in Manipur.



Map 3. Approximate location of bus stop at Malom; Irom Sharmila's neighbourhood at Kongpal Kongkham Leikai; Kangla Fort at the heart of Imphal.[6]

[5] Press Trust of India, "Woman launches fast unto death."
[6] Mapped on Google Earth by author. All project files can be found at https://bit.ly/3y7MyP3.

News of Sharmila's fast was hardly picked up by any of major national dailies. Amongst my primary sources, only *The Indian Express* published a report on her decision to 'fast-unto-death,' and included a statement from Sharmila.[7] *The Hindu* published several reports on the Malom Massacre and the widespread protests that followed the massacre (strikes, torching of vehicles and buildings),[8] but no mention was made of Sharmila's hunger strike. In fact, the first article that mentions Irom Sharmila was published in 2004, a few months before the killing of Manorama Devi and the naked protest by the *Meira Paibi*s.[9] Reports about Irom Sharmila in *The Hindu* became consistent in 2006 when Sharmila took her protest to New Delhi (to be discussed later in the chapter).

It is important to note here that *The Hindu* is the only major national daily that termed the incident at Malom as a 'massacre,' indicating that the publication sought to express the seriousness and the violent implications of the incident to its readers. Although the incident was not directed solely towards women, *The Hindu*'s initial reports also highlighted that a pregnant woman was killed in the incident, and that four women were beaten by the Assam Rifles personnel. This conveyed that the women bear significant consequences of indiscriminate violence inflicted by the Indian armed forces and get caught in the crossfire between the state armed forces and the UGs. There is no available report in the digital archive of *The Times of India*, which indicates that the newspaper has chosen not to archive a significant event in the contemporary history of Manipur (and Northeast India), although over two decades have passed since the incident and Irom Sharmila has, since then, become an icon

[7] ibid.
[8] Correspondent, "Govt. orders inquiry into massacre," The Hindu, 6 November 2000, https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-miscellaneous/tp-others/govt-orders-inquiry-into-massacre/article28052767.ece; "Vehicles, exam centre torched," The Hindu, 7 November 2000, https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-miscellaneous/tp-others/vehicles-exam-centre-torched/article28052780.ece; "Bandh disrupts life in Manipur," The Hindu, 8 November 2000, https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-miscellaneous/tp-others/bandh-disrupts-life-in-manipur/article28053091.ece.
[9] "Human rights violations take centre stage in Manipur," The Hindu, 10 April, 2004, https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-tamilnadu/human-rights-violations-take-centre-stage-in-manipur/article27595132.ece.

of Manipur. Considering the *The Times of India* has the highest readership amongst the English national dailies and is funded by state actors, the absence of narratives from Manipur indicates that this deliberate silencing of the Malom Massacre and Sharmila's hunger strike was in the state's interest to maintain a positive narrative about the state armed forces' operations at the borderlands. It was necessary that the armed forces, as the sovereign's disciplinary technology, had to be portrayed as the protectors of its citizens; the killing of ten innocent civilians could not disrupt that narrative.

Furthermore, no articles were published in either *The Indian Express* or *The Hindu* about the arrest of Irom Sharmila. On 5 November 2000, Sharmila was arrested for 'attempt to commit suicide' under Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) that states, "Whoever attempts to commit suicide and does any act towards the commission of such offence, shall be punished with simple imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year…"[10] It is evident that the government hoped to intimidate Sharmila into giving up her resolution to fast-unto-death. However, she refused to yield and as her condition worsened after a week of fasting, she was taken to Jawaharlal Nehru Hospital in Imphal to be given fluids intravenously, as the state could not afford to let her die. When Sharmila refused to be fed, she was force-fed through an intravenous tube attached to her nose. She was kept in solitary confinement in her hospital ward and force-fed for one year as Section 309 allows imprisonment only upto a year. However, she was re-arrested a few days after she was released from imprisonment. Thus, Irom Sharmila went through a cycle of arrest on charges of 'attempt to commit suicide,' being imprisoned in a hospital ward and force-fed intravenously, being released after a year only to be re-arrested after a few days. While hunger strikes have been commonly used as a mode of resistance in India, Irom Sharmila's was the only hunger strike that lasted for sixteen years as the Indian

[10]Ministry of Law and Justice, "Abetment to suicide," Indian Penal Code (Amendment) Act 1995, Section 309, https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/A1860-45.pdf.

state continued to refuse to give in to her demand to withdraw the AFSPA. The state was committed to maintain an 'exceptional territory,' couched in the language of national security, at the cost of the life of Irom Sharmila, and yet she was not allowed to die either.

Why hunger strike?

Irom Sharmila's decision to fast as a mode of resistance was inspired by the long history of hunger strikes in India. Hunger strikes are a core component of the Gandhian philosophy of *satyagraha* (truth-force, or soul-force). In recent history, hunger strikes had been used effectively by leaders of the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (Save Narmada Movement) – a social movement led by adivasis, farmers and environmentalists against constructions of dams over the Narmada River that flows through Western and Central India. In addition to this history, it is also crucial to contextualize the Malom Massacre and Sharmila's decision to go on a hunger strike within the political climate of Manipur at the time, as well as Sharmila's personal experiences.

In 2000, there had been an escalation of conflict between armed rebel groups in Manipur and the Indian armed forces due to ongoing negotiations over the extension of a ceasefire between the Central Government and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-IM (NSCN (IM)) – an underground armed rebel group.[11] The NSCN (IM), in their demand for independence from India and the establishment of a Greater Nagaland, also sought to incorporate Naga-dominated areas of Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. This was opposed by the Manipuri Meiteis, who feared losing territory – the hills – to this vision of a Greater Nagaland. Therefore, there were several armed encounters between the Indian armed forces and the rebel groups, where civilians were caught in the crossfire.[12] In a notable incident,

[11] The NSCN (IM) had entered a ceasefire with the Government of India in 1997 that had ended in July 2000.
[12] Correspondent, "Six shot dead in Imphal," *The Hindu*, 19 May 2000, https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-miscellaneous/tp-others/six-shot-dead-in-imphal/article28016684.ece; "Gunmen kill nine in Manipur," *The Hindu*, 27 June 2000, https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-miscellaneous/tp-others/gunmen-kill-nine-

two students were killed by personnel of Assam Rifles on 2 August 2000 August. A press release by the Assam Rifles stated that their personnel open fired upon two 'insurgents' in a retaliatory action and weapons and ammunitions had been recovered; it was later established that the two had been students, not insurgents.[13] Moreover, the Manipur Government, in agreement with the Central Government, had extended the status of 'Disturbed Area' under the AFSPA from 1 June 2000 until 2002.[14] The Malom Massacre, therefore, was direct result of this heightened tension between the state armed forces and the UGs.

On a personal front, Sharmila had joined the HRA in September 2000 as an intern where she was able to participate in workshops on human rights in India and internationally. As a member of a committee formed by the HRA to study the impact of AFSPA in Manipur, Sharmila met and interviewed lawyers, human rights activists, NGO workers, media persons, scholars, and victims of human rights violations in Manipur. This experience, coupled with her previous activism and participation in protests against the AFSPA, convinced her that despite marches, sit-ins and other modes of traditional protests, violence continued to be rampant in Manipur.[15] At the beginning of her hunger strike, she stated that her work with the commission, "opened [her] eyes to the injustice meted out by the security forces in the state."[16] Much like the *Meira Paibi* and other Manipuri people, she focused on AFSPA as the cause of this cycle of violence. Sharmila's decision to fast unto death, therefore, was not spontaneous. It was born out of the witnessing of violence inflicted upon the Manipuri people due to imposition of

in-manipur/article28029450.ece; "Businessman shot dead in Manipur," *The Hindu*, 14 October 2000, https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-miscellaneous/tp-others/businessman-shot-dead-in-manipur/article28048710.ece.

[13] Correspondent, "Imphal tense after gunning down of two students," *The Hindu*, 5 August 2000, https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-miscellaneous/tp-others/imphal-tense-after-gunning-down-of-two-students/article28036208.ece.

[14] "Manipur is disturbed area," *The Hindu*, 10 June 2000, https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-miscellaneous/tp-others/manipur-is-disturbed-area/article28020197.ece.

[15] Deepti Priya Mehrotra, *Burning Bright: Irom Sharmila and the Struggle for Peace in Manipur* (Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2009), Kindle.

[16] Press Trust of India, "Woman launches fast unto death."

AFSPA and militarism in Manipur by a sovereign whose bordering practices causes the indiscriminate death of the Manipuri people. It was within this context that Sharmila was produced as a violent self-sacrificing resistant subject. She embraced herself as the 'insurgent' subject that the armed forces had deemed the ten civilians to be, and thus, weaponized her life to become a site of 'counterconduct' to the state's violence by refusing to be governed under deathly violence of the AFSPA that renders Manipuri lives as bare lives.

Becoming the 'Iron Lady of Manipur'

> *...this hunger strike is the only way I can achieve my goal of getting AFSPA withdrawn from Manipur. I'm a revolutionary, a social reformer but only through peaceful means.*[17]
>
> – Irom Sharmila, in interview with Kartyk Venkatraman

Irom Sharmila's hunger strike did not have overtly gendered origins. She always stated that her fasting was a protest against the AFSPA on behalf of all Manipuri people, and did not claim to be a feminist or even a women's activist. Furthermore, the hunger striking body does not immediately possess the gendered connotations found in bodies of female naked protesters, as discussed in Chapter III. Nevertheless, Irom Sharmila has become a feminist icon of resistance against militarism in India. As feminist scholarship on female Palestinian hunger strikers in Israeli prisons and camps and female Irish hunger strikers in the 1980s has demonstrated, the female body as a hunger striker has specific gendered implications in anti-colonial, anti-apartheid, anti-military, and anti-occupation resistance movements.[18] The female

[17] Venkatraman, "Fasting and Protesting."
[18] See, for example, Amanda Machin, "Hunger Power: The embodied protest of the political hunger strike," *Interface: a journal for and about social movements* Volume 8 (1) (May 2016): 157-180, http://www.interfacejournal.net/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Issue-8-1-Machin.pdf; Louise Ryan, "Traditions and Double Moral Standards: the Irish suffragists' critique of nationalism," Women's History Review 4(4) (1995): 487-503, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09612029500200095.

hunger-striking body becomes particularly poignant in its resistance against a state that is both colonial and patriarchal.

Militant Men/Peaceful Women – Gendered Notions of Violence

An amalgamation of gendered and racialised connotations can be traced to the hunger striking body of Irom Sharmila, located in the specific context of Manipur. Sharmila has been variously called 'The Iron Lady of Manipur,' 'youth icon,' 'The Defiant Lady,' and 'an Unlikely Outlaw' in national and international media, as well as in the scholarship about her hunger strike.[19] However there is little to no identification of the fact that at the core of the protest is a young Manipuri woman making a political statement through the weaponisation of her life.

Hunger striking is essentially a mode of resistance that inflicts prolonged self-directed violence upon the body of the hunger-striker. The hunger-striking body slowly deteriorates, and bodily functions shut down due to the deprivation of water and nutrition. It is a "slow and invisible violence that transforms the body, diminishes its existence by depriving it of nourishment, and decomposes it."[20] Irom Sharmila refused to drink water or to eat food, agreeing to clean her teeth only by using cotton soaked in water. The body of the hunger striker, hence, violates and is also violated simultaneously. When viewed through this framework, Sharmila's body tends to destabilize gendered constructions of violence and peace. In doing so, it further disrupts the notion that violence and political action can only be coded as (militarized) masculine, while peace and non-violence only as feminine.[21] There is an anxiety

[19] Mehrotra, "Burning Bright."
[20] Banu Bargu, "The Silent Exception: Hunger Striking and Lip-Sewing," *Law, Culture and the Humanities,* (May 2017): 11, https://doi.org/10.1177/1743872117709684.11.
[21] Miranda Alison, "Women as Agents of Political Violence: Gendering Security," Security Dialogue 35, no.4 (2004): 447-463; Swati Parashar, "Women in Militant Movements: (Un)Comfortable Silence and Discursive Strategies," in Making Gender, Making War: Violence, Military and Peacekeeping Strategies, ed. Annica Kronsell and Erika Svedberg, (New York: Routledge, 2011): 175; Simona Sharoni, "Gender and Resistance to Political Violence in Palestine and Israel," in *Handbook on Gender and War*, ed. Simona Sharoni, Julia Welland, Linda Steiner, and Jennifer Pederson (Northampton: Edward Elgar Pub., 2016): 381.

to frame women in conflict areas as passive victims. Even when they engage in resistance and political action, there is a tendency to view these actions as non-violent. However, through the weaponisation of her life and the sacrifice that this action demands, Irom Sharmila becomes a 'human weapon,' thus equating her life and body to the guns and ammunitions that the state armed forces use to inflict violence upon her people.

Moreover, as Bargu notes, the hunger striker's body has already been weaponized by the state against the body's bearer as agents of the state tortures it to make the insurgent subject an obedient and loyal subject.[22] Sharmila, by weaponizing herself, reverses the directionality of the violence that the Indian state inflicts upon the Manipuri people and makes her body both the subject and object of violence. Hunger striking becomes a mode of resistance whereby the female body, which is frequently violated by the colonizing forces of the Indian state, wrests back control over violence in a non-violent manner (i.e., without the use of arms and ammunitions). It declares to the violent state that it no longer has command over the violence it deploys to depoliticize and render as 'bare life' subjects of an entire community. Irom Sharmila's hunger strike further demonstrates that resistant subjectivity is produced through relations of power that operate upon the female body and violate it.

Breaching silence and invisibility

The hunger strike is, furthermore, a public performance – a public spectacle – and much like the *Meira Paibi*s' naked protest, it aims to rupture the wall of silence that the state attempts to impose to repress any resistance to its absolute power. Amanda Machin discusses how British suffragette's hunger strikes in early 20th century allowed women to remain in public gaze, while also exposing the violence that the state inflicts upon women's bodies as they

[22] Banu Bargu, *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014): 281, PDF.

starved and were subsequently, force-fed.[23] However, located at the borderlands – at the peripheries of the sovereign's territory – Sharmila's hunger strike could not become a public spectacle. Her location, in fact, allowed the Indian state to silence her resistance; this was made easy due to existing biopolitical regime (discussed in Chapter I). Isolation through solitary confinement was one of the tactics used most effectively by the state to silence Sharmila. Moreover, as discussed earlier in the chapter, Sharmila's fast hardly made it to national news except for a few intermittent reports, primarily in *The Indian Express* and *The Hindu*. News of her hunger strike was picked up by national media as a concurrent protest against the AFSPA along with the *Meira Paibi*s' naked protest in 2004. Therefore, as demonstrated in Chapter I, the Indian state, the armed forces, the media, and the juridico-political system worked in tandem to maintain the narrative that the Indian armed forces are present at the borderlands to ensure national security and protect citizens from insurgent groups that threaten the territorial integrity of the Indian nation-state. The lack of singular attention in the national media towards her hunger strike contributed to the Indian state's continued disregard of her demand to withdraw AFSPA. Sharmila, therefore, decided to temporarily shift her protest to New Delhi – the center of the sovereign's territory.

In October 2006, when Sharmila was released from custody, she decided to go to Delhi because she knew that if she continued to fast in Manipur, the police would re-arrest her withing days and keep her in solitary confinement for another year.[24] As only the Gauhati High Court had jurisdiction over her case, by shifting to New Delhi (which was under the jurisdiction of the Delhi High Court), she could escape the cycle of imprisonment, isolation, force-feeding and release. Her protest began at Rajghat (a memorial dedicated to Mahatama Gandhi) and then moved to Jantar Mantar – a protest site at the very center of Delhi and only a 20 minutes' walk

[23] Machin, "Hunger Power."
[24] Mehrotra, "Burning Bright."

away from the Parliament. As information about her arrival spread through activist, scholar and journalist circles, human rights activists, women's organisations, students, and other citizens joined her protest.[25] As the protest grew bigger, it demanded attention from the national media.

Taking her protest to the heart of the nation proved to be fruitful in breaching the wall of silence. *The Times of India* reported on Irom Sharmila's protest at Jantar Mantar, which stated that she arrived in Delhi after being released from custody and that upon arrival, she "offered floral tributes at Rajghat before resuming her fast at Jantar Mantar."[26] Ironically, on the same day, the newspaper also published multiple reports on the expansion of the Indian Army. One article focused on the procurement of T-90S tanks from Russia for armoured regiments.[27] Another article reported extensively on a statement by the Chief of the Army Staff regarding plans for revamping surveillance and intelligence-gathering systems of the state armed forces.[28] Meanwhile, over the next few weeks, *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express* published multiple articles and reports detailing Sharmila's fast. *The Hindu* reported on Sharmila's arrest by the Delhi Police and her transfer to the All-India Institute for Medical Sciences (AIIMS) to receive urgent medical support as her health deteriorated.[29] Siddharth Vadarajan, a renowned journalist, editor and academic, drew focus to the Justice Jeevan Reddy Committee, and questioned why the recommendations of the Committee had not been

[25] ibid.
[26] It must be noted here that Sharmila never broke her fast; she continued fasting even as she traveled to New Delhi and visited Rajghat before taking her protest to Jantar Mantar; TNN, "Six-yr-long protest fast shifts to Delhi," The Times of India, 5 October, 2006, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com//india/Six-yr-long-protest-fast-shifts-to-Delhi/articleshow/2091477.cms.
[27] Rajat Pandit, "1,000 more T-90 tanks to give Army 'teeth,' The Times of India, 5 October, 2006, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com//india/1000-more-T-90-tanks-to-give-Army-teeth/articleshow/2091386.cms.
[28] PTI, "'Army all set to become a balanced force,'" *The Times of India*, 5 October 2006, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com//world/rest-of-world/Army-all-set-to-become-a-balanced-force/articleshow/2093242.cms.
[29] She had not eaten and drunk anything since she flew to Delhi from Imphal; Special Correspondent, "Delhi police arrest Irom Sharmila," *The Hindu*, 7 October, 2006, https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/delhi-police-arrest-irom-sharmila/article3057868.ece.

implemented yet.[30] He astutely noted that the leak of a misleading summary to the public only indicates that the Central Government, the Ministry of Defence and the Army hoped to only appease the public, or to discredit the report of the Committee itself so that "no one would bother agitating for its release;"[31] this was, however, disrupted by the presence of Sharmila in New Delhi. Rakesh Shukla, then an advocate at the Supreme Court, similarly drew attention to the recommendations of the Committee and noted that the independent powers given to the armed forces under AFSPA is a "large scale violation of human rights."[32]

Widespread descriptions of Irom Sharmila's condition and the history of her struggle achieved Sharmila's goal in shifting her protest to New Delhi – drawing public attention to her protest and the political situation in Manipur. *The Hindu*, in its 'Corrections and clarifications' section on 12 October 2006 noted that its readers had enquired whether the report of Sharmila fasting for six years had, in fact, been a typological error; it had to draw its readers' attention to Varadarajan's article "Does anybody care about Manipur" where the details of Sharmila's fast was documented. That the newspaper had to print a clarification regarding Sharmila's fast indicates towards two things: one, rising interest in and speculation about her protest, and second, the lack of knowledge regarding her fast within public discourse. It is, of course, no wonder that such widespread coverage caught the attention of a voyeuristic public that craves public spectacle.[33] Accustomed to the idea of food and water as 'natural' and a 'necessity,' it is difficult to fathom that a living person could have gone six years without eating or drinking anything, defying the very basic requirement of life.

[30] Siddharth Varadarajan, "Official panel wants stringent safeguards on Army use," *The Hindu*, 8 October, 2006, https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/official-panel-wants-stringent-safeguards-on-army-use/article3058264.ece; Siddhartha Varadarajan, "Does anybody care about Manipur," *The Hindu*, 10 October, 2006,https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/does-anybody-care-about-manipur/article3058900.ece.
[31]ibid.
[32] Rakesh Shukla, "Scrutinising these 'special powers,'" *The Indian Express*, 19 October, 2006, https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/scrutinising-these-special-powers/.
[33] Machin, "Hunger Power."

Figure 1. Irom Sharmila in her special ward at the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences in Imphal. Source: Deepak Shijagurumayum.[34]

The image of Sharmila with the tube attached to her nose and her disheveled hair (see Figure 1) would further pique the curiosity of the public, while at the same time, inducing discomfort. By performing as a deviant and insurgent subject, which is usually relegated to the peripheries, in the very heart of the sovereign's territory, she creates a spectacle of herself; she cannot be ignored. Her body becomes the object of the multiple gazes, particularly the media that attempts to understand her psyche, and the meaning of her hunger-striking body. The public spectacle of Sharmila's hunger strike is further heightened by the fact that it is an indigenous woman's body at the center of these gazes; it is an indigenous woman that is

[34] Deepak Shijagurumayum, "Irom Sharmila: 15 years on since she began her fast against AFSPA," *The Indian Express*, 23 November, 2014, https://indianexpress.com/photos/picture-gallery-others/irom-sharmila-15-years-on-since-her-fast-against-afspa/.

speaking out through her performance of starvation – this is a body that is hardly ever present in political discourse, let alone exist at the center of the sovereign's domain.[35]

Therefore, it is only by moving from the peripheries of the sovereign's power to the very center of it that Sharmila managed to rupture the wall of silence that the sovereign had imposed. By moving to New Delhi, and continuing her hunger strike a few blocks away from the Parliament and the President's residence, Irom Sharmila demanded the attention of not just the Central Government but also that of the citizens of India; the invisibilised body became visible. This is, of course, not to say that resistance is not possible in the 'exceptional territory' of border zones. If anything, Irom Sharmila proves that the violence in this space produces resistance subjectivities that are tenacious in their precarity.

However, even as Irom Sharmila's hunger striking body disrupts gendered boundaries between violence/peace, speech/silence, visibility/invisibility, it must also negotiate through patriarchal notions of the woman as self-sacrificial.

Becoming a 'Goddess' – Martyrdom, Spirituality, and Religiosity

> *This struggle I'm undertaking is God's will. I had taken on this responsibility of the struggle, so I welcome it with open arms.*[36]
>
> – Irom Sharmila, in interview with Pankaj Butalia.

Elements of spirituality and religiosity had a strong presence in Sharmila's protest. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Sharmila had already been fasting for religious purposes when she began her hunger strike. Throughout her hunger strike, she held steadfast to that religiosity and further, the principles of *satyagraha* and Gandhian non-violence resistance. Her portrayal

[35] Jinee Lokaneeta, "Sovereignty, Violence and Resistance in North East India: Mapping Political Theory Today," *Theory & Event* Volume 20, Number 1 (January 2017): 76-86, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/646844.
[36] Irom Sharmila, "Interview with Sharmila," interview by Pankaj Butalia, Fragrance of Peace (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2010). Kindle.

as a "living Gandhian" and her own position on *satyagraha* exalted her to the pedestal of a living goddess who had decided to forego the basic human needs of food and water. Deepti Priya Mehrotra and Namrata Gaikwad, as discussed in the literature review of the thesis, have celebrated Sharmila's hunger strike as an act of self-disciplining and suffering that productively uses non-violence as a mode of resistance.[37] However, such readings have failed to analyse how Sharmila's protest simultaneously conformed to and challenged nationalist and patriarchal discourses of the self-sacrificial woman.

Self-sacrifice and the influence of Gandhian philosophy

The appeal of *satyagraha* and non-violent resistance lies in Gandhi's statements that it is accessible by anyone regardless of their physical strength or capabilities – "In non-violence, the masses have a weapon which enables a child, a woman, or even a decrepit old man to resist the mightiest government successfully."[38] Within Gandhian philosophy, non-violent resistance is formulated as a form of self-disciplining resistance that exercises self-denial and provides self-purification; resistance, hence, is turned inward. This turning towards the inner realm of the self – or the spirit/soul – makes *satyagraha* a traditional feminine mode of resistance that demands self-sacrifice against masculinist "brute force,"[39] and a peaceful surrender to death "without retaliation, anger or malice."[40] It also followed the dominant nationalist discourse at the time that emphasized upon the gendered dichotomy between the inner/outer realms or the spiritual/material, wherein the inner signified the true, or essential, identity of Indian culture.[41]

[37] Mehrotra, *Burning Bright*; Mehrotra, "Restoring Order."
[38] Mahatma Gandhi, "Selections from Gandhi's Non-Violence in Peace and War", in Gandhi on Non-Violence, ed. Thomas Merton (New York: New Directions Pub., 2007): 64.
[39] ibid., 58.
[40] ibid., 71.
[41] Partha Chatterjee, "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India," *American Ethnologist* Vol. 16 No. 4 (Nov. 1989): 622-633, https://www.jstor.org/stable/645113.

As the spiritual (or the inner) was the realm of the feminine, women had to responsible for its protection and nurturing.[42]

Since Sharmila embraced the Gandhian philosophy of *satyagraha*, it is imperative for any analysis of her hunger strike to consider patriarchal notions of self-sacrifice and suffering, particularly within a framework of Hindu tradition where the self-sacrificial mother is the idealized form of womanhood.[43] This notion of self-sacrifice is closely tied to kinship and familial systems in Hindu families where the woman is expected to put the well-being of the others in the kin before her own; self-sacrifice is, therefore, naturalized as a feminine ideal. Indian nationalist discourses drew upon traditional and pre-colonial sources to address the 'woman question.'[44] In these discourses, Hinduism was often conflated with 'Indian' tradition as is evidenced by the fact that Hindu mythical figures such as Sita, Savitri, and Damyanti became traditional icons through which the modern Indian woman was defined.[45] These mythical figures became symbolic of ideal womanhood that had be capable of self-sacrificing their interests, and thus be the ideal female citizen of the nation.

Sharmila, despite being an insurgent subject, conforms to these nationalist and patriarchal notions of the self-sacrificing Indian woman as Meiteis are dominantly Hindus. However, I argue that self-sacrifice, in Sharmila's case, does not denote obedience to a patriarchal state but defiance against it. Hunger striking transforms Sharmila from an object of violence to a resistant subjectivity that embraces patriarchal construction of the sacrificial woman and manipulates it to avoid violent backlash from a masculinist and patriarchal state

[42] ibid., 627.
[43] Aditi Mitra and J. David Knottnerus, "Sacrificing Women: A Study of Ritualized Practices among Women Volunteers in India," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary & Nonprofit Organizations* 19(3)(2008): 242-267, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27928123
[44] Chatterjee, 627.
[45] Rochana Majumdar, ""Self-sacrifice" versus "Self-interest": A Non-Historicist Reading of the History of Women's Rights in India," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* Volume 22, Number 1&2 (2002): 21-22, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/191247/pdf.

precisely because of the respect that the state accords to the self-sacrificing woman. Self-sacrifice also becomes a mode of communication in the face of imposed silence. By sacrificing food, water, and movement, Sharmila communicated to the Indian state that living under the AFSPA was similar to confinement/imprisonment and that it meant sacrificing any autonomy over one's life and body. Moreover, the fact that Irom Sharmila did not actually intend to die, and continuously professed a desire to live in order to continue her fight against the AFSPA. This is evidenced by her eventual acceptance to be fed intravenously. This refusal to die works to wrest her back from patriarchal notions of the self-sacrificial woman, although her hunger strike was still tied to her kin, that is, the Manipuri people.

Force-feeding and threat of martyrdom

Throughout her fast, she maintained that "[l]ife and death is in the hand of God."[46] In her interview with Pankaj Butalia (Indian documentary filmmaker), she expressed that she is unafraid of either life or death; she asserted, "The fact is we are all born to die."[47] This is true to the Gandhian principle that the result of *satyagraha* ultimately lies in the hands of God.[48] The fact of the matter was that her life and death was at the hands of an Indian state that was invested in keeping her alive but also denying her demands.

Banu Bargu states that any mode of resistance that negates life often draws upon "spiritual resources of self-denial, asceticism and martyrdom"[49] to create new forms of spirituality that fuel the "self-transformation of the political actors in revolt"[50] and provide them the determination to put their lives and bodies at stake. Self-sacrifice, as Bargu further points out, is also productive as the self-sacrificing body attains martyrdom in death, thus

[46] Special Correspondent, "Delhi police arrest Irom Sharmila"
[47] Sharmila, "Interview with Sharmila."
[48] Gandhi, "Selections," 88.
[49] Bargu, "Starve and immolate," 69.
[50] ibid., 69.

providing "power and vitality"[51] to the cause of the martyr. This, according to Bargu, indicates "[t]he dual quality of the weaponization of life as an end and a new beginning."[52] Even in life, Sharmila had become a 'goddess.' Therefore, the Indian state could not afford to let her die and risk becoming a martyr for the Manipuri people. This sentiment was reflected in a statement by a high-level official of the State Home Department –

> In Manipur, if an ant is killed in a road accident, there will be a blockade and widespread protests. Can you imagine what will happen if Irom Sharmila should die due to fasting? The entire state will burn for days.[53]

The Indian state could not afford to give in to Sharmila's demand to withdraw the AFSPA, and thus put national security at risk. At the same time, it could not afford the martyrdom of Sharmila, thus resulting in a possible uprising.[54] Sharmila had already attained the status of goddess in Manipur, and if she were to die, there would be mass mobilization against the Indian state and particularly, the AFSPA. It was, therefore, in the state's interest to avoid Sharmila's death; it responded swiftly to reassert its control over the life and body of the 'unruly subject,' and render it powerless and dependable.[55] Within three days, Sharmila had been arrested and fed intravenously – a cycle that continued for 16 years. It is testament to the sovereign's need to control its subjects' life that Sharmila was arrested under the false charges of "attempt to suicide," when she had continuously stated that she is not "suicide-eager".[56] In fact, the criminalization of suicide is itself evidence of the biopower that the Indian state exercises over its citizens. The state further attempted to make her a dependable subject, and thus bring her back within the folds of its control, by isolating her and thus forcing her to rely

[51] ibid., 244.
[52] ibid.
[53] Venkatraman, "Fasting and Protesting."
[54] Kartykvenkatraman, "A fast move."
[55] Lauren B. Wilcox, "Dying Is Not Permitted: Sovereignty, Biopower, and Force-Feeding at Guantánamo Bay," in *Bodies of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press), PDF.
[56] Venkatraman, "Fasting and Protesting."

merely upon its agents – the doctors and nurses that purportedly looked after her well-being, and the jail wardens. The state carefully controlled who was able to meet Sharmila in her solitary confinement by imposing bureaucratic red tapes that made it a challenge for Manipuri people to meet her. Venkatraman writes –

> Getting an interview with her was about the easiest thing, for the [Manipuri] government was more than happy to have the media report that she was alive and well, as many times as possible. While the media had easy access to her, family members were not allowed audience.[57]

This is also echoed by Mehrotra, who documents the application process as a non-media person–

> Permission to meet her is not easily granted. Each application for a visit faces a highly cumbersome procedure. It can take upto a month…If the application gets due clearance from all these offices, an inspector accompanies the visitor to meet Irom Sharmila. Obviously, the government is determined to isolate her from all contact with the outside world, in the hope of weakening her struggle.[58]

Furthermore, the narrative regarding Sharmila's health was also carefully controlled. Despite repeated statements by her friends and family that her vital organs had begun to fail by 2002 (possibly, before that), the state maintained that "she is being looked after properly by the doctors and fed nasally by them. There has been no report of any problem about her overall health."[59] Venkatraman also notes that as a journalist from 'mainland' India, getting an interview with Sharmila while she was imprisoned was easy "for the government was more

[57] Kartykvenkatraman, "A fast move."
[58] Mehrotra, "Burning Bright."
[59] Kashyap, "She's 29."

than happy to have the media report that she was alive and well, as many times as possible."[60] Due to the juridico-political system already in place, as well as the location of Manipur in the peripheries of the nation, it becames easy to control the narratives that trickle out to the rest of the country, as has been repeatedly analysed in various sections of this thesis.

Therefore, the threat of Sharmila's martyrdom due to her attaining the status of a 'living Gandhian' and a 'living goddess' set her apart in front of the eyes of a sovereign that allowed the killing of the civilians at Malom with impunity. Of course, Sharmila herself is not seeking martyrdom,[61] and yet the possibility of the (potential) insurgent body transforming into a martyr lingers. The meaning of martyrdom that is usually inscribed into the soldier's body cannot be inscribed into the potentially insurgent body as martyrdom.

Conclusion

> *Ms. Sharmila told journalists that she is neither an icon nor a goddess but an "ordinary woman with ordinary desires.*[62]
>
> – Press statement upon ending the hunger strike

Sharmila ended her hunger strike after 16 years on 9 August 2016 with a few drops of honey, without having attained her political. It was much publicized and generated divisive opinion. The Manipuri people considered her as a traitor. In fact, when she contested for the seat of the Chief Minister in the 2017 Manipur Assembly Elections, she was able to secure a meagre 90 votes while her opponent, the incumbent Chief Minister who had been in power since 2002, secured 18,649 votes.[63] She had been put on a pedestal by the Manipuri people and

[60] Kartykvenkatraman, "A fast move."
[61] Mehrotra, *Burning Bright.*
[62] "Irom Sharmila ends 16-year fast," The Hindu, 9 August, 2016, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/Irom-Sharmila-ends-16-year-fast/article14562315.ece.
[63] K Sarojkumar Sharma, "Irom Sharmila suffers defeat, gets only 90 votes," *The Times of India*, 12 March, 2017, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/assembly-elections/manipur/news/irom-sharmila-suffers-defeat-gets-only-90-votes/articleshow/57601062.cms.

the media alike, and once she decided to end her hunger strike, there was outrage. Even her lifelong friend and defender Babloo Loitongbam (a Manipuri lawyer, human rights activist, and the director of HRA) accused her of destroying their movement to repeal the AFSPA.[64] In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2018, she says that even the *Meira Paibi*s, who had stood steadfast with her protest throughout, were angered by her decision to end the fast – "In their imaginations I had already been sacrificed"[65] to the cause. Her decision to marry Desmond Coutinho – who is of British-India descent – made matters worse; she became a "whore"[66] that had given up the cause for the love of an 'outsider' – a *mayang* – whom the Manipuri people perceived as a citizen of a colonizing state.

Although Irom Sharmila's hunger strike, along with the *Meira Paibis*' naked protest – was successful in gaining attention of the national media towards the violence that Manipuri people face due to the disciplinary tactics of the Indian state, it failed to achieve its primary goal – the repeal of the AFSPA. This failure, combined with the reaction of the Manipuri people towards the end of her fast, indicates towards the necessity of mass and collective organization and mobilization against militarism and the state machinery and not merely sporadic organizing. Here I align myself with Nandita Haksar, who was one of the few scholars who contended that the public spectacle of Irom Sharmila's hunger strike served to draw attention away from her goal.[67] Instead, Sharmila herself became the cause, and the Manipuri people mobilized to ensure that she continue her hunger strike. Even her supporters who joined her at the New Delhi protest in 2006 contributed to the exultation of her image as a self-sacrificial 'goddess' (evidenced in Mehrotra's writings about Sharmila) Hence, it was inevitable that she

[64] Michael Safi, "How love and a taste of honey brought one Indian woman's 16-year hunger strike to an end," *The Guardian*, 11 November 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/11/irom-sharmila-love-story-worlds-longest-hunger-strike.
[65] ibid.
[66] ibid.
[67] Nandita Haksar, "Irom Sharmila's Struggle against Military Repression: A Critique," *ANTYAJAA: Indian Journal of Women and Social Change* 1(2)(2016): 169-181, https://doi.org/10.1177/2455632716681112.

would end her hunger strike as her primary demand was neither fulfilled by the state, nor did it garner nation-wide support for the withdrawal of AFSPA.

Nevertheless, Irom Sharmila's hunger strike, much like the Meira Paibis' naked protests, indicates the multiple possibilities of resistance that exists within 'exceptional territory' at the margins of the nation where the sovereign's biopolitical (and disciplinary tools) operate with impunity. I have read her hunger strike not simply as a non-violent mode of resistance (which has been the trend in the literature concerning Irom Sharmila and her protest), but as a mode of violent resistance, wherein the protestor makes a political statement, and in fact, exposes the violence of the state, by turning inwards. The resistant female hunger striker becomes a site of 'counterconduct' to the violence that the Indian state initiated in Manipur, transforming the object of the sovereign's violence to a resistant subjectivity that is gendered. This is significant because the nature of violence under AFSPA is also gendered (as discussed in Chapter II), although it kills and tortures civilians indiscriminately. The female hunger striker becomes a text via which those rendered as 'bare life' by the sovereign can reclaim autonomy over their lives and deaths. Furthermore, Irom Sharmila's body, situated at the threshold of violence/non-violence, silence/speech, invisibility/visibility, disrupts the gendered binaries of these categorizations. Her protest also indicates how the self-sacrificial gendered subject weaponize their female bodies to resist a patriarchal sovereign that is invested in the (re)production of the gendered insurgent subject as 'bare life' to maintain its control over the borderlands.

In the next chapter, I will discuss yet another self-sacrificial gendered subject that transformed the female body into a site of 'counterconduct' to the violence of the sovereign in Manipur – the resistant mother.

III. 'MOTHER WILL BE RAGGED NO MORE': THE SPECTACLE OF VIOLENT MOTHERHOOD

> *It was a general feeling that we, the women of Manipur, were virtually naked. We could easily be molested or raped. Why then should we not walk in the streets naked? Why not tell the whole world about our helpless situation?*
>
> – *Ima* Gyaneswari, in an interview with Teresa Rehman[1]

Even as Irom Sharmila continued her hunger strike, demanding the repeal of AFSPA and the end to the cycle of conflict and violence, excessive violence continued in Manipur. In 2003, preparations began to be made to further strengthen the security at the Indo-Burmese border with the Assam Rifles increasing the strength of its troops and its capacity. An apathetic sovereign, invested in ensuring its rule through the exclusion of its populations at the borderlands, continued to legitimize and accommodate the violence of its armed forces.

This chapter provides an analytical discussion of the *Meira Paibis*' naked protest and analyses the ways in which female nakedness provides space within an 'exceptional territory' to negotiate agency through the weaponization of the female body. The *Ima*s created space for agency and resistance by making a spectacle of female nakedness, grotesque emotions, and political motherhood. I argue that like Irom Sharmila's hunger strike, the Meira Paibis' naked protest transformed the female body into a site of 'counterconduct' that re-directed the violence that the Indian state inflicts upon its colonised subjects towards itself. The violent spectacle of mothers' naked bodies and naked emotions not only aimed to breach the silence imposed by

[1] Teresa Rehman, *The Mothers of Manipur: The Twelve Women Who Made History* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2017): 136.

the sovereign, but also to rewrite social scripts regarding notions of honour and shame primarily through the deployment of their roles as mothers. I further argue that rage and grief become productive in establishing the insurgent's body as 'grievable.' Finally, I urge for a nuanced understanding of the women's resistance because although the protest was collective, the nature of agency negotiated by each *Ima* was diverse and fractured.

The Death of Thangjam Manorama Devi

The events preceding Manorama Devi's death were nothing extraordinary for the Manipuris who routinely witnessed and experienced family members, friends, and neighbours being arrested from their homes, often upon unconfirmed allegations and without any evidence or warrant.[2] At around 3:30am on 11 July 2004, Manorama Devi was arrested from her house upon allegations that she was an active member of the underground (and outlawed) People's Liberation Army (PLA). She was identified by the Assam Rifles as an informer for the PLA and an expert with improvised explosive devices (IEDs).[3] A statement made by the Assam Rifles on 24 July 2005 claimed that they had "undisputed evidence"[4] of Manorama's association with the PLA, and that her activities had been tracked for a while before her arrest.[5] The statement did not specify the duration of the period that Manorama was tracked. However, according to statements made by her family, personnel from the 17th Assam Rifles entered and began searching their house without giving any explanation. Manorama was then dragged out of her house, while her family was told to wait in the courtyard. Her brother claimed to have heard soldiers interrogating Manorama and torturing her in another part of the courtyard but

[2] Dolly Kikkon, "Memories of Rape: The Banality of Violence and Impunity in Naga Society," in *Faultlines of History: The India Papers II*, ed. Uma Chakravarti (New Delhi, Zubaan Books, 2016): 94-126.
[3] Meenakshi Ganguly, "These Fellows Must Be Eliminated,": Relenless Violence and Impunity in Manipur," *Human Rights Watch* (September 2008): 25, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/india0908webwcover_0.pdf; Nirmalya Banerjee, "No rape in Manipur: Defence," *The Times of India*, 21 July, 2004, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com//city/kolkata/No-rape-in-Manipur-Defence/articleshow/785826.cms.
[4] ENS/PTI, "Manorama had militant links: Assam Rifles," *The Indian Express*, 23 July, 2004, https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/manorama-had-militant-links-assam-rifles/.
[5] ibid.

hidden from the family members.[6] She was then taken into custody (still alive at the time) and her family were made to sign a 'No Claims Certificate,' which stated that the family members had no claims against the Assam Rifles and that personnel had not harassed or misbehaved with the women of the house or damaged any property.[7] These were standard procedures that the Assam Rifles had to follow when arresting or searching properties, and often family members are threatened or intimidated into signing these certificates. The Assam Rifles claimed to have recovered a radio set and a grenade. This was disputed by Manorama's brother who stated that he had not witnessed the Assam Rifles personnel recovering any object or property from the house.[8]

At around 5:30AM, Manorama's body was discovered by villagers at Ngariyan Maring, around 4 kilometers from her house.[9] Her body was bullet-ridden, and it bore signs of torture and rape. An Assam Rifles statement claimed that she had been leading them to false hideouts of the PLA, and that she was shot while trying to escape from them.[10] They further claimed that they had given her 'due warning' (as stipulated in the AFSPA) and that shooting at her had been a last resort.[11] However, lawyers who represented Manorama's family in the court case regarding her death at the Gauhati High Court in June 2005 argue that there are several fallacies and gaps in the initial Assam Rifles statement as well as formal reports filed at the court at the time of the hearing. First, there had been no female constable present at the time of her arrest as is required by law; the Assam Rifles contend that they were unable to procure one.[12] Second, at the time of her arrest, Manorama had been wearing the traditional Manipuri sarong – the *phanek* – and as it is usually tightly bound, it would have been nearly impossible for her to run

[6] ibid., 26.
[7] ibid., 27.
[8] ibid.
[9] ibid.
[10] Samudra Gupta Kashyap, "Govt offices set ablaze in Manipur," *The Indian Express*, 19 July, 2004, https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/govt-offices-set-ablaze-in-manipur/
[11] ibid.
[12] Ganguly, "These Fellows Must Be Eliminated, 28

fast.[13] Third, no empty cartridges or blood were found near the site where Manorama's body was found. She was also unarmed, which makes it difficult to understand why the military personnel would open fire at her from a distance.[14] Fourth, a post-mortem conducted at a civil hospital in Imphal reported that no signs of rape or physical molestation had been found on her body, thus officially establishing that she had not been raped or sexually assaulted when in custody. However, the question immediately rose as to how bullet wounds were found in her genital area if she had been shot while trying to flee, calling attention to the possibility that the Assam Rifles personnel had tried to cover up evidence of rape.

There are, therefore, conflicting narratives regarding Manorama's death, indicating towards the sovereign's disciplinary (the armed forces) and regulatory technologies (the national media) efforts to control the narrative. By making it difficult to ascertain the 'facts,' the sovereign protected its armed forces and demonstrated its complicity in the violence of Manorama's death. I have relied on Meenakshi Ganguly's 2008 report on human rights violations in Manipur for the 'facts,' as she conducted extensive interviews with lawyers, family members and relatives of Manorama, human rights defenders, government officials, army officials. However, the report is not entirely reliable due to the conflicting eyewitness reports and the Assam Rifles' ambiguous statements. Nevertheless, the bare facts are – (a) a 32-year-old woman was arrested from her house based upon mere allegations; (b) she had died while in custody; (c) her body bore signs of torture and sexual assault, including gashes to her inner thighs; (d) the Assam Rifles had been trying to obstruct justice by refusing to cooperate with local officials and instead claiming to conduct their own internal inquiry into the matter. Manorama's death took on a political meaning. Because the armed forces could not exert control over the (allegedly) insurgent/enemy body, it decided to torture, sexually assault, and

[13] ibid. 29.
[14] ibid.

kill Manorama. Death, therefore, became the final desperate attempt to reclaim control over the insurgent body. However, the same death produced a resistant subjectivity that sought to destabilize the sovereign's control over life and death through the weaponization of female nakedness.

The Decision to Protest Naked

Several of the *Ima*s of the Meira Paibi had seen Manorama's body at the site it was found or had been present during the post-mortem of Manorama's body. As recounted in Teresa Rehman's interviews with the twelve *Ima*s, the sight of Manorama's bullet-ridden body was horrifying.[15] Hence, the Assam Rifles' claims that Manorama had been shot while trying to escape outraged them. They saw Manorama's death not only as an assault on the dignity of Manipuri women, but also as an excessive act of violence that was unwarranted. Protests immediately broken out across Imphal and subsequently, across the state.[16] The Meira Paibi had initially planned to organise a large rally demanding the repeal of the AFSPA on 16 July, but a curfew was imposed by the Manipur state government.[17] The government was trying to control and repress the protests, although people defied the curfew and protested by staging sit-ins and rallies. The *Ima*s knew that they had to be strategic and secretive. Therefore, they met in secret and discussed available strategies of protest amidst an environment where they could face swift retaliation, especially as the government and and its forces were already prepared to retaliate against protests.

Various suggestions such as a silent protest, a bicycle rally, and an indefinite hunger strike (following in the footsteps of Irom Sharmila) were discussed before they finally decide to stage a naked protest in front of Kangla Fort in the centre of Imphal.[18] Having supported

[15] Rehman, *The Mothers of Manipur*.
[16] Kashyap, "Govt. offices."
[17] Rehman, *The Mothers of Manipur*, 36.
[18] Ibid., xxxii.

Sharmila for four years and participated in countless protests and demonstrations in futility, they knew that they had to shock a response out of an apathetic state that did not care for the Manipuri people. The choice of venue was also strategic as it was a sacred place for the Meiteis, and the historic power seat of the Meitei rulers that had first been occupied by the British colonial administrators in 1891 and later by the Ministry of Defense of India in 1947. For decades, the Meiteis had been demanding that the ownership of Kangla Fort be returned to the state of Manipur. Therefore, by protesting in front of the headquarters of the Assam Rifles, the women hope to shock and shame the armed forces, and by extension the Indian state, into withdrawing AFSPA from Manipur.

Figure 2. The Imas protest in front of Kangla Fort.[19]


Figure 3. Volunteers aid the protesting *Imas.*[20]

At 10 am on 15 July 2004, the women began to strip and disrobe in front of Kangla Fort. They had already removed their jewellery and inner garments earlier. The twelve middle-aged women who finally participated in the protest were – *Ima* Ibemhal, *Ima* Ramani, *Ima* Momon, *Ima* Mema, *Ima* Nganbi, *Ima* Ibetomi, *Ima* Tombi, *Ima* Jamini, *Ima* Taruni, *Ima* Gyaneswari, *Ima* Jibanmala, and *Ima* Sarojini. They arrived at Kangla wearing only the traditional *enaphi* (blouse) and the *phanek* (a sarong-style skirt) – symbols of the honour and dignity of Meitei women. They were accompanied by other members of the *Ima* Ngangi, who

[19] Anubha Bhonsle, "'Indian Army, Rape Us,'" *Outlook India*, 10 February, 2016, https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/indian-army-rape-us/296634.
[20] Tridip K Mandal, "On Mother's Day, We Salute the Naked Protest of Manipur's Mother," *The Quint*, 12 May 2018, https://www.thequint.com/videos/mothers-day-manipur-manorama-mothers-naked-protest-indian-army-assam-rifles.

was the only protestor who spoke English, began banging the gates of the Fort and shouting, "We are all Manorama's mothers. Come and rape us."[21] It was a defiant and angry call to the armed forces to violate their naked bodies in a public space as they violated Manorama's body in the dark and in secret. They carried two white banners with the slogans "INDIAN ARMY RAPE US!" and "INDIAN ARMY TAKE OUR FLESH!" written in red – the colour of blood. The ink for the words 'rape' and 'flesh' were written with a dripping effect, indicating the blood of Manipuri people that had spilled over the decades due to militarism. The twelve *Ima* continued to shout in English and in Meitei for the army to rape them as they had Manorama; they demanded that the army confront them. The commanding officer of the Assam Rifles ultimately came out, but he merely folded his hands, bowed to the women, and then left.

The women then marched naked to Raj Bhavan – the Manipur government's Secretariat. Both buildings are situated in the center of Imphal. By then, several of the *Ima* had fainted, and the police and ambulances had also arrived. Although the *Ima*s were not arrested at the time, they were arrested later; charges were dropped only three months later. However, in that brief time, they had achieved their immediate goals. They had managed to shame the armed forces, as evidenced by the CO of the Assam Rifles who, however briefly, bowed to them[22] and by the soldiers stationed at the gates, who had turned their heads away when the women had begun to disrobe. They had also managed to gain the attention of the national media.

In the News

This temporary and brief public exposure of the naked female body was seen as so threatening that the Manipuri government swiftly declared a strict indefinite curfew and local

[21] Rehman, *The Mothers of Manipur*, xxxvii
[22] This is, however, a rather optimistic reading of the CO's action; it is entirely possible his actions indicate towards efforts to temporarily placate the women as the police arrived immediately afterwards. Moreover, he made no other effort to engage with the *Ima*s.

cable TV channels were banned from transmitted any images or news of the protest. However, some local channels had already broadcasted videos and images of the protest by the time this order was issued. Hence, despite the state's attempt to stonewall any flow of information regarding the naked protest, it was quickly picked up by local and national media outlets.

The Hindu archived one of their initial reports on Manorama's death and the naked protest under the 'National News' section on 17 July 2004, nearly unheard of any events related to the Northeast India, which are often relegated to 'regional' news. The article described police firing upon protestors in a rally on 16 July 2004, injuring forty people, which included several women. The article then reported, "On Thursday, about 40 women staged a nude dharna[23] here protesting the killing…They demanded the removal of the [AFSPA] and the setting up of a judicial inquiry into the killing."[24] The report further stated that government officials had claimed that the broadcasting of the naked protest by the local cable network news had incited further violence in Imphal. *The Indian Express* reported that "Trouble began on July 10"[25] with the death of Manorama, which triggered protests across Imphal including the burning of several government offices. The report further alluded to the naked protest as the "zenith"[26] of the ongoing protests. The first report published by *The Times of India* about the protest is on 21 July 2004, where the focus was on the post-mortem report that "established"[27] that Manorama had not been raped; the news article briefly mentioned, "In protest against killing and atrocities against women by security forces in Manipur, a group of women had staged a nude protest at the Assam Rifles headquarters in Imphal."[28]

[23] A demonstration or protest; usually peaceful sit-ins.
[24] The Hindu, "Woman's death sparks protest," *The Hindu*, 17 July, 2004, https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/womans-death-sparks-protest/article27641233.ece.
[25] Kashyap, "Govt offices."
[26] ibid.
[27] Banerjee, "No rape in Manipur."
[28] ibid.

These initial reports suggest that there had been efforts by the state to control the narrative regarding Manorama's death and the naked protest. The ban on the broadcast of news about the protest and the immediate imposition of an indefinite curfew meant that it was difficult to provide accurate details of Manorama's death as well as the protest(s). Hence, some details reported in these news articles were inaccurate – first, Manorama was arrested in the early hours of 11 July 2004, and not on 10 July;[29] second, while there had been forty women present, only twelve women had participated in the naked protest while the others mostly stood by and assisted the *Ima*s as they could. Most of these reports also did not carry photos of the naked protest, indicating that either the naked bodies of these elderly mothers and grandmothers were presumed to be inappropriate for consumption by the readers, or that it was an effort to decrease the shocking visual effect of seeing the naked bodies of these women. Moreover, these initial news reports focused on the various protests and the curfews imposed because of the protest, rather than the killing of Manorama herself or the institutionalized violence that led to her death. *The Times of India*'s report, for example, focused on the post-mortem report that allegedly "established" the 'truth' that Manorama had not been raped. Only *The Indian Express* briefly mentioned that Manorama's body "bore marks of torture including marks on the inside of her thighs as well as genitals."[30]

Despite the inaccuracies and regardless of the focus on these initial news reports, the naked protest gained the attention of the national media from the periphery of the sovereign's territory. The Meira Paibi had succeeded in their immediate goal of gaining the national media's attention, unlike Irom Sharmila whose hunger strike gained popular attention only when she strategically moved her protest from the peripheries of the sovereign's territory to the very center of it. It was the violent spectacle of female naked bodies and emotions that

[29] Kashyap, "Govt offices."
[30] ibid.

shocked the media, and the state, out of its apathetic stupor. The next section analyses the ways in which the *Ima*s violent spectacle of their naked body and naked emotions carved a temporary space of agency wherein they could destabilize the sovereign's authority and redirect its violent disciplining and surveillance tactics back towards it.

The Violent Spectacle of the Naked Body

> *[T]his concession to modesty seemed only to accentuate both their vulnerable nakedness and helpless rage, forced to use their vulnerability as a weapon. Truly, they were enacting an ancient drama, as avengers of crimes against ties of gender and kinship.*[31]

In the headline for the opinion article from which this excerpt is taken, M.S. Prabhakara – a veteran journalist who has reportedly extensively on the Northeast – described the naked protest as "The Furies come to life." The Furies (or, the Erinyes), in Greco-Roman mythology, were three goddesses of vengeance and retribution, punishing specifically men for crimes such as perjury, parricide, homicide, and other unpunished crimes.[32] The image of the women banging the gates of the heavily guarded Kangla Fort and demanding the soldiers to come out and rape them as they had Manorama (and countless other women of Manipur) must have resembled the vengeful and raging Furies coming to life. Indeed, if the twelve *Ima*s naked protest has been perceived as form of weaponizing the vulnerability of the female body at the hands of a militaristic state, it automatically becomes inscribed with meanings of violence that come associated with the term 'weaponization,' or "weapons of protest."[33] The naked protest was in no way an unarmed *dharna* or a mode of non-violent resistance. The women came

[31] M.S. Prabhakara, "The Furies come to life," *The Hindu*, 30 July, 2004, https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-tamilnadu/the-furies-come-to-life/article27646688.ece.
[32] *Collins English Dictionary*, s.v. "Furies," accessed April 18, 2021, https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/furies
[33] Gaikwad, "Revolting Bodies," 305.

armed with their bodies to create a violent spectacle of the female body by sacrificing their honour and dignity. Therefore, to call their protest non-violent as scholars like Deepti Priya Mehrotra, Namrata Gaikwad, V. Geetha and Uma Chakravasti have[34] is to contradict, and in fact, to negate the symbolic countering of the guns and arms of the Assam Rifles with the weaponization of the naked female body. After all, nakedness (or, exposure) carries multiple meanings depending upon the context in which the disrobing occurs.

Reclaiming the Exposed Female Body

Nakedness can be pleasurable, mundane, or humiliating, depending upon who is naked, the space, and the relationship of the naked person with the spectator(s), if any.[35] More importantly, nakedness carries distinctly gendered connotations. The exposed body in public space is perceived as indecent, shameful, humiliating, and dishonourable, thus rendering it vulnerable. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter I and II, the female body is inscribed with nationalist and cultural meanings of purity and honour of the family and community, as well as the reproducer of the community. Hence, stripping and public parading have been often used to punish women in India as modes of caste violence and public justice.[36] The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 identifies the forcible removal of clothes from a member of the scheduled castes or scheduled tribe and parading them naked as a punishable offence under the act,[37] but nevertheless stripping and parading continues as a punitive measure for any number of reasons that range from inter-caste/inter-religion marriage

[34] See Literature Review.
[35] Barbara Sutton, "Naked Protest: Memories of Bodies and Resistance at the World Social Forum," *Journal of International Women's Studies* Volume 8 Issue 3 (April 2007)
[36] Misri, "Are you a man," 607.
[37] Parliament of India, "The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, Section 3(1)(iii), https://bit.ly/3zzLfdn.

to perceived offence by a male relation. Some of the most notable cases of stripping and parading in India include those of Phoolan Devi,[38] and Maya Tyagi.[39]

In a way, too, Manorama's body, though not naked, was punished through public exposure. Her body was left in the fields – a mere four kilometers from her house – for the villagers and her family members to discover. This was an act to further humiliate and dishonour a gendered and racialised insurgent body. Although death was a desperate bid by the sovereign's forces to reclaim control, it was insufficient as a punitive measure. The callous exposure of her mutilated body, with its gunshot wounds and gashes in various parts of the body, was an act of disciplining, of warning other potentially insurgent bodies of the fate that awaited them if they turned into unruly subjects. Even in death, the insurgent body cannot and will not be accorded dignity.

Diabate, in her conceptualisation of 'naked agency' argues that this form of agency "results from a certain awareness of [the naked woman's] locatedness and from an understanding of her challenging material conditions, which stimulate her capacity for reaction in a specific way."[40] The *Imas* knew that they had limited time and space to stage their protest; their experience with activism had given them the knowledge that there would be swift retaliation from the police and the armed forces in the form of curfews or arrests. They also knew that they had to make themselves heard in a language that the targets of their protest

[38] Phoolan Devi, a *dalit* woman, was locked up in a room, beaten, and raped by several upper caste men over three weeks in the late 1970s, or in 1980 (the timeline of her life is obscure), and then paraded naked in Behmai village in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. See Revathi Krishnan, "Bandit Queen, MP, feminist: Phoolan Devi could never be put in a box," *The Print*, 25 July, 2019, https://theprint.in/theprint-profile/bandit-queen-mp-feminist-phoolan-devi-could-never-be-put-in-a-box/267513/.

[39] Maya Tyagi was travelling with her husband and two of his friends in Bulandshahar district of UP when their car broke down near a police station. When the men left to get their tyre repaired, a police officer in plainclothes molested Tyagi. Her husband retaliated by slapping the police, who further retaliated by shooting dead all the men travelling with Tyagi. Tyagi was then stripped naked and paraded through the market area. See Sahar Bhog, "Who Decides the Definition of Rape?" *Feminism in India*, 22 May, 2019, https://feminisminindia.com/2019/05/22/definition-rape-laws/

[40] Diabate, *Naked Agency*, 50.

would understand, and it had to be effective in a way that sit-ins, rallies, or even hunger strike would not be. The mode of naked protest provided a way to elicit response through the weaponization of the socio-cultural and political meanings of the naked female body. The *Ima*s, by baring their naked bodies, reversed and reclaimed the multiple meanings inscribed onto the exposed female body, particularly into the female insurgent's body, by taking advantage of the available social scripts as well as the constrained space of resistance. Their nakedness, along with the banners and chants, became a text through which the protestors were able to redirect gendered notions of shame and humiliation towards the patriarchal and colonising institutions that punish and discipline an insurgent population by utilising these gendered social scripts.

In a space where resistance can be a matter of life or death (as evidenced by the forty people who were killed in a protest rally the day after the naked protest),[41] the brief spectacle of resistant nakedness can be seen as an enactment of agency that is also potentially threatening to their lives, depending upon the reaction of the target spectator of their nakedness. Therefore, it was with the risk of death that the *Ima*s rushed to the gates of Kangla Fort after disrobing. This act of resistance, thus, made a public spectacle of the violence that occurs in the shadows, in the peripheries of the nation upon bodies deemed as 'dangerous' by the sovereign. The *Ima*s demanded that the army rape them and eat their flesh as they had with countless other Manipuri women and girls while they were in custody, during raids of houses, or to discipline Manipuri men. It was a command to the armed forces, and also to the Indian general public, to confront the violent othering of Manipuri bodies and the rendering of Manipuri people as 'bare lives' in the name of national security. It raised the question of, 'Security for whom?' which exposed that the Indian population had the privilege of being protected by the Indian state at the cost of marginalised communities.

[41] The Hindu, "Woman's death."

Furthermore, the 'us' and 'our' in the commands 'INDIAN ARMY RAPE US!' and 'INDIAN ARMY TAKE OUR FLESH!' signifies the deep sexual and racial divisions, and thus, imbalanced power relations between a colonised and violated Manipur (and the Northeast region) and the masculinist colonizer that is the Indian state. The brutal killing, gratuitous rape, and grotesque exposure of Manorama's body reduces it to 'flesh'[42] – stripped off the meanings and subjectivities inscribed onto the body to dehumanize her in death.[43] Her captive body was sensualised and brutalised for the sadomasochist viewing pleasure of the sovereign's subjects (the armed forces). As Weheliye argues, it is unclear whether the unnecessary brutalization of Manorama's body deviates towards violence or sexuality.[44] Hence, within this framework, the choice to use 'flesh' as one of the commands becomes significant. Of course, the *Ima*s were not aware of this distinction between the body and the flesh and hence, I would hesitate to ascribe such meanings to their chants. However, the *Ima*s did recognize that such violence was inflicted upon Manorama's body because she had been produced as the (racialised and gendered) 'Other' by the sovereign. Hence, like Sharmila, by inviting the Indian army, and by extension the Indian state, to violate them, the *Ima*s became 'counterconduct' – their bodies transformed from objects of violence to subjects of violence through the centering of and emphasis on the 'I.' This public invitation to violate the female body, thus, reclaims the body and the subjectivity of the tortured body that the sovereign attempts to render in/human. As I discuss in Chapter I, it is also an act of reclaiming the pleasure derived from the gratuitous sexual violence that the armed forces deploy over an insurgent population as a disciplining and surveillance tool. Of course, this invitation succeeds in shaming and reclaiming sexual power

[42] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no.2 (1987): 65-81, doi:10.2307/464747.
[43] Alexander Weheliye, "Pornotropes," *journal of visual culture* Vol 7(1) (April 2008): 71, https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412907087202.
[44] ibid., 72.

only due to the role of the Meira Paibis as mothers in Manipuri society, as shall be discussed later in the chapter.

Negotiating Emotions of Shame and Rage

In confronting the Indian armed forces in a public space, the *Ima*s also had to confront their own public humiliation and violation of their bodies due to its exposure in a public space. In their interviews with Rehman, the *Ima*s talked about their hesitancy to participate in the protest and the trance-like mode that they entered once they began to disrobe. *Ima* Gyaneswari recounted, "I had no awareness of anything. I was in my own world, shouting slogans…"[45] She further recalled, "We confronted the men in uniform with fire in our hearts. It was like the climax of the rage and agony we had harboured for years."[46] Gaikwad reads such deployment of emotions as haunting and "*excess*, a madness,"[47] and the protest itself as "wild and desperate."[48] However, as discussed in the literature review of the thesis,[49] such reading of the violent spectacle of rage and grief reduces the agency of the women to the realm of irrationality. In a way, as Gaikwad argues, this haunting becomes empowering because the naked protestors escape any liberal rationalisation of resistance.[50] However, as Diabate points out in the case of Igbo genital cursing against the colonial administration, the "rhetoric of excess and of uncontrollability combined with that of the intervention of dark spirits [the trance-like mode], the "White" men dismiss the meticulousness of women's organising."[51] Hence, the framing of the protests as a haunting or beyond the grasp of rationality is double-edged because the rhetoric of irrationality and madness is also deployed by the colonising sovereign power to delegitimize indigenous populations at the borders/frontiers by both the British and Indian

[45] Rehman, *The Mothers of Manipur*, 137.
[46] ibid.
[47] Gaikwad, "Revolting Bodies," 306.
[48] ibid.
[49] See Literature Review.
[50] ibid.,
[51] Diabate, *Naked Agency*, 184.

colonial administrations.[52] Moreover, such a reading circumvents the reversal of meanings, and feelings of shame and regret that the women felt once the protest was over. The agency of the exposed female body is complex; it constantly fluctuates and cannot be homogenised as empowering, as has been the trend in feminist analyses of the naked protest.[53]

Here I contend that it is productive to read the women's trance-like state and instinctive deployment of their rage and grief as simultaneously agentive and a dissociative mechanism at the time of the protest. The *Ima*s needed to counter internalised patriarchal social scripts of shame and humiliation that are inscribed into female nakedness for their protest to succeed. Central to the protest was to dissociate from the cultural meaning of the *enaphi* and the *phanek*, which were the only pieces of clothing that the women wore as they gathered at Kangla Fort. The *enaphi* and the *phanek* symbolize the honour and modesty of Meitei women. The *enaphi*, worn by married women indicate their status as mothers in Meitei society, and it is almost never taken off. Rehman states that *Ima* Ramani covered herself with the *enaphi* even when going to sleep.[54] Similarly, the *phanek* signifies the modesty of Meitei women and it is supposed to cover their lower bodies, including their ankles. If the *phanek* is worn above the ankles, the woman is considered as arrogant.[55] Therefore, disrobing within this socio-cultural environment was traumatising for the *Ima*s, especially since as mothers, they were supposed to be the upholders of the honour and dignity of the community. Here, rage and grief proved to be agentive; the *Ima*s recount how despite feeling a sense of shame, their rage at the brutality inflicted upon Manorama's body propelled them to confidently disrobe and expose themselves to the voyeuristic eye of the public. Moreover, the *Ima* had to draw strength by dissociating from the self and blending into the collective to overcome the social meanings and taboos that

[52] Simpson, "BORDERING AND FRONTIER-MAKING;" Baruah, "In the Name of the Nation."
[53] See Literature Review.
[54] Rehman, *The Mothers of Manipur*, 22.
[55] ibid.

are attached to female nakedness. The many descriptions of feelings of numbness, of emotionless, and being in a trance indicate not towards haunted, being haunted or hysterical. Rather, these descriptions indicate that it was necessary to dissociate from their immediate material surroundings to exercise and exert their agency as gendered insurgent subjects.

The *Ima*s also expressed to Rehman that once the protest was over, they felt shame and embarrassment. *Ima* Jibanmala recalled all the mothers crying as they returned home. Even though their bodies were exposed temporarily, their nakedness was forever memorialised by the presence of the media and cameras. Although their goal was to gain the attention of the media, the broadcasting and printing of images and videos of their nakedness was an act of violation. With access to these images in the public domain, their bodies are thus repeatedly gazed at and violated. To access the basic right to speech, they had to sacrifice their bodies, which is another form of self-directed violence. Performing their nakedness as spectacle also began to feel futile as the Assam Rifles stuck to their narrative regarding Manorama's death, and no justice was meted out. In fact, the Assam Rifles tried to frame the *Ima*s as being heavily indoctrinated by the PLA, the UG that Manorama had allegedly been a member of.[56] Thus, their agency became precarious[57] due to these conflicting emotions, indicating that paradoxical and confliction notions of power and helplessness can exist simultaneously. Not all *Ima*s felt a sense of empowerment or liberation through the exposure of their naked bodies. Thus, it is important to consider these fragmented accounts and negotiations of agency within the specific material and socio-cultural conditions of the protest when discussing the potential of female nakedness as resistance.

[56] Special Correspondent, "Army orders inquiry but sees a pattern to protests," *The* Hindu, 18 July, 2004, https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/army-orders-inquiry-but-sees-a-pattern-to-protests/article27641716.ece.
[57] Diabate, *Naked Agency*, 52.

The violent spectacle of nakedness and emotions immediately gained the voyeuristic attention of the state, the national and international media, as has been discussed extensively in the literature on the protests.[58] It is important to note here that the *Ima*s were able create a space of agency where they could make a violent spectacle out of their naked bodies and naked emotions without immediate retaliation from the armed forces. This was possible due to their respected positions as mothers in Manipuri society as well as patriarchal scripts that desuxualize the ageing female body. The next section explores the identity of the Meira Paibi as mothers, and how foregrounding of political motherhood in their resistance allowed the *Ima*s to exercise of agency in an otherwise repressive 'exceptional territory.'

Mothers as Defenders of Society

> *The government never tried to understand the heart of the mothers.*
> – Ima Ramani, in an interview with Teresa Rehman.[59]

> *There is no respect for mothers and sisters in our society. There is no point in wearing clothes at all.*
> – Ima Momon, in an interview with Teresa Rehman.[60]

The Meira Paibis center their roles as *Ima*s, or mothers, in their activism. One of the rallying cries during the naked protest was, "We are all Manorama's mothers. Come and rape us."[61] Motherhood has often been deployed by women as a mobilizing identity while legitimizing their engagement in social movements and peace processes across the world.[62] Examples

[58] See, for example, Gaikwad, "Revolting Bodies;" Rehman, *The Mothers of Manipur*; Sutton, "Naked Protest;" Stacy Alaimo, "The naked word: The trans-corporeal ethics of the protesting body," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* Volume 20 Issue 1 (2010): 15-36, https://doi.org/10.1080/07407701003589253; Naminata Diabate, "The Cinematic Language of Naked Protest," *Journal of African Art Historty and Visual Culture* Volume 11 Issue 3 (2017): 248-268, https://doi.org/10.1080/19301944.2017.1401886.
[59] Rehman, *The Mothers of Manipur*, 24.
[60] ibid., 36.
[61] ibid., xxxvii.
[62] [62] KSH Bimola Devi, "Women in Social Movements in Manipur," in *Social Movements in North-East India*, ed. Mahendra Narain Karna (New Delhi: Indus Publishing, 1998): 75-81; Simona Sharoni, "Gender and

include peace activism by Israeli and Palestinian women,[63] the Grupo Apoyo Mutuo in Guatemala, the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and the Co-Madres in El Salvador. Closer to Manipur, the Naga Mother's Association in Nagaland has identified itself as a stakeholder in the peace process in Nagaland.[64] L. Basanti Devi notes that in India traditional notions of motherhood are used by a patriarchal state to exclude women from the public domain and political processes. At the same time, motherhood also becomes a source of political activity for women,[65] as notions of caring and protecting the children of the community becomes a mobilizing and legitimizing source of political agency. In Manipur, the *Meira Paibi* movement emerged as a movement to safeguard the children of their local communities from social 'ills' like alcoholism, drug abuse and addiction, domestic violence. As violence escalated with increase in counterinsurgency operations in the 1980s, the movement focused its attention on protecting the Manipuri people from the excessive violence of the Indian armed forces and the UGs.

The meaning of *Ima* has also evolved over the decades. *Ima* no longer means merely the biological mother who is the reproducer and caretaker of the Meitei community. *Ima* is the mother of a people who has been subjected to excessive violence and abjection in an 'exceptional territory.'[66] Motherhood has transcended the boundaries between the public and private domains, and the *Ima*s occupy public spaces as defenders of the Manipuri people. Hence, Manraj Grewal (see Chapter II) encounters a group of members of the *Meira Paibi*

Resistance to Political Violence in Palestine and Israel," in *Handbook on Gender and War*, ed. Simona Sharoni, Julia Welland, Linda Steiner, and Jennifer Pederson (Northampton: Edward Elgar Pub., 2016); Jennifer Pederson, "In the rain and in the sun: women's peace activism in Liberia," in Handbook on Gender and War, ed. Simona Sharoni, Julia Welland, Linda Steiner, and Jennifer Pederson (Northampton: Edward Elgar Pub., 2016): 400-418;

[63] Simona Sharoni, "Gender and Resistance to Political Violence in Palestine and Israel," in *Handbook on Gender and War*, ed. Simona Sharoni, Julia Welland, Linda Steiner, and Jennifer Pederson (Northampton: Edward Elgar Pub., 2016): 381; Devi, "Meira Paibi."

[64] Rita Machananda and Seema Kakran, "Gendered Power Systems and Peace Politics in Nagaland," in *Women, Peace and Security in Northeast India*, ed. Åshild Kolås (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2017), EPub.

[65] Devi, "Women in Social Movements."

[66] ibid.

holding a vigil against the armed forces at night in a public space to protect their children. This political motherhood is anti-state, resistant and grieving; the mother, not the state, emerges as the primary protector of the Manipuri people. Grief becomes a productive force through which political motherhood weaponizes itself to resist a hostile state.

Mothers Grieving the Insurgent's Death

As discussed, dominant in the spectacle of naked emotions at the protest was a sense of collective grief and rage. This grief was not just over Manorama's rape and death, but also over all the innocent Manipuri people who had died in the conflict between the state armed forces and the UGs since counterinsurgency operations began in Manipur. Grief, therefore, becomes a driving force behind the *Imas*' decision to disrobe and sacrifice their honour and dignity (and a tool of dissociation). Nationalist narratives of war often deploy the grief of soldiers' mothers to gain support and sympathy for the war cause; grief, belonging to the domain of emotions, is feminized within these narratives.[67] Grieving and mourning is controlled and dictated by the state wherein next-of-kin of martyred soldiers take political action in form of public speeches and state memorials/funerals.[68] However, within such nationalist and militarized frameworks, only certain lives are rendered "grievable" – lives that are protected by the state and make a claim of belonging.[69] Judith Butler notes that grief can be hierarchized whereby lives that have suffered the "violence of derealization"[70] that are not considered as 'human life,' or 'life' itself cannot be mourned as it is "neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral"[71] – such lives are erased from any mode of public grieving because they are not lives at all.

[67] Cecilia Åse, Monica Quirico, and Maria Wendt, "Gendered Grief: Mourners' Politicisation of Military Death," in *Gendering Military Sacrifice: A Feminist Comparative Analysis,* ed. Cecilia Åse, Monica Quirico, and Maria Wendt (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019): 147-148.
[68] ibid.
[69] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 32.
[70] ibid., 33.
[71] ibid.

The insurgent body, having already been rendered 'bare life' by the sovereign, constitutes an 'ungrievable' life within the Indian public; there is a prohibition on the public grieving of the insurgent's death.[72] To grieve the insurgent's death is to be labelled as an anti-national – a threat to the nation. The *Ima*s' public spectacle of grief and rage over the death of the insurgent, therefore, destablised the notion that the death of those lives rendered as 'bare life' is not prohibited from being publicly grieved/mourned. Moreover, as they positioned themselves as the mothers of the insurgent(s), they also disrupted traditional nationalist narratives of war wherein gendered grief – usually that of the soldiers' mothers – is mobilized to gain support and sympathy for the state's militarism. The *Ima*s, through the weaponization of their nakedness, demanded that the Indian public mourn the deaths of the countless 'ungrievable' lives of Manipur. This raging grief of the naked mother in a public space cannot be controlled or manipulated by the state. To defy and reclaim this control, the *Ima*s were willing to sacrifice their own honour for the sake of the Manipuri youth, especially the Manipuri women upon whose bodies the violence of the state is intensified. As *Ima* Ibemhal stated, "It was acceptable even if I died while doing this; but I had to make people sit up and take notice of our plight. I was ready to die like a heroine – for a cause."[73] Hence, while the naked protest can be framed as a confrontation between mothers and a patriarchal state, the *Ima*s worked in tandem with patriarchal *and nationalist* scripts regarding motherhood, sacrifice and gendered grief to render 'ungrievable lives' grievable.

Of course, such a reading risks falling into the trap of essentializing women's roles in conflict regions or peace processes.[74] However, in a highly militarized and masculinized 'exceptional territory,' the rhetoric of grieving motherhood allowed the *Ima*s to access political agency. Even when the rhetoric of their resistance in grounded in patriarchal and

[72]ibid., 37.
[73] Rehman, *The Mothers of Manipur*, 10.
[74] Devi, "Meira Paibis."

heteronormative scripts of motherhood, the spectacle of their grief demands response, and escapes nationalist scripts of what constitutes as legitimate grief.

Conclusion

This chapter has studied the ways in which the *Ima*s (temporarily) carved out a space of political agency through the instrumentalization of female nakedness in material conditions where any form of resistance can be a matter of life and death. Through the public spectacle of their nakedness, they became disruptive and threatening, which was further heightened by their sarcastic demand that the Indian army rape them and eat their flesh. The public exposure of their naked body and naked emotions also served to destabilize the idea that the insurgent body is not grievable within nationalist discourse. By publicly grieving for Manorama – an alleged insurgent – and all the Manipuri lives that have been lost to violence, the *Ima*s deployed the rhetoric of grieving motherhood to demand attention and justice, and to *humanize* the insurgent's body. The maternal naked body was simultaneously the loving and caring *Ima* as well as the terrifying and grotesque *Ima*. Thus, even as the *Ima*s worked in tandem with patriarchal and nationalist notions of shame and honour attached to the female body, they rewrote and re-directed these patriarchal social scripts back at the patriarchal sovereign. Most importantly, it is because of their positions as mothers within Meitei society that the *Ima*s did not face any violent backlash from their community. Instead, their act of sacrifice for the protection of their community garnered support and respect for their protest and their collective cause.

The violent spectacle of women's naked protest further achieved the goal of drawing the immediate attention of the national media – something that Sharmila's protest had failed to do. While media reports did not focus on the voices of the *Ima*s, their naked protest spurred a series of opinion pieces and articles on the legibility of AFSPA and demands for its revision

and withdrawal. The death of an insurgent's body at the periphery of the nation elicited response from an otherwise unresponsive and apathetic sovereign. The Indian state, in a small concession, handed back ownership of Kangla Fort to Manipur. The Indian government also constituted two committees – the Justice Jeevan Reddy Committee and the Justice Verma Committee. The former, in its report submitted in 2005, recommended that AFSPA be withdrawn; the latter, in its report submitted in 2013, noted that systemic sexual violence has been legitimized by the AFSPA.

These recommendations, however, remain unimplemented and AFSPA continues to be imposed in Manipur. The state also did not agree to the *Meira Paibis*' primary demand that the AFSPA be completely withdrawn from Manipur. The state only agreed to its withdrawal from the Imphal Valley, which optimistically can be viewed as a success. One can also argue that the naked protest was more effective than Irom Sharmila's protest in garnering (almost) immediate response from the Indian state and its regulatory apparatus (the media). However, in Rehman's interviews, the *Ima*s expressed a sense of hopelessness as they felt that their sacrifice had been futile.[75] Even as the insurgent subjects are tenacious in their resistance, so is the sovereign in its commitment to a violent governance.

[75] Rehman, *The Mothers of Manipur*.

‘Fragrance Of Peace’: Conclusion

The central aim of this thesis was to understand how gendered insurgent subjects at India’s borderlands navigate agency to create spaces of resistance within zones that are (re)produced as ‘exceptional territory’ by the Indian state’s modalities of power. I have demonstrated that a triadic modality of power consisting of the sovereign (the Indian state), its disciplinary technology (the state armed forces) and its regulatory technology (the national media) enables the sustenance of ‘exceptional territories’ at India’s borderlands. Moreover, violent bordering practices of surveillance and punishment is enacted upon the bodies of insurgent subjects that are (re)produced as the ‘dangerous’ racialised and sexualized ‘Other’ or as ‘bare lives,’ as these subjects that can be assimilated into the nationalist discourse of ‘Indianness’ due to a contentious political history. These violent bordering practices specifically target indigenous Manipuri women because within nationalist and patriarchal discourses, women become signifiers of biological, cultural, ideological (re)producers of their communities. The insurgent population, therefore, is punished by inflicting violence upon its women – sexual violence becomes the vehicle violence. This became specifically highlighted in the murder of Thangjam Manorama Devi in 2004.

However, as I have argued throughout the thesis, modalities of power also influence the resistance that emerges from within these ‘exceptional territories.’ As the sovereign’s violence enacts itself the most intensely and violently upon the gendered insurgent subject, it also becomes the site where violent resistance is produced. To resist a sovereign that governs through death, the gendered insurgent subject, therefore, turns to death to perform their resistance; this is the most prominent in Irom Sharmila’s hunger-strike. Within such material conditions, the gendered insurgent subject’s life and body are weaponized to counter the sovereign’s control over life and death. Unlike other forms of armed resistance that direct

violence outward, Irom Sharmila's hunger strike and the *Meira Paibis*' naked protest re-directed violence towards the self, thus violently sacrificing themselves.

Hence, I depart from the dominant reading within Indian feminist scholarship that have so far analysed both protests as non-violent modes of resistance against a violent and militaristic state. I have instead argued that the gendered insurgent subject becomes a site of 'counterconduct' to the sovereign's violence at the borderlands. Irom Sharmila, by deciding to go on an indefinite hunger strike became a resistant self-sacrificing subject that the state could not afford to be sacrificed, lest she gained the status of a martyr. The *Meira Paibi* weaponized their identities as mothers, thus producing a resistant grieving motherhood. In each case, gendered insurgent subjects negotiated agency by conforming to but also rewriting patriarchal scripts that attach certain meanings of sacrifice, honour and shame to women's bodies. Each mode of resistance constitutes a violent sacrificing of one's body and one's self. I further argue that such modes of resistance that work within patriarchal scripts do not necessarily mean conforming to essentialist gendered notions of womanhood. In highly militarized zones such as Manipur, where relations of violence assure death to its inhabitants, resistance becomes limited. In such material conditions, patriarchal scripts allow women to access political agency and subjectivity. Therefore, I argue that there needs to be a nuance understanding of the fractured agencies that gendered insurgent subjects negotiate when performing such self-sacrificial modes of resistance.

As a concluding remark, I wish to state that even as it is important to celebrate Irom Sharmila and the *Meira Paibi* for their violent sacrifices, it is also important to address the fact that the material conditions that necessitated their resistance continues to exist in Manipur. In fact, as recently as December 2000, the Manipur government extended the 'Disturbed Area' status of the state. Hence, the lives and conditions of the Manipuri people remain largely unchanged

despite the violent sacrifices made by Irom Sharmila and the *Meira Paibi*. Hence, I urge for a deeper engagement with the violent capitalist and modern colonial structures that benefit from the devaluation of indigenous life. There needs to be better collaboration between Indian feminist scholarship and grassroots peace activism that seeks to address what needs to be done to counter a biopolitical regime that necessitate violent sacrifices of indigenous women in the first place.

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