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Tbeh Jingshai

KINDLING A LIGHT

From the Editor's Desk

It's been a happening quarter for the country and especially for the north-east region, which has after a long time made it to the headlines, albeit for all the wrong reasons. First the devastating floods and landslides in Assam, Arunanchal, Meghalaya and Manipur and then the agitation in Imphal. The former unprecedented in scale, the latter in fury.

We dedicate this issue of Tbeh Jingshai to these two events- one natural, another man-made - which have not just disrupted lives in the region, but have also woken New Delhi from its long drawn slumber. In fact, the colours we use in this issue, Pink and White are symbolic- they are the colours of mourning in Manipur.

Even as we write this note, the streets of Imphal are flooded with women and girls in pink phaneks and white shawls. These Imas- meaning mothers - of Manipur are mourning the disappearances and killings that have become a way of life here. They are protesting against the atrocities which they have been subjected to time and again. They are desperate and they are angry. Angry at an administration that continues to ignore their plight. Angry at an army that shields those who torture, rape and kill, under the aegis of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958. Angry at a Centre which refuses to respect their needs, rights and aspirations. Angry at the underground which continues to extort whatever little they earn.

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It is the intensity of this anger that has finally managed to ring alarm bells in Delhi. And yet, this much awaited attention has been short-lived. Already, the echoes of Manipur are beginning to fade.

The media interest that followed the nude protests is beginning to wane. Even the self-immolation bid and death of a young student agitator hasn't managed to keep the issue alive. The very fact that someone shot the entire immolation bid, instead of helping the student or stopping him raises many concerns. This issue of Tbeh Jingshai is just a small attempt to rekindle the interest in the problems that embroil the state.

At the same time, it is an effort to bring to light the plight of those who are victimised, not just by the state but by nature itself, year after year. Floods are an annual event in the north-east region, especially in Assam and Arunanchal Pradesh. As rail and road links to the entire north-east region pass through Assam, even the states that are not directly in the way of the surging waters, bear the brunt of the crisis.

In the flooded areas, people lose not just their houses, possessions and livelihoods, but even their dignity and lives. Institutions of community life are affected, starvation and water borne diseases are common and a life of abject poverty becomes the fate of many.

And yet, if floods are an annual phenomenon why aren't preventive measures taken before the disaster strikes? Why are attempts always directed towards short term service delivery? Why the absence of long term strategies to tackle the problem? Why the laxity in relief work? Why the utter disregard for women's needs in relief camps?

This newsletter does not answer any of these questions. In fact we believe that more than answers what these questions merit is attention. They first need to be posed. Only then can an attempt be made to answer them. So, what we do here is just raise questions and issues, based on our experiences in Assam, Meghalaya and Manipur.



Courtesy: Action Aid India, Guwahati

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Stop Press: What the papers Reported...



Courtesy: Action Aid India, Guwahati

ONE DAY IN THE NEWS: July 19, 2004

Assam

The death toll in the current wave of floods has increased to 68. Floodwaters of the Kopili and the Killing today overtopped the NH-37 disrupting road communication between Lower and Upper Assam.

Tinsukia district: The Sadiya sub-division remained cut off from the mainland since July 17 due to suspension of ferry services. This has affected supply of food and other essential items to neighbouring Arunachal Pradesh. 60,000 of people of 116 villages have been affected. 500 cattle heads have been lost. The floodwaters have washed away many animals of the Dibru Saikhowa wild life sanctuary.

Bokakhat: Over 59,000 people of 56 villages have been affected.

Bharalu river: Due to an increasing influx of waste material, the bed of the Bharalu river has become shallow, and at places, the river has lost its width. During rainy season, the river carries more water than it can contain within its banks.

Majuli: Vast areas of the river island have been sub-merged and about 80,000 people have been affected.

Barak Valley: The overall flood situation of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi districts of Barak Valley remain critical as the NH 53 and NH 154 are still under water. About 10 lakh people have been affected. The three districts of Barak Valley, Mizoram, Tripura and parts of Manipur are still cut off from the rest of the country due to severe landslides in Sonapur area of Meghalaya. The condition of these areas has become serious due to the closure of the Jowai road for the last eight days. An acute shortage of essential commodities and unprecedented price hike has paralysed lives.

Railway links: Due to non-stop torrential rains, occurrence of landslides has increased on the Lumding-Badarpur hill section leading to considerable damage to the railway lines.

Violence Against Women: A nine-year old girl from Charanpara village of Udalguri was raped and killed by a 16-year-old boy. He had lured her with a promise of collecting the floating firewood from the river.

Arunachal: Torrential rains in the past 20 days have left at least 10 dead. Anjaw and Lower Dibang Valley districts were completely cut off. Telecommunication links were snapped. East Siang and Lohit districts were also badly hit. About 1.5 lakh people were affected by the floods in the four districts.

Tripura: Tripura continued to remain cut off from the rest of the country since July 9 due to landslides on the Jowai Road. Rail connectivity of the state was also partly disrupted.

Meghalaya: With increasing rains, the

A collection of facts and snippets from the fourth estate to present an overview of the floods and trail of devastation that followed

flood situation in Meghalaya's Garo Hills district turned grim and 80,000 people were affected.

SOME OTHER SNIPPETS...

Assam: Amina Khatun gave birth in a relief camp in Ghoragaon. She did not get any food for two days and consequently could not nurse her baby. The baby died.

In Kalaigaon in Darrang district, three youths disguised as army men entered a relief camp. They misbehaved with the women who were asleep and demanded that 3 young girls be sent to one Major Singh. It was soon discovered that they were local miscreants.

July 21, 2004

In Jagiroad, the mother of three minor children sold her body to a truck driver to feed her family. Following this, her husband deserted her.

August 5, 2004

Meghalaya: The national highway connecting Garo Hills with the rest of the region has been cut off.

In a landslide accident two lives have been lost, about 80 small villages and 35,000 villagers have been affected.

The Dawki Muktapur Borhgaat road has been blocked following five major and more than ten other minor landslides.

July 22, 2004

Manipur: The NH 39 has remained blocked for the past 10 days following mudslides in Mao and Kangpokpi areas of Senapati district. Nearly 1,000 trucks carrying essential commodities are stranded at Mao gate, neighbouring Nagaland, cutting off supply of essential goods. Several petrol pumps in the state capital have closed down due to scarcity of petrol and diesel.

July 20, 2004

Facts and Figures:

Morigaon, Assam

- The swelling waters of the Kopili dam project, the Kolong tributary and the Brahmaputra river, are responsible for the floods
- In all 1,02,916.26 hectares of land and 7,15,032 people living in 598 villages have been affected.
- Five villages have been completely washed away, 97 partially.
- 46,924 houses have been fully damaged and 41,834 partially.
- There are 92 relief centres but no relief camps
- Three veterinary teams with medicines and vaccines have been made available
- 32 medical centres with about 58 doctors have been set up with the help of Action Aid, Oxfam, HPC and the army

Source: Morigaon District Administration

Meghalaya

- 4 deaths were reported from Jowai on July 19; one from Reba -Syntu Ksiar in the Jaintia Hills
- 87 villages and 7827 people affected in Sylsella: 12 villages and 4027 people in Tikrilla: 84 villages affected in Betasing, in West Garo Hills

Source: Meghalaya Secretariat
courtesy Mr Hynniewta and Kong Maria

What we Found...Ravaged Lives

To ascertain the quality of life in the aftermath of the floods, NEN conducted a small study in the Boha Doloni Village of Morigaon district and in Morisuti in Sonitpur district of Assam. In Boha Doloni, the NEN team visited the Jagiroad College Relief Centre which houses over 3000 inmates, conducted field interviews with 15 families living on the roadside and with officials from the district administration. In Morisuti, families staying at relief camps and representatives from local NGOs were interviewed. The picture that emerges is indicative of the condition of a people who are forced to battle for survival year after year. During the period of study (between August 4 and 6, 2004) all the major and link roads to and from the Morigaon district were still not operational and the National Highway connecting Sonitpur district was under water at many places.

The General picture

The whole of Morigaon district barring Jagiroad was under floods. 25 bridges and 123 road links were damaged. In Jagiroad, there are 5 relief camps which have been set up in schools, colleges, *Namghars* (Vaishnavite prayer hall) and on the roadside. These camps have to be shifted from one place to another, with the rise in water levels. Some people have been in these camps for over 16 days now. As groups of college students guard the relief camp, the inmates feel safe. However, they are unsure of what the future holds for them. The loss of their homes and hearth continues to haunt them. In Morigaon district, even NGOs like the Mahila Mehfil which are conducting relief work have lost their property and source of livelihoods. The centre of Morisuti escaped the fury of the floods, but areas beyond half a kilometre of the Centre were devastated. In most cases, the floods were sudden and the people were forced to leave everything behind. Paddy cultivation has been damaged. Four relief centres have been opened. Inmates complain that these centres are noisy and overcrowded.

Health status

In Jagiroad, children in the camps suffer from diarrhoea, skin infection and flu. Malaria, infections and fungal ailments are common among adults. Pregnant women have developed ulcers on the tongue. Girls have a difficult time during menstruation. They find it embarrassing to bathe, urinate and "change". One cause of the rampant infections could be the lack of sanitation facilities. The 7 toilets in the camp are unhygienic. In the villages, girls defecate in floating rafts.

The road side families have sent their daughters to stay with relatives. Two women have given birth on the road for which they had to pay Rs. 700 each. Some organisations are providing hygiene packs containing soap, mug, bucket, teeth powder, sanitary napkins. In Morisuti, people complained that there were no bathing and sanitation facilities. It was evident in both the camps that the specific health needs of women were ignored and did not form a part of relief packages. As the distribution of food was often haphazard, the health of pregnant and nursing mothers and their babies are at a big risk.

Another reason for the deteriorating health conditions could be the unavailability of clean drinking water. Due to the lack of firewood, families are unable to even boil the water. Thus the high incidence of water-borne diseases.

Education

Some children have lost their books. Schools and colleges have been converted in to relief centres.

Food

In both the areas, people complained that the food was inadequate. In Jagiroad each person had received some rice, dal, mustard oil, kerosene and milk powder for children from the government. Till the time of the survey, they had got rations only twice. No vegetables were distributed. Not only was the diet inadequate, it was also lacking heavily in proteins, vitamins and other nutrients.

In Morisuti, people allege that not only is there a discrepancy in the distribution of aid material, but relief packages are also being siphoned off. Inmates allege that food meant for flood victims is being used as daily wages for labourers who gather floating logs and cut them. The people here also complained of a lack of transparency in the relief process. They were unaware of what relief materials were being distributed and by whom.

Livelihood

A majority of the people in the two areas were farmers and daily labourers. Besides the loss of crops and cattle, people also had to deal with falling prices. In Jagiroad, a farmer who used to sell his crops for Rs.125-140 per maund, had to contend with Rs 60-80. A woman who sold duck for Rs 100-120 each, was forced to sell them for Rs 20-60. Beneficiaries complain that the cattle which survived the floods are now dying of starvation.



Courtesy: Action Aid India, Guwahati

All this has resulted in a loss of livelihoods and abject poverty compelling women to resort to prostitution. Young men have fled to Dimapur in search of employment. In Jagiroad, the people claimed that some of these youth were lured by the underground (UG) outfits.

Conclusion

Relief camps do provide some succour to the flood victims. However due to the lack of coordination in relief efforts, the rampant corruption and the blatant apathy towards the needs of women and children, the quality of life in relief camps is abysmal. This has left many disgruntled. A greater transparency in the relief process would not only help to pacify people, it would also check the misuse of aid materials. Further there is a need to ensure that people get hygienic and balanced food in the camps else it could lead to disease and epidemic. The livelihoods issue also needs to be tackled. Unemployment is anyways rampant in the north-east region. Floods accentuate the problem and as the study revealed make it easy for UG outfits to lure youth.

There is a need for potable drinking water, better sanitation facilities and medicines in the relief camps. Finally, while none of the women living in the relief camps complained of any instance of physical violence, there is an unspoken violence which women in all flood situations are being subjected to: the violence of unfulfilled needs. This has to be remedied urgently.

Fuming Floods

What they said...

Here's what the people of Assam- the policy-makers, journalists, relief workers and victims had to say about the floods in the state.

We have records of the Brahmaputra at Guwahati from 1901. This year's level – 51.42 mtrs -seems to be the highest in this century. During the British time no flood control work was executed. Starting from the second five-year plan, we have built 850 Kms of drainage, 4454 Kms of embankment and 85 large size sluice gates in the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys. We have also implemented erosion prevention schemes over an area of 650 Kms. However, short-term measures can only protect against small and medium floods The Gol has constituted the Brahmaputra Board for recommending and identifying long-term flood control measures.

**Arun Kr. Dutta, Secretary,
Assam State Flood Control Dept**

27 army columns are providing cooked food, conducting medical camps and rescue operations in Assam. By the last week of July, the army columns in conjunction with 10 helicopters of the Air Force had rescued/ evacuated 10,000 people, provided medical aid and relief materials to 19,329 people.

Special medical camps have been set up in Kokrajhar, Dhubri, Morigaon, Nagaon and Bongaigaon districts. Four bridges have been launched in Kamrup, Nalbari and Barpeta. Action is on to launch two bridges in Nalbari and Cachar. However, the army does not have any decision making power and can not comment on strategies. We follow the directives of the Centre.

An army personnel conducting flood relief operations

In Kamrup district, 85,850 families have been affected. Our committee has organised 17 relief camps and 23 relief centres which provide rations, tarpaulin, tubewell, cattle feed etc. through staff of the circle office in every district. In the short term we will provide basic relief materials. Long term measures include construction of houses, building of embankments, reconstruction of roads. For this an amount of 50 crores has been proposed to the Centre.

**J. D. Lahkar, Office of Deputy
Commissioner, Kamrup**

The reasons for the floods are varied. Environmental changes; no plantation of forests in water-

shed area; increasing number and haphazard construction of embankments; stiff bureaucracy; deforestation and immigration of settlers to the embankments. The embankments require repairs.

This year we are collaborating with other like-minded organisations in the districts of Morigaon, Nalbari, Dhemaji Darrang to provide, tarpaulin sheets, bleaching powder, phenyl, etc. In the relief camps, we have built low cost latrines. Health check-ups are conducted by local doctors (PHC) for about 1000 patients every day.

Mrinal Gohain, Action Aid India, Guwahati

Unprecedented rainfall caused by ecological imbalance and the opening of dams in China, Bhutan and Umrangso are responsible for the present havoc. In collaboration with district administration and local groups, CASA is providing relief materials and shelter in Nalbari, Morigaon, Barpeta and Nagaon districts to 13000 beneficiaries. As midterm strategies, CASA aims to create district level Tasks Force and elevated ranges/ plots.

A.K. Goldsmith, CASA, Coordinator NE

We were staying near the river. The water level rose suddenly and we could not save anything except our lives. I have never seen such a devastating flood. Initially we took shelter in the relief camp at Morisuti LP School. On the first day, we didn't have anything to eat. The next day, someone offered us cooked rice and dal. The relief camp was very noisy and crowded. There were no facilities for bathing and for two days I could not respond to nature's call. After that I moved to my mother's place in a different village.

**Victim, Health Camp at Morisuti,
Sonitpur distt.**

The flood waters rose to a height of six-seven feet. We moved with our utensils to houses that were on raised areas. Menfolk went to Block Development office and collected rations. Since there is no baby food in the relief rations, the mother of a seven month old baby fed her baby rice. The baby is suffering from stomach disorder. There is a complete breakdown of health services. The health sub-centre is under water. Due to disrupted transport and communication links, the ANM is not coming and vaccination programme under RCH has stopped. During the floods, we used rafts to respond to nature's call. Drinking water was collected from the tube-wells of shelter



Courtesy: Tezpur District Mahila Samiti

Relief workers distributing aid materials in Morisuti

providers. Now there are cases of diarrhoea, scabies, and fever.

**Women, Health camp at Baha Doloni
village, Morigaon district**

No proper data or archival records of the history of flood damage in Assam exist. Embankments are still earth and sandbags affairs due to the rampant corruption. Further, this year, there has been no coordination with neighbouring states and countries on the release of excess dam water. The press was hamstrung by the lack of information on relief work. An interesting dichotomy was visible: people in the interior areas of Sipajhar, Kharupetia, Koliabor knew to the last decimal how much compensation they would get, while people in Hajo, Raha and other not so interior places, were in the dark.

Siddharta Sharma, Reporter, The Sentinel

The work done on flood relief is inadequate as the focus is on immediate service delivery. There is a need for long term strategies which take into account the needs of women and children who are often forced to take shelter on highways. They are exposed to all kinds of dangers. The relief camps are not safe either. They don't have adequate facilities. At times women have to walk miles to find places to defecate. This make them more vulnerable.

Nivedita Hazarika, ICCW, Guwahati

A river changes its course every year. We respond by haphazard construction of embankments. We rely on antiquated systems of construction which get washed away easily. The Brahmaputra is highly silted; dredging is necessary. A river linking system to drain out the excess water is a good idea. Unfortunately, the government relief menu has not changed over the years. There are no specific relief items for women and girls eg hygiene packs. Despite security arrangements in camps, there have been cases of VAW.

Bedabrat Bora, Sr Reporter, Amar Axom

Manipur Protests: Powerfully bare or barely powerful?

The nude protests by the women of Manipur symbolises not their power, but their anguish

For many people in Manipur, the sight of a protest march or a desolate road in times of curfew is quite normal. It happens regularly. But when the women of Manipur disrobed to protest against the alleged rape and murder of Manorama by the Assam Rifles, it was much more than a regular protest.

For the women of Manipur – the mothers, sisters, wives, daughters - this was the last straw. A desperate, yet valiant effort to get their voices heard. By exposing their pain and coming out in the open to fight their distress, they had carried on with their legacy of activism.

Historically, Manipur has witnessed many women's movements which have contributed singularly to women's collective role in society today. These include the Women's' Movement of 1904 against the levy on rice, Pothang or the Movement to discontinue the system of compulsory forced labour in 1913, the Zeliangrong Naga Uprising of 1927-32, the great Nupilan of 1939 and the Meira Paibi movement against alcoholism in 1975.

These movements coupled with the prominent position of women in the Ima markets and their aesthetic dance forms, have made the civil society in the state recognize the significance of their womenfolk. Thus, the 1980s witnessed a new role of the Meira Paibis or Torch bearers, who were, and still are, involved in alerting the community about army patrols. Known for their influence within the community and outside, these women now began to negotiate with the armed forces when men of their community were taken into detention and became the buffer between the state forces and the ordinary people. Concerned groups, including the Indian army began to consult and involve them in local cases. They started settling disputes which were social and domestic in nature. They became the pride of Manipur, something the state could boast about to the rest of the country and the world.

And yet here were 14 women stripping and standing in front of the Kangla gate with banners. On the face of it, the protest was an immediate reaction to the killing of 30 year-old Th. Manorama Devi - a suspected cadre of the proscribed PLA (People's Liberation Army)- by the Assam Rifles personnel. However, if we

look deeper into the matter, we realise that the women used their bodies to protest against and call for a final solution to an oft repeated sexual violence.

Not that protests or bandhs are new to Manipur. We know of various campaigns that have been launched time and again to protest against extra-judicial killings, disappearances and to address the issue of violence against women. However, so far no real solution has emerged. There is simply no access to justice, even for the "empowered" Meira Paibis.



Members of the All Manipur Women's Reformation and Development Samaj have been the force behind the Meira Paibi movement in the state. They spearheaded the Kangla Gate protests.

The reasons are evident when one examines the degree of support that civil society and its men give to these women's groups. Since Manipuri society, its politics and social codes of conduct are determined through patriarchal norms, women's voices for concrete solutions have received marginal attention.

On the face of it, Manipuri society gives full

recognition to women's collective action, the 'strong' role of Meira Paibis and the like. However, conversations with individuals and groups in different parts of the state have revealed that the men of authority, both state and non-state, do not include women in decision-making. There has been no move by the powers that be to take women as partners in their strategic planning. However, they do include women in their processions, locality based bandhs, submission of memorandums and certainly when young men have to be salvaged from army or police custody. In fact, on these occasions it is only the women folk who are egged on to action and their visibility stems from the fact that this is the only arena where they are given an opportunity to express their views.

It's on this spectacular visual strength of women that most of us have convinced ourselves that the 'power of women' in Manipur is truly the most significant of all the movements in India. The incident of July 15 to many, further reiterates this symbolism of women's power. Unfortunately, it is just the opposite - the desperation of a group of women who have staked all that they have to get some of what they want. Spirit and courage - yes, but power, definitely not.

Operation Guinness

There's more to Manipur than bandhs, landslides and curfews. On March 17, 2003, a team of doctors at the Shija Hospitals and Research Institute, a private hospital nestled in the foothills close to Imphal, successfully removed the largest neck tumour in the world from a 12 day old baby.

The baby, Satyajit, was born with a benign neck tumour weighing 1.2 Kg, almost 40 per cent of his body weight. "Doctors at the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences had given up hope. He could not even be breast fed and so nose feeding was done," recalls Satyabanda Pebam, the baby's grandfather. The family however did not lose hope and agreed for an operation, which according to Dr Palin, the man who led the operating team, had only a 10 per cent chance of being successful.

At the end of 35 minutes, the tumour has been successfully removed and the team of doctors led by Dr Kh. Palin and comprising of Dr. S. Jugindro. Dr. Mrs. Kh. Boney, Dr. T Sanayaima and Dr. Anjay B, had found a place in the

Regional Inputs Guinness book of world records. Unfortunately however, Satyajit today suffers from a malignant condition. This is not linked to his previous ailment and he is undergoing treatment, say doctors.

How tall is my paddy...

Inside the jungles of Chumukidima in Nagaland, proudly stands another success story. It was here on October 1, 1998, that Pastor Melhite Kenye first cited a rare species of paddy- according to the Guinness book, the tallest paddy species in the world.

Believing the eight and half feet plant with as many as 510 grains in each ear, to be a rare species, he protected it. He cultivated another 100 plants of the same species inside the compound of the Chumukedi Town Baptist Church to observe whether they would match the mother plant in size. In 2000, the Pastor raised plants which grew up to nine feet in height and had 340 grains in each ear. This new found species has been called "Meihite Kenye Lha" and the pastor has still preserved the mother plant for researchers.

Events Calendar

Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders

By: The Martin Ennals Foundation, a collaboration of 10 HR NGOs

Description: Granted annually to someone who has demonstrated an exceptional record of combating HR violations.

Award: 30,000 Swiss Francs

Last Date: October 1

Contact: Martin Ennals Foundation

Luis Marreiros, Coordinator
c/o OMCT
8, rue du Vieux-Billard
P.O. Box 21
CH - 1211 Geneva 8, Switzerland

Tel. (+ 41 22) 809 49 25
info@martinennalsaward.org

Scholar Of Peace Fellowships, 2005

By: WISCOMP (Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace)

Description: Awarded under 3 categories: Fellowships for Academic Research are expected to lead to the production of a publishable monograph by the end of the grant period. PG research or doctoral degree prerequisite. (If in the midst of an MPhil or PhD, apply only after the submission of thesis). Media Fellowships are designed to support young and mid-career journalists. The Special Projects seek to identify and support talent that explores innovative approaches and uses alternative

and creative media such as film, art, theatre, dance. Open to NGO workers, activists, grassroots practitioners, artists, full-time professionals and policymakers.

Eligibility: Open to South Asians under the age of 45 from a variety of professional backgrounds. Women are encouraged to apply.

Last Date: Applications accepted throughout the year.

Contact: info.wiscomp@fuhhdh.org
Tel: 91-11-24648450 (Ext. 112)
www.fuhhdh.org

Fellowship for Health and Population Innovation

By: Population Council, India (Formerly the MacArthur Fund for Leadership Development)

Description: Open to individuals who wish to evolve innovative approaches in the areas of population, reproductive and sexual health, rights and generate sound evidence to inform programmes and

policy. Applicants may be from any discipline or sector.

Contact: Fellowship for Health and Population Innovation
Population Council, Zone 5 A,
Ground Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodi Road, New Delhi 110 003
fellowships@pcindia.org
Website: www.popcouncil.org

Roundtable on Manipur

NEN is facilitating a series of round tables in Imphal, Manipur to review the present crisis and address the issues that embroil the state. Two such discussions have already taken place – one on August 25 and another on September 6. The final round table will be held between October 28 and 30 in the state capital. The round table being organized by members of Manipur's vibrant and vociferous civil society, will see the participation of journalists, lawyers, theatre artists, academicians, rights activists and the Meira Paibis. It will include people who are spearheading the current agitation and will attempt to look at the role of women's activism in society in the context of decision-making. It will also attempt to address the information gap that exists between the state and the rest of India and evaluate the AFSPA and its consequences for the state. Finally, the round table will try to analyse the root cause of Manipur's problems and discuss ways of addressing them. NEN welcomes the participation of rights activists, civil society organizations as well as professionals from across the country in this round table discussion. Participants will have to meet their travel and accommodation expenses. NEN will only provide logistical support. Those interested can contact Gunjan at the Delhi office for details. e-mail: delhi@northeastnetwork.org

Manipur: The Endless Vigil

The brutal killing of a 32 year old woman suspected to be a cadre of the proscribed PLA. Women disrobing and asking the Assam Rifles to kill and rape them. A mass movement to demand the repeal of an Act that has long been misused by the armed forces. Imphal was burning yet again. Why? I had to go and find out.

From the airport to our office in the city, it was series of backlanes and *kuchcha* (muddy) roads. The main roads were apparently full of slogan-shouting people burning tyres and police officials firing rubber bullets and tear gas shells to disperse them. And yet I saw none of it.

That evening I told my colleague- Everything here is so calm and quiet. Trust the media to blow things out of proportion. She was amused. I was soon to understand why.

Imphal is like the Vesuvius. An outward calm masks the inner turmoil. And then suddenly, it erupts. The last time it erupted was during the ceasefire extension controversy in 2001.

For the next week or so, life moved from one curfew to another bandh to yet another curfew. "This has been the way of life here for years now," a shopkeeper grumbled from behind the half closed shutters of his shop. A point reiterated by many.

Manipuris have learnt to live with these bandhs and curfews. Of course, the consistency of these events since the killing of Manorama has been unprecedented. Beginning from July 11 to my visit in mid-August not a single day had passed when some area of the state was not under a bandh called by the protestors or a curfew clamped down by the administration.

"We have had only 13 working days between July 12 and August 16," a school principal revealed. Even on the days when the school did function, attendance was minimal and often, they were forced to close midway because of sudden unrest.

Unpredictable. That is what life in the city has become. "Here in Imphal, we don't make appointments because we never know if we would be able to make it to them," an activist told me. Wait and watch. For the Centre it might just be an excuse for not doing anything. For the people of Manipur, it is a way of life.

So, every morning, the bandh or curfew call notwithstanding, people gradually come out of their houses. "The bandhs have been on for over a month now. If we sit at home in fear, what will happen to our children? Already I have had to take loans to feed them. I have to use every opportunity to sell my goods," explained a vegetable seller who like most fruit and vegetable sellers in the state is a woman.

By six or seven in the morning, groups of youth collect on street corners, shops and hotels operate from behind half closed shutters. A few enthusiasts also carry on with their morning jogs. Cycle rickshaws swiftly carry people to nearby markets and work places. Some autos and two wheelers ply, albeit on circuitous routes. Life goes on ...at a snail's pace and often in circles.

And even in the midst of this scurried movement, the air of expectation is evident. Everyone is waiting for the signs of trouble. One shot in the air or a glimpse of a group of protestors and the shutters are downed. The streets turn desolate again. Slogans fill the air, a few tyres may or may not be burnt. Suddenly truckloads

of army men and police jeeps turn up from nowhere. The crowd is dispersed, often with force.

A couple of hours later, heads start peeping out and gradually shutters begin to open. People begin to venture out again waiting for trouble to reappear. "Earlier, the evening news on the local TV channel would warn us about the likely trouble spots. Since the bandh calls are usually locality based, we would know where to go and where not. But now that the government has taken the channel off the air, we just have to risk it," complained a passer-by.

Indeed, throughout the turmoil in the state, ISTV, the local television channel has been taken off air for prolonged durations more than once. But it is in times of crisis, that innovation brews its head. So one fine evening, in my hotel room situated in the heart

of the city, I suddenly heard something being blasted from speakers. I rushed to the hotel balcony- the evening curfew had been clamped and I could not venture out- but saw nothing. Later, a shop keeper told me that someone had been announcing the local news from loudspeakers across the street.

And while the local news went off the air, reporters from the national media filled the hotel rooms in Imphal. For once, Imphal was news. I decided to tag along with a few scribes to see the real situation. After all, their access was far greater than mine. On the very day that 28 year old Chittaranjan immolated himself, a friendly journo took me to a news studio and showed me some rare footage. I saw everything from the Kangla gate

protests to the police atrocities on groups of protestors. I also saw the entire footage of the immolation. I was shocked and not just at the desperation of the protestors or the brutality of the state forces. No, that I had known about. It was in a sense expected. What shocked me was the footage itself. Someone was busy filming while a life ended. The cameraman did not bother to call for help or to help. The footage was more important than a human life.

In that one instant when a youth committed suicide, everyone became a silent spectator - the cameraman and the groups of policemen who just stood by and made no attempt to stop him.

Since that evening, I have heard many opinions about the video. Some question journalistic ethics. Others defend them. "It is their job after all." Yet others maintain that the videos were all part of a well thought out campaign. The people of Manipur have finally learnt to use the power of media to get their message across. How else was it possible for someone to shoot each one of these events? Why were these videos circulated and made available to all TV channels and newspapers, the stiff competition amongst the reporters notwithstanding?

Did the media unite and share information for a cause or did they become conduits for the protestors? It's been a fortnight since I left Imphal - again through backlanes and this time with a "sick" placard on the car to avoid being stopped by the anguished agitators- and yet these questions and many others remain.

Manipur is a complex situation and with every new curfew and bandh, it is getting still more entangled in its own problems. Perhaps that is why, despite the suffering which the people have been subjected to because of the bandhs, the agitation continues. The people are tired of the fear, the uncertainty. They are tired of waiting and watching.



FROM THE FIELD...

Gunjan Veda



NEN Activities

Sensitising the Police

NEN organised a Gender sensitisation programme for 49 DSP (Deputy Superintendent of Police) trainees at the Police Training College in Dergaon between July 10 and 12. The programme which was facilitated by a two member team from Kolkata based Sanhita, extensively discussed the causes and effects of domestic violence and the legal provisions which are available to curtail it. It talked about Sexual Harassment at the workplace. Two members from the Tezpur District Mahila Samiti contextualised the issue of VAW by talking about its prevalence in Assam and discussing case studies.

NEN goes online!

Information about the North East Network, it's work and upcoming programmes is now available online at our very own website www.northeastnetwork.org.



The site, designed by an independent consultant, Bimal Kumar Dimri, was launched in August this year and has been conceptualised as an information bank on issues, which we work on and believe in. We, at NEN, would like to once again express our gratitude towards all those who have contributed their articles to our online resource pool.

Reproductive Health for students

Annie from the NEN Shillong office imparted basic knowledge on "Sexuality and Youth" to students from the Laban Presbyterian High School on August 13. At a talk organised by the YWCA,

Shillong, she discussed changes the body goes through during adolescence and addressed the many queries that both boys and girls had on a topic generally considered to be taboo.

Amar Kotha workshop

Even as the state reeled under its worst flood in recent times, 25 participants from six different organisations gathered for the Amar Kotha workshop on July 17 at Tezpur, Assam.

The workshop was organised by NEN after an extensive needs assessment and centred on areas like development, floods, unemployment, corruption, health status of women and declining sex ratio. Right to information and its use as a strategy was thoroughly discussed. A few films – *Where is my dinner?*; *Development flows from the barrel of a gun*; *In a Forest Hangs a Bridge* and *Unheard voices*- were also screened. The first talked about food security, the second about the right to information. Sanjay Kak's, *In the Forest hangs a Bridge* focused on the disappearing traditional practices and the struggle mounted by some people in Arunachal Pradesh to save them. The final movie talked about NEN's work.

Understanding Manipur

NEN has been organising a series of private screenings of the film, "Soldiers in Sarongs", directed by Prof. Lokendra Arambam of Manipur. The film, which was commissioned by NEN last year, traces the history of the Meira Paibis and their changing role in society in the context of the armed conflict. It also briefly examines the contradictions within the Meira Paibis and the various problems that plaque Manipuri society. The film has already been screened for students, journalists, activists, academics, theatre personalities and civil society organisations in Delhi and Guwahati. Copies have also been sent to like-minded organisations to facilitate similar shows across the country. The



screenings follow a visit by a two member NEN team to Imphal in August this year, to review the situation in the state. They are an attempt to contextualise the present crisis in the state and to acquaint the people with the women who are spearheading the agitation. Copies of the film can be obtained from NEN's New Delhi office.

A quick recap...

This quarter saw the NEN members organising and facilitating a series of trainings, meetings and workshops.

- A cluster group meeting wherein members presented their preliminary research findings on Natural Resource Management from herbs, livestock and forest management, was held on May 20, 21 at the Orchid Lake Resort, Shillong. Each project was thoroughly evaluated through the social and gender framework.
- A follow-up of the in-house CEDAW training took place at Shillong in June.
- NEN took part in the discussions on the BPPA and the International campaign protesting Violence against women.
- Two group discussions on AFSPA and the situation in Manipur were initiated in Imphal
- NEN facilitated a week long training by AFPRO at it's Resource Centre in Chizami to train local youth on building low cost sanitation facilities.
- Chizami Women's Health Centre celebrated it's sixth Foundation day on July 27, 2004.

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