

Book Reviews

Glimpses of a Forsaken State and its People

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Book Review

Bhonsle, A. (2016). *Mother, Where's My Country? Looking for Light in the Darkness of Manipur*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger. (Rs. 499/- , pp. 250)

In the book, the author attempts to present the history of conflict, the various episodes of brutalities that people have long endured and the everyday struggles of the people of the state. Coming from a background of journalism, the author has done extensive research which has shaped the book with nearly nine years of fieldwork. She has conducted over two hundred interviews and studied documents and court testimonies to verify the accounts that have been recorded. She has tried to give account of all the stakeholders: the civilians, the army, the state bodies or the insurgent groups. While giving account of the civilians, the author has tried to give space to the many ethnic groups residing in the state. While reading the book, we get to know about the historical narrative of the state along with an unbiased description of the tensions that exists amongst the ethnic groups. This is a commendable portrayal that is usually missing in books of other authors on similar topics, where focus has been on the history or tensions of their own state or focus on the history and problems of their own ethnic group/ community only.

The book has 15 sections with an introduction and an epilogue. The sections do not form an uninterrupted flow. Each section focuses on different issues such as incidents of rape, the Malom massacreⁱ, Irom Sharmila, her family, her fleeing to Delhi, history of the state, experiences of the insurgents at their camps, Manorama incidentⁱⁱ and the protest by a

group of women at Kangla Fortⁱⁱⁱ, and many more. The descriptions of the rape accounts and the court proceedings are heart wrenching. It vividly brings alive the images to anyone reading the book and makes one feel for the men, women and children in the state. There are descriptions given of people who have been caught up in the conflict and have been killed in encounters, facing extortion threats from the insurgent groups or checking in the name of security by the armed forces. The extreme experiences of the people and the mistreatment they face reflect the complete denial of human rights. The physical and mental trauma experienced by the people cannot be measured, one can only try and empathise with them.

The author brings to the forefront the hardships faced by the people and the everyday struggle for basic goods due to the numerous economic blockades in the state. The blocking of the National Highways could be called by any of the ethnic communities or the insurgent groups for voicing issues or for showing resistance to various decisions taken up by the state. This results in the complete absence of movement of vehicles. Goods could get stranded on the roads for months which results in the unavailability of many basic products such as medicines, cooking gas, petrol, kitchen products, among others (p. 169). The functioning of the banking system may get hampered due to the non-availability of cash. The whole country was in

chaos for a couple of months, post-demonetization due to shortage of cash, but Manipur had been in this chaos since a very long time. The long queues at petrol pumps and ATMs have been a common sight and daily struggle endured by the people of the state. The book also highlights how the continued struggles for survival reflect the resilience developed by the people, be it the quiet struggle by Irom Sharmila against AFSPA^{iv} or the strong front shown by her family members or the fight for survival by the people in the midst of prolonged conflict.

One chapter is entirely devoted to specifically discuss the problems faced by children due to the prevalent conflict. Her focus has been a family who lost two children in the Malom massacre (p. 44-50). This could be one example which reflects the perils in numerous families in the state. This act of being caught unaware during encounters between the armed forces and the insurgents could be many. What was most hitting was the fact that one of the children who died was the recipient of the National Bravery Award in 1988, and the mother continued to receive letters from the Ministry of Child Welfare in Delhi asking about the child's welfare nine years after the incident. This reflects a complete lack of awareness of what is happening in the rest of the country and the attitude of the Centre towards the people of the north eastern states.

The author has also highlighted in the backdrop of a court testimony the story of a young boy of twelve years studying in class VII, who was brutally beaten and killed in a case of fake encounter, 150 metres away from his home (pp. 232-237). He was accused of being a member of an insurgent group. Another case is of a nineteen years old teenager who also became a victim after he was suspected by the state police of being an insurgent member (237-240). These are only two cases which have been reported in the book; nearly 1,528 cases of extra judicial killings have been petitioned in the Supreme Court, filed by relatives

and friends of victims who had been killed in fake encounters in the state (Hazarika, 2016). An important aspect raised by the author is of young boys who are members of the insurgent groups. She has described young boys in their late teens who are living in camps, as temporary residents, post the negotiation between the insurgent groups and the state. Some of the groups have signed the Suspension of Operation agreement where they no longer carry on insurgent activities; instead they stay in encampment authorized by the government and get a monthly stipend of 3,000 rupees and basic infrastructure (p. 125). Here the author describes the inactive and bored lifestyle of these young boys. When they are at their competent best and could accomplish much if given the opportunity, these young boys are simply wasting their time and life.

The prolonged conflict and the uncertain political situation have led many families to send their children to the metro cities for education, and also many young adults to migrate for work. This leads to another problem faced by the people of the north east region such as racist experiences and labelling (pp. 13-17). From calling names to prejudices, being judged and in extreme cases, physical assaults have also been reported. This is an important aspect which needs to be explored further regarding these young boys and girls who are already facing the trauma of conflict in the state and double harassment of extreme racism, which many a times are subtle and unreported. All these contribute to mental disturbance and needs to be addressed for the complete well being of individuals.

This leads us to reflect on the larger role that education could play in mitigating the conflict, in helping to untangle the cause of conflict or understand the issues that affect the various ethnic groups. The experiences gained from interacting with fellow students and shared learning could help to question rigid beliefs about self and the

others. Plus, the opportunity to attend school or college in the midst of conflict would help bring some normalcy in the lives of the students and help them cope with the conflict with the hope of a better future (Winthrop and Kirk, 2008). Though there are numerous books on conflict in the north east, the focus has mostly been on the political situation and the history of conflicts. This book gives a glimpse into the everyday struggle of the people and the detailed description of the incidents make you relate to the pain felt by the people. The book introduces the readers to a state, and its people, which has been neglected and is constantly fighting for survival.

References

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- Winthrop, R., & Kirk, J. (2008). Learning for a Bright Future: Schooling, Armed Conflict, and Children's Well-Being, *Comparative Education Review*. 52(4): 639-661.

1. Ten innocent civilians, including school students, were killed when an Assam Rifles convoy was attacked by an insurgent group and they fired back in retaliation on November 02, 2002.
2. Manorama Devi was accused of being a member of an insurgent group and was brutally raped and killed in a fake encounter by Assam rifles personnel on July 10, 2004.
3. In retaliation to the Manorama incident, twelve women of a women's group had stripped off their clothes in front of the historic Kangla Fort, the seat of the royal power and then occupied as a post by the Assam Rifles.
4. Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which gives unprecedented power to the armed forces to arrest any suspect without any evidence. This is in implementation in select states of India, which are identified as problem states such as Kashmir, Manipur and Nagaland.

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