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Women and borders in militarised northeast India

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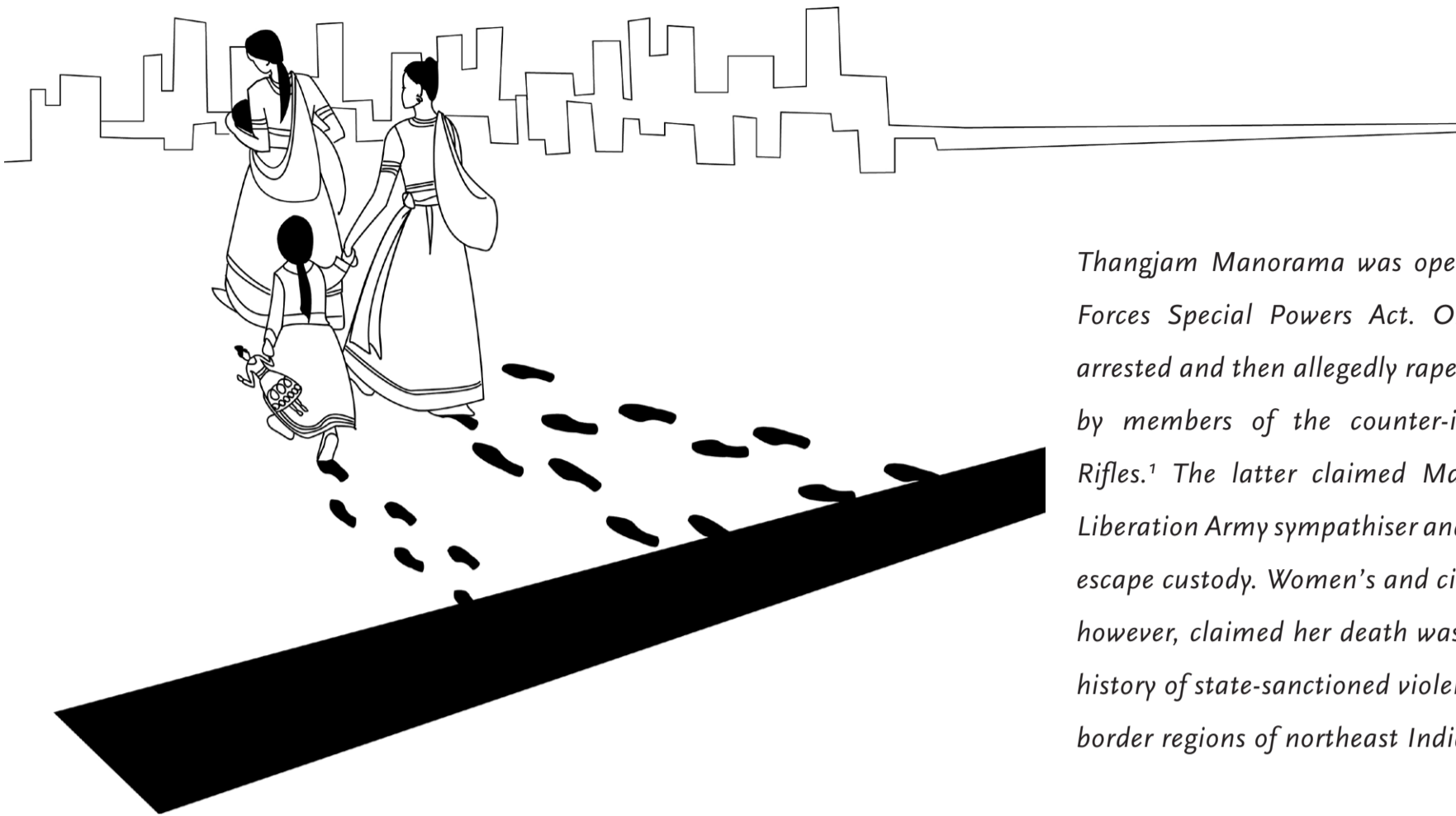
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Thangjam Manorama was openly critical of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. On 11 July 2004 she was arrested and then allegedly raped, tortured and murdered by members of the counter-insurgency group Assam Rifles.¹ The latter claimed Manorama was a People's Liberation Army sympathiser and was killed while trying to escape custody. Women's and civil liberties organisations, however, claimed her death was one more episode in the history of state-sanctioned violence against women in the border regions of northeast India.

Women and borders in militarised northeast India

Paula Banerjee

A history of violence

Surrounded by Bangladesh, Nepal, Burma, China and Bhutan, Northeast India is geographically isolated from the rest of the country. Due to its irredentist movements, the region is considered hostile by the central government. In 1958 New Delhi passed the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) specifically for the region; while it was originally meant for six months, it remains in force today. Among its many articles, AFSPA gives any commissioned member of the armed forces the right to kill anyone suspected of being a terrorist. Civil liberties and women's organisations hold the legislation responsible for the plight of Northeastern women, who have been subjected to decades of human rights abuses.

The region's history under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act reflects how women have suffered under the two patriarchies of rebel and state armed forces.² After the Act's passage, state security personnel flooded into the region while migrants responded to the demand for labour to build roads and military infrastructure. This increased the number of males and exacerbated the already uneven gender ratio: the 2001 census reported 978 women per 1,000 men in Manipur, 975 in Meghalaya, 950 in Tripura, 938 in Mizoram, 932 in Assam, 909 in Nagaland and 901 in Arunachal Pradesh. This coincided with increased violence against women who were marginalised from

public spaces, while state-sanctioned and inter-communal conflict further intensified their marginalisation. Human rights abuses against women considered members of alien groups became endemic: rape, torture, trafficking and the sex trade have all increased in recent years. Newspapers report that 'the northeast has become a supply zone for trafficking women and children not only in the flesh trade, but for forced labour, child labour, organ transplantation, camel jockeys and others.'³

Threats from beyond?

Migration is considered one of the area's greatest security threats, with rebel violence and terrorism routinely portrayed as external threats which justify AFSPA. Most migration-related media reports from Northeast India verge on the sensational, are anti-immigrant, and typically emphasise the need to protect native sons and daughters. The atmosphere is now so tense that both internal and external migrant workers are regularly attacked. Infiltration is indeed among the threats that Northeast Indian women face; as the border is porous, it is easy for criminals to cross over, attack women (on either side) and then disappear back behind the border. While rape is common and is often blamed on people from across the border, the public rarely acknowledges that these incidents are part of a more general rise in violence against women, including kidnapping and marital rape.⁴

A related trend concerns Northeast matrilineal tribes such as the Khasis,

Garos and Jaintias, where migration is being used to justify making these tribes patrilineal in order to change inheritance patterns. In 1997, the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council – which has constitutional jurisdiction over Khasi 'customary law' – passed the Khasi Social Custom of Lineage Bill. It sought to codify the traditional system of inheritance through the female line, but it drew protests led by the all-male organisation *Syngkhong Rympei Thymai* (SRT), which called for changes to the matrilineal system. SRT executive Teibor Khongee claimed: 'We are just like refugees and the moment we get married we are at the mercy of our in-laws. We are reduced to bulls and baby-sitters with virtually no role in society.' The SRT claim outsiders marry Khasi women for their property. 'There is frustration among the Khasi youth', reported Shillong school teacher Peter Lyngdoh, who had to move to his wife's house after his marriage. 'I think this should be changed. We have no land, no business and our generation ends with us.'⁵ The Khasi Student Union (KSU) and the Naga Student Federation (NSF) have issued decrees prohibiting outsiders from marrying their women. The issues of migration/infiltration are thus not just used by the government to justify AFSPA; they have become tools to justify empowering men at the expense of already marginalised women.

Trafficking for the sex trade and for labour is also on the rise. India is one of seven Asian nations on the US watch list for human trafficking, and a tran-

sit country for prostitutes from Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal. Girls are practically imprisoned in the region's brothels while children as young as nine are auctioned off for up to 60,000 rupees to buyers from as far as away as the Persian Gulf. 'A sizeable proportion of prostitutes found in Kamathipura and Sonagachi, the infamous red-light districts of Mumbai and Kolkata, respectively, are of Nepalese origin.... Of the 5,000-7,000 Nepalese girls trafficked into India each year, the average age over the past decade has fallen' from between 14 and 16 years to between 10 and 14 years.⁶

AIDS adds to their misery. 'Women and children who are trafficked are at high risk for infection with HIV, which is a death sentence for the victims.'⁷ Most newspaper reports portray AIDS as a disease from abroad: 'prostitutes, who

belong to the immigrant population, are the main carriers of the virus.'⁸ Wild stories proliferate: women from communities in conflict with the state are said to infect themselves in order to infect the armed forces, thus justifying the security measures allowed by AFSPA.

Increased migration has thus become an occasion for men to reconfirm their control over resources. The plight of women in Northeast India demonstrates how in times of crisis, women are victimised not merely by external power structures but also by those of their own communities. ◀

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Notes

1. See Shakespeare, L.W. 1980. *History of the Assam Rifles*. Gauhati: Spectrum Publications.
2. See Banerjee, Paula. 2001. 'Between Two Armed Patriarchies: Women in Assam and Nagaland'. Manchanda, Rita, ed. *Beyond Victimhood to Agency: Women War and Peace in South Asia*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
3. ——. 1 October 2005. 'Anti-trafficking Consultation: An Eye-opener'. *Imphal Free Press*.
4. National Commission for Women report quoted in *Hindustan Times*, 3 January 2005.
5. Seema Hussain. 'Khasi Men Question their Role in Matriarchal Society'. www.khasi.ws/khasimen.htm.
6. July 2001. 'Strengthening Cross Border Networks to Combat Trafficking of Women and Girls'. Proceedings of workshop organised by NNAGT and supported by UNIFEM. Kathmandu, p.42.
7. Donna M. Hughes quoted in: King, Gilbert. 2004. *Woman, Child for Sale: The New Slave Trade in the 21st Century*. New York: Chamberlain Brothers, p.172.
8. Ibid.