

THE SHATTERING OF THE LAND OF JEWELS

GARY CACHIA reports on the human rights situation in the little-known Indian state of Manipur and finds that children shoulder much of the suffering.

Unlike the rest of India, the picturesque state of Manipur is often neglected by travellers. Sliced off from the main body of India, Manipur is located in the north east of the country, wedged between Bangladesh and Myanmar. But geographical isolation isn't the only reason that travellers steer clear of Manipur. To travel in Manipur, requires a special permit from the Indian government. The Australian government also recommends that travellers avoid going to Manipur because of the current "security situation".

There are many reasons why Manipur might be a place that tourists would like to visit. Manipur is well known in the field of art and culture and is best represented by the classical Manipuri style of dance. A style peculiar to itself, its inspiration is purely religious and reflects the vibrant culture of the 29 different tribes of Manipur. The state also boasts an exotic landscape with gently undulating hills, emerald green valleys, blue lakes and dense forests.

The following article explains why Manipur, which literally means 'the land of the jewels', has been struck off the tourist trail. It also highlights some of the atrocities that have occurred in the region since independence from British rule.

India is the world's largest democracy with a population of 980 million and has experienced 5000 years of civilisation within known history. Despite all the divisions and differences of religion, caste, language, ethnicity and culture, and despite its poverty and illiteracy, India subscribes

to and believes in democracy, both as a system of government and a way of life. However, the political situation in Manipur shows that the country still has a long way to come before it becomes a fully-fledged democratic nation.

★ A Brief History

Originally a princely state, Manipur was ruled by a succession of *Maharajas* (kings), who were descended from an Indian adventurer known as Pakhangba. The dynasty reigned uninterrupted, for hundreds of years until Manipur was made an integral part of the Indian Union in 1949. Manipur was the last state to be conquered by the British and the last state to be merged into India.

A lot of controversy surrounds the merging of Manipur with India. Maharaja Budhachandra wanted Manipur to remain as an autonomous unit of India enjoying responsible government. The Maharaja went to Shillong to meet the Governor to discuss administrative problems of Manipur in 1949. Instead of discussing the administrative problems he signed the Merger Agreement on 21 September the same year.

An atmosphere of secrecy seemed to surround the negotiation of the Merger Agreement particularly whether the merger was voluntary or not. The merger came into force on the 15 October 1949 and was placed on part "C" of the Indian constitution.

★ How the Jewel is being shattered

The population of Manipur is approximately 2 million. There are approximately 70,000 Indian military personnel (1 soldier for every 28 Manipuris) located within its 22,000 square kilometres.

Manipur is classified as a restricted area by the Indian government and permits are required for access to both citizens and non-citizens. The permit entitles people to travel within supervised groups only, they last three days and are issued exclusively by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

This tight level of restrictive access ensures that visitors only see what the regime wants them to see. "The Indian government has used restrictions on access to hide the serious human rights situation in the north-east region," reported Amnesty International. "This has resulted in a climate being created in which the security forces are able to use excessive force with impunity."

Since 1996 Amnesty International has produced 23 reports highlighting the situation in Manipur and has released 49 press releases condemning human rights violations. The reports explore atrocities ranging from the systemic use of rape to disappearances and executions committed by military personnel.

★ Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act

Armed opposition groups have been active in Manipur since the 1950s. What began, as a movement for self-determination for the indigenous



Naga people is today far more complex. Various other tribal and non-tribal communities have become engaged in the conflict. A faction-ridden armed opposition has emerged, organised on the basis of community affiliations and conflicting demands for greater autonomy and self-determination.

For over four decades, the *Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958* has been in force in Manipur as a response to the armed opposition group. The *Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act* confers broadly defined powers in the armed forces to "shoot to kill" persons under suspicion of conducting anti nationalistic actions.

On the 8 September 1980 the Indian Government declared the entire state of Manipur to be "disturbed", under section 3 of the Act, which allowed for the universal implementation of the act across the entire state. The armed forces special powers act was challenged in the Supreme Court of India in 1997 but was later dismissed by the Supreme Court.

This law has fostered a climate in which the agents of law enforcement use excessive force with impunity. As well as providing powers to shoot to kill, the Act provides virtual immunity from prosecution to those forces acting under it. Despite consistent allegations of widespread human rights violations in areas of the north east of India where the Act is in operation no member of the security forces has been prosecuted for a human rights violation.

★ The impact on children

This excerpt from the Amnesty International report *Manipur: The silencing of youth* (ASA 20/05/98 May 1998) highlight the plight faced by children living in the province.

"Children are often the silent witnesses to appalling human rights violations in Manipur. In several recent incidents, children have been forced to witness their mothers being subjected to rape and sexual harassment by security forces. On 4 April 1998, a woman was raped in Keirenphabi village in Manipur. Army personnel just outside the house in which she was being raped reportedly held her four-year-old son with a gun to his head. Similarly, an eight-year-old boy suffering from polio was forced to witness the rape of his mother in the outskirts of Imphal in August 1996." Children in Manipur are also directly targeted by security forces, and subjected to torture, "disappearance" and sanctioned executions. In particular, security forces often perceive young boys to be supporters, collaborators and potential future members of opposition groups. By targeting young men for persecution and intimidation security forces believe they can prevent future generations from becoming "terrorists".

Amnesty International has reported a number of incidents where teenaged boys were tortured and sometimes killed in the process of rooting out armed insurgency groups. Other young boys have been forced to watch their mothers being bashed, or were bashed in front of their mothers. Sometimes children become random

victims of indiscriminate killings by security forces.

Ethnic conflict in Manipur has affected and claimed the lives of hundreds of children. Opposition groups in Manipur are also responsible for subjecting children to human rights abuses. They have subjected children to kidnapping, rape, torture and executions. Security forces have been accused of failing to protect communities from attack and steps are rarely taken to investigate incidents and bring those responsible to justice.

★ Some other outcomes of the conflict in Manipur

Civilians account for 90 per cent of the casualties in Manipur and indeed it is the civilian population who are the target of the violence. The government practices random acts of violence that aims to demoralise and paralyse the local people. As a result the local infrastructure is slowly deteriorating. Government services are often suspended, banks shut down for months on end and general strikes occur with alarming regularity. Civil rights are destroyed, including the right to freedom of information. All media outlets are heavily censored. In such an environment, corruption is rife and those in authority make not attempt to eliminate it.

★ The Australian Government Stance

The Federal government of Australia has few postings relating to human rights violations in India. The only relevant posting relating

to human rights comes from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade issues the following standard warning to Australian citizens contemplating travel to India:

"Australians travelling to India are reminded that...prior permission is required from the Indian authorities to visit certain parts of the country, particularly in the north-east...The security situation in the north-east remains uncertain. Australian citizens should consider deferring travel to the states of Assam, Nagaland, Tripura and Manipur."

This warning highlights some of the complexity of the situation. The Australian Government provides little public information on the situation in India.

★ Hope from despair

Despite the horrific human rights abuses being perpetrated, hope still remains for the people of Manipur. In October 1993 the Indian Government established The National Human Rights Commission as an expression of concern for the protection and promotion of human rights. The commission has its own investigations team and has the power to investigate all forms of human rights abuses. The commission is an autonomous body established by an act of parliament. The chairperson and other members of the commission are appointed by the president after being recom-

mended by a high-profile committee.

In 1997 the commission received 20,833 complaints relating to human rights violations across India. In 1998 the commission received 36,800 complaints, an increase of nearly 77 per cent. The commission has not yet published the results from 1999 but it is likely that they will shed some light on the situation in Manipur.

Anna Pinto, Director of the Women and Children Division from the Centre for Organisation Research & Education (CORE) addresses some other solutions to human rights abuses in her article *Indigenous children of north east of India: The denial of childhood*. Pinto argues for programs to be developed and implemented on a range of strategies in addition to those being implemented by the National Human Rights Commission.

Pinto suggests that to improve the human rights situation for children in the north east there must be education campaigns for professionals and government functionaries working with children. There is also a need to provide vocational training programs for children in services such as health, trades and small business management, she says. Upon completing such training, children should be given access to micro-credit facilities. Pinto urges for the establishment of community-based therapy and crisis support as well as outreach programs addressing children and their caretakers.

"The most important obstacle to overcome is the suspicion and hostility of both state and non-state actors to activists working in this sensitive and extremely difficult field," writes Pinto. "Without this tolerance...activists will be targeted, their support and functioning mechanisms obstructed and their work disrupted. With the increasing hostility and growing sense of injustice felt by sympathisers of either party to the conflict, the impartiality of activists must be respected as essential for the well being of the child."

If pressure on the National Human Rights Commission remains strong, along with continued international pressure from agencies and individuals, the way ahead for the people of Manipur may become brighter. With any luck, the doors to Manipur will be flung open so that its cultural heritage and environmental beauty will be recognised around the world. ■

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REFERENCES

Amnesty International, *Manipur: The silencing of youth*, (ASA 20/05/98 May 1998).

Pinto A & N Thckchom, *Indigenous children of north east of India: The denial of childhood*, The Centre for Organisation Research & Education.

★ What you can do to improve the situation in Manipur

You can write letters to the Government of India, your local Member of Parliament, The Minister for Foreign Affairs and make the following points:

Express concern at evidence that articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child are being violated with impunity in India, in particular in Manipur. Urge the authorities to implement in practice articles of the Convention, ratified by India in 1992;

Urge the authorities to ensure that security forces respect the right of individuals in Manipur to peacefully protest against human rights violations and to give a commitment that peaceful protests will not be met with force.

Express concern to the authorities about the climate of impunity in Manipur. Urge that immediate measures be taken by the central and state authorities to ensure that there are no legal or practical impediments to bringing those responsible for human rights violations to justice in accordance with international standards.

Urge the Indian government to retract the Armed Forces (Special powers) Act of 1958

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