

Rape as a tool of political persecution: What the Manipur video tells us

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The shocking video from Manipur, where three Kuki women can be seen paraded naked and sexually assaulted, allegedly by a Meiti mob, once again establishes how gendered violence remains a tactical tool in areas of conflict. It also raises questions about the role of the state which does not take preventive measures to address this.

While the extent of violence against the three women is horrific enough, it must be noted that police complicity in the attack has also been reported. On Thursday, July 20, a day after the footage surfaced, The Indian Express ran an article quoting one of the survivors. The survivor [told IE](#), “The police were there with the mob which was attacking our village. The police picked us up from near home, and took us a little away from the village and left us on the road with the mob. We were given to them by the police.

Manipuri women’s rights activist and expert on issues regarding women in conflict zones, Mary Beth Sanate says that Manipur has been in conflict for many decades, and since the mid 1980’s, there have been several ethnic conflicts, armed conflicts, conflicts over land and forest, inter-boundary disputes, conflict of political aspirations and ideology, etc., and it has been a highly militarised state. “In all these conflicts and militarisations, women and children suffer utmost violence,” she says.

Elaborating on the lack of action by the Union and state governments in Manipur, lawyer and womens’ rights activist Vrinda Grover says that a police officer in the area confirmed that a zero First Information Report (FIR) was registered on May 18, days after the said incident in the video occurred. A ‘zero FIR’ is a first information report that can be filed at any police station contrary to regular FIRs that need to be filed in the jurisdiction in which the crime has occurred. “The media and general public got to know of this incident only Wednesday (July 19), but the state knew. The Chief Minister knew and we assume the Home Minister was intimidated. Yet, until the public, particularly women, expressed horror on social media, there was absolute silence. Can the

state simply hide behind the explanation that such instances of sexual violence occur when conflict breaks out?" she says.

Suchitra Vijayan, author, founder and executive director of Polis Project tells TNM that it is important to not see the incident within the narrative of "a few bad apples." She also draws the connection between martial rape by the armed forces, the role of the police, and the kind of violence that's currently unfolding in Manipur.

Citing two widely reported rape cases in Manipur, Mary Beth speaks about Thanjom Manorama, a 32-year-old woman, who was raped and murdered on July 11, 2004 by the Para Military Unit of Assam Rifles. "Her bullet-ridden and badly mutilated dead body was found abandoned three kilometres away from her home where she was arrested the night before. On January 16, 2006, armed insurgents belonging to the valley-based United Nation Liberation Front (UNLF) raped 21 girls. Levis Hmar, a 21-year-old girl, told the media then that UNLF members went to her village, beat up male members in the residences, targeted the fairer girls of the village, dragging some of them into the jungle or to nearby houses. All these girls were sexually assaulted," she says, recalling news reports.

In Manorama's case, the Guwahati High Court had let go of her harassers since the Assam Rifles had been deployed under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, and the state government did not have jurisdiction over them. It was only in 2014, after many protests, that the Supreme Court awarded a compensation of Rs 10 lakh to her family. But her perpetrators were never punished. The image of women protesting the inaction, naked, bearing banners that said 'Indian Army, rape us', haunts the nation's conscience even today.

Suchitra says that military uses sexual violence in the borderlands whether it is in Kashmir or in the North Eastern states, calling it ubiquitous. "There is extensive documentation of such violence. From that what we see is the police becoming arbiters in terms of violence in the community. They become purveyors of not only custodial violence and death, but also purveyors of sexual violence within communities. Going forward from there, what we now see is that the violence is no longer in the hands of the state. It is outsourced to the majoritarian mob—what we call collective public violence."

Suchitra goes on to say in this regard that, "The mob is already primed and prepped for violence across the board. We can see this in the case of the Gujarat riots as well. That model is being perfected. The mob becomes the absolute purveyor of collective public violence, aided and abetted by the

police and the Indian state. The majoritarian group, which is given immense power by the state, can now by itself inflict physical and sexual violence. And the state is willingly standing aside and watching or aiding and abetting.”

Throughout history, whether it is wars, communal upheavals, civil discord, or caste clashes, the female body has repeatedly become a site of violence. The example of Shobana Dharmaraja, known as Isaipriya, is a parallel that cannot be forgotten in this context. Isaipriya was a Sri Lankan Tamil journalist who broadcasted news for the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Elam (LTTE) during the civil conflict in Sri Lanka. In the last leg of the Sri Lankan civil war, Isaipriya was captured by the Sri Lankan army. She was raped and tortured before being killed.

“This is a recurring pattern and whenever communal or ethnic tensions have broken out, women’s bodies have been targeted because they are seen not as belonging to individual women, but as repositories of the community’s honour, and as tools to humiliate and put the entire community in place,” Vrinda says.

Recurring pattern in conflict zones

This pattern of targeted sexual violence on women during conflict is an ongoing concern across the world. Citing multiple United Nations (UN) reports, the publication Think Global Health [points out](#), “Sexual violence during conflict can be divided into three overarching categories: a war tactic, widely committed with an intentional purpose; tolerated, but not specifically ordered, by leaders; and committed independently by individuals when the opportunity arises.”

Similarly, a 2014 UN report on the Rwanda Genocide highlights that the victims of armed conflict are far more likely to be civilians rather than soldiers, “The vast majority of casualties in today’s wars are among civilians, mostly women and children. Women in particular can face devastating forms of sexual violence, which are sometimes deployed systematically to achieve military or political objectives.”

The report further adds, “Rape committed during war is often intended to terrorize the population, break up families, destroy communities, and, in some instances, change the ethnic make-up of the next generation.”

Speaking to TNM, lawyer, human rights defender and executive director of People’s Watch, Henri Tiphagne, points out how this pattern of violence against women in any kind of conflict zone is repetitive. “In the instance of any major upheaval, be it caste-based, communal, or ethnic, gendered violence is the primary weapon of choice. This is true of conflicting groups of

people and in the case of state authorities. When it comes to state authorities, sexual violence is an instrument of repressing entire groups of people. In India it is used predominantly against Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim and Christian women. And contrary to popular belief, similar violence, occurs in the southern part of the country as much as it does in the North.”

Advocate Sudha Ramalingam too emphasises how this pattern keeps repeating. “Sexual violence has always been used throughout history for political one-upmanship. We see that in the contexts of wars, for example, when apart from plundering the losing side, women were abducted and raped,” she says.

The use of sexual violence for one-upmanship is true today just as in the past, whether it be a political upheaval or personal grudge, according to her. “In the patriarchal fabric, women are property and an attack on them is a way of cowering the men from the opposite side into submission. It is a form of signalling. The thought process is, if women and children are attacked, whatever else fails to cow the men, this will not,” she says

Sudha further points out that even in the case of private disagreements between men, it is women who become collateral damage. She cites a recent case from Cuddalore district in Tamil Nadu. “A young panchayat president, Mannivanan, in Semmakottai has been doing good work and has built up quite a following. His opponent, Vel Murugan, has been unable to defeat him. The means he took to bring him down was to publicise a video of Mannivanan’s extramarital lover. The relationship between the two was consensual and private. Vel Murugan accessed a video clip of them together and spread it among the public. He even had it published in the local newspaper. The woman, unable to face the public harassment, is struggling with suicidal ideation now.”

Sudha’s sentiments are echoed in a paper by Claudia Card, a professor of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. In her paper, Rape as Weapon of War, she writes “The ubiquitous threat of rape in war, like that of civilian rape, is a form of terrorism. As with other kinds of terrorism, rape as a practice often has two targets. One target may be a throw-away or sacrificial victim who is used to send a message to others. The role of women who are raped and then murdered is like that of people who are murdered in a bombing. They are used to send a message to the second targets, whose compliance with various demands and expectations is sought by the terrorist.” Writer and activist Meena Kandasamy says that from the time when war used to be an exclusively all-male activity, and the idea of subjugating or raping conquered women was seen as something similar to loot and pillage, the spoils

of war. Over the course of time, rape itself has been weaponised into a tactic of war or conflict, making it an easy path to terrorise a population into submission.

What message is the state giving women?

Despite there being an FIR, one accused seen in the video was arrested on July 20, 77 days after the incident. Vrinda Grover points out that the state's inaction in situations like this gives women a clear message that their perpetrators will be granted impunity.

“The men are visible in the video, it's a cognisable, non bailable crime. So if you have registered an FIR, you must make an arrest immediately. The arrest took place on July 20, after women expressed anguish on social media and the Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud said he is taking suo motu cognisance and asked the state to act. Now the Union government and the state machinery have awakened. What message is this giving the women of this country?” she asks.

A woman journalist who has been reporting from Kashmir for the past 6 years, especially post the Article 370 abrogation, tells TNM on the condition of anonymity that communication shutdown is a big tool the state often uses, making it impossible for so many to cover facts on ground. The frequent internet shutdowns in conflict zones also directly impacts women when violence is meted out to them, isolating them from gaining any external support.

“It is always the government which should take responsibility for whatever happens during such violence. They should take cognisance of the situation and of anyone who's responsible for such heinous crimes against women. Not just common citizens but also security forces/police personnel must be put before the law,” she says.

Meena says that be it the case of Manipur or the Tamil women of Eelam, rape was first weaponised by state actors, occupying forces, the police, and the army. “I think it is important we recognise that rape, often by a state force, has long enjoyed impunity in this region, and now we see that in the context of systematic ethnic clashes, it is coming to the fore again. In addition to the immense physical and mental harm, the trauma of the experience and the destruction of selfhood that victims face, such use of rape also definitely is aimed to other a certain group of people, shame them, and make them live in constant, predictable fear,” she says.

Vrinda also adds that in this context, we must not forget Bilkis Bano, who was gangraped during the riots in Gujarat in 2002. “Her violators were granted remission by the Gujarat government and released recently. The way she was denied justice still haunts the nation and it is that very thread that runs through the conscience of the state,” she says.

Emphasising that the state must use its power to safeguard women and individuals from marginalised identities when conflict breaks out in any area, Vrinda also says that the entire situation must be investigated by the police. “We have seen this one video, but is this the only such incident that has happened in Manipur in the last few months? We don’t know but the police must find out and ensure they take preventive and punitive action. Otherwise, why should a woman trust this state or any of its machineries to help her?” she asks, adding that it is the state’s duty to use its power to protect the dignity and safety of people. “If it fails to do that, what is its power worth?” she says. Meena adds that we are reacting to the images we have seen – images that didn’t reach the mainstream because of internet shutdowns. “These are the tip of the iceberg and often, the horrors are uncountable,” she says.

Mary Beth says that often, when it comes to peace building, it is again the women who are burdened with the onus. “The women in Manipur as individuals and as women collectives are actively engaging in the frontline of conflict as human shields, protesters, protectors of community, mediators and peace builders while being victims of violence in different forms. After the conflict, it is again the women who shoulder the burden of peace building and community building,” she points out.

<https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/rape-tool-political-persecution-what-manipur-video-tells-us-180044>