
**Article: Terrifying Picnics, Vernacular Human Rights, Cosmos Flowers:
Ethnography about Militarised Cultures in Northeast India**

Author(s): Dolly Kikon

Source: Explorations, ISS e-journal, Vol. 1 (1), April 2017, pp. 48-71

Published by: Indian Sociological Society

Terrifying Picnics, Vernacular Human Rights, Cosmos Flowers: Ethnography about Militarised Cultures in Northeast India

--- Dolly Kikon

Abstract

In this article, I focus on the social life of vernacular human rights culture in Northeast India and present three ethnographic accounts about experiences of human rights from the region. Often engagements about human rights and engage with different audiences – from policy makers, activists, academics, and grassroots organisations – quickly fall into two categories. Those who look out draw from international institutions like the United Nations and similar rights policies and regulations. While the second group, those who look in, connects with social and political movements in their local contexts. However, no categories are neat. Highlighting everyday experiences of human rights activities in Northeast India, this essay describes the ethics and challenges of engaging with notions of human rights in militarised societies like Northeast India.

Key words: Armed forces, Human rights, Insurgency, MASS

Introduction

During the summer of 1998, I was in Dimapur for my summer break. I was studying law in Delhi University and as a member of a human rights organisation in Nagaland, the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR),¹ some friends and I organised a human rights workshop. Such exercises were routine for many of us. During this particular summer, we organised a three-day workshop that started in the morning and ended with dinner. As one of the organisers, I would wake up in the morning and rush off after informing my mother that I was going for an NPMHR meeting. One evening my mother asked me, ‘So how much did your boss pay you for your work?’ Confused I replied, ‘Which boss?’ And she reminded me, ‘Your boss Mr. M.P. Mishra?’ I told her, ‘Mom. I am not working for Mr. M.P. Mishra’, and explained that NPMHR was an acronym for an organisation, the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights.

I was introduced to the world of human rights through organisations with comprehensive aims, objectives, and acronyms. Today, as an anthropologist working in an armed conflict region like Northeast India, I frequently come across instruments, mechanisms, regulations, resolutions, declarations, and charters that appear in various human rights documents. Yet, for my mother's generation – the notion of human rights was seldom linked to a structured organisation like the NPMHR, but more to nameless political collectives in the villages where friends and neighbours volunteered their time, produce – grains, cattle, labour among other things – for the Naga movement. My mother was born before the Second World War and her childhood memories of the fierce battle that raged in the Naga Hills is a mixture of sounds and smells: the gun shots, the ambulances rushing to the military hospitals, and the whispers of her siblings in the underground shelter when the battle intensified around them. Moving on, she lived through the Second World War, the India- China War of 1962, the formation of Nagaland in 1963, and the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Her generation became the first batch of casualty of India's counter insurgency operations in postcolonial India. She told me how the Indian security forces set up check gates outside her village and stamped the wrists of the cultivators with red ink as they went to the paddy fields. In the evening, the villagers were required to show the red inscriptions in order to re-enter the village. This was one of the countless counter insurgency tactics besides rape, torture, and disappearances that have taken place in the long armed conflict in Northeast India. My mother's generation also lived to witness the most violent phases of the fratricidal killings among the Nagas and other ethnic groups.

In this article, I focus on the social life of vernacular human rights culture in Northeast India and present three ethnographic accounts about experiences of human rights from the region. Often engagements about human rights and engagement with different audiences – from policy makers, activists, academics, and grassroots organisations – quickly fall into two categories. Those who look out draw from international institutions like the United Nations and similar rights policies and regulations. While the second group, those who look in, connects with social and political movements in their local contexts. However, no categories are neat. This article highlights how everyday experiences of human rights activities in Northeast India might help us to understand the practices,

ethics, and challenges of engaging with notions of human rights in militarised societies like Northeast India and beyond.

Here, it is important to contextualise the political history of Northeast India briefly. The region has seen numerous armed conflicts since Indian's independence and is considered as the hub of the longest running insurgency movement in South Asia, the Indo-Naga armed conflict. The South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) presents that the entire region has approximately close to a hundred insurgency/terrorism movement². Within this backdrop, the standard of human rights in Northeast India has been deplorable given the imposition of extra constitutional regulations like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958). However, in the early 1990s, human rights became an official state project in India. The Human Rights Protection Act was passed in 1993. Within this act, Section 2 Clause (d) of Act defines 'human rights' as, '...the rights relating to life, liberty, equality, and dignity of the individual guaranteed by the Constitution or embodied in the international Covenants and enforceable by courts in India.'³ Soon, even though the armed conflict and counter insurgency operations in Northeast India carried on, the Manipur Human Rights Commission was set up in 1998 and the Assam Human Rights Commission came up in 1996 as a consequence of the establishment of the Human Rights Protection Act of 1993. However, the formation of the Manipur and Assam Human Rights Commissions played a marginal role for the militarised societies in Northeast⁴. These state human rights commissions were not authorised to take up cases relating to the Indian security forces, which magnified the disjuncture between the everyday experiences and understandings about what constitutes human rights on the ground and the dysfunctional and defunct procedures that were laid down by state authorities. In these state commissions, certain practices were recognised as human rights violation and therefore necessary to be addressed, while those outside the ambit of the rights commissions were excluded and left out⁵.

In the backdrop of this political history about the contestations over what constitutes human rights in Northeast India, the following section of the article is divided into three sections. First, I describe a picnic trip with a human rights activist from Ukhrul and his encounters with various actors – both state and non-state – as he explains his social and political world. The second section of the paper is presented as an interview with a former human rights activist from Assam. His reflections about his arrests and what constituted human rights from

‘the ground’ offers understandings about the fragile lives of rights activists. The final section of the paper presents conversations during a road trip with an activist from Imphal. Conversations about family, landscape, and hobbies such as gardening offer the diverse and complex world of people in militarised zones. Emphasizing on the practice of everyday life as an important site to tease important social histories of human society, this article focuses on the everyday lives of people and reiterates what, Michel de Certeau notes as, ‘the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible.’ (de Certeau, 1988, p. 93). The experiences of human rights activists I present in the following section of this article is highly ethnographic, but is founded on a theoretical framework of human rights, justice, and violence.

Picnics, Death, and Terror

In the summer of 2013 I visited the home of James and the trip left an impression on my mind. As my stay came to an end in James’s hometown, we trekked up a mountain one morning with a group of friends. As we climbed higher, he told us that he had attended an international workshop on human rights in a South Asian country recently. He shared his experiences about the different simulation exercises they had to carry out. Initially, he found it amusing but said that he enjoyed the interaction with other participants from Thailand and Cambodia. As we were talking about his trip, the fog began to roll in. Apart from the scattered cattle grazing on the foggy mountain that morning, we did not come across anyone. ‘This is an ideal place for a picnic!’ James announced, abandoning his reflections about the human rights workshop and told us how picnics were important occasions when he was growing up. As teenagers in the 1980s, picnics were an opportunity to invite their classmates – particularly girls they fancied. James’s memory lingered on the cassettes. The tape recorder was the device that controlled the mood of the picnic. In order to save the battery life of the recorder during these social outings, James and his friends took turn to rewind and forward the cassettes by inserting their fingers, twigs, and pens in the spools. ‘We exactly knew where to stop. We had memorised the spot where our favorite song would start’, he told us.

Throughout the year, the fog is part of the landscape in James’s hometown. Irrespective of what residents are doing – going to school, eating their meals, or working in their paddy fields – within minutes the fog takes over this town. I

imagined James and his friends as a band of teenagers appearing from a mountain of fog carrying a tape recorder booming their favorite number. Then inserting pens and fingers to manually rewind and forward the cassettes. Was it not an ideal place to fall in love I asked James, half teasing him but serious at the same time. 'Not quite', he responded. James's hometown located in Ukhrul district, a Naga inhabited area located in the hills of Manipur witnessed some of the most brutal accounts of the India-Naga conflict since the 1950s. The trauma and structural violence is still visible in James' hometown and among the community in the neighboring villages as well⁶.

Like several towns located on the international border between India and Burma, James's district became the transit point for drug trafficking. By the 1980s, along with the presence of the Indian forces and the Naga insurgents, the availability of heroin and drug peddlers swallowed the residents into a deeper hole of violence and nightmare. The most vulnerable group was the teenagers who began to experiment with drugs – particularly heroin. Many of them became addicted to the substance. James said that he also began to experiment with heroin but discovered that he was allergic to the substance. At the period of time he thought 'what an unfortunate thing'. He could not join his friends, but began to sell it to his neighbours and friends. James was in middle school when he sold his first stash of drugs.

James described his teenage life in the following manner, 'Money was falling out of my pockets. I had so much money with me. I was handling hundred thousand rupees but I was so young, so I spent buying candies, giving treats to my friends, and blowing it up every day.' One day, the Naga insurgents posted in his town started a clean-up operation.

During that period a fresh consignment of heroin arrived for him. Excited to sell this new stock, he went to look for his best friend. As he walked towards the best friend's house, he came upon a crowd. When he walked up to the center of the human circle, he saw a terrifying sight. The body of his best friend lay on the ground. There was a bullet wound on his forehead that has created a gaping hold. 'His hands and legs were still trembling and blood was coming out of his mouth and ears', James said. It was part of the clean-up operation that the Naga insurgents had started in the town. The Naga armed group declared to impose a capital punishment on the drug peddling community and did not distinguish

between children and adults. Everyone they caught during that phase of the clean-up was executed publically.

Traumatized and shaken, James buried the consignment of heroin outside the town and ran away. He travelled to the next district and joined the same insurgent unit that had killed his best friend. His stint as a guerrilla soldier did not last long. Just out of high school and the eldest child in the family, his mother went to the commander general of the insurgent unit and requested the insurgent organisation to release James of his duties on compassionate grounds. A few weeks later, James was escorted out of the guerrilla training camp and made to board a bus that was headed to his hometown.

Not long after that, James said he went off to a theological seminary in South India. A few years later, armed with a theological degree he returned to his hometown. Given the heightened conflict situation and the violence he witnessed, he began to organise meetings and fact-finding trips across his district and beyond. Gradually he began to devote more time for civil and political rights activities than for his local church where he had begun to work in a youth ministry. I asked him, 'So how is it to be a human rights activist now?' Looking embarrassed, he said he did not see himself as a human rights activist. Instead, he said that he was someone who was just 'running around constantly'. As I listened to James's stories of growing up all the way to his trauma and returning back to his hilltop town, his past and the present realities he negotiated everyday served as a reminder about the limitations of conventional notions of human rights activists. The label of activism was only part of a label that James embraced when he attended workshops I had noted earlier. By defining himself as someone who was 'running around constantly,' James seemed to capture the relation that connected his activities with his bodily movement. Considering the number of tasks he carried out and the various social and political positions he held, he was actually always on the move. The asymmetries that exist between the official definition of rights and ethics and the experiences of practitioners like James drew my attention towards the everyday political lives of human rights in violent and militarised places like Northeast India. James listed out some of his everyday activities as follows:

- (a) Organising relief measures such as malaria medicines, soaps, and cultural concerts for villages between the India and Burma international borders.

- (b) Negotiating with different insurgent factions in the hills and valleys whenever residents are abducted for political vengeance.
- (c) Attending inter-ethnic student union meetings to negotiate for peace during inter-ethnic tensions, and mobilise them to collaborate on various campaigns and protests.
- (d) Volunteering as a guide and informant for civil and political rights groups who visit his district and arranging their accommodation and travel itinerary.
- (e) Always available to fill up a spot anytime a member from his human rights organisation is unable to make it for a meeting or a fact-finding trip.
- (f) Attending the various 'martyrs' day' observed by his ethnic community in his district and across the neighbouring states.
- (g) Carrying out small contracts and projects to help out the household.
- (h) Working as a negotiator whenever there are conflict between vernacular journalists and insurgent groups regarding reports in the local newspapers.
- (i) Documenting and filing human rights violation reports.
- (j) Sending out human rights press release to different newspapers and organisations.

James's life presented the complex and entangled social worlds of human rights practitioners. The fact-finding reports and campaigns that James and his colleagues organised were often contested by state agencies, be it the state police or the Indian security forces. He said that at times, competing ethnic insurgents summon James to 'clarify' or 'apologise' for their position, reports or publications.

The social world that James inhabits presents the challenges of offering a neutral or a cleaned up description of the place and its human rights culture. By this I mean a clean narrative that separates the place as militarised and ravaged by war and terror and its inhabitants as either victims or accomplice of forces that state authorities are hunting down. In the case of the Naga people, the Indo-Naga armed conflict have presented two distinct enemy camps – the Indian state and the Naga people – yet in reality these lines and boundaries are not distinctly drawn. For several decades as the armed conflict waged, a section of Naga tribal elites emerged as the managers of the Indian state. Equipped with power, money, and authority, it was the rise of the Naga elites that also gave rise to the emergence of the Naga poor. Therefore, as the extreme poles of who constitutes the enemy camps (Nagas *versus* Indian state) important political issues such as cases of

sexual violence and domestic abuse within the community were treated as non-issues⁷.

Although this kind of activism is often left behind with the neat structured language of human rights, James's everyday engagements with hostile groups, insurgents, and the community at large captures the very foundations of what constitutes the vernacular human rights culture. The essence of civil and political rights movement across the world lies in engaging with the troubling disjuncture between citizenship, justice, and equality. Thus, James's experiences and his transformation from a traumatised teenager, missionary, and eventually to a rights practitioner are deeply connected with the political and social cosmology of militarisation and violence. In places like Manipur, human rights exist within a political world that is deeply fractured and contentious. While rights practitioners like James cultivate solidarities between antagonistic ethnic groups, negotiate with insurgents to maintain peace, and protest against the extraction of resources and construction of big dams, they often face threats, arrests, and are constantly under state surveillance⁸.

Since the 1990s, the Indian armed forces operating in militarised zones across India have increasingly promoted human rights awareness workshops, set up medical camps and scholarships. Increasingly, the language of rights and justice that James and his colleagues practiced remained unintelligible to the state, while Indian security forces were authorised to bestow human rights culture and practices.

In this context, human rights is a charged political and moral field for state agencies and human rights practitioners alike. What did it take to understand 'human rights' without getting into the cycle of debates about taking sides in favour of the state or non-state actors? During our conversation, James said that paramilitary forces and the Indian intelligence wings listened to their phone conversations, scanned their emails, or raided their mailboxes. His friends had been picked up for interrogation as well. These activities were legitimised by state authorities and carried out in the name of maintaining law and order. Yes, this story was not an exceptional case restricted to Manipur as the following section shows.

A Vernacular History of Human Rights

Tezpur, Hailakadni, Golaghat, Sibsagar, Morigaon, Jorhat, Tinsukia, Nagaon, Guwahati, Nalbari, Boko, Barpeta, Dhemaji. These are names of towns, cities and village in the state of Assam. These are also names of places where Lachit Bordoloi has been arrested. 'I have been arrested twenty one times starting from the 1980s', he told me one evening as he reflected on his past as a human rights activist. Like James's accounts of 'running around constantly', Lachi also said that he started his activism in his youth, but began to engage closely with 'human rights issues' when he joined the *Manab Adhikari Sangram Samiti* (MASS) a human rights organisation in Assam in 1991. During our conversation in 2014, Lachit had resigned from MASS to devote his time for other social and political matters.

In the last decade or so, human rights have become an important language for activists and state agencies as well across Northeast India. Today, the Indian armed forces and the state police, and state institutions with a history of violence, extra-judicial killings and torture have adopted the language of human rights as I noted earlier in this article. However, it is important to examine how the language of rights was defined by grassroots activists and vernacular associations as a political principle. For many young activists in the 1990s, what started as a concept that defined cases of extra-judicial killings and violence gradually began to include issues of land acquisition and natural resources too.

Today, the notions and principles of human rights for many communities in Assam is intertwined with ethnic politics, resource management, and demands for land rights. However, in the following interview with Lachit Bordoloi he explains how human rights and how their meanings can be organically traced to the vernacular life of politics.

DK: What is your reflection about the history of human rights in Northeast India?

LB: Long before the formation of the national or state human rights commissions in Manipur and Assam, or the Protection of Human Rights Act of 1993, there was violation of human rights in Assam and other parts of Northeast India. In Manipur and Nagaland, there was large-scale violation of human rights since the 1950s, but in Assam it started after the requisition of the Indian army and the imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958). Before that, during the Assam

Agitation in the 1980s, there was large scale human rights violation, but the concept of human rights was absent. The whole movement was more focused on the foreigner's issue that is why the human rights view was missing. We were talking about atrocities and access use of force as a violation of democratic rights, but the whole concept of human rights was missing during this time. Then the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)⁹ came up and the imposition of army and imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (in Assam) created large scale violation of human rights. There was no human rights organisation in Assam at that time to take up the issue. So in 1991, *Manab Adhikari Sangram Samiti* (MASS) was formed in Assam and we realised the norms and the procedures of human rights; how in our daily lives, in every step, there was human rights violation.

DK: How did the formation of MASS help you to connect with the language of rights?

LB: Actually when we realised what constituted human rights violation, we saw that there were no human rights in Assam. We were not treated as humans by the Indian armed forces because there was a conflict. In conflict, the state agencies only give importance to combat. So human rights violation was normalised – both the urban and the rural people accepted the day-to-day violation of human rights as their fate. If an individual was picked up by the armed forces, beaten up, and released, the person felt lucky because he was alive. People were getting killed and there was a large-scale crime against women as well. In that situation, if someone survived even after a serious torture, he considered himself as lucky. After MASS started documenting the human rights issues and educating people (particularly in rural Assam) about human rights, people slowly started talking about human rights. They realised and came to know about the international standards of human rights or the question of human rights.

DK: What was your experience with the human rights culture in Northeast India after establishment of the state human rights commissions in Assam and Manipur?

LB: Even after the adoption of the National Human Rights Protection Act of 1993, the question of the state human rights commission was absent in Assam. But representing MASS (the human rights organisation), we went to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (in Geneva) and presented the case of human rights violation in Assam. The government representative (of India) assured us

that they would form a state human rights commission in Assam to look into the cases of violation. But by the virtue of the act, the state human rights commissions were ineffective in a situation of armed conflict. As you know, the human rights commission cannot take up cases related to armed forces, so the large part of the human rights violation were left out by the state human rights commission(s).

DK: How about cases that falls within the ambit of the state human rights commissions? What happened to them?

LB: Even for cases of domestic violence and other violations, the human rights commissions were not serious because you have to realise the political atmosphere at that time (in the 1990s). In a conflict situation, the conflict influences the courts, the human rights organisations, and even the society. Particularly, we have seen that armed conflict influences the court to a great extent. Earlier, the court took a very strong reaction towards each and every case of human rights violation, but slowly it went down and we witnessed that the court had become insensitive to all cases of human rights violation. In a similar manner, the human rights commission(s) also intentionally or under the influence of the government – because they are dependent on the government for their salary and budget – became insensitive to other cases of human rights violation, which were outside the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) that included the police.

We (MASS) had submitted many cases, hundreds of them, to the State Human Rights Commission of Assam. In many cases, the human rights commission sought a letter from the Superintendent of Police (SP) in the district. You know if the police are involved in a human rights violation case, their report will support and justify the case of violence. In such cases, after the human rights commissions got letters from the SP, the commission would send it across for your comment. After taking your comment, or even if they fail to get any comment from the complainer involved in the cases, they (the police) will dispose off the case. In 2000 the police fired on tea workers when they were protesting in Darrang (in Assam). The police killed 3-4 tea workers and we (MASS) lodged a complaint. A retired police officer who was appointed as a member of the state human rights commission (Assam) went there. He enjoyed the hospitality of the tea workers and afterwards submitted a report justifying the police firing. In another case, in 1998-99, MASS members protested against crime against women. In front of the DC's office in Bongaigaon the Indian armed forces assaulted a group of women

protesters. During the protest, the police beat up a woman member of the central executive committee of MASS, Ms. Dhira Chaudhary. The police also tore her clothes during the physical assault. We complained and the police took statement from the victim, but they (the human rights commission report) justified the action and the police booked her under the National Security Act (NSA).

We have seen that in every case, the state human rights commission took the side of the perpetrators. They cannot look into the case as a neutral body. Even in domestic violence cases, they do not take a position for the victim. This is because the ground reality is very different from the internationally recognised human rights standards. For example, if one woman or man is beaten up by the army, tortured, and is kept for several days in the camp, after he/she is released he/she will not file any complaint because he is grateful to be alive and survive the ordeal. In one case I remember in the border of Darrang district a place named Goreswar Line, an old man was picked up from his hotel by the Indian army and tortured to death in the army camp. We (MASS) petitioned about this case in the High Court. The court took up the case and sanctioned a compensation for the victim's family. After that, the army took revenge. They picked up his son and killed him too. So if the victim files a complaint to the Deputy Commissioner of police, or to the State Human Rights Commission of Assam, the army will take revenge.

No one can prevent the Indian army from taking revenge because they are the supreme authority here in Northeast India. In Manipur also we saw how the army beat up the judges. So if judges are beaten up, the Deputy Commissioner (DC) and Superintendent of Police (SP) kept in army custody and threatened, how will the common people hope for justice from the DC or the SP? I have seen with my own eyes how a DC was standing before an army captain. When an India army captain enters an SP or a DC office (In Assam), the officials stand up and wait for an order from the army captain. The ground reality is different. The common people want to survive – no one can save them from the army, not the DC or the SP or any other institution.

Illegal detention is a big issue in the international conventions to maintain the standard for human rights. No army or police can detain you illegally for long time. But here in Northeast India, illegal detention is so common that no one considers it as a human rights violation. Assaulting a woman or torturing a

woman in public is not considered as human rights violation. Where will they go with their complaints? MASS was the only human rights organisation in Assam documenting human rights violations and eight of our central executive committee members were killed by the Indian armed forces. The founder general secretary was killed, the founder chairman escaped an assassination and we had to request for security and protection. How can people expect redressal from the human rights commission, court, or the authority? In this situation, people accepted the human rights violation and consider themselves as lucky ones (when they survived the torture and interrogation).

DK: What are your reflections and the ways in which the ground reality connect with the international rights conventions?

LB: See, the United Nations human rights conventions and all other international conventions are all very fine, but they are far away from the ground reality (in Assam). The big human rights organisations are not aware of the ground reality here.

We have also worked with Amnesty International (AI) and other organisations. They know the international standards but they are less aware of the ground reality (in Assam). For these organisations, there are procedures. If a human rights violation takes place, then you can go to court, you can go to international organisations etc. But we have already done all that! We have gone to court and to international organisations. What happened? Many persons disappeared in army custody. We submitted those cases to the United Nations, to Amnesty International (AI) and the World Organisation Against Torture (WOAT); we physically went to their offices and enquired about the cases. The whole procedure is a recommendatory process. They are not binding on the government. Even the United Nations bodies took up our cases but they could not ask the government of India to locate the bodies or say something to the people. They (the Indian armed forces) simply refuted the cases about the disappeared persons and that is the result of the whole procedure. So there are standards, but in practice how can you get redressal? How can you get justice?

See international human rights organisation wants neutrality; they want to work with institutions. Many of us know that there is no neutral position. However, one does not have to support an armed group or a political movement, but one has to be more concerned about violation of human rights. What bothers me is that

international organisations do not give any relief to the victims of human rights violations. This whole exercise of the human rights procedure should focus on giving relief to the victims. It should be able to protect them.

DK: So you mean to say there has been no change at all?

LB: The only transformation is this. The Indian armed forces are taking more care in carrying out the human rights violations in Assam. They will not leave witnesses. Earlier they indiscriminately picked up people, but now they follow a target-oriented approach. So if you ask me about the result, I will say that they are more careful in their operation and make sure there are no of witnesses to prove they (armed forces) are guilty of human rights violation. There is no procedure that can make any army official or a district administrator or a police to directly give justice to any victim. If you cannot protect the victim after all these procedures, how will the victim assess your (human rights bodies) activities?

From a victim's point of view, everything is useless. Okay. You are doing so much; Organising workshops, presenting papers, and taking cases to United Nations or to international body, but for a grass-root level activist, there is no justice. So if the international organisations start working on the ground then it will make some sense. Otherwise, in a superficial way, you are doing some good work but the victim is not getting any support.

DK: Tell me about local organisations like MASS and other new human rights organisations we see nowadays in Assam?

LB: From 1990 onwards MASS was everything. It provided intellectual support for human rights education, a moral ground to say that this is a politics (the armed conflict and violence) we do not want. It was also a peace constituency when the conflict became out of our control. So we were so many things. After the Bhutan War in 2003 (when the United Liberation Forces of Assam camps were destroyed and there were series of counterinsurgency operations throughout Assam), it was very clear that we needed a peace constituency in Assam – particularly in the Brahmaputra valley. There was no peace constituency besides local organisations like MASS in Assam or the Naga human rights group, the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights. We said 'no' you have to talk about peace (to the armed groups).

Elsewhere in the world, peace keeping is the role of the churches and other civil society organisations. Here in Northeast India, we do not have civil societies, so the local human rights organisations were compelled to take up the issue of peace. The political situation compelled us to take up peace. Brokering for peace (between insurgents and the state) is not an agenda of human rights organisations, but the situation and time dictated the agenda of human rights during that period of time.

So human rights were just one of the things we did among many other things. We were not a professional human rights group. None of us took home a salary or got stipends for attending workshops. We were not on any fellowship. I survived, but many of my friends were killed. It was a mission for us and we focused on establishing mass based activities.

There was no one to help us or stand behind us except the local organisations from the neighbouring states. We tried to form an opinion and resistance against the human rights violations – for example, in Tripura, Nagaland and Manipur there were human rights movements – so we tried to reach out and create solidarity and alliances.

The big international United Nation bodies and others were not of much help to protect and give justice to the victims during the worst phase of the armed conflict in Northeast India. We tried to bridge the gap but it was not of much help. Even on the national stage in other parts of India, we joined hands with others and raised human rights issues. The solidarity and alliances was because of the persistence of the local grassroots human rights activities. Eventually, the international organisations also started looking towards the issues and the region (Northeast India). Today, at least you will see that there is a paragraph devoted to the region in the international reports. It was all due to the efforts of the local organisations.

DK: What is the biggest achievement of the local human rights organisations in Northeast India today?

LB: I feel that the biggest achievement of the local human rights movement was the local solidarities that were formed among different human rights groups. Okay, there are international human rights groups and national bodies in India, but the human rights education to the grassroots was missing. Only because of the

local organisations like MASS in Assam and other similar organisations in the neighboring states, people were educated and made aware of the concept of human rights.

The biggest achievement is that today people know about human rights and are vocal about it. Today, if any national or international rights based organisation start a campaign here, they get a good response from the grassroots because they (the people) know about human rights now. Human rights education is the biggest achievement of local human rights bodies like MASS. During the Assam agitation in the late 1970's and the early 1980's, the police and paramilitary forces killed more than 800 people, but we were not aware of the concept at that time.

DK: Where do you learn about human rights?

LB: Let me make this clear. We learnt about human rights on the ground. We did not go to Geneva or New Delhi to learn about human rights. We started MASS without getting any connection with any national or international organisation. We realised that we need a human rights organisation to protect human rights and give assistance and support the victims. Of course, the international human rights conventions were useful later as we tried to connect with other parts of the world to understand social movements and the history of human rights.

Lachit Bordoloi's reflections about the history of human rights captured how particular human rights histories of certain geographical region come to life. Everyday experiences of loss or memories of violence are embedded and identified with people who live in the villages, towns, and cities across Assam. Like many other aspects that emerge from social and political relations, notions of inequality and ethics are pressing issues that human rights activists encounter in their daily lives. Without denying the pressure and anxiety of working in militarised places, conversations with vernacular human rights practitioners across the years revealed one thing. Initially, they appeared 'out of place' in serious conversations about international conventions and instruments of rights. However, their life stories and the violence they had witnessed and social movements they devoted their lives to indicated the importance of proposing new ways to engage with the language of rights. Perhaps lives of human rights activists like Lachit Bordoloi and his memories about a particular phase of political life in contemporary Assam should invoke for framing a history about vernacular human rights in Assam based on empathy and care. What do I mean by

that? The last section of the article captures this connection between human rights and empathy that is founded on a politics of accountability and responsibility.

Cosmos Flowers

Some people are destined to travel. ‘I have to come down to the valley tomorrow,’ Rose told me as we traveled up to the hills in Manipur one morning in 2013. There is constant traffic between Imphal valley and the adjoining districts in Manipur, a vibrant multi-ethnic state in Northeast India. Some travel for pleasure, others for trade and work, but it was difficult to define Rose’s frequent travels between the hill and the valley. It appeared that the road that connects Imphal and Ukhrul, which takes approximately 4 hours, was her home as our conversation progressed during the course of our journey. Her solidarity and sense of belonging was neither fixed in Ukhrul (the hills) nor in Imphal (the heart of the valley). Growing up in an inter-ethnic household where her parents came from communities that were perceived as hostile towards one another, Rose’s sensibilities about what constitutes human rights in places like Manipur was an important lens to understand everyday lives and politics. Manipur is a place where the pressure to fix one’s political beliefs and ethnic ideology is immense. This political reality became intelligible as Rose described the history of the hamlets and landscapes we passed during our journey.

Earlier that morning, as we approached the foothills after we left Imphal, Rose described the history of each village, stream, paddy field, and hillock we were crossing. The physical features of the landscape functioned as natural boundaries for the diverse ethnic communities who lived here and the conflicts that erupted due to overlapping claims.

Ethnic boundaries are particularly significant in states like Manipur where there are multiple demands for ethnic homelands and concessions. Every ethnic group today emphasizes on a pristine and unique history to demand for greater political and administrative power. Therefore, in the quest for a timeless and pure history to assert one’s identity, the notion of what constitutes rights and boundaries among each ethnic group plays an important role to maintain the fragile alliance and peace of the competing groups. The everyday practices of carving out various boundaries – moral, social, and physical ones – transformed the contours of the landscape. How did Rose connect the vocabulary of human rights as someone who spent a considerable amount of time on the road traveling round Manipur?

The lives of the Border Road Organisation (BRO) work force entered our conversation through Raju, a disabled boy we saw sitting outside his plastic tent beside the road. Raju's house is located on a precarious ridge beside the state highway; a narrow road where two vehicles delicately squeeze through. Raju and his parents came from Jharkhand, a state in eastern India. Raju's parents arrived here as BRO workers and he was born inside the plastic tent beside the road that connects Imphal and Ukhrul. Raju's father abandoned his family when he realised that his son was unable to walk. When his mother remarried, Raju's stepfather tried to kill him. He smashed Raju's kneecaps and cut his body. 'From head to toe' Rose told me, but I was unable to comprehend this horrible act until I realised that the stepfather had systematically made multiple incisions on Raju's body – his shoulders, back, thighs, arms, calves and stomach – in order to bleed him to death. It was a coincidence that Rose's shared taxi stopped beside Raju's tent later that day. She called the medical team in Imphal, the state administration, the BRO officials, and the volunteers working for the national children's project. After Raju was discharged from the hospital, his grandparents, who were also BRO workers, became his legal guardians. Rose continues to look out for Raju by giving him food, medicines, and offering help whenever he has needs medical attention.

The idioms of kinship and ethnic alliances are integral in the social world that Rose inhabits. Politicians, cultural associations, and student bodies often call upon their respective 'people' to build their political constituencies in an ethnically diverse state like Manipur. In a state where political and ethnic boundaries are distinctly maintained, the BRO workers who come from states like Jharkhand seldom enters into the discourse on rights. They remain outside the ambit of community rights and justice framework. Particularly, for rights practitioners like Rose who are often overwhelmed by the conflict situation and the urgency to attend to matters around them, they often find themselves confronting everyday ethical questions about one's limitations and responsibilities. Yet, the questions that Rose struggles with everyday highlight how human relations are formed and sustained in difficult places. As we ascended to a particular point, she declared that this slope overlooking a hamlet was her favorite spot. Symmetrical terraced rice fields and a multitude of fruit trees stood on the undulating slopes. She paused the stories of ethnic conflicts and the political situation and described how her favorite spot was a romantic landscape.

Many who visit politically volatile places like Manipur talk about their experiences of survival and the risks to travel across the hills and valleys. Journalists and researchers have often presented their distressing encounters with informants, insurgent leaders, and political leaders. For example, a few years ago I met a doctoral research student who told me that she had to undergo psychotherapy for two years after her traumatic fieldwork in Northeast India. Recently, a research associate from a policy research institute in India described her apprehensions of being molested, raped, and killed by insurgents during her research trip to Guwahati. While such insights continue to perpetuate Northeast India as a dangerous place, Rose's description of a romantic spot at heart of a hamlet that had witnessed a grim ethnic conflict unsettles these dominant imaginations.

Miniature ponds dotted the landscape as the road forked away from the terraced rice fields. A village located below Rose's romantic picnic spot was the site of an ethnic conflict between the Nagas and the Kuki community around two decades ago. After the conflict, a Kuki couple adopted thirteen children who were orphaned during the conflict. These children came from different ethnic backgrounds including that of the warring groups. In 2012, a man arrived in the village. He claimed that he had a charitable boarding school in Sikkim and promised to educate the children. He took away seven children. When the couple tried to locate the address the man had left behind, they could not locate the man or the address. 'The couple are trying to locate the children', Rose told me. It was registered as a child trafficking case.

Rose had not prepared to share with me the chronology of her experiences or point out her favorite spots and hamlets as we traveled on the road that connected Imphal and Ukhrul. But her reflections underlined the social worlds that rights practitioners like her traverse every day and humanised the people and places they came across. I also learnt that Rose's favorite romantic spot was intimately attached to her childhood memory when her family traveled to the hills to visit her extended kin groups during the holidays.

Beneath the cloudy blue skies where the BRO workers repaired and cleaned the roads, Rose unlocked a precious memory that kept her together on days she wanted to give up everything - her activism, work, and remain committed to

causes around her. Working in a conflict zone at times appears as though the responsibility to attend to everyday concerns of human rights and justice is the task of the victim while the state agencies continue to mutate their violent actions with stronger laws, impunity, and institutional safeguards. Perhaps, that is why I was mesmerised with Rose's story of the Cosmos flowers.

I learnt that the highway between Imphal and Ukhrul used to be lined with Cosmos flowers. Growing abundantly especially along her romantic spot, the flowers became a screen between the paddy fields and the tarred roads in this mountainous road. Rose began to explain how the Cosmos flowers along this stretch of the highway had almost vanished during the heights of counter-insurgency operations in Manipur. She said, 'It is the timing. The flowers were in full bloom but before they could produce the seeds that would fall on the ground and germinate for the next season, the BRO workers chopped down the flowers and burnt them up'. The periods prior to the Indo-Naga ceasefire agreement of 1997, a treaty that was signed between a Naga insurgent group and the government of India, the hills of Manipur – especially the road between Imphal and Ukhrul – was a regular site for ambushes and battles between the Naga insurgents on the India forces. As part of a counter-insurgency measure, the security forces ordered the Border Road Organisation to clear the tracks parallel to the highway. The BRO workers began to routinely chop down anything that grew on the vicinity of the road. Rose told me that in the last few years youth clubs, school students, and church members has organised tree planting activities to beautify the roads, but none of these trees were able to survive the diligent road clearing projects of the BRO workers.

The disappearance of the Cosmos flowers was an unexpected casualty of the counter-insurgency measure in the hills of Manipur, yet Rose had developed a personal project. As an avid gardener whose knowledge of plants and flowers was exceptional, she collected different kinds of Cosmos seeds around Imphal and Ukhrul. During the appropriate season every year, she paid no attention to the means of transportation – bus, shared taxi, mini bus, or an official jeep – that was carrying her to the next destination. She requested the driver to stop at designated locations along the highway. Standing beside the road, she scattered the seeds of the Cosmos flower she carried along with her during her travels between Imphal and Ukhrul. She laughed and said, 'Often when I am scattering the seeds, security

forces patrolling the highways become suspicious. They suspect that I am planting a bomb and come over to interrogate me or investigate the seeds I am carrying’.

Conclusion

Northeast India is an extremely militarised region with a disturbing record of human rights violations. The ethnographic accounts about James, Lachit, and Rose captures how everyday experiences about what constitutes violence and trauma deeply shapes one’s understanding of human rights. As I have highlighted in this article, understanding the social life of vernacular human rights culture in Northeast India is not solely about citing provisions and international conventions. Instead, the ability of rights practitioners to reflect, articulate, and more importantly practice what they perceive to be injustice and violence constitutes the everyday meaning of human rights. While invoking the official definition of ‘human rights’ takes places in different temporal and spatial locations, the core of its meaning resides in the lived experiences that people encounter in different scales. For instance, while James attends workshops and meeting as a human rights activist in South Asia, he prefers some other designation when he returns to his hometown. For Lachit, the differences and challenges of international human rights organisations is the inability to connect with the local ground reality. While, Rose’s life as a mobile human rights practitioner shows how connections and feelings are often not situated in a designated territorial location, but tends to be based in social relations that are nurtured by extending empathy and solidarity. Ultimately, the meaning and concept of human rights, as this article has highlighted, will be enriched when voices and experiences of people from militarised and violent societies are recognised as important foundations for justice, reconciliation, and freedom.

Notes:

¹ Refer to this report to follow the advocacy work on the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights. The campaign for the demilitarisation of the Naga areas continues to be an important human rights issue.

<http://www.nagalandpost.com/ChannelNews/State/StateNews.aspx?news=TkVXUzEwMDA5OTk1MQ%3D%3D> (last accessed on 21 September, 2016)

²Refer to http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/index.html (last accessed on 21 September, 2016)

³ For a pdf copy of the act refer to http://nhrc.nic.in/documents/Publications/TheProtectionofHumanRightsAct1993_Eng.pdf (last accessed on 20 September, 2016)

⁴ The situation of the state human rights commission in Manipur is deteriorating. Since 2010, the seat of the chairperson for the state human rights commission has been lying vacant. This commission is defunct and victims of human rights in the state have no recourse to appeal for justice and demand security. For a detailed report refer to <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/imphal/Despite-assurance-by-CM-Manipur-Human-Rights-Commission-yet-to-be-revived/articleshow/51613555.cms> (last accessed on 22 September, 2016)

⁵ Official definitions and international conventions on human rights still play a significant role in Northeast India. Thus, a cursory glance at several preambles of regional human rights organisations like the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) or the Manab Adhikari Sangram Samiti (MASS) translated as the Forum for Struggle of Human Rights, carefully lays down how the aim of the respective organisation is to promote and address the issues of human rights.

⁶ The everyday militarisation and violence of the place was captured when a peaceful people's rally was attacked by security forces killing two protesters. This event was not the an exceptional case and like other similar events, the entire town was shut down as security forces burnt down vehicles, shops, and picked up people from the streets and tortured them. Refer to this report for details <http://ifp.co.in/page/items/22857/mass-peace-rally-turns-violent-in-ukhrul-end-peaceful-elsewhere> (last accessed on 21 September, 2016)

⁷ This point I make is not to dismiss the history of human rights abuses and state violence that Naga society experienced. Refer to human rights report titled, 'India: Operation Bluebird: A case Study of Torture and Extrajudicial Executions in Manipur' by Amnesty International to refer to the human rights abuses by Indian security forces and the toll that villagers had to face during counter-insurgency operation (AI Index: ASA 20/17/90. DISTR:SC/CO/GR).

⁸ Well known human rights activist Babloo Loitongbam described the last decade of civil and political violence in Manipur as follows: 'From 2004 to 2007, following mothers' protest, there were series of military operations in Manipur including Operation Tornado, Operation Somtal-I & II, and Operation Loktak. The period of 2007, 2008 and 2009 was particularly bad because the Army and Manipur Police commandos were following Punjab model of annihilation. Extra-judicial killings were rampant. Every day people died and innocent civilians were killed. Worse still, incentives were given for such murders. In other words, there was a well-placed environment or a vicious cycle, under which innocents were targeted. In 2009, the Home Minister P Chidambaram came to Manipur but we were not given a chance to meet him. Thus, we went to media and said that the approach of the Government worked to maintain trouble and conflict in the region instead of resolving the issue'. It is important to note that human rights activists have been arrested, tortured, and in certain cases killed. In order to follow the full interview, refer to the link <http://www.countercurrents.org/babloo220315.htm> (last accessed on 21 September, 2016)

⁹The ULFA is an insurgent outfit in Assam who demands a sovereign Assam. This armed group started in 1979. Refer to https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Liberation_Front_of_Assam (last accessed on 22 September, 2016)

REFERENCES:

De Certeau, M. (1988). *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

<http://www.nagalandpost.com/ChannelNews/State/StateNews.aspx?news=TkVXUzEwMDA5OTk1MQ%3D%3D>

(last accessed on 21 September, 2016)

http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/index.html

(last accessed on 21 September, 2016)

http://nhrc.nic.in/documents/Publications/TheProtectionofHumanRightsAct1993_Eng.pdf

(last accessed on 20 September, 2016)

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/imphal/Despite-assurance-by-CM-Manipur-Human-Rights-Commission-yet-to-be-revived/articleshow/51613555.cms>

(last accessed on 22 September, 2016)

<http://ifp.co.in/page/items/22857/mass-peace-rally-turns-violent-in-ukhrul-end-peaceful-elsewhere>

(last accessed on 21 September, 2016)

<http://www.countercurrents.org/babloo220315.htm>

(last accessed on 21 September, 2016)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Liberation_Front_of_Assam

(last accessed on 22 September, 2016)

Dolly Kikon is Lecturer at the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne.
