

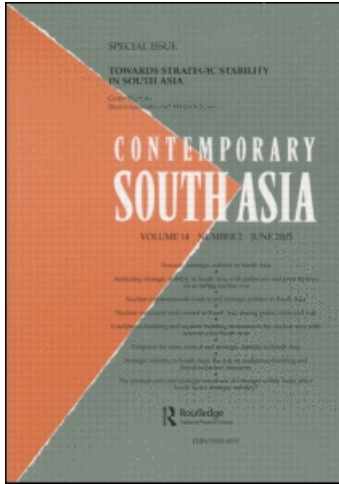
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Revolting bodies, hysterical state: women protesting the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958)

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The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958) (AFSPA) has been debilitating for people in Manipur, already struggling with socio-economic and political marginalisation since independence. The consistent erasure of Manipur by an apathetic and forgetful 'mainland' India provides the political impetus for anti-state groups demanding autonomy. The people of the state are, however, ambivalent about taking sides, having experienced the violence engendered by both factions. It is within this complexity that I situate my study of the AFSPA. My paper will elaborate on a theory of haunting, a metaphor I evoke to address this complexity of postcolonial modernity and its silences, by focusing on the protesting icons of the Meira Paibi and Irom Sharmila. Examining the idea of haunting provides us with a vocabulary to push at the limits of rationality that both political movements and social sciences rely upon; haunting, then, is both a methodology *and* a theme that might help us account for lived realities that are far from rational, clear-cut and thus easy to access. The figure of Sharmila emerges then as one not only haunted by the violence of the postcolonial moment but also simultaneously haunting us – isolated, confined and outlawed, she occupies a liminal position between the living and the dead, enacting a disruption that simply cannot be contained by the modern Indian state or even a rational social science seeking to represent her.

Keywords: manipur; violence; state of exception; women's political protests; haunting; modernity

Introduction

On an early July morning in 2004, Thangjam Manorama's mangled, bullet-saturated body was found dumped on a pavement outside Kangla Fort, which headquartered the Assam Rifles battalion in Manipur. Her custodial killing mirrors the fate of many Manipuri youth taken in for 'questioning' by the Indian Army for alleged links with 'militant' outfits (Amnesty International 1998). The brutal execution of Manorama sent shockwaves across the city, precipitating widespread demonstrations. The voices of protest converged unanimously in their denunciation of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (1958) (AFSPA), which has become a symbol of the violence perpetrated by the nation-state against a segment of its population. However, this convergence cannot be understood as anything but strategic; disparities in political convictions have always complicated the dynamics of this

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historic conflict. The consistent erasure of Manipur by an apathetic and forgetful 'mainland' India provides the impetus for several 'insurgent' groups demanding autonomy. Caught in the crossfire between the Indian Army and various (internally sparring) anti-state groups, the people of Manipur have become targets or simply 'collateral damage' of the conflict.

Many people in Manipur are ambivalent about taking sides having experienced the threat and violence engendered by *both* clashing factions. While typically socio-political movements are mobilised around well-defined problems with groups outlining a clear agenda of social, economic or political changes that need to be instituted, in Manipur it is virtually impossible to decide who the ultimate culprit is – the state or the armed groups? Under these circumstances, one would assume that political action becomes weak if not unfeasible, yet this is certainly not the case. There have been frequent protests, in strikingly passionate ways, against injustices related to the conflict. This paper will examine the anti-AFSPA protests of both the Meira Paibi (women torch-bearers) and Irom Sharmila (who has been on a hunger strike against the AFSPA since November 2000), in order to ask the following question – is politics fashioned differently when poised upon fundamental uncertainties and unstable premises? Put differently, when Manipuri women stand up against atrocities *despite* being conscious of their inability to pinpoint the state as the unequivocal wrongdoer that needs to be disowned, do they shine light upon a unique vision of politics that is different from the various social and political activisms that we encounter in civil societies across the world today? If lived realities are fraught with contradictions, then what are the limitations of political movements that smooth over these incongruities and artificially posit coherent paradigms upon which their ideologies and actions are based?

It is the contours of these contradictions and inconsistencies that I seek to explore in this paper, and I situate my analysis of the AFSPA squarely within it. The complexities encountered everyday by people in Manipur are a consequence of a long history of violence, and the echoes of those wounds forcefully and repeatedly find their way back into modern social life. My task in this paper is thus to elaborate on the historical consistency of the coercion and assaults against peoples in the Northeast, and to undertake an analysis of the ghostly traces of this past that make their presence *felt* experientially as we confront the protesting icons of the Manipuri women. Since, as I shall demonstrate, logical apparatuses of comprehension will necessarily fail us in this latter endeavour, I argue that we need to develop different analytical tools. Towards that end, I build upon Gordon's (1997) idea of haunting, as both a theoretical and methodological framework that might help us to better understand the intricacies of postcolonial modernity and its silences.

The quasi-colony: colonial mechanics *within* postcolonial 'democracy'

In 1958 the Indian Constitution bestowed the national security forces with unmitigated powers to operate in the Northeast, by implementing the AFSPA. This act allows the Indian Army to encroach upon private property, penetrate homes and arrest people without a warrant and to assault, shoot or kill people, on the grounds of suspicion alone. It also disallows the initiation of any civil action against defaulting personnel without the (rarely given) consent of the central government (Government of India 1958). The powers offered up by the AFSPA make it highly prized by the military, which is unrelenting to demands that the Act be revoked for

being barbaric, undemocratic and for escalating violence. The Army argues that the AFSPA is an essential tool to maintain peace and stability in a challenging region, rife with inter-ethnic clashes and political turbulence caused by recalcitrant armed groups, threatening national sovereignty with their separatist demands (Mukherjee 2005).

Since colonial times the Northeast has been isolated and marginalised economically, socially and politically. This subjugation has been replicated by the postcolonial Indian nation-state, which has worked hard at concealing the violence it perpetrated upon the region in annexing princely states that received their own independence from the British. For instance, in a disavowal of Manipur's sovereignty, the Indian Government (in 1949) placed the King under house arrest and forced him to accede to India – a violence enshrined in the formative moment of this 'Indian' state (Menon and Nigam 2007).

The illegitimate use of military force and the continued distortion of national memory with regard to 'minority' communities are premised upon the persistence of the liberal self-image of the Indian state. The patronising and deprecating other-image it created was forcefully demystified by leaders like Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Dr B.R. Ambedkar, and met with some resistance by sovereigns like the Nizam of Hyderabad and the King of Manipur. In the contemporary moment, however, the picture of a fluid and tolerant democratic India has become embedded in the national imagination, erasing the history of forceful and illegitimate appropriation of entire lands and communities. This is partly why protest against the Indian state is silenced by the buzz of the 'majority' and by the bullets and batons of the Indian Army. Voicing resistance, both rationally and legally, in this context, becomes a fraught, if not impossible, task.

The Northeast has over the years been broken up into several states, officially referred to as the 'Seven Sisters' (now eight with the inclusion of Sikkim), a name that is arguably symptomatic of a tendency of 'mainland' India to pejoratively feminise the Northeast and to erase its myriad differences. Furthermore, the Northeast is spoken about in official tourism narratives as an 'unexplored paradise'; Manipur specifically is described as 'an alluring atmosphere of mystery, a land wrapped in velvety silence' (Ministry of Tourism 2009). In popular culture the Northeast is cited as an integral element of the resplendent diversity of India. Bollywood blockbusters such as *Chak de India* (2007) work magically to reinforce such ideas.

A proliferation of such discourses concretely contributes to the conjuring up of the Northeast as an essential ingredient of India – something to be claimed despite each unspoken abjuration. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida elaborates on this 'sleight-of-hand' (1994, 86) perfected by an expert *escamoteur* (trickster) that consists of 'causing to disappear while producing "apparitions"' (1994, 158). The production of such images conceals the status of the Northeast as newborn India's very own quasi-colony.

Calling it a *quasi-colony* acknowledges that this relationship is *not* commensurable with that of imperial Europe and her colonies. Yet, it is clear that there are definite similarities to colonialism in the dealings of postcolonial India with the Northeast. These include the politically nebulous claim to the Northeast; the various tropes that 'mainland' Indians draw on to construct people from the Northeast as fundamentally different, including 'race,' ethnicity, religion, and language; the kinds of stereotypes circulated about the Northeast such as food habits, morality, and substance abuse; the denial of 'coeval time' to the predominantly tribal peoples of

the Northeast (Fabian 1983), which ratifies the paternalism of the Indian state; the exploitation of the natural resources of the Northeast; and the violence that the state has sanctioned and legitimised over the years in the name of national territorial integrity and ‘peace’.

The appearance of this quasi-colony in the heart of an entity that had formerly been a model colony, and only became a nation through anti-colonial struggle, relocates colonial mechanics *inside* the framework of Indian democracy, challenging the reading of ‘postcolonial’ as suggesting a violent break from colonialism. While ‘postcolonial’ has encapsulated the haunting of the colonial past and its troubled legacy (Chatterjee 2001; Niranjana, Sudhir and Dhareshwar 1993) and postcolonial theorists have elaborated on the formation of incomplete and/or fragmented modernities in relation to that dynamic (Bhabha 1994; Chakrabarty 2002), the presence of these quasi-colonies points to the *interior* of post-Independence democracy and modernity, which both in its formative moment and its sovereign character are never outside colonialism. It is in this context that the AFSPA operates with impunity.

No longer exception – AFSPA as the *state*

Despite organisations such as the United Nations Human Rights Committee, Amnesty International, the Asian Centre for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch and the government’s own Justice B.R. Jeevan Reddy Committee Report recommending the repeal of the AFSPA (Reddy et al. n.d.), the state and the Army continue to insist upon the *need* for it. The popularised narratives of the Northeast discussed above not only legitimise the AFSPA but also make its necessity seem obvious to mainstream Indian citizen-subjects, spawning the idea that the exigency of the Act is cognisable by some universal or objective standard. Agamben (2005) pushes further in arguing that the idea of *necessity* is in fact based upon a subjective appraisal and relies heavily upon an individual judgement necessarily made in the declarative mode. This pronouncement is solely the prerogative of a sovereign.

In the *State of Exception*, Agamben (2005) offers an extended analysis of the nature and topography of the sovereign power (wielded by the King or the modern State) in dealing decisively with a crisis that threatens to unhinge its very existence. His formulation of the exception helps situate our understanding of the AFSPA, itself a constitutional provision to deal with an exceptional situation. According to Agamben, the exception is unique in that it sidesteps the normative, and is thus marked by its exclusion from the orbit of the law; however, he emphasises that the exception is not merely extraneous to the legal terrain because it is the ‘legal form of what cannot have legal form’ (Agamben 2005, 1). In other words, the exception is tethered to the law, and even in being cast as exterior it *simultaneously* frames and expounds the law and thus inheres in it.

Further, Agamben argues that the exception, which was previously a provisional measure to deal with *specific* instances that could not be addressed by the law, now gets transformed into a *state* (of being) and adopted by democratic nation-states as an instrument or a ‘technique of government’ (2005, 2). Thus he claims that ‘the voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency (though perhaps not defined in the technical sense) has become one of the essential practices of contemporary states, including so-called democratic ones’ (Agamben 2005, 2). The amplified powers of the

executive branch permit them to authorise declarations of emergency, which can then legitimately extend military jurisdiction into the civil domain and curb personal liberties of its population.

Agamben's argument has a fairly disturbing core. Namely, even as wars are being declared today in the name of democracy, touted as the only desirable and legitimate mode of governance, the backbone of the democratic tradition has ironically already been snapped; and he cites Walter Benjamin, who writes the modern 'exception . . . has become the rule' (Agamben 2005, 6). What we find then is a blurring of the boundaries between democracy and totalitarianism. While the exception can theoretically be incorporated within the democratic framework, there are ultimately no constitutional guarantees against its abuse, posits Agamben, except for the people's own determination. Sadly, for the 'world's largest democracy', this determination to impel a revocation of the AFSPA has clearly been lacking.

The AFSPA's explicit role in fostering violence in the region is well documented (Amnesty International 2005; Human Rights Watch 2008; South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre 1995). The powers that it bestows upon the military personnel are extensive, and the removal of any culpability gives these soldiers unlimited license to act according to whim. In her analysis of the 'indefinite detention' to which the post-September 11 US Government subjected people it perceived of as 'threats', Butler (2006) attempts to tackle the question of the changing modalities of sovereign power in the contemporary world system. She argues the need for an analysis of fresh configurations of sovereignty in the context of the suspension of law, during a purported state of emergency. Sovereign authority is no longer the singular and sanctioned authority of the crown or the nation-state, it is now the rule of what she calls the 'petty sovereigns [who] abound, reigning in the midst of bureaucratic army institutions mobilised by aims and tactics of power they do not inaugurate or fully control. And yet such figures are delegated with the power to render unilateral decisions' (Butler 2006, 56). Even as it makes a bid for democracy, the Indian nation-state must acknowledge that it simultaneously condones the brutal and totalitarian acts of individual army officials, and sponsors violence and terrorism against marginalised peoples within its territorial boundaries, under the pretext of protecting them.

The AFSPA, while by no means the sole locus of the conflict in the Northeast, has thus accrued tremendous symbolic value and now epitomises the often unrecognised and unstated conflict between the Indian nation-state and various communities in the region. While there is no agreement on how to begin to resolve problems in the region, the AFSPA is still a common ground, uniting people from diverse positions against the injustice perpetrated by the Indian state and its proxies. However, this consolidated front adopted by people struggling to overthrow the yoke of the AFSPA is a strategic move; divergent political beliefs and stances abound in the Northeast, and our critique of the AFSPA needs to somehow account for these differences.

So while it is crucial to flesh out imbalances in the power dynamic between 'mainland' India and the Northeast (most palpable in the struggles against the AFSPA), or even to challenge the legitimacy of the Indian state and its actions, we must simultaneously be able to address the difficulty that, for most people from the region, taking sides has turned out to be a treacherous affair. Between the tyrannical representatives of the Indian nation-state unleashing violence on them and the rebellious, and often coercive, dissenters wreaking havoc within their own

communities, people often find themselves caught in a bind. To fight political battles is perhaps conceivable when you are certain of your convictions, when fair and just can be pinpointed easily as distinct from false and unjust. How does one respond to the ubiquitous and extremely palpable reality of inequalities, terror and injustice, when you can never be absolutely certain of who the oppressor is and who is being oppressed or if these two categories are shifting, permeable and being sculpted by each new circumstance?

What the body bears/bares

These questions are not simply academic ones. Out on the pavement, Manorama's corpse bore the marks of the violence of the state. Her genitals were mangled to the point of unrecognition, to the point where it was absolutely impossible to even ascertain whether she had been raped or not. Her death bore testimony of the most visceral kind, to the unwavering brutality of the security forces. The most vocal and visible protestors in the wake of this incident were the Meira Paibi, a women's organisation, who grief-stricken (when all outcries went unheeded by authorities) stripped naked and marched to the gates of the Army Headquarters at Kangla Fort demanding justice.

The Kangla Fort that houses the Army's headquarters in Manipur has a spectral quality about it. Occupied first by the British then by the Indian Army, it stands as a silent potentiality, a material reminder of the Indian state's annexing of Manipur two years after independence. Since then the Indian Government has 'returned' the fort to the Manipuris; but on that day when 12 naked women stood rattling the gates of the fort chanting 'Rape us! Kill us! Take our Flesh!', they were challenging not only a distinct and more powerful entity on the other side of the fence but were also jostling with the past. The past was staring back at them, marked indelibly on them, weaving in-between the ghastly, almost unbelievable text they unfurled on a banner and chose to carry on their bodies – 'Indian Army Rape Us'. What did this protest do, if not leave us absolutely speechless?

The protests of the Meira Paibi are strongly reminiscent of Mahasweta Devi's short story called 'draupadi' about a Santhal woman who is raped in police custody after she is 'kountered' (1997, 28) for her involvement in the Naxalbari Movement. Dopdi's pride in her 'pure unadulterated black blood' (Devi 1997, 31) and her location outside the dominant system of meanings, indeed her utter contempt for it, do not allow her to experience rape in the way intended. The ambivalent double bind of patriarchy, which rapes a woman in order to show her the model of chastity she should aspire to, is completely destabilised by Dopdi's refusal to clothe herself after her rape. She 'tears it with her teeth' (Devi 1997, 35), casting aside the piece of cloth thrown at her – a residue left over from the rape whose function is to act as a transition for the disciplined body. It is a gift from the law that will legitimate the body and locate it in its proper place but will in the same moment legitimate the rape and punishment of the law. It is an exchange that will complete the interpellation of the body into this order, the giving of a name (in being clothed, the body bears something) that follows in the wake of destruction, a name that, by being accepted because there is no other choice, completes the semantic annihilation and disallows the body a funeral on its own terms. In refusing this cloth, Dopdi refuses a gift, a name, an exchange, and the terms of that exchange. She ceases to bear anything readable to the law – she cannot be placed anymore. Neither is she bare – her refusal

to wear the cloth exceeds a simply naked body. This excess is beyond comprehension and offers nothing but terror.

Much like Dopdi, the Meira Paibi also used their bodies as weapons of protest against a violent and marginalising state. The film *Soldiers in Sarong* (2004) offers a striking and thoughtful portrait of the history of Meira Paibi's activism in Manipur. Indeed, it suggests that these bodies are the site of resistance and subversion; of women's negotiations with and struggles for agency and self-determination. There seems, however, to be an important distinction between Dopdi and the Meira Paibi's protests. Dopdi's refusal to don her clothes eschews the very foundations of the law of the paternal state. The ultimately revolutionary spirit of her act makes her a terrifying figure to contend with. Under no circumstance can she be incorporated by the social order; there is nothing anyone can do or be that would render her a viable subject.

In contrast, the Meira Paibi's protest is predicated on a certain understanding of the woman's body as chaste and deserving of respect. By marching down the streets naked, the distraught elderly women evoke an unbelievable horror in the viewer, primarily because of the knowledge that 'normal' women do not bare their bodies to the world. What must this horror be that these women are confronted with that compels such an extreme response? What seems to underlie the narrative of these women is an acceptance of the basic premise of the liberal state. Their indignation stems from a problematic yet wholly rectifiable aspect of the state, which instead of protecting its citizens has turned upon it. In this particular instance, the 'draconian/black' (as it is most often referred to) AFSPA becomes the rallying point around which their politics are launched. The message is rephrased interestingly by Shillong-based journalist Linda Chhakchhuak (2004):

No one in Manipur is saying that a person suspected of militant links should not be arrested. Even the Meira Paibi ... would agree that the Army has a tough job to do in the insurgency-infested state. But the vicious psychopathic actions of the Army are not normal security-related acts. The arrest and subsequent killing of Manorama, a woman, and then the Act of throwing her body by the wayside, pretending they had nothing to do with it, can hardly be called an anti-insurgency operation of a self-respecting disciplined army.

The precepts of the liberal nation remain untouched by such a fashioning of politics. These outraged women are haunting presences, forcefully enacting the return of the dead and disappeared in Manipur; yet in the same stroke they appear to be haunted – haunted by the rational discourses of liberalism. Their protest, which was singular enough to catch the voyeuristic eye of the entire nation as photographs of these women were plastered on the front pages of most mainstream newspapers across the country, inverts the structure of the AFSPA – a violent means deployed toward the repeal of the Act. Through their protests, then, is the state being invoked as a just entity, ultimately worth preserving even if it is at the cost of silencing the marginalised and dissenting voices that resist the injustice of the mechanics of this power? In protesting the AFSPA as being an aberrant law, are the protesters then taking the bait of the nation-state and treating it as the exception when in fact it is the rule? And further, in treating it as an exception, are they stamping out the possibility for any questioning of the structure that holds these power relations in place?

However, even as we attempt to track the rational impulse underlying the violent protests of the Meira Paibi, we are simultaneously left with a sense of dissatisfaction,

the feeling that this interpretation is somehow wholly inadequate to describe the assortment of meanings that issue from their unprecedented and terrifying challenge to the state and its officials. *INDIAN ARMY RAPE US*. These are the words they bear on their bodies; the only linguistic clues they provide. Yet they leave us with nothing but a sense of helplessness. Overwhelming words inscribed boldly in red on a plain white banner. A succinct statement of fact, but also an injunction. A challenge to the Army to openly, once again, do what it does in the shadows of the dark, hidden behind those very gates. Their wild and desperate protest is marked by an *excess*, a madness, an element that escapes any rationalising move such as the one made by the journalist quoted above and echoed here. Their bodies, their chants, their grief, their shock – all these coalesce to create that which refuses rational explanation, which in advance mocks any and every attempt to even understand, much less critique, which escapes the jurisdiction of language itself. How do we proceed when such intense expressions of suffering by people at the margins (of the nation-state) cannot even be thought about coherently, much less understood or explained?

Haunted spectres: across the brink of reason

We find ourselves, at this point, at the very limit of rationality – a rationality that drives not just the logic of the postcolonial nation-state but also every attempt at understanding or representation. Chakrabarty (1998) has attempted to take on the hegemony of rationality that is at the heart of the social sciences, but more broadly all academic and political work, and that persists even if the historian is dealing with subjects that eschew normative reason. This is true even of the subaltern scholars who have been sympathetic to the ‘small voices’ of history (Guha 1982). Chakrabarty analyses Ranajit Guha’s earlier, canonical essay ‘The Prose of Counter-Insurgency’ to argue that, when Guha’s subject – the Santal – invoked the divine by insisting that he participated in a rebellion upon the instigation of his *Thakur* (God), Guha, as a secular-Marxist historian, had to distance himself from this ‘supernatural’ explanation even as he tried to represent the Santal’s understanding of the event. The Santal’s remembering is an example of what Chakrabarty calls ‘subaltern pasts, which cannot enter history as ever belonging to the historian’s own position’ (1998, 22). The ‘minority histories’ of historians like Guha are therefore not always ‘subversive’, since they leave intact the fundamental premise of History – a faith in secular reason, a distinct notion of time, remembering and historicity.

However, Chakrabarty concludes that these two positions, the rational historian and the recalcitrant historical subject, are *not* completely exclusive. Subaltern pasts, much like the modern state of exception, are a terrain where this conflict is nourished; it enables history to both go about its business while at the same time motioning toward the edge of its dominion. Similarly, Agamben also cautions us against thinking of the state of exception as either simply internal or external to the legal realm, but instead posits that ‘the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other’ (2005, 23). This threshold provides the space for two contradictory positions to co-exist, not in a way that leaves the other to its own devices but in an active engagement with it, seeking from it the very grounds upon which it can know itself as distinct, yet bleeding right back into it. These

theoretical tools (subaltern pasts and state of exception) then not only aid us in conceptualising the problems posed by the AFSPA in Manipur, but also interestingly reflect, in their very structure, the ambiguities and complexities that people there have to contend with, in their daily negotiations with the state and its detractors.

It is this mutual co-existence of contradictions that Gordon (1997) attempts to theorise, and in doing this she offers us an extremely useful concept – that of ‘complex personhood’, which evocatively describes the world we inhabit:

Complex personhood means that all people ... remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others ... that even those called ‘Other’ are never never that ... that even those who haunt our dominant institutions and their systems of value are haunted too by things they sometimes have names for and sometimes do not ... At the very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people’s lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning. (Gordon 1997, 4)

Gordon insists that taking this idea of complex personhood seriously is critical to understand what she calls the ‘most important theoretical statement of our time’ – that ‘life is complicated’ (1996, 3). Acknowledging and understanding this complexity, this *simultaneity* of experience and affect, is crucial but also unexpectedly difficult given the paucity of tools we have to think and begin to articulate such confusions, such lack of purpose, such failures of cognition. With what words do we begin to formulate thoughts about that which is ontologically designed to slip through the fingers of meaning-making apparatuses? How do we, for example, describe two powerful, yet ambivalent feelings co-existing in us (sometimes even peacefully)? Gordon offers us the idea of haunting, a paradigm that is capable, she argues, of taking into account the complexities of life, which becomes an extremely useful framework with which to approach the ideas and sentiments of protesting women in Manipur.

Haunting is then ‘neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalisable social phenomenon of great import. To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it’ (Gordon 1997, 7). We are haunted today by the violence and/or the silence of the past; the past that was forcefully excised from public memory by the dominant forces of the time. As Derrida argues, ‘hegemony still organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony’ (1994, 46). To study the ghost or the *revenant* is to re-establish a connection with the past, and in doing so perhaps chart out an alternative future. These ghosts that return also continue to plague the reasonable business of a social scientist, whose vocabularies, worldviews and practices could not begin to account for this enchantment that we have supposedly left behind in our modern world. Haunting is then, by Gordon’s descriptions, not just a theme or a phenomenon that might help us account for lived realities that are far from rational, clear-cut and thus easily accessible. It is also a methodology capable of being ‘attentive to what is elusive, fantastic, contingent, and often barely there’ (Gordon 1997, 26), enabling us to glimpse perhaps the naked truths that the Meira Paibi are baring in their outraged storming of the Army Headquarters.

The metaphor of haunting materialises when one confronts the image of Irom Sharmila, who has not touched food or drink in over eight years. Haunted by the shocking massacre of 10 innocent civilians at the hands of a retaliating army, in

November 2000 Sharmila went on a hunger strike unto death, with the demand that India revoke the AFSPA. She was arrested after a few days on the charge of attempted suicide and put into the medical unit of the Central Jail in Imphal and has since then been in confinement, being force-fed by a pipe thrust in her nose. Her body lies wasting under police custody, her story and her body for the most are invisible to the nation, but also to her family and the people who care about her. Isolated, confined and outlawed, Sharmila occupies this liminal position between the living and the dead, hanging precariously from a thin tube. Dead by the logic of her protest, Sharmila is however still alive – a direct consequence of the punitive mechanisms of the sovereign state that claims her life and her body for itself. Haunted by the violence and suffering that she has witnessed, Sharmila is, in turn, a haunting figure – ashen and frail, lying in bed, speaking in a halting tone of her ‘bounden duty’ (see Joshi 2007).

It is useful to track the formation of this body, which was denied its original form of protest because the appropriation of self-destruction, her death-wish, was a direct threat to the sovereign’s power over the body (see Foucault 1995). The arrest is thus the immediate response of the state to an incursion on its territory – to place her body under arrest, under the protection of the state, and to disallow it its form of protest. When Sharmila continues her protest in the form of fasting, the state has to continue its hysterical response and sustain her life. The battle between Sharmila and the state continues in a stalemate, on the site of her body, a body that bears the history of this tussle in a way that is indistinguishable from its present form. Had the state allowed her to die in the first instance, it would have revealed itself as murderous and emasculated in the same gesture. In the gap between the state’s power over her body and her own interpellation as a citizen of the state, lay the ghost of another self. This is the self that continues to haunt the state with every passing year.

Time goes on and with it the haunting intensifies. Sharmila has now been elevated to the realm of the sacred; that which exceeds human rationality and finitude. Now it matters little when she dies, having consigned her body to death, and with only the state keeping her alive, Sharmila has become a fantasy of the state, a fantasy it is unable to get rid of. If she was to die, it would not haunt any less as she will have been the ghost they kept alive for so many years. When she dies, she will, if anything, gain in mythical proportions. The question that will continue to haunt the Indian state is why could they not let her die? The answer is, of course, because of the meaning that has accrued onto her body. It is at this level of accrual that the body has been reworked; meaning is something the body bears, it is readable, and it is what the state demands. The baring of the body creates the possibility for other – often, unpoliced even unapprehensible – meanings to attach themselves to the body. Sharmila’s protest is difficult to explain away because the state emerges as an entity that cannot even allow her to protest. It cannot hear her demand, and it cannot answer her. There is no justice that can be done to Sharmila. Even if her life/death was to achieve its goal of getting the AFSPA abolished, what would it say about the state that it took eight years (and counting)?

In effect, how will the state be remembered? How can it remember itself as a benevolent state in the face of this ghost? How has it found itself with this difficult body that seems to need only time to accumulate meaning – that resists any rationalisation? The entire framing of her imprisonment can be read allegorically. The body is under duress, it is distanced from everyday needs and desires, it is

focused on a single cause for which it continues to become emaciated, and for which it suffers. It is kept alive by the sheer will of a people or a state that cannot converse coherently with it. It seems to have a direct connection with God, where such extraordinary acts are possible because they are divine injunctions. It is profoundly ideological. From a feminist politics of the body, it has transcended to an oracle of truth and justice. That body speaks slowly, sparingly, and with much effort. In fact, it does not speak; it makes pronouncements.

Kavita Joshi's (2007) *My Body My Weapon*, a short documentary on Sharmila's protest, aptly frames the entire journey in terms of a sacred expedition, a kind of Moses-like experience, where to watch the documentary is to participate in the revering of a contemporary holy figure. God can freely speak through her with no contradictions. The protest can be elevated to the level of a battle between good and evil – a story that obsesses popular culture, that must agree to not take it 'seriously' in order to indulge in it, yet precisely the story that organises mystical injunctions. What is the place of this enchanted figure in the imagination of the modern liberal individual and the modern liberal state? In what way does the couching of this body in a discourse of sacredness enact a disruption that is increasingly difficult for the state to contain? Or to rephrase, how does the sacred haunt the modern state or even academic attempts at understanding the unstable ground where politics in Manipur is played out?

Figures like Sharmila transgress the very limits of human thinking and yet return to speak to it haltingly and hauntingly. In some ways her protest illuminates the exteriority, helplessness and disillusionment faced by marginalised peoples, occupying spaces at the fringes of what Chatterjee (2001) refers to as 'civil society'. It speaks poignantly of the tenacity of the human spirit struggling against injustices meted out by cruel states and cruel laws. Yet as Joshi's film hauntingly conveys, Sharmila's protest is not simply a rational and strategic manoeuvre to have the AFSPA repealed. Even as she attempts to pressure the state to change its policies, she has consecrated her body to the divine; and through her words (in the film) we are transported to a parallel dimension that she simultaneously inhabits and draws from – the realm of the sacred. Like the Santhal who was called upon by his maker to participate in a peasant rebellion, Sharmila too is inspired by a divine presence that nurtures her spirit. 'God gives me courage, unlimited courage and that is why I am still alive – through these artificial means' she says, pulling at the tube in her nose (see Joshi 2007). This is an interesting moment in her narrative, when God seems to converge uncannily with the nation-state. It remains unclear what she means to say; is she alive because of God's blessings or thanks to the 'protective' nation-state, or then does God act through the laws of the state that force her to stay alive?

What is of consequence here is that in encountering Sharmila we are forced to cast aside all 'logical' or 'democratic' arguments against the AFSPA, and instead say that the fact that this one woman protests in *this* particular way is enough reason to abolish it. This is an astounding feat, not easily accomplished, and it behoves us to pause a little to ask how this is made possible? Sharmila's protest reverberates strongly with Benjamin's attempt to infuse the divine into a Marxist conception of historical materialism. In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (Benjamin 1968), he argues that theology must, for political expediency, hunch under the table, out of sight, but it nevertheless pulls the strings of the puppet of historical materialism. This theology does not preserve the law but in fact destroys it in order to make it anew. Benjamin's invocation of the divine or messianic opens up politics to make space for

that which is outside human control, which cannot be colonised despite the best efforts of the modern liberal state. Echoing Chakrabarty (1998, 22), we must then ask what space do we allow for the messianic (or more broadly, the sacred) in our attempts to understand and analyse social phenomena? Put differently, what is lost when we attempt to 'scientifically' apprehend that which simultaneously exists in the realm of the sacred, even as it has a rational element to it?

Through this paper, I have attempted to trace and analyse this coexistence of contradictory impulses caught within single events, concepts and moments. Mirroring the simultaneity of radically opposed strands in the very structure of the state of exception (as argued by Agamben) and in subaltern pasts (as discussed by Chakrabarty) are the experiences of the people of Manipur in the face of decades of the AFSPA, particularly the women whose protests I have tried to analyse. Being sensitive to the limits or pitfalls of political action or mobilisation does not necessarily occasion the death or disavowal of all politics. We can still join our voices against the AFSPA despite knowing that this alone is not a final solution. A critique of the AFSPA is simultaneously a reminder of the violence enshrined by the modern nation-state, by liberal politico-economic paradigms, by normative society against its margins. And all these inequalities, both systemic and singular, must be confronted and addressed as we attempt to fashion a more just and tolerant social order.

I suggest that analysis of contexts like Manipur must take more seriously the complexities that abound both in everyday life and in the analytical tools we adopt to study it. The task is an uphill one, perhaps even 'impossible' in the Derridean sense (Derrida 1992, 29), requiring us to familiarise ourselves with oddities such as magic and trickery, ghostly entities, gods and goddesses, poetry and prose, bodies and affects, with that which we cognitively resist or perhaps cannot even easily conceptualise. The politics that Sharmila and the Meira Paibi women sculpt for us overthrows the framework of means and ends despite being tied to it simultaneously. Theirs is a politics that can and must risk everything to alleviate the unbearable bitterness of the past and its present. A politics with no eyes for the future, fashioned out of the sheer collapse or failure of human dignity and reason, yet only made possible by it.

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