

# Manipur may not recover from this indifference

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July 26, 2023

**Violence, silence, and stereotype blend together to create the symbolic hypocrisy of the BJP-led regime.**



Shiv Visvanathan,

- JUL 26 2023, 15:31 IST
- UPDATED: JUL 26 2023, 15:31 IST



Women from the Zo-Kuki community stage a protest demanding separate administration for Tribals of Manipur, in Churachandpur, Tuesday, July 25, 2023. Credit: PTI Photo  
Every atrocity from rape to genocide generates a standard etiquette of social response. There is no sense of feeling and little reference to justice. All one needs are the correct words.

The recent Manipur violence brings this hypocrisy out dramatically. Think of Prime Minister Narendra Modi traversing the world for two months, suddenly playing patriarch fighting for the honour of every woman. Congress leader Sonia Gandhi responds in contempt, but has little to say about the Prime Minister equating events in Rajasthan with Manipur. Delhi Chief Minister and Aam Aadmi Party leader Arvind Kejriwal cuts in with the right comment but creates at the most a storm in a Delhi tea-cup.

Our outrage, and our sense of horror seems to have been normalised into a standard behavioural response. Even Pavlov's lab rats might show more eccentricity. Very soon outrage lapses into indifference or hypocrisy. The responses are finally dictated more by electoral politics than by any sense of understanding or empathy.

Today, responses to violence have been ritualised both as acts of production and consumption. The recent riots reveal that violence today is an act of policy normalised through electoral politics. Violence in fact, is symbolically consumed through a digital repetition that replaces memory. A video footage enacts the second round of violence reproducing the act of rape. There is little sense of outrage, only vicariousness. The very act of replay reproduces a sense of mimicry. History repeats itself, not as a farce but as a video recording.

Politicians are equally empty. Outrage, in fact, becomes an emptying out of responses. The question is, how do we confront such a response. How do we rewrite a constructive narrative which violence and media have been repeating to ensure a point. The predictable sense of outrage lacks new shades of morality. The human being disappears. As sociological categories take over, society reads the marginal and the minority as dispensable. Some want them to be abandoned in any future narrative.

In fact, two models of violence appear clearly in the current era. The first is represented by the crisis in Himachal Pradesh, where development becomes a form of violence for the erasure of organic communities and ecologies. The second, in Manipur where violence is a form of development consolidating existing power structures. Violence becomes a currency of power; violence becomes a language of the hegemonic outlining of who gets what and who does not. Violence underwrites the existing social contract. Violence also delimits your repertoire of rights with Meitei and Naga claiming turf, while the Kuki is caught in the liminality of terrains. Violence becomes both a symbolic and material text legitimising the politics of current discourse.

One must reread violence several times because the standard protests are skin deep. One must read it symbolically, ecologically, and demographically. One needs to outline its script to challenge the logic of current systems. One sees that this is why both Modi and Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh were not really bothered by it and responded to it with cliché. It is here that independent critical analysis of the academe and the civil rights groups becomes crucial.

Language needs to be reinvented. The Prime Minister uses cliché echoing "anguish" as he stands in "the temple of democracy". Piety in the form of correctness hides distance. Even a quick investigation shows that the FIR for the incident was gathering dust, and the Prime Minister's belated reaction, which was a combination of caution and distance, adds to the suspicion. Words like horror used too often get lost in the stereotypes. One needs a return to storytelling.

One must realise the role of woman in Manipur. One senses this as one recollects the role of the mothers of Manipur in confronting the earlier violence of the Assam Rifles. One finds another resonance when one recollects Irom Sharmila's epic fast for over 15 years. One must grasp that violence, silence, and stereotype blend together to create the symbolic hypocrisy of the regime.

A different sense of civics and governance is crucial. The citizen must emerge in these narratives. One must ask, whether the communities are consulted after such events. A civil rights report needs to retell the story. Truth can hardly be left to current regimes where the body becomes a site of violence and indifference, reinforcing electoral politics.

One needs a different therapy, a new kind of storytelling, a narrative that echoes the truth commissions, in reworking the tacit structures of violence. Today, stereotypes and violence become two sides of an indifference from which Manipur may not recover. The emptiness of democracy is stark.

*(Shiv Visvanathan is a social scientist and professor, OP Jindal Global University.)*

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## **BJP's indecisiveness a handicap for NDA**

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**The BJP's much-touted claim of the benefits of a 'double-engine' government stands exposed as Manipur burns with both the Centre and the state being mute spectators**

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Sayantan Ghosh,

- JUL 26 2023, 11:10 IST
- UPDATED: JUL 26 2023, 11:10 IST



Recently, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) revived its National Democratic Alliance, now comprising 38 political parties. Most of these political parties are regional and politically marginal, except for a handful of parties like the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP)'s breakaway faction and the Eknath Shinde faction of the Shiv Sena.

The BJP's clear line of attack has usually been against the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, which has now given way to the Opposition alliance called the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (I.N.D.I.A), which BJP leaders have called an alliance of the corrupt. That said, it is important to recognise that the NDA also faces several obstacles. The greatest obstacle for the BJP-led alliance will be convincing the public that if elected back to power it will be sufficiently decisive. The Narendra Modi-led government has failed woefully to maintain decisiveness, which was expected of a second-term government after it was voted back to power with a greater mandate than 2014.

It is crucial to note that the Modi-led government has lacked decisiveness in many significant decisions. For instance, the Prime Minister repealed the three controversial farm laws without an explanation. Putting aside the discussion on the merits/demerits of the three laws, such ambivalence raises questions about the government's true intent, foresight, and planning. The BJP-led government was similarly indecisive on other issues, such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). However, it has taken the government over four years to design the rules and notify the public.

In Manipur, the BJP's indecisiveness is on full display. Despite extensive discussions, the party has failed to hold its Chief Minister accountable for the violence and bloodshed. It is regrettable that it took a disturbing, violent video of unspeakable atrocities against women for Prime Minister Narendra Modi to speak, albeit very briefly, on the dreadful state of affairs in Manipur. Similarly, the ruling party or the government

did not show solidarity with the protesting female wrestlers, who alleged that BJP MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh sexually abused many wrestlers. The BJP did not remove Singh from any position and did not issue a public statement against him. A few weeks ago, the saffron party reinitiated its push for a Uniform Civil Code, but till date has not come out with a draft giving an outline of what it intends to unify.

The BJP's obdurate stance on the violence in Manipur and the wrestler protest exemplifies its arrogance. Despite repeated requests from Opposition parties, the BJP is not yet convinced that the Prime Minister should address the Manipur issue in Parliament. In a democracy as extensive as India's, such a display of arrogance is deplorable. These problems also indicate a lack of decisiveness at the regional level, indicating that the party's leadership is struggling to maintain control. This emphasises the potential repercussions of the centralisation of power, which appears to be backfiring. It appears that the BJP is ignoring signals of indecisiveness and instilling the belief that the party can win elections with the aid of Modi's image and charisma. Recent losses in Karnataka, and Himachal Pradesh have demonstrated that this approach must be abandoned, and that Modi alone cannot win state elections for the BJP.

At this juncture, the BJP must recognise that regardless of the significance of these 38 political parties, when an alliance is formed, as the largest stakeholder, it will be required to uphold these parties' expectations. Currently, it will be difficult for these smaller parties within the NDA to persuade the public that they have joined forces with the BJP government at the Centre is decisive and has a clear vision about India's future. The BJP's much-touted claim of the benefits of a 'double-engine' government stands exposed as Manipur continues to burn with both the Union and state governments unable to control the situation.

The BJP has shown decisiveness in its persistent attacks on Opposition leaders across India via central investigation agencies. Similarly, the BJP has been decisive in limiting the democratic rights and autonomy of state governments by interfering in governance-related issues through governors, or by introducing ordinances, as it did in Delhi.

The BJP's allies in the NDA will confront a formidable challenge when discussing the government's failed promises and decisions that have been withdrawn. The 38 parties in the NDA Ultimately, the NDA will have to rely on the image of Prime Minister Modi. But the question remains: how long will the BJP continue to contest elections solely on Modi's strength? The BJP and NDA must realise that when people elect a government with such a large majority, they expect decisiveness, not volatility.

*(Sayantan Ghosh is visiting professor of journalism at St Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata. Twitter: @sayantan\_gh.)*

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**A huge wall of money separates BJP from I.N.D.I.A**

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**More than Prime Minister Narendra Modi's image and BJP's cadre strength, the biggest odds for the Opposition are the way donations pour into the party's coffers.**

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[Jyoti Punwani](#),

- JUL 26 2023, 10:57 IST
- UPDATED: JUL 26 2023, 11:01 IST



The new Opposition alliance, I.N.D.I.A, has enough odds ranged against it: the Prime Minister's larger than life image; the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s huge cadre, and the advantages that any ruling party enjoys in a national election.

However, perhaps the biggest of these odds, or, the one advantage which acts as a multiplying force for the BJP's other strengths, are the way donations pour into its coffers.

The latest report by the Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR) shows that from 2016 till 2022, the BJP received three times the amount of donations than all the other national parties combined, both as electoral bonds and direct corporate donations.

About Rs 5,300 crore went to the BJP in the form of electoral bonds; the amount that the other parties got was about Rs 1,800 crore.

Yet, these crores made up just 52 per cent of the BJP's resources. For the other parties, they constituted almost the bulk of their funding: ranging between 61.54 per cent for the Congress to 93.27 per cent for the Trinamool Congress.

The 2024 Lok Sabha election is crucial for parties that have combined to form the I.N.D.I.A alliance. Even if they don't win, they need to limit the BJP's current overwhelming presence in the Lok Sabha to be able to hold the government accountable, and to effectively oppose new laws that would dilute the people's rights. But when planning how best to get these results, how much to spend on each constituency, the Opposition will have to keep close track of its budgets.

The ruling BJP, on the other hand, will have no such worry. It can keep aside its entire income from electoral bonds for spending on its candidates, knowing that its coffers will remain half-full.



As everyone knows, electoral bonds, which cost between Rs 1,000 and Rs 1 crore, are an opaque method of political party funding; nobody gets to know who's donating them. This is why both the Election Commission of India and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) objected to them when they were introduced in 2017.

The ADR reports show that these bonds remain the favourite method of donating money to parties; and that most parties use these donations for election campaigns.

As citizens, we need to know where the money that a party spends on canvassing our votes comes from. Are these companies that donate these bonds legitimate, or have they been set up only to channel black money into political donations? Are PSUs being forced to donate?

Consider Modi's 2019 election campaign. Apart from him addressing three-four rallies daily, he was projected as a brand; a biopic was released on him, and for the three months of the campaign, the free Namo TV channel was on every set top box.

All this cost money. Where did this money come from?

The ADR report covers a large period. In 2016, the Narendra Modi government was fairly new. By 2022, the Prime Minister was half-way into his second term. By then the effects of demonetisation, GST, and even Covid-19 and its lockdowns, had hit everyone. Small businesses had been forced to wind up; jobs had shrunk; digitalisation and Aadhaar rules were making the lives of the rural poor miserable. This period also covered the widespread anti-CAA-NRC protests and the year-long protest against the farm laws.

Yet, there was no let-up in the flow of funds to the ruling BJP. In 2017-2018, the crucial year before the general elections, the BJP received 18 times the amount of direct corporate donations that all other parties did. Did the others even stand a chance?

As its unity plans start taking shape, how does the Opposition tackle this huge wall of funds that separates it from the ruling party? There is little likelihood that the sale of electoral bonds will stop; a petition asking the Supreme Court to investigate their functioning has been pending for five years now. The apex court has turned down requests to stop their sale till the petition is disposed of.

The answer lies in how well the Opposition manages to connect with the people. Can it convince them that its models of governance as seen in states ruled by these parties can lead to a life where access to health and food aren't luxuries? Where homes aren't bulldozed without notice? Where raped women don't kill themselves waiting for their rapists to be arrested? Where saffron-clad mobs aren't allowed to lynch and humiliate whoever displeases them? Where jobs aren't a mirage?

Reaching out to convince people that life might get slightly easier will also require funds. But more than that, it will require these parties to have a genuine desire to change lives.

(Jyoti Punwani is a senior journalist.)

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## Small steps towards internationalising Indian rupee

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**As India's economy expands, the focus on internationalising the Indian Rupee must increase in tandem.**



Vinay K Srivastava,

- JUL 25 2023, 14:22 IST
- UPDATED: JUL 25 2023, 14:24 IST



India is moving on the path of internationalisation of the Indian Rupee (INR) to hedge transaction, translation, and economic exposures. Recently, India locked two back-to-back deals for cross-border payment in the INR.

The third deal which is underway is with Indonesia, the details which were discussed when Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman met her Indonesian counterpart Sri Mulyani Indrawati in Gandhinagar, Gujarat on July 17. The first two countries with which India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) is connected are Singapore and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

A day prior to this meeting, on July 16, India signed an MoU with the UAE to settle trade in INR that will cover all current account and permitted capital account transactions. Now importers could use domestic currency to pay for imports from the UAE.

The agreement with Russia for trade in INR has been handy, especially after sanctions imposed on settlement in US dollars by European countries. Apart from this, the RBI has permitted the banks of 18 countries to settle payments in the domestic currency. In addition to this, 64 countries have expressed their interest to trade in the INR.

### **Benchmark currencies**

There are more than 150 currencies in the world that are legal tender. However, cross-border payments have been dominated by the \$. The \$ became the medium of international payment at the Bretton Woods Conference of 1944.

Although it formally was discontinued with the end of the Bretton Woods system in the late 1970s-1980s, the \$ is still designated as reserve currencies and every country has been preserving their forex reserve principally in the \$. Despite this, the \$ has weakened from its high of 2022. However, it still looks distinctly precious against major currencies of the world, especially against sterling pound.

### **Why domestic currency?**

Russia, China, and a few other countries have been more vocal in questioning the \$-dominated international monetary system. There is a growing demand to find an alternative to the \$ considering the unilateral economic sanctions imposed by the United States on Russia for invading Ukraine.

The fact is that the gap between the \$ and the nearest contender is huge, and it will be a while before that chasm is levelled. China has been pushing the Renminbi to replace the \$ wherever possible, but it has been met with limited success. The Renminbi's success will depend on how the trade war between the US and China plays out.

The \$'s pole position is intact for the near future as data shows that it is still the preferred currency for international trade between countries. By end of 2021, the US dollar accounted for about 40 per cent of cross-border Swift flows.

### **India's position**

India is one of the fastest growing major economies in the world. It is now the fifth largest global economy with a GDP of \$3.75 trillion in 2023. Given the strong economic recovery following the Covid-19 pandemic, the INR has the potential to become an international currency. Efforts to reduce transaction cost, as well as settlement time along with the introduction of the e-Rupee are aimed towards this goal.

While India is striving to internationalise the INR, it must not aim to pitch it as a reserve currency, mainly because India is far from a dominating position in world trade. India accounts for a miniscule 1.8 per cent share in leading exporters and 2.8 per cent in imports. As this share grows in the decades to come, the focus on an INR-based trade will be the right approach.

It is a long way for the INR, but deals like the ones with Singapore, the UAE, and Indonesia are steps in the right direction. There are challenges in focusing on an INR-based trade, as was recently seen when India paid Russia in Chinese Yuan. India, Russia, and China are leading the change in moving away from the \$ by developing their own financial infrastructure, the success of which depends on onboarding more nations. As India's economy expands, the focus on internationalising the Indian Rupee must increase in tandem.

(Vinay K Srivastava is associate professor, ITS Ghaziabad. Twitter: @meetdrvinay)

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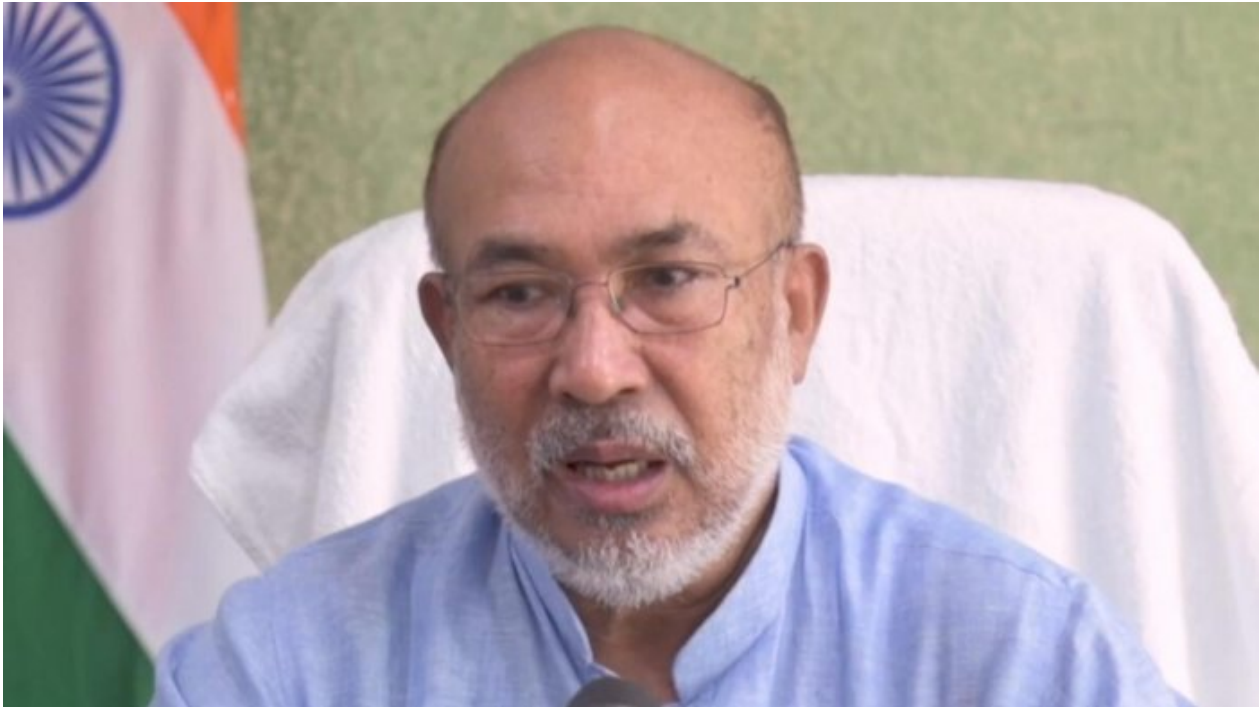
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**We are staring into the abyss in the North-East and the abyss is not just staring back at us, it is also mocking us**



Saba Naqvi,

- JUL 25 2023, 11:47 IST
- UPDATED: JUL 25 2023, 11:47 IST



When the 2002 communal violence took place in Gujarat, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee tried to get Chief Minister Narendra Modi to resign. But the rank and file of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) backed Modi to the hilt.

At that point he was not an elected Chief Minister, and had been selected by the BJP high command to replace a discredited state leadership. The scale of the violence and polarisation, however, established Modi firmly as the protector of Hindus — and the individual who would show minorities their place in India. It should not, therefore, be forgotten that these are the roots of the current BJP leadership ruling India.

### **Read | One more arrested in Manipur naked parade video case**

The recent video of two tribal women in Manipur walking naked and being molested by a crowd has shaken the country, from the judges of the Supreme Court to ordinary citizens. We are asking for answers and punishment. Yes, the Centre did make a request to ask the BJP Chief Minister N Biren Singh, to resign, but no one seems to be pushing him too hard to demit office. He joined the BJP from the Congress in 2017, and has been Chief Minister since then. It's worth stressing that it was only in 2022 that the BJP won a majority on its own in Manipur. As Chief Minister, Singh has often been accused of pushing an anti-tribal agenda.



The North-East is a multi-dimensional jewel with many tribes and faiths: Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist, to name a few. It is fragile. It always needed to be handled with care, delicately, or else it would crack, as Manipur has now. Yet with so much hate in the air, the Chief Minister that the national media wants sacked (as 21 years ago it did with the Chief Minister of Gujarat), is seen as a hero of the Meitei community (53 per cent of the population) who are the Hindu settlers in Imphal Valley. The tribes, the Kukis (16 per cent) and Nagas (24 per cent) are mostly Christians. The current conflict is between the Meitei and the Kuki.

These are the ugly distortions that emerge when we set one community or tribe against another; when we do not speak the language of unity, but utilise the politics of division. The politics we have seen some BJP regimes practice are designed to bring out the worst prejudice in human minds, to fan fears and provoke fights over land and hypothetical losses/gains, and use women's bodies as the sites of conquest. It happened to Bilkis Bano in Gujarat 21 years ago, and is happening to Kuki women in Manipur today.

We are staring into the abyss in the North-East and the abyss is not just staring back at us, it is also mocking us. For decades now, we heard accounts of how the RSS missions were active in the North-East states, keeping an eye on Christian missions and positioning themselves as protectors of Hindus in a complex region known for insurgencies, a historic alienation of certain tribal communities, and the presence of the Indian Army.

The BJP is in power in four states in the North-East — Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Tripura. Within the largest state Assam, identity issues have traditionally played out as insider/outsider, Bengali and Assamese that at times would overlap into Hindu versus Muslim. Even as Manipur is burning, the most popular BJP Chief Minister of the North-East routinely speaks the language of ascending hate as if he is seeking to light another fire around the fault-line of Hindu vs Muslim. That is always a neater construct for the BJP/RSS than Meitei vs Kuki, unless we give it the Hindu vs Christian dimension.

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, also a former Congressman now showing his worth to the RSS, is credited with opening up the gates of the North-East to the BJP post-2014. There has been speculation that his crass and communal statements — the most recent being that Miyans (Bengali Muslims) are responsible for rising vegetable prices — come from the strategic need to keep the pitch polarised as there are also signs of a Congress revival in Assam. He would like the Bengali Muslim votes to stay with Badruddin Ajmal's All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) and not transfer to the Congress. Assam has 14 Lok Sabha seats, and Manipur has two.

Simultaneously, Sarma's BJP predecessor, Sarbananda Sonowal, who served a full term (2016 to 2021), did not plumb to such communal depths and though he had his bases. Sarma is, reportedly, defining his term by upping Hindu vs Muslim, Assamese vs Bengali, and by Machiavellian moves in the other small states. But what does

Machiavelli do when the house has burnt down? Meanwhile, N Biren Singh remains a hero to his community. So, can the current BJP leadership in New Delhi push Singh out for following a template it created years ago in another part of India?

*Saba Naqvi is a journalist and author.*

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