



Duncan McDuie-Ra

Borderland City in New India

Frontier to Gateway

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Asian Borderlands

Asian Borderlands presents the latest research on borderlands in Asia as well as on the borderlands of Asia – the regions linking Asia with Africa, Europe and Oceania. Its approach is broad: it covers the entire range of the social sciences and humanities. The series explores the social, cultural, geographic, economic and historical dimensions of border-making by states, local communities and flows of goods, people and ideas. It considers territorial borderlands at various scales (national as well as supra- and sub-national) and in various forms (land borders, maritime borders), but also presents research on social borderlands resulting from border-making that may not be territorially fixed, for example linguistic or diasporic communities.

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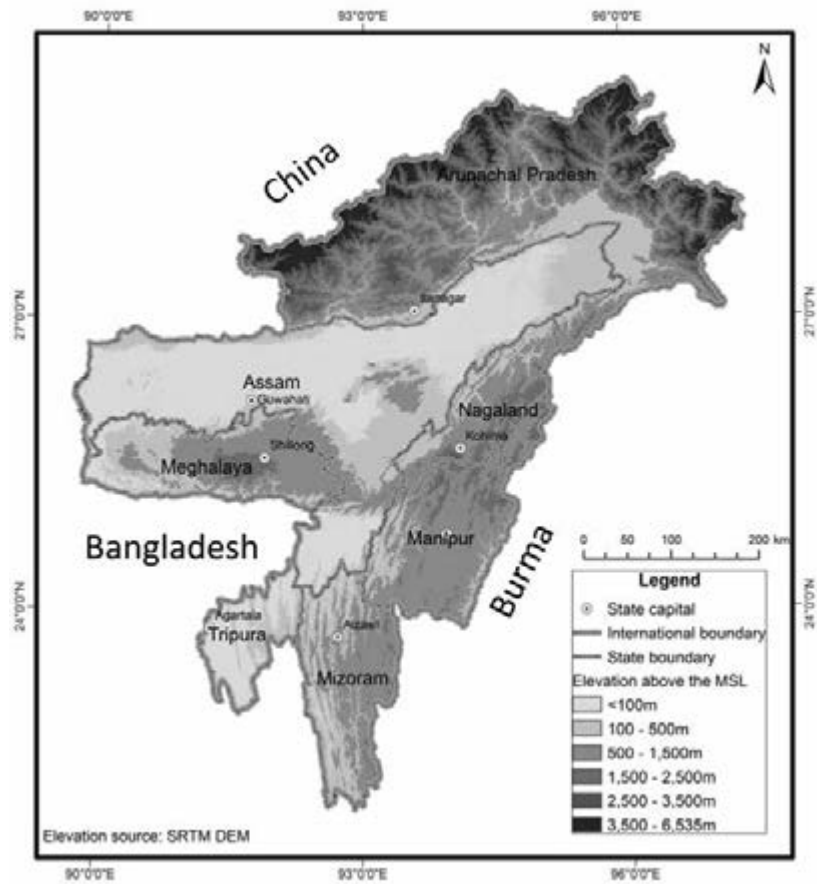
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Dedicated to the journalists of Manipur

Map 1.1 Manipur and surrounding states and territories



Source: Sarat Phukan

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1 Introduction

On the far eastern edge of India, just 100 kilometres by road from Myanmar, is Imphal, the capital of Manipur; a former kingdom controversially merged into the Indian Union in 1949 and subject to various separatist and interethnic conflicts ever since. With a population of half a million, Imphal city sits in the Imphal valley, a depression within the Patkai range at an elevation of 770 meters surrounded by higher, steeper hills that form the majority of the land in the state. Among the semi-completed residential buildings, military check posts and headquarters, government buildings sitting behind security bunkers, and markets teeming with goods from across the border are the remains of Imphal's cinema halls. On Bir Tikendrajit Road, one the Imphal's busiest streets, sits Rupmahal – a theatre built in 1948 and the onetime heart of Imphal's politically charged theatre scene (see Somorendra, 2000) and later a cinema. Like so many other patches of pavement along Bir Tikendrajit Road, including the nearby public library, the courtyard of Rupmahal hosts a second-hand clothes market. Vendors have strung bamboo poles hanging shirts and coats between concrete pillars, exterior walls, and on protruding steel rods. On plastic sheets arranged on the ground are piles of pants and T-shirts. The clothes have labels and logos in Chinese, Korean and Thai. Inside the dark lobby of the theatre is an old ticket window for Imphal Talkies, the cinema that ran from of Rupmahal for several decades (and now the name of one Manipur's best-known rock bands). The cinema has not operated since the early 2000s when underground groups imposed a ban on Hindi language in Manipur, reducing the number of films available to show. This, combined with mounting insecurity for residents since the 1990s, killed off Imphal nightlife (Akoijam, 2010). The place appears deserted but behind the heavy door of the theatre is a troupe of actors rehearsing for an afternoon performance under a few light bulbs dangling from the roof. The cinema is gone, but in its place the theatre has been resurrected.

Around the city the scene is repeated. At Friends' Mini cinema in Paona Bazaar the grand stairway that would have once led up into a mezzanine foyer is lined with small shops, built on improvised timber platforms balanced on the stairs and propped up with cinder blocks, selling new clothes that have come from the border markets. In the upper foyer four men are playing table tennis by the entrance to the main cinema hall in the complex. One of them agrees to open up the locked door for me. All of the seats have been removed and the floor is taken up by orderly rows of second-hand clothing in bales under the soaring ceiling. The pink and

sky-blue stucco ceiling remains, though it has faded. Light comes instead from bulbs dangling from rope tied the length of the hall and through large holes in the wall where air vents have been removed to let in shards of sunlight (and pigeons). One of the caretakers explains that they look after stock for several merchants in the surrounding area. Every now and again the merchants send porters to carry off a bale from their massive inventory, all of which are marked with a name and a number hand-written on the side.

Perhaps most poignant of all the old cinemas is Shanker Talkies in Lamphelpat, a locality in the west of the city. In a yellow and red cube building dating from the late 1970s, Shanker Talkies too has a once-grand walkway complete with scenes from the *Khamba-Thoibi*, a Manipuri folk-tale, above the landings and the long-disused kiosk. Old film posters peel off the walls and debris gathers on the marble floor. Shanker Talkies was built as a twin theatre and the larger theatre is still used occasionally for premiere screenings of Manipuri films – a thriving industry also aided by the decline in Hindi cinema – though following their premiere local films are mostly shown in smaller video halls and in people's homes on laptops and DVD players. When I visited Shanker Talkies the door to the smaller theatre was open. Inside it was dark – the only light coming through removed sections of wall near the ceiling. On the stage was a drum-kit and microphones. In the aisles a man paced up and down rehearsing a sermon. Others walked back and forth praying. A young man, Chao-toiba, approached and welcomed me to the Spirit of Faith Church Imphal, an evangelical sect for recent Meitei converts to Christianity running services in the old cinema for want of a permanent space. He asked that I stay for their service, stressing that I would enjoy listening to their pastor who was trained in Ukhrul – a hill area right on the border with Myanmar.

Afterwards in the vacant lot outside where shops once stood selling food and locally made shoes and clothes to cinema patrons, and where playing cards and small brown medicine bottles now lay scattered on the ground, Shanker Talkies stood against the bright midday sky as a tempting metaphor for Manipur's recent history. The ban on Hindi language had helped the decline of cinemas in Imphal. Chronic insecurity and high levels of violence certainly played a role as well. Ironically, the ban on Hindi was enforced and planned by Meitei ethno-nationalist groups in a bid to preserve Meitei language and culture. Yet a decade and a half later within an old cinema run-down by the ban, a group of Meiteis were running an evangelical church welcoming new converts to Christianity: Indian cultural domination may have been prevented but other 'external' influences were certainly visible in social life. Indeed if the end of Hindi cinema suggests a

kind of closing off of Manipur to India in the 2000s, a turning away, then the influx of second-hand clothes that now fill the very same buildings originating from East Asia, perhaps via other stops, suggests an opening to the rest of Asia – all played out on the urban landscape. Yet among all this direction changing Rupmahal is still staging Manipuri plays, suggesting perhaps that indigenous culture can persevere in the midst of these larger dynamics. Of course the metaphor is partial, just one thread in a complex story. But a compelling thread nonetheless.

Imphal was classified 'disturbed' by the Indian Government from 1980-2004. Imphal's residents have been subject to the excesses of extraordinary laws and military occupation, incoming flows of refugees, separatist insurgencies and armed extortion, and mostly unsuccessful attempts at economic development. The city exemplifies what Dunn and Cons call a sensitive space, where people are subject to multiple 'interwoven projects, logics, goals and anxieties of rule operating at once' (2014: 102). Despite decades of violence, extraordinary laws, poor employment prospects, and civic dysfunction, Imphal continues to grow. Migrants arrive from rural Manipur, from neighbouring border polities, from across the borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar, and – controversially – from other parts of India and Nepal. At the same time a large Manipuri diaspora has formed, sending back remittances to relatives and later returning to settle in Imphal.

This book is an exploration of belonging, exclusion, and agency in Imphal at a time when prevailing configurations of power in the city, honed through decades of extraordinary laws and dysfunctional civilian politics, are being met by the forces of capital let loose by the transformation of the borderland from a frontier to a corridor. My argument has two parts. First, I argue that within the city authority is fragmented into microsites of contention where state, quasi-state (military and paramilitary) and non-state actors seek to control space. This situation evokes Lund's notion of fragmented sovereignty, namely that in 'post-colonial political landscapes, governance is not the preserve of governments. A wider variety of institutional actors are at play in this enterprise, often using the language and idioms of state' (2011: 887). Everyday acts by residents such as protest, creating memorials, marking territory, and the demarcation of neighbourhoods challenge the spatial practices of those in control, or seemingly in control. These acts are attempts to make place, to establish and maintain a sense of belonging. However, I posit that belonging also entails exclusion of others, and in Imphal this takes place along two main fault lines: between ethnic communities and between Manipuris and migrants from outside the state. Imphal is the battleground upon which these claims for place are fought.

I am interested in how these battles play out in, and also shape, the urban landscape itself. As discussed further below, the conceptual framework of sensitive space (Dunn and Cons, 2014) and fragmented sovereignty (Lund, 2011) – approached with cognisance of Lefebvre's (1991) dialectical approach to the production of space – illuminates the ways Imphal is controlled and the ways this control is challenged from below by people in search of belonging and trying to make do. Making do, what Pine refers to as 'creative tactics for seizing opportunities and negotiating risk' (2012: 10), takes place in a city where the enablers of everyday life such as mobility, safety, security, property rights, cash loans, sanitation, and employment are promised and provided by various actors at various times in different parts of the city. So too are the threats to everyday life such violence, extortion, and evictions among others. This argument is explored in part one of the book.

Having established the contours of the frontier city and the ways residents navigate them, part two explores its nascent transformation into a gateway city. Not only is the borderland seen as a corridor to new markets, it is seen as a new market itself and subject to various policies aimed at maximising its 'potential'. The liberalisation of a militarised city long-dominated by a heavy state presence and security-driven governance brings forth my second main argument. Official discourse of the Indian Government and various policy analysts and think tanks envisages a future borderland where goods, people, and production move in and out of the gateway city. Yet connectivity operates very differently when viewed from below. Various organised and ad hoc actions exploit new mobilities and new vulnerabilities to make claims for recognition of Manipuri sovereignty, to challenge the ways space is controlled on the streets, and to make demands on the Manipur and Indian Governments for greater territorial autonomy – for example. I argue that while connectivity brings Imphal further under the control of the Indian state and opens the city to Indian and transnational capital – a sensitive development in a polity where resistance to India has underpinned political and economic life for the last sixty years – connectivity also provides new opportunities to advance claims for place, belonging, and territory.

Further, Imphal's booming private health and education sector are reshaping the landscape of the city. The so-called 'health city' and 'education city' are seemingly at odds with the picture of the city painted in part one; violent, dysfunctional, divided. However, in keeping with the second point of argument, they also demonstrate alternative imaginings of connectivity: the desire for local entrepreneurs engaged in licit and illicit livelihoods to invest in making Imphal a health hub for the borderland

Image 1.1 Shanker Talkies, Lamphelpat

and the extraordinary demand for private education to enable further study in other parts of India and provide a ticket out. These booms have stretched the boundaries of the city generating new struggles over place in the peri-urban fringe. They are also examples of endogenous liberalisation that depend, in part, on the dysfunctional state apparatus and the power of non-state actors. In other words it is doubtful whether such a boom would be possible without the ‘transgression and erosion’ (Dunn and Cons, 2014: 104) of sovereign power that characterises life in Imphal; a situation likely found in other militarised borderlands with various degrees of similarity and difference. Finally, at least in the case of the health sector, endogenous liberalisation is an expression of self-sufficiency for a community with limited mechanisms to enact autonomy and for whom existing institutional structures have disappointed.

Disturbed City, Sensitive Space

Manipur is part of the subnational region known as Northeast India, an administrative term of the Indian Government applied to diverse geographic region consisting of eight federal states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura as well as

a number of autonomous territories. With the exception of Sikkim all of these states have had at least some of their territory declared a 'disturbed area' in the last six decades. A disturbed area is any designated territory within the current (though disputed) borders of India where extraordinary laws can be enacted. Only the Ministry of Home Affairs or the Governor of the respective state can declare an area disturbed (Ministry of Home Affairs, 1958/1998, Section 3). In India the Governor is a non-elected position appointed by the President. In the Northeast the appointee is usually a former member of the military (Baruah, 2005). Designating an area as disturbed must be reviewed periodically every six months – yet there is no limit on the renewal of disturbed status, and some areas of the borderland have been declared disturbed continuously for decades. Once declared the designation is not open to judicial review and state and local governments can do little to challenge its imposition.

Disturbed status produces a disturbing reality. It enables the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 (AFSPA) to operate. The AFSPA permits any member of the Indian Armed Forces and Paramilitary (armed forces hereafter) to fire 'even to the causing of death' upon individuals acting in contravention of any law or order, carrying weapons (or anything capable of being used as a weapon) or assembling in a group of five or more people. Under the AFSPA, suspected persons can be detained for 24 hours, with unlimited extensions/renewals, and members of the armed forces are permitted to enter any premises without a warrant; collapsing the distinction between public and private space. Most significantly, the AFSPA provides legal protection (in the form of both *de facto* and *de jure* impunity) for members of the armed forces operating in a disturbed area (Mathur, 2012).

Imphal was declared disturbed in 1980. Disturbed status was lifted from the Imphal valley, including Imphal city, in 2004 following mass protests after the rape and murder of a Manipuri woman, Thangjam Manorama Devi, by members of the Assam Rifles paramilitary, including a bold nude protest by members of the Meira Paibis women's association (Bora, 2010; Gaikwad, 2009; Misri, 2011). Yet the legacy of disturbed city status is powerful. A decade on the armed forces still occupy the city, still administer various public buildings, and still have a major influence on political and social life. Further, although the Manipur Government has its own police forces that are not legally bound by the AFSPA they operate within the same culture of impunity and are responsible for much of the contemporary violence in Imphal. As an indication of the scale of rights abuses under AFSPA, 1528 cases of 'fake encounter', the term used for the murder of a civilian by the military that is then justified by branding the deceased an insurgent, were

currently awaiting hearing in the Supreme Court as of June 2014 (Imphal Free Press, 2014). A staggering number for a population of 2.6 million and keeping in mind that this figure represents only fake encounters, not rape, murder without fake encounter, and disappearances. This number only represents the incidents that have been filed as cases. Many relatives of those killed do not take cases forward over fear that they will face retribution, that other family members will be investigated, or because they simply have no faith that it will do any good.

Many of these killings took place before 2004, but there is little to indicate that levels of violence or insecurity have been significantly reduced by the lifting of disturbed status from the city, especially when it is still in place in other districts of the state and given the armed forces have not left the city. Further the Manipur police and various local security forces do not operate under the auspices of AFSPA, thus the lifting of disturbed status does little to affect their operations. Imphal may no longer be officially disturbed, yet life on the ground continues to be disturbing; subject to the same culture of violence and impunity that has characterised the city since the 1980s (McDuie-Ra, 2012b). Violence has become unremarkable over time, reflecting Sidaway's notion of 'banal geopolitics' (2001) wherein violence is framed as 'unexceptional' – if at all – in the face of on-going and oft-repeated arguments about the inviolability of Indian territorial sovereignty on the one hand and the savagery of anti-national rebellion on the other (see also Abraham, 2014).

The activities of the various underground groups further produce the disturbing reality of everyday life. Estimates of the number of underground groups operating in Manipur tend to hover in the 30s (SATP, 2014a; IDSA, 2014) though the propensity of state agencies and right-wing think tanks to use labels like 'terrorist' or 'insurgent' to describe underground groups can be misleading. Some groups are organised armed groups fighting for secession from India, for changes to existing federal state boundaries, for territorial autonomy within Manipur, and for changes to ethnically determined affirmative action categories. Many of these groups have 'above ground' political parties, media outlets, and affiliated NGOs that engage with the government and the military on various issues – usually outside formal politics. Some are distant offshoots or loose affiliates of these organised groups or have no relationship to them. Some are closer to organised crime networks that engage in illegal activities like smuggling, trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion but also in the murky world of Imphal's infrastructure development, contracting, racketeering, and – increasingly – social services. They are able to exercise control over certain spaces within the city and

influence mobility, livelihoods, and security in negative and positive ways depending on circumstances. They protect as well as threaten, and for many residents this makes them very similar to the armed forces or the police.

The territorial politics of the three main ethnic groups in Manipur, vestiges of colonial anthropology and systems of rule: the valley-dwelling Meitei and hill-dwelling Naga and Kuki tribal communities exacerbate tensions in the city. Violent encounters between Naga and Kuki communities ruptured life in the hill areas through the 1990s leading many of those affected, or simply scared, to flee to Imphal. In the 2000s tensions between the Meitei community and both hill communities heightened the hostility of interethnic tensions, culminating in three epochal moments. First, the Meitei protests against the Naga ceasefire and possible redrawing of Manipur's boundaries in 2001 that led to security forces killing 18 Meitei protestors. Those killed were subsequently made martyrs and have a permanent memorial site in Imphal (Kekrupat) and an annual day of mourning – a constant reminder of the hill-valley tensions. Second, in late 2010 the Mao Gate incident provoked hostilities between Nagas in the hills and the Meitei community of the valley when the Manipur Government tried to block the leader of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM), the main Naga independence organisation, Thuingaleng Muivah, from entering the state. Nagas protested in the hills, blocking the highways into Imphal and cutting the city off for almost three months. Third, Kuki communities pushing for an autonomous hill district within Manipur staged a blockade of Imphal in 2011 that went for even longer. Life during the blockades is trying. Shortages, price hikes, closed schools, offices, shops, and deep community tensions keep many people off the streets.

In Imphal, the condition of living in a disturbed city has an undeniable legacy. Yet the disturbed city is more than a categorisation or description of a period. It is a metaphor for the ruptures to everyday life experienced in the borderland during the brutal chapters of state-making that have taken place prior to and following Indian Independence in 1947. Yet disturbed also gives a sense of continued affect: of a sub- or semi-conscious state of being and acting birthed in moments of rupture yet continuing long after (see Seigworth and Gregg, 2010).

Disturbed status and its attendant extraordinary laws raise the question of how such conditions can exist in the world's largest democracy? Agamben's (2005) reworking of Schmidt's state of exception has proved very attractive to scholars seeking to understand the existence and persistence of extraordinary laws in Manipur and other parts of the borderland

(Basavapatna, 2012; Chakravarti, 2010; Gaikwad, 2009; Kshetrimayum, 2009; Sundar, 2011). Authors utilising Agamben to frame the Northeast – even in passing – argue that extraordinary laws have been able to function in the region for so long because the region itself is an exceptional zone, disloyal, unstable, and violent; where the exception to the law initially created under conditions of crisis has become the norm (Agamben, 1998: 166). This appears to perfectly describe disturbed areas and the persistence of AFSPA. For example, in referring to AFSPA Vajpeyi writes that Manipur should ‘not be thought of only as a zone of exception, but as a contradiction so extreme that it undoes the totality in which it is embedded, and breaks it down into distinct and mutually opposed regimes: a democracy and a non-democracy; two nations: India and not-India’ (2009: 36). She goes on to argue ‘if the AFSPA is the ban under which the sovereign power of the Indian state has placed all of the Northeast, then the exception to the rule of law that is spatialised in the Northeast should be thought of as a camp’. The camp being what Agamben calls ‘the fundamental bio-political paradigm of the West’ and where subject populations are stripped of their rights and agency (1998: 181). Agamben’s concept of ‘bare life’ is also used to refer to people living under AFSPA; a population in a permanent state of exception without political or legal rights, or even subjectivity, at the whim of sovereign power (see Kshetrimayum, 2009; Gaikwad, 2009; Vajpeyi, 2009). Political agency is restrained, though when it does occur requires desperate and spectacular gestures, such as the naked protests by members of the Meira Paibis in Imphal in 2004, discussed in chapter 3, analysed brilliantly by Baishya (2010).

While seductive and certainly evocative, the popularity of Agamben for understanding the borderland, Manipur, and Imphal is not only becoming formulaic, it is redirecting scholarly enquiry away from the multiple forms of sovereign power that operate, the agency of different actors and individuals in the region, and the complex and ambiguous nature of citizenship in the borderland. Manipur is not a camp. This is not to say sovereign power cannot take away life with little or no consequences; this is true. And while evoking exceptionalism marks the gravity of abuses of sovereign power in Imphal by state and quasi-state actors, their power is not absolute, they are highly sensitive as to how they are portrayed, and they are engaged in contentious struggles to control of the city – some of which they lose. While I am not antithetical to the framing of Indian power in relation to its ethnic minority borderlands in this way myself, at least at a certain level (McDuie-Ra, 2009a, 2012a), such an approach calls forth a singular coherent sovereignty that is difficult to locate on the ground. Further it constructs

Manipur as a passive space, a depoliticized landscape of misery with few agents or acts of defiance, let alone endogenous sources of power. It erases almost all of the complexity and contradiction of life in Manipur. Further it stops short of unravelling this complexity to see whether exceptionalism does indeed shape everyday life – a necessary task for ethnographers.

As Baishya argues with regard to the burgeoning use of Agamben in works on the Northeast borderland: 'By privileging the postcolonial state as the singular topos of sovereignty, and correspondingly, the overarching entity that spatialises the state of exception, commentators ... often downplay the fractured nature with which governmentality is wielded and its effects experienced or endured in the region ... [and] leads to a restricted vocabulary for understanding modes of sovereign governmentality, states of dispossession and its aftermaths' (2015: 606-607).

The state of exception gives an interesting starting point but reveals little of what constitutes social and political life within the borderland, and in the case here, in Imphal. Given the power of state, quasi-state, and non-state actors in controlling space in Imphal it is crucial to move beyond its limitations. It is here that the concept of 'sensitive space' developed by Dunn and Cons (2014) serves as a useful starting point for understanding power and belonging in Imphal. Sensitive spaces are notable 'for the multiple forms of power that abound, compete and overlap there and the forms of anxiety that they provoke for both those who are governed and those who seek to govern' (2014: 95). Anxiety is certainly characteristic of Imphal, where the desire for control by certain actors is often more identifiable than actual control of space.

The concept identifies multiple forms of power in contested spaces and the ways people navigate and challenge these in their everyday life (2014: 100-101). And in doing so people are 'constantly forced to transgress the bounds of projects, they erode specific sovereign projects – the techniques of sovereign power – and the claims to sovereign authority that they mark' (2014: 102). This constant erosion produces anxiety for actors seeking to govern sensitive space as it exposes their tenuous hold on territories they claim. Thus agency is not only about making do, but the ways that making do can expose the limits of control; especially when control emanates from multiple, often overlapping and/or competing sources. This in turn leads to newer attempts to control. In this kind of space rule by chance – aleatory sovereignty – typifies power in a constantly shifting landscape.

As Lund has argued in his work on public authority in Africa, social life is 'constantly (re-)produced and sanctioned, not necessarily by one single body of "state", but by a variety of institutions which, in doing so, assume

public authority and some character of the state' (2006: 688). Legitimacy is a crucial part of establishing authority, and what is regarded as legitimate varies within different spatial and social contexts. Further, legitimacy shifts over time and in relation to the actors themselves and issues on which legitimate authority is sought; it is established through conflict and negotiation (2006: 693). Lund goes on to argue that a key component of legitimising public authority is territorialisation through 'delimitation and assertion of control' over a geographic area (2006: 695). This is a key characteristic of the disturbed city, which is composed of multiple microsites of control and contention.

Frontiers to Corridors

The legacy of the disturbed city is lived through a contemporary moment of dual connectivity. On the one hand it is becoming better connected to Myanmar and onto Southeast Asia as part of the oft mentioned but rarely qualified 'Look East Policy' of the Indian Government (see Haokip, 2015). Imphal has become a staging post for all kinds of transnational ventures from highways to trade fairs to car rallies. No longer the end of the road, India's recalcitrant frontier plagued by rebellion and deprivation, Imphal is now very much *on* the road, metaphorically and materially speaking, linking South and Southeast Asia. Imphal is imagined as part of a zone of 'potential', where the irresistible force of India's rising power meets the seemingly unbound economic might of Southeast Asia and China – where anything and everything is produced and purchased. Better access to markets, somewhat mystically imagined, is equated to peace, opportunity, and development. Connectivity to the east has garnered a great deal of attention among journalists, scholars, politicians, and entrepreneurs in Delhi and in the borderland itself. It can be seen as a more natural fit; the Tibeto-Burman, Tai and Mon-Khmer inhabitants of the frontier becoming more formally linked with their co-ethnics across the international border (a problematic claim to be sure, but one made with startling regularity). Yet there has been significantly less attention given to the ways connectivity and the opening up of the frontier has necessitated greater connection between the borderland and the rest of India.

The flow of goods, people, and capital into Imphal does not just come from across the international border but from mainland India as well: *outward* connectivity to other parts of Asia and *inward* connectivity to the rest of India. The Indian state has increased its presence in the borderland

for the last five decades through the military and paramilitary facilitated by categories like disturbed, by creating federal state units and attendant bureaucracies – made up of persons indigenous to the borderland and migrants from other parts of India, through party politics, and through objects that mark the landscape as Indian territory – statues of Gandhi, State Bank of India branches, Assam Oil and Bharat Petroleum fuel pumps, and distance markers from the Border Roads Association. In recent years new layers of ‘India’ have been added to the landscape of the borderland; though this is not the ‘old’ India of the military and the bureaucracy, but the ‘new’ India of the market. The arrival of new India is even more fascinating in Imphal where ‘old’ India never took hold and has been strongly resisted for decades.

Dual connectivity is transforming Northeast India in ways that resemble transformations taking place in borderlands across Asia, the transformation from frontiers to corridors. Transnational connectivity promises railways, highways, and visa-free regimes. It promises easier commerce to boost the economies of rural and provincial areas. These connections pass through borderlands. Not only do they connect borderlands and their residents across borders but also they connect them to heartlands within contemporary state boundaries. Better-quality infrastructure brings state authority right up to the very edge of territories claimed. Yet it is not just the agencies of the state that gain access to the borderlands through greater connectivity. Borderlands become more attractive markets with more consumers and lower costs of transportation. Connectivity also reduces the costs of extraction from borderlands. Thus resources like coal, timber, animal and plant life are no longer as risky and expensive to extract – especially for state agencies and their private partners who can operate with the protection of the military. And it provides a faster, cheaper, and often safer route for borderland residents to migrate out of frontier to work in the heartlands. In the process of enabling flows of goods, capital, and people across borders transnational connectivity can bring borderlands more firmly into the national fold.

I am very wary of over-determining connectivity as a transformative factor in the economic, social, and political life of Imphal. Indeed not *everything* that happens in Imphal is a result of connectivity or a reaction to it. Rather, I view connectivity as characteristic of the present conjuncture; it captures the moment wherein borderlands are subject to particular experiments in state-making based on increasing accessibility for the private sector and increasing the capacity for cross-border movement – significant shifts from the security and state-led development approach that has characterised

the decades since independence. Borderlands are fascinating vantage points from which to study national and transnational transformations. There has been a voluminous amount of literature analysing the impacts of neoliberalism (usually referred to as liberalisation in the Indian context) and globalisation in India, which will be discussed in chapter 5. While this literature accounts for changes at the national and the subnational levels, there is limited investigation into the way these changes affect volatile territories at the very edge of the Indian state.

The borderland city is where these transformations are concentrated and contested, where the conjuncture is most intense. This makes Imphal such an appealing site. Connectivity has re-situated Imphal within India and as a conduit for flows beyond India. It is also where local territorial imaginations are enacted producing localised tensions and conflicts. In studying a city like Imphal there is an opportunity to conceptualise the borderland city as a particular urban environment, sensitive urban space if you will, and also capture the scholarly turn towards research on vernacular urbanism and small cities.

Bell and Jayne note that 'in developing countries two-thirds of urban residents live in places of less than 1 million people' (2009: 689). They argue that 'if the role and nature of small urbanity is to be more fully understood, a number of "imaginative leaps" must be taken by theorists currently hung up on the notion that globalisation of the city means globalisation of the metropolis' (2009: 690). Bunnell and Maringanti (2010) refer to this turn in scholarship as moving beyond 'Metrocentricity'. Moving beyond mega-cities also calls for more engaged ethnographic work, work that cannot be done from afar with secondary data (2010: 417). It is hard, slow work, but work that lends itself to ethnographic approaches and 'conceptual flexibility and a willingness to engage with plural traditions' (2010: 418).

This is a significant turn in Asia, especially South Asia, where small cities have received less attention from scholars, yet as Denis et al. (2012) demonstrate in the case of India, small, rapidly growing urban settlements are vital sites for understanding development and change. However, they remain almost completely obscured by the focus on mega-cities. In South Asia the small city is a hard sell. The mega-city dominates research in a number of disciplines, alongside work on the village or the rural region. Work on migration bridges the two, yet the small city remains marooned in between.

Imphal is also a borderland city shaped by its location on the periphery of the Indian state close to international borders. There is now a discernable 'next generation' of borderlands scholarship that is moving beyond

advocating for the importance of borderlands towards locating borders within and outside contemporary nation-states *and* as part of globalised flows of people, goods and capital and innovative ways of reading these flows (Cons, 2016; Eilenberg, 2012; Harris, 2013; Reeves, 2014; Yeh, 2013). In this book I seek to place the borderland city at the centre of analysis rather than a component part of frontier politics, regions, or cross-border networks.

When it comes to research on Northeast India, cities rarely draw much attention despite the rapid growth in the urban population, discussed in chapter 2. Imphal is a surprisingly plural city. This may seem like a defining characteristic of any city, anywhere, yet in the Northeast cities are predominantly conceived as administrative headquarters for whichever ethnic group has been granted autonomy over the territory in question. Thus the state capital of neighbouring Mizoram, Aizawl, is assumed to be a city inhabited by Mizos, and the state capital of neighbouring Nagaland, Kohima, to be a city inhabited by Nagas. The Sixth Schedule protecting tribal lands and the creation of federal states in the borderland has institutionalised this demographic alignment, unlike across the border in Myanmar or in China where deliberate trans-migration policies have drastically altered the ethnic composition of cities like Lhasa or Myintkyina. In the Northeast ethnic plurality is rarely assumed despite the intersecting territories that shape the region's geography. The armed forces, bureaucracy, and the economy of counter-insurgency bring migrants to Imphal in large numbers. Manipur does not have any restrictions on migration from other parts of India, though communities in the hills fall under the Sixth Schedule, theoretically protecting their lands from other communities. Imphal is in the valley not the hills and as 'home' to the non-tribal Meitei population has no mechanism for restricting settlement. Decades of violence in the hill areas and the draw of economic and education opportunities in Imphal – whether or not these are realised – have brought internal migrants from the hill areas and other parts of the valley to the city. Connectivity has increased the flow of people into and from Imphal. Far from a Manipuri city in the Manipuri homeland – or even more specifically a Meitei city in the Meitei-inhabited valley, Imphal evokes Appadurai's concept of an 'ethnoscape', 'the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals' (1996: 33). Imphal is not a cosmopolitan wonderland like Qatar, Toronto or Singapore. Its plurality is relative, however, it is significant, given the fissures between Manipuris and outsiders and among the different ethnic groups indigenous to the state; fissures that play out in Imphal.

In focusing on belonging and exclusion in Imphal I am interested in when ethnicity matters, for whom, and to what ends. Ethnicity in Manipur has been shaped by colonial anthropology, particularly the distinction between hill and valley communities aligned to tribal hill dwellers and non-tribal valley dwellers – a distinction widely critiqued but salient in contemporary politics (see Jilangamba, 2015). Thus while there is potential use in discussing these constructions – and many scholars of the region spend a great deal of time doing so – in postcolonial Manipur, these categories have been hardened through constitutional provisions aimed at uplifting the lot of tribal communities – primarily the Sixth Schedule – and by ethno-nationalist movements seeking ethnically exclusive homelands with various institutional structures based on these extant ethnic categories. Therefore while ethnic divisions in Manipur should not be taken as a given, the construction of ethnic difference along three main fissures is deeply embedded in the politics, society and economy of Manipur. Work that seeks to explore life on the ground must contend with the saliency of these categories rather than dismiss the often arbitrary and even absurd nature of their creation. All of these communities live in Imphal, and the pluralism of the city reveals the moments and sites where ethnic divisions break down and where they are hardened. As Brubaker (2006) argues in his study of everyday ethnicity in the town of Cluj in Romanian Transylvania, ‘That ethnicity and nationhood are constructed is a commonplace; *how* they are constructed is seldom specified in detail’ (2006: 7, emphasis in original). In Imphal spatial divisions between ethnic groups are present – divisions marked by ethnic symbols, places of worship, types of dwelling, graffiti, and the inhabitants themselves. At first glance these divisions are firm. Yet on closer inspection the firmness dissolves and can even disappear. In fact in some parts of the city firm divisions were never there in the first place. At other times ethnic boundaries harden leading to exclusion and violence. In these times belonging is realised on a smaller scale: the household, the neighbourhood, the *laishang*, church, or mosque.

Approaching Imphal

Research for this book took place from 2011 to 2014 over multiple visits to Imphal. In late 2010 I was conducting fieldwork with migrants from the Northeast living in Delhi, a study that itself built on a decade or so of work in the borderland (McDuié-Ra, 2012a). During my time living in a Northeast enclave in Delhi and visiting migrants working in malls, restaurants, hotels,

and call centres it became clear that a large proportion of the young people leaving the borderland were leaving Manipur. This was especially true for migrants who arrived with few connections, resources, or plans – those at the bottom end of the migrant pool. They just needed to get out. Many wanted to stay out. They missed home, to be sure, but the prospects of having a future there was remote. The place was broken. These kinds of responses fit the image generated of Manipur and Imphal city in the national media: soldiers, shootings in the street, blockades of burning garbage.

Despite assumptions that Imphal is a Meitei city owing to its history as seat of the Meitei kings and its location in the valley, throughout my time in Delhi I continually met members of various tribal communities who called Imphal home. Some were born there, others moved there at a young age to follow their parents who went for work. Others went for their secondary schooling or on various scholarships. This raised questions that I couldn't let go: what was life like in the city for members of these different communities apparently locked in ferocious interethnic politics of exclusion? Did members of these communities get along? Does ethnicity even matter in Imphal? Moreover, what was everyday life like in a place so many were determined to leave?

In late 2010 there was a rumour going around among friends from Manipur living in Delhi; restrictions on foreign access to Imphal were to be lifted. I had been waiting for almost ten years for this news and it was hard to concentrate on the research I was doing in Delhi. Imphal was calling. However, the news was very hard to verify. Further, Manipur had just experienced a ninety-day blockade that had inflamed tensions between Meitei and Naga communities. It seemed unlikely that this would be the time to lift restrictions on foreign visitors. Friends from Manipur were also sceptical. Some thought it was a mistake. Some thought that if I set out for Imphal I would be turned back upon arrival. I went to Manipur Bhawan in Delhi, the state 'house', to ask if the rumours were true. The guards out the front were dubious that I had legitimate business inside but relented, perhaps for the novelty. Once inside no one was very sure who could answer my question. I was sent to various rooms in poorly lit maze of small rooms to meet baffled bureaucrats. Finally a beaming staff member located me with a photocopy of what looked like an official facsimile that stated that from January 1, 2011, restrictions on foreign entry would be lifted for a trial period. The staff member warned me that many of the officials in Manipur might not know there has been a change so I had better take a copy of the page with me. In February 2011 I arrived in Imphal for the first time and returned every few months through to the end of 2014.

My approach to the research began with a more or less conventional ethnography based on engaging with people's daily lives: accompanying friends on their trips around the city on errands, to markets, festivals, weddings, to visit relatives, and having conversations at each turn. These friends would pass me onto other people they knew who had an interest in whatever I was pursuing whether illegal settlements, skateboarder hangouts, abandoned development projects, or new apartment blocks. Through this organic low key sampling I was able to learn more about a particular statue, neighbourhood, street, ritual, and narrow my focus to particular spaces and particular flows and explore these in more depth through targeted interviews with key informants along with continuing informal conversations with anyone willing.

I began field research with a very simple question: what has changed? This usually led people to discuss material changes: new houses, demolished shops, a new bridge, an abandoned school, more rubbish, or fewer trees. Respondents would then explain the causes of these changes and through these conversations I was able to gauge who was building big houses, who was settling in makeshift slums, where students from a particular neighbourhood were now going to school and what it cost and how parents managed to pay. I would be invited to follow people to see old rice mills, new malls, construction sites, weaving factories, and attend rallies. Asking about change also invited residents to talk about their fears, hopes, pride, and ways of making do.

Alongside gaining material from people I also gained material from reading the urban landscape – the material and symbolic dimensions of space and the dynamics that shape it. Lefebvre's (1991) dialectical approach to the production of space is a useful starting point. For Lefebvre, the urban is a level between everyday life and the existing order – and in the case of Imphal this order is shaped within and beyond the borderland, Lefebvre's 'near order' and 'far order' (Kipfer et al., 2013: 124). The urban is a space of 'encounter, assembly, simultaneity' (Lefebvre, 1979/2003: 118). It needs to be understood as a social force and the product of social forces produced through three connected dialectical processes (or 'moments'): spatial practice or perceived space, representations of space or conceived space, and spatial representations or lived space (Lefebvre, 1991: 33-42). The first process refers to material structures reflecting the spatial manifestations of social and political power, the second is the abstraction of this power as ideology, knowledge and language used for domination, the third is the space of everyday experience where material and abstract power are lived. These three moments are of equal value and enable analysis of the material

and symbolic elements of space, how they are produced, challenged, and experienced. As he notes in the *Production de L'espace*, 'In reality, social space "incorporates" social actions, the actions of subjects both individual and collective who are born and who die, who suffer and who act' (1991: 33). In Imphal this approach reveals the material, ideological, and lived experience of sovereign power produced by state, quasi-state and non-state actors and the ways this is marked on the landscape, on the built and natural environment.

To explore this – along with encounters with the people of Imphal – I paid particular attention to the landscape. I focused on: (i) billboards: which indicated what was being marketed and the symbols and images being used, (ii) posters: mostly glued onto walls and electricity poles announcing events from rock concerts to political meetings, (iii) public service announcements: including those from both state and non-state actors usually painted onto walls directly or printed on paper and displayed in shops and other businesses, (iv) graffiti: including political slogans, symbols and text marking underground territory, and street art, (v) memorials: including official statues of Indian figures and local nationalist heroes, war memorials, memorials to killed members of the armed forces, and killed members of underground groups, (vi) public buildings: from army headquarters to showcase public works, (vii) houses: new and old, big and small, traditional and contemporary dwellings, (viii) neighbourhoods: who lives in them, who patrols them, who marks them with their territorial claims, (ix) places of worship, (x) markets; mobile and permanent, illegal and legal, indoor and outdoor, and (xi) fields, forests, groves, ponds, and rivers in various states of ruin and rejuvenation. I took thousands of photographs of the landscape and shared these with friends and acquaintances who would interpret what they thought I had captured. Locals would also take photographs and share them with me, whether on their phones, by email, or from their own collections. Through this ongoing exchange (which continues through the writing of this book) I was able to build additional narratives of the city; an additional script to the things I witnessed in person. This combined with interviews and conversations forms the ethnographic material used in the book. Unlike my previous research where I depended on meeting people, I often spent long periods in Imphal alone with the urban landscape, or with one or two companions scaling a fence to look into an abandoned lot, searching for a rumoured memorial, or hanging out in a hospital cafeteria.

The visual landscape of Imphal is challenging. It can appear chaotic and illegible. Imphal has patches that are planned and orderly, and indeed a drive to create order is an important part of the city's development plan

(Imphal Municipal Council, 2007). However, most of the material space appears haphazard. It is particularly challenging to read the appearance of chaos without reproducing its inferences. Here King's approach to reading urban space is useful in finding ways to dissect what appears impenetrable. King focuses on juxtapositions – namely attention to the positioning 'of the dissimilar and even the incompatible', superimpositions – what he calls 'activities piled on activities, screens on screens', and chaos itself which 'needs to be seen as a medium for resilience and survival, more rarely also for resistance' (2011: 12). These three concepts draw attention to the ways space is appropriated, officially and unofficially, temporarily and more permanently, all of which drive change in Imphal reflecting past and present configurations of power and their accompanying imaginations.

Sense also plays an important role in the articulation and demarcation of space in Imphal (see Low, 2013). In Imphal attempts to articulate and enforce acceptable sensory behaviour characterise relationships between: (i) tribals and non-tribals based on the food different communities cook and eat, the smell of illegal distilleries, the noise from religious worship and festivals, (ii) between different class groups, for example poorer areas are perceived as smelly by some urban residents because of the rubbish, the industry (metal works, incineration, animal slaughter), and noise owing to overcrowded dwellings and raucous behaviour often linked to rural sensibilities and alcohol consumption, while wealthier areas are imagined as quiet, odour free, and clean, (iii) between residents and the authorities, for instance, sensory disturbances are taken as indicators of ineffective urban governance and thus the smell of burning garbage and polluted watercourses, the noise and pollution of heavy vehicle traffic, and the aesthetic breaches of the built environment contribute to the perceptions of civilian authorities as corrupt, inept, or incapable.

Structure of the Book

The book is divided into two parts. Part one, *Disturbed City, Sensitive Space* explores the microsites of control and contention in Imphal through three chapters. Chapter 2, *Belonging* focuses on plurality, polarity, and neighbourhoods to sketch the different ways residents of Imphal maintain a sense of place in the disturbed city. I consider the more obvious ways of belonging, such as ethnicity, and alternatives, from sports to illicit eating and drinking. Chapter 3, *Control* is concerned with the control of urban space in Imphal and the ways this is contested. The first part of this chapter examines the

armed forces, who control parts of the city by enacting security, and the civilian government, who control parts of the city through development projects and attempts to order urban chaos. The relationship between the armed forces and the civilian government is rarely seamless making it difficult to locate a singular hegemonic force in control of space in the city. The second part uses the example of memorials around the city to demonstrate the ways in which spatial control is contested by residents; a challenging task in the disturbed city. This tentative counter-hegemony reveals the small acts residents take to mark the landscape with memories of violence, loss, and defiance. Chapter 4, *Exclusion* shifts emphasis to the interethnic politics that play out in the city. Imphal is cast as an arena within which the territorial politics of hill and valley/tribal and non-tribal play out. Any notion of unified counter-hegemony is fragmented during periods of intense interethnic tensions, as during the blockades of the city in 2010 and 2011, when exclusion and belonging are negotiated through struggles among the population with the armed forces and civilian government as bystanders and occasional interveners. A much larger movement to exclude non-Manipuris from the city, and the state, in 2012-14 subsumed interethnic tensions and cast all Manipuris as indigenous peoples united in their precarious geographic and demographic circumstances at the edge of the Indian state. The movement seeks the implementation of the Inner-Line Permit system or ILP, a mechanism for restricting entry and monitoring the presence of non-Manipuris in the state. Once again Imphal is the arena where this plays out.

Part two, *Liberalising the Frontier* considers the ways in which inward and outward connectivity to India and to Southeast Asia shape parts of the disturbed city and vice versa. Chapter 5, *Gateway City* analyses the recalibration of Imphal as a gateway to Southeast Asia. Imphal is subject to vigorous bureaucratic imaginings as the gateway to a zone of potential where cross-border flows of goods and people will produce economic opportunities and diplomatic gestures with neighbouring countries will legitimise the borderland as part of India. This chapter discusses the campaign for Meitei Mayek script on all visible signage, the clothing trade, and the ASEAN car rally to demonstrate the unexpected opportunities and controversies of connectivity. Chapter 6, *Health City* uses the name given to celebrate the concentration of high-quality private health facilities in the city and investigates how world-class health facilities can exist in such a tumultuous polity. The poor conditions of the public hospitals as well as demand from patients across the border in Myanmar and other parts of the borderland have led to a thriving private hospital system driven by health

entrepreneurs – mostly return migrants or defectors from the public system. This has produced alternative ways of enabling movement mobility across the border for patients that bypass Indian authorities. The boom in private healthcare has also transformed the landscape on the northern edge of the city and created new battles over land between settlers who moved into the peri-urban fringe in the 1990s escaping conflict and a new class of medical and other professionals seeking land and entrepreneurs seeking to build new facilities. Chapter 7, *Education City* analyses the private education boom taking place in the city fuelled by demand from parents and their children to gain qualifications to travel west for further education or work in other parts of India, a renewed possibility in light of better connectivity. The boom is also fuelled by the utter dysfunction of the public school system. New schools are extending the boundaries of the city in the southwest and diminishing the size of smallholder farmland on the peri-urban fringe. The cost of private schooling also affects the landscape as families in the hills sell land and timber to send their children to the education city. This is a kind of accidental liberalisation, which, as with the health sector, was born out of necessity, has become the norm and attests to the uniqueness of liberalisation in the disturbed city.

Terminology and Place Names

In this book I use official names for landmarks, wards and neighbourhoods in the city. Some parts of the city have alternative names, but these are only noted if they add something to the material being discussed. Only main roads have names, and where it is relevant I have used these names. Neighbourhood streets and laneways rarely have names. Where possible I use English language terms to describe various spaces, objects, and types of terrain – the exceptions are terms with no clear English language equivalent and in these cases I use the local term and have done my best to explain the term at first usage and have provided a glossary.

I use the term 'tribal' to refer to communities that fall under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which applies to 33 groups in Manipur. The term is Imperial, denotes backwardness, and is selectively applied (Barbora, 2008; De, 2014; Jilangamba, 2015; Karlsson, 2001, 2003; Xaxa, 1999). However, it is used by communities subject to the term, by the Indian Government and Manipur Government to govern these groups, and is a major determinant of rights claims for these communities. The term 'tribal' can create confusion given its use to identify tribal communities from central

India, referred to in Hindi as *adivasis*. *Adivasis* are not related to Northeast tribals ethnically nor have they had a great deal of historical contact, and *adivasis* fall under a different constitutional provision (the Fifth Schedule). The term 'tribal' or *adivasi* is often considered pejorative when referring to these communities, denoting a position outside the caste system and the bounds of civility, whereas in the Northeast the term is internalised and a source of pride, akin to being identified as indigenous and being able to make claims on the state for reservations in education and employment, protection of ancestral lands, and recognition of traditional authority (see Van Schendel, 2011).

Tensions between tribals and the Manipur Government, which is perceived to represent the interests of the Meitei majority, are a crucial element of contemporary politics. Despite these tensions the category tribal is rarely questioned. In fact, there are members of the non-tribal Meitei community seeking inclusion in the Sixth Schedule as tribes, in part as a response to the supposedly unfair advantages to which tribal communities are entitled. They have an active organisation, the Scheduled Tribes Demand Committee of Manipur Valley, which even met with former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2012. The Committee claims that extending the Sixth Schedule to Meiteis will better integrate the hill and valley communities of Manipur, that Meiteis still maintain animist traditions despite mass conversion to Hinduism (this is not an outrageous claim given the extent of revivalism of the pre-Hindu Sanamahis religion), and that tribal and non-tribal communities share racial lineage as Tibeto-Burman peoples. Yet as Piang argues (2014), the irony of the claim for Scheduled Tribe status is that it comes mostly from the upper-caste Meiteis, the *dwija*, or twice born, who have historically exercised a high level of prejudice towards tribal communities. Piang adds, 'after more than 65 years of independence, the forward classes of society are demanding the status of "backward classes"'. What is interesting about the claim is that it reflects the view that tribals have too many advantages from affirmative action policies and that in the contemporary era they are no longer disadvantaged vis-à-vis the non-tribal population; a view regularly voiced by Meiteis in Imphal during fieldwork. Yet tribals will counter with the opposite view, that they experience disadvantage when compared to the more populous Meitei who hold the majority of seats in the assembly, the majority of high-level government posts, and control a larger share of the economy. The important point here is that the tribal status is desired not shunned and thus I will use it in a similar way throughout the book.

The two main tribal groups are the Naga and Kuki. These are not perfect amalgams and many smaller tribal communities resist incorporation into these larger groups. This means that sizeable communities like Hmar, Paite, and Vaiphei that do not always willingly yield to inclusion in the amalgamated categories are mostly invisible. However, for the sake of clarity I will use these umbrella terms in this book except where it is necessary to identify a more specific community.

I will use the term Meitei to refer to members of the Meitei ethnic group. I don't wish to suggest the Meitei population is homogenous, nor do I wish to suggest that the Naga or Kuki communities are either, and intra-ethnic distinctions will become clear during the course of the book. At various points I will use the term Manipuri to refer to all of the 'indigenous' peoples of the state; namely Nagas, Kuki, all other tribal communities, and Meiteis as well as the Pangal community of Meitei Muslims. Manipuri is a tricky term because it is often used to refer to the Meitei ethnic group only. In this book I will be using it to discuss politics of migration and the distinction made between Manipuri and non-Manipuri people. Indigenous is used in some of the campaigns against migration, and it usually includes Meitei, Naga, Kuki, and other tribal communities and thus I will use it from time to time when discussing this campaign, especially in chapter 4.

Finding a term for the non-Manipuri population is a little more difficult. There are many people in Manipur, and Imphal especially, who have migrated from outside the state. Significant numbers have fled conflicts in neighbouring parts of the borderland and settled in Imphal, including from Mizoram, Nagaland, and Myanmar. These latter communities blend into the tribal population and are tolerated, more or less. Those who have migrated from other parts of India, Nepal, and Bangladesh are much more visible as outsiders, even those born in Manipur, and the term non-Manipuri is usually used to refer to these communities. The word *mayang* in Meiteilon (the Meitei language) is commonly used to refer to non-Manipuris in Imphal, though there are different words in tribal languages. Given this divergence I will use the term non-Manipuri in this book for the most part. I also prefer to use non-Manipuri as its use has forced consideration of the boundaries of being a Manipuri; an important component of the dynamics of belonging and exclusion that plays out in the city. In sum, I recognise the limits of all these terms, however, the terms have currency on the ground, in institutions, and in the public sphere. Given the contentious nature of most things in Imphal I have used pseudonyms for all of the people quoted or referred to in the text. The only exceptions are in quoting politicians or other public figures from statements they have made in the press or on the public record.