

School versus paddy: education and mobility in Manipur



Imphal, the capital city of Manipur – a former kingdom turned federal state currently situated on India’s border with Myanmar – is experiencing a private education boom. The boom appears counterintuitive. Imphal is a militarized and often dysfunctional city, yet enormous swathes of land are now occupied by relatively expensive private schools that draw pupils from all over the city and from other parts of the state. Private coaching classes are run out of homes. Education agents all over the city offer admission to universities and colleges in South India, Thailand, and Eastern Europe. Education providers from outside Manipur, mostly from other parts of India, recruit students from Manipur – most noticeably at the large education fairs held in Imphal in the spring such as Edufest, Edu-options, and Edu-expo.

Duncan McDuie-Ra¹

PROVIDERS AND USERS OF PRIVATE EDUCATION usually discuss its growth as a necessity, a way of making do in response to the rotten and corrupt public system; though clearly the private sector has its fair share of corruption in different ways. Yet the idea of cleansing, of starting anew, is very powerful. A kind of accidental liberalization is evident – part pragmatism, part opportunism. Various ways of imagining the borderland pitch Imphal as the ‘gateway’ to Southeast Asia and stress the cross-border ‘potential’ of connectivity.² In contrast, the education sector is symptomatic of, and instrumental in producing a counter directional flow towards India.

The boom in private education cannot be appreciated without some sense of what ails the public system. Friends in Imphal would always begin telling me about the problem by discussing the ways jobs are acquired. A post in a school is advertised and the Department of Education is flooded with applications. To secure the post, applicants must pay a bribe (between 1000 and 5000 USD). With lots of people offering bribes, it is possible to offer a large sum and still miss out. The more desirable the post, the higher the amount needed, particularly if it is in the city. If an applicant does not have the necessary qualifications then the amount will be higher still. Applicants thus need to secure a large sum of money to land the post. In order to do this, many, though certainly not all, applicants or their families borrow money or sell assets. Once the post is secured, some – though not all, it must be stressed – teachers either do not attend their jobs, sporadically attend, or attend for only parts of the day. Often they work as private tutors or teachers in private schools while still drawing their public salary. A teacher may spend the day working elsewhere, or not at all, and pay another person a portion of their salary to appear at the school. In many cases, the proxy is unqualified and has little incentive to actually teach. The Manipur Government has attempted to deal with the problem

by steadily increasing teacher salaries in the public system, though this seems to have raised the stakes for securing a post, besides providing teachers with more salary to distribute to proxies. Proxies do not exactly live a comfortable life – they face a continual anxiety of being found out, or of losing their income, if the person who actually holds the job disappears or dies – not an uncommon occurrence in Imphal where disappearances and extra judicial killings have marred everyday life for the past three decades.³

With the increase in the problem, the naming and shaming of teachers who do not report for work or appoint proxies have also become more common, especially in the print media. Furthermore, non-state actors, including student unions and some underground groups undertake physical inspections of schools in various towns and urban localities and take action against absentee teachers directly or report them to the government and monitor the response. The most well-known and sustained campaign is the *Eikhoi Lairik Ningthina Tamsi* (loosely translated as ‘Let’s Study Correctly’) run by the Manipur Students Federation since 2007. If we add to this scenario, the practice of teachers requesting money or ‘presents’ to award high marks, teachers leaving the state to work in other parts of the borderland and beyond where the employment conditions are more stable, routine closures of schools for bandhs (strikes), and schools closing during blockades (Imphal city was blocked off from the rest of the country for over three months in both 2010 and 2011 by protestors demanding long-denied autonomy in hill areas of the state), and it becomes clear why the public school system in Manipur has been declared “near impossible to run”.⁴

The issue is not a lack of schools. Indeed Manipur has a relatively high number of schools per 100,000 head of population: 150 elementary and 31 secondary compared to a national average of 97 elementary and 14 secondary.⁵ The issue is the quality of education and facilities, attributes

that the Manipur Government attempts to address by allocating funding, but which either fail to materialize in schools or even if they do, end up having minimal impact on the demand for private schooling. Demand for learning the national curriculum, especially at the higher secondary level (class 11 and 12), is a crucial factor in the boom. The national curriculum is needed to qualify for tertiary study in other parts of India. It is an illustration of the inward pull of citizenship, significant in the present conjuncture given the long history of resistance to Indian citizenship in Manipur.⁶

Transforming the landscape

The boom in private education has transformed Imphal, especially in the southwest. The main area being transformed lies between three main roads that run southwest and south out of the city: National Highway 150, Mayai Lambi Road, and the Indo-Myanmar Road. Peri-urban farmland has become a dense conglomeration of schools, hostels, and small shops. Infrastructure has been slow to catch up and brand new schools with four floors of reflective blue glass can be found at the end of muddy tracks across waterlogged rice fields. Since the mid-2000s, the epicentre of the boom has been Sangaiprou, where the oldest and most reputable catholic secondary schools are located. Much of this area lies beyond the municipal limits, crossing into the so-called ‘outgrowth’ area (Naoriya Pakhanglakpa, a ‘Census Town’), as well as into areas of paddy fields and small farms.

Many of the entrepreneurs who started schools in Sangaiprou are returnee migrants. Having spent time outside Manipur studying and working in other parts of India, returnees with some capital come back and invest in the sector. Many of those involved with starting schools have studied business or worked in marketing or similar fields outside the state. Returnees have a social standing in Imphal that helps facilitate trust, gain access to loans and finance, and open doors with officials. Of course, a great many migrants return unemployed, in debt, and with few connections to make anything happen at all. However the relationship between returnees and the booming private education sector is significant.

Walking through the back blocks of Sangaiprou between the main roads, the various stages of the education boom are revealed. At one end of the scale, ground is being broken, or more accurately filled, for new schools. Labourers shovel soil and stones into former rice fields and swampy wasteland. Corrugated iron sheets, steel construction rods, and bricks lie in piles at the edge of unsealed roads. Completed and semi-completed schools loom behind painted brick walls with broken glass and nails embedded in cement along the top. Functioning schools with names like Herbert, Zenith, Children Ideal, Comet, Modern English, Little Flower, Shemrock Bubbles, Standard Robert English, and Kids Foundation occupy buildings of various sizes and styles; some with brightly painted bricks, others with mirrored glass, others with patterned concrete and tiles. Hostels are found in similar buildings with walls, gates and guards and also within local houses. Some houses advertising hostel accommodation have extra floors or outbuildings added. Electricity poles and walls are plastered with advertisements for tuitions and hostel rooms. There is also evidence of

Above:
A billboard for
Edu Expo 2013.
Khoyathong,
Imphal. June 2013.
Photo by author.

a bust accompanying the boom. Empty buildings with the school or hostel name faded or painted over, buildings sinking into the soil or with parts of wall missing, and vegetation and cattle reclaiming seldom used lots.

Costs for a year at a private school vary dramatically depending on the school, whether a pupil is a day student or boarder, and the grade they are in; from less than 3000 rupees a year (50 USD) for a day student in primary school to as high as 72,000 rupees a year (1200 USD) for a top higher secondary including hostel costs. With so many schools it is difficult to know what is typical, or indeed if there is such a thing. Furthermore, it is difficult to gauge what kind of a financial burden this is for families. Wages in Manipur are very difficult to track given the size of the informal sector, the supplementary income earned through other work and through corruption, and remittances from relatives working outside the state.

Given the high level of competition among private schools, attracting students depends upon showcasing success by profiling one or two high achieving students in the most recent exams or advertising the number of 'first divisioners'. The top students become well known faces in the city following exam results. Schools take out advertisements in newspapers, billboards, and banners to profile these students. Neighbourhood associations do the same, erecting banners and even billboards to congratulate the successful students from a particular locality, thereby perpetuating the culture of high achievement. Local celebrities, usually actors and sportspersons, also bequeath awards to high achieving students. The government holds ceremonies for rank-holders and gives scholarships to study outside the state. Even the maligned Indian armed forces present awards to the top students. My respondents from the private school industry noted that established schools screen applicants very carefully so that their overall performance does not lag and they can produce more 'first divisioners'. Thus competition to get into schools is fierce. Parents of poorly performing students have a difficult time gaining admission for their wards to some schools and either offer to pay higher tuition or turn to newer schools that need to build up their student numbers.

Decaying public schools visible throughout the city provide a stark contrast: buildings in poor condition, few pupils, and sometimes just a caretaker and no teachers; although some public secondary schools and colleges prove to be exemptions. City residents make money from running hostels in their houses, opening shops near schools and hostels, offering extra coaching, and as agents helping students apply for further study outside. The flipside of

the boom is much less visible; household debt, education scams, qualified young adults with no work, and the loss of peri-urban farmland. Even less visible is the murky world of land transactions, corruption in school licensing, and taxes paid to underground groups. The biggest cost to starting a school is acquiring land. And conversely those able to supply land, usually by first acquiring it at a low cost, are believed to make the most money in the industry.

Schools versus paddy

Diminishing agricultural land is a contentious issue throughout Manipur exacerbated by overlapping systems of land tenure, poor record keeping, and the closure of the Manipur State Land Use Board, and a history of mass land acquisitions by the Indian government; mostly for military use, and the government of Manipur; for development projects.⁷ The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act was implemented in 1960 to make title and transfer of land simpler in the Imphal valley. Various attempts have been made to extend the law to the hill areas, which tribal communities in these areas have strongly opposed.⁸ A 2014 amendment to the act makes it easier to convert agricultural land of half a hectare or less for non-agricultural purposes by putting the decision for or against conversion ('diversion' in the policy) to a district committee to assess the 'likely benefits' and legislating only minor penalties for violations.⁹ However no rules are applicable in the case of acquisition of agricultural land by the state government.¹⁰

Somewhat contradictorily, the Manipur Legislative Assembly passed the draft Manipur Conservation of Paddy Land Bill July 2014. The bill seeks to prevent paddy land being used for another purpose, paddy land being differentiated from other forms of agricultural production. Critics have argued that the bill does not provide protection for land that is not classified as paddy but used for food production and that it encourages the conversion of forest and wetlands into food growing areas.¹¹

In the last decade, several groups have taken action on declining agricultural land, most notably the Heingang Kendra Loumi Lup. Most recently the Conservation of Paddy Lands and Natural Resources Protection Committee (CPL) was formed to fight for paddy land. The CPL mentions "the rampant construction of schools, brick fields, hospitals, development of roads by farm lands, and even churches" that have rendered high yielding farmland useless.¹² Some of these structures are illegal or have been purchased from someone other than the rightful landowner, usually referred to as 'land-grabbing' in Imphal.

Below:
CPL poster on
a granary. Chingol
Leikai, Imphal.
May 2014. Photo
by author.

Some transactions are legal, some illegal, and others are legal on paper but involve some coercion. Much of the agricultural land is not being transferred from smallholders to commercial entities on a large scale, as in other contexts where land-grabbing is studied¹³ – it is being transferred from small holders to other smallholders for a completely different usage. Manipur is already dependent on imported agricultural produce, a highly vulnerable position for residents in Imphal when the city has been cut off for months at a time during blockades. The profusion of imported rice, much of it from faraway states like Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, and the difficulties of finding local rice varieties in the markets, exemplify the issue for many Imphal residents. Incidentally the rice yield in Manipur is 2100 kilograms per hectare and only slightly below the national average,¹⁴ but the area under cultivation is small and the accuracy of figures is continually disputed. The trade in food from outside the state has long been dominated by non-Manipuris, and thus food insecurity and identity insecurity are intertwined. Dependency on non-Manipuris for food is often raised in arguments for instating the Inner Line Permit (ILP) to restrict entry and settlement of non-Manipuris in the state. Cheap food, mostly packaged, comes from across the border with Myanmar and includes food manufactured there as well as from Thailand, China, and even Korea (the stock of Choco-pie biscuits in Imphal appears never-ending).

In areas like Sangaiprou notices pasted onto walls of granaries and warehouses interspersed among the new school buildings read 'Save Agricultural Lands. Save Manipur'. The same signs can be found in other areas on the edges of the city where farmland is being redeveloped. The issue highlights sharp divisions between the agrarian population of the valley, especially on the outskirts of the city, and the new purveyors of private capital investing in education and also hospitals, spiritual retreats, and shopping malls.

The boom in the private education sector is driven by the desire of residents to leave Manipur and pursue aspirations for a better life in other parts of India. The desire to leave is also symptomatic of life in this part of the borderland where violence, surveillance, insecurity and limited livelihood opportunities (or perceptions thereof) push many young people to leave, and a higher secondary education, as well as vocational training, is a crucial component. The privatization of the education sector stems, in part, from the dysfunctional state apparatus and the other sources of power that make things happen in Imphal. In other words, it is doubtful whether such a boom would be possible without the "transgression and erosion" of sovereign power that characterise life in Imphal.¹⁵

Duncan McDuie-Ra is Associate Dean Research, Arts and Social Sciences, and Associate Professor in Development Studies at The University of New South Wales, Australia (d.mcduie@unsw.edu.au).

References

- 1 This chapter is based on content from my forthcoming monograph; McDuie-Ra, D. *Frontier City to Gateway City: Militarisation and Liberalisation in Imphal*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- 2 See Parameswaran, P. 2014. 'Modi unveils India's "Act east policy" to ASEAN in Myanmar', *The Diplomat*, 17 November 2014.
- 3 Dobhal, H. 2009. *Manipur in the Shadow of AFSPA: Independent People's Tribunal Report on Human Rights Violations in Manipur*, Imphal: Socio Legal Information Centre; Phanjoubam, P. 2005. 'Manipur: Fractured Land', *India International Centre Quarterly* 32(2/3):275-87.
- 4 Salam, J. 2014. 'Theft, Corruption, and Parental School Choice in Manipur', *Economic and Political Weekly* 49(12).
- 5 *Eleventh Five Year Plan 2007-2012, Volume II, Planning Commission, Government of India*, pp. 37-38.
- 6 McDuie-Ra, D. 2012. *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- 7 Das, J.N. 1989. *A Study of the Land System of Manipur*, Guwahati: Law Research Institute, Eastern Region.
- 8 Phanjoubam, T. 2003. *Bleeding Manipur*, New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, pp.212-13.
- 9 Manipur Revenue Department. 2014. *Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act*, Imphal: Government of Manipur, p.2.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 4
- 11 Yumnan, J. 2014. 'An Introspection: Manipur Paddy Land Conservation Bill 2014', *Sangai Express*, 28 July 2014.
- 12 'Body for Conservation of Farmlands', *Peoples Chronicle*, 12 July 2014.
- 13 De Schutter, O. 2011. 'How Not to Think of Land-grabbing: Three Critiques of Large-Scale Investments in Farmland', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 38(2):249-79
- 14 Manipur Planning Department. 2013. *Draft Annual Plan Proposals 2013-14*, Imphal: Government of Manipur, p.4
- 15 Dunn, E.C. & J. Cons. 2014. 'Aleatory Sovereignty and the Rule of Sensitive Spaces', *Antipode* 46(1): 92-109, p.104.

