In March 2014, Dinesh Tongbram’s feature film 23rd Century premiered at the Manipur Film Development Corporation and the Bheigyachandra Open Air Theatre in the Palace Compound. These two venues are a short distance apart next to the Hapta Kangjeibung; an historic polo ground still used for polo but also for staging political rallies, the Sangai Festival each December, and various trade fairs. South of the polo ground is the Royal Palace, where the British moved their installed ruler, Chura Chand, after occupying Kangla Fort in 1891, and adjacent to this the Shree Govindajee Temple built in 1846. To the north along the same road is the City Convention Centre, an oversized building for its surroundings, sitting lonely behind a locked gate covered in reflective blue glass and home to a seemingly abandoned government water tanker. The contrast is compelling: the remnants of the independent kingdom at one end of the road and the new spaces of power, modernity and development at the other. The content of 23rd Century weaves the fading past with a warning about the future. Based on a 1992 play, the film depicts the Imphal of the future as overdeveloped and overpopulated. The extension of the railway into Manipur has led to massive influx of migrants, and Manipuris (though the film mostly focuses on Meiteis) have become a minority in the city. The Chief Minister is a non-Manipuri and the rights of Manipuris have been dismantled. Driven to poverty, humiliating forms of livelihood, and subject to violence by the occupying armed forces, the couple at the centre of the film struggle to survive. The film narrates a common insecurity throughout the borderland, namely numerically small populations distinct from the majority ‘Indian’ culture and society being overwhelmed by migration into their homelands. The insecurity is not unwarranted given the massive demographic shifts that have taken place throughout the borderland, but particularly in states where protection for indigenous communities is weak as in Assam, Tripura, and indeed Manipur. Yet what makes the Imphal depicted in 23rd Century even more telling for the themes of this book is that connectivity is the cause of the influx. The railway brings the masses of migrants. It is a death knell. It is the end of isolation. The image of a fictitious Imphal train station adorns the poster and billboards advertising the film. This is the future that connectivity invites, unless something is done about it now. The release of the film comes during a popular movement to implement the Inner Line Permit System in the state (ILP). The ILP is a system of controlled entry, settlement, and monitoring of non-indigenous migrants into borderland polities based on
a colonial regulation and currently in force in neighbouring Mizoram and Nagaland. The music video for the lead song from 23rd Century even features clips of the protests calling for the ILP equating the story in the film with the contemporary movement to exclude non-Manipuris from the state. The film also comes at a time of public debate over the merits of the proposed extension of the North East Frontier Railway to Imphal through Jiribam, on the border between Manipur and Assam, due for completion in 2016. Land seizures, displacement, and environmental damage brought by the construction of bridges and tunnels has sparked sporadic opposition, however, the implications of easier entry to Manipur and easier access to Imphal, especially though train travel which in India is still the primary mode of transport for the poor and middle class, strikes at the core of anxieties over territory, belonging, and identity. These anxieties are captured in the film but they also play out in contemporary Imphal where exclusion provides the counterpoint to belonging in a city controlled by state, quasi-state, and non-state actors.

This chapter focuses on exclusion from different spaces in the city. Exclusion produces belonging, and belonging enables place, and place is a way of countering the diffuse hegemony of state, non-state, and quasi-state actors. Places are more resilient by excluding ‘others’ – realised along various fissures, from different patches of the city. Contesting the presence of the
armed forces and the dysfunction of the civilian government does not come from a unified collective of individuals and associations. It is tempting to read resistance to spatial control by the armed forces and civilian government as evidence of a unified groundswell of grassroots activism intend on wresting back control of the city streets. Challenges to hegemonic power in the city are certainly bold, brave, and often remarkable given the constraints on agency in the disturbed city. Yet rarely are they inclusive. The dynamics of belonging and exclusion, control and contestation, operate among residents, too. Any notion of a 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. However, a much larger movement to exclude non-Manipuris from the city, and the state, in 2012-14, subsumed interethnic tensions. The movement for instating the ILP casts all Manipuris as indigenous peoples united in their precarious geographic and demographic circumstances at the edge of the Indian state and Imphal is the arena where this plays out. These two fissures, interethnic and Manipuri/non-Manipuri, make up the two sections of this chapter. Any discussion of ethnic politics in Imphal is sensitive and this chapter does not attempt to be a comprehensive account of the events of recent years, their causes, or the relative worth of the justifications for the events that unfolded. The focus here is how these events affect everyday life in the city, affirming and jeopardising belonging.

Ethnic Politics

Conflicts between different ethnic groups in Manipur have played out in Imphal, though they go through phases of heightened and reduced tensions. During my research in Imphal the spectre of two arduous blockades lingered, affecting relations between communities and making blockades a viable tactic in bargaining with the local and Indian state. The threat of a blockade has become a perpetual possibility during any breakdown in interethnic relations. Imphal’s geography of vulnerability – a valley surrounded by hills – and the prominence of a discourse that casts Imphal as a Meitei city and the seat of power for a government that supports Meitei interests, not to mention the unexpected success of the two blockades in 2010 and 2011, have all contributed to the appeal of blockades as a form of action in the vacillations of interethnic politics. However, in a plural city
where members of all of these communities live, the blockades and the interethnic grievances they represent, were experienced in Imphal’s ‘tight spaces’ to recall Bollens’ phrase from chapter 2 (2012: 13). Before discussing the ways blockades were experienced in the city I will outline briefly the two longest lasting blockades: Mao Gate in 2010 and the Sadar Hills in 2011.

**Mao Gate**

Mao Gate is the entry point to Manipur on the highway from Nagaland located in the Senapati District. Parts of this district are claimed for Nagalim – the Naga homeland that encompasses the present state of Nagaland and tracts of territory in other parts of the borderland including northern Manipur. Senapati and neighbouring Ukhrul District are the frontline of competing subnational territorial claims by Nagas to realise Nagalim and by Meiteis to keep Manipur’s present boundaries intact (usually referred to as ‘Territorial Integrity’ in Manipur).

In May 2010 Thuingaleng Muivah, the *Ato Kilosner* (leader) of the NSCN-IM, the main Naga independence organisation, conducted a peace and reconciliation tour of all the Naga districts on the Indian side of the India-Myanmar border in preparation for peace talks with the Indian Government. Political and insurgent factionalism, tribal and clan affiliations, interfaith divisions, and the legacy of insurgency campaigns, arrests, and human rights violations by all sides in the Naga struggle necessitated a push for unity during pivotal peace talks. Muivah was received by the different Naga clans and tribes and spoke about unity and peace on each stop. Throughout Naga areas *hohos* (‘traditional’ Naga institutions), local governments, and local NSCN-IM chapters organised receptions for Muivah in villages, churches, and schools. Children lined the roads into towns and villages and waved the Nagalim flag to welcome Muivah to their locality.

The Meitei community and the Manipur Government viewed Muivah’s tour with suspicion. The tour came at a particularly sensitive time in ethnic relations in Manipur. For many years Naga civil society groups in Manipur have pushed for an autonomous district council in the Naga areas. Such councils exist in other hill areas of the borderland legislated by the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 1947. Autonomous district councils in Manipur have fallen under a more opaque regime. Six councils were created in 1971 and subject to direct elections (Gonmei, 2013; Hazarika, 2004; Riamei, 2013). After violence escalated in Manipur during the 1980s, the councils were suspended under the orders of the Delhi-appointed Governor of Manipur. Under pressure from civil society groups a new act was passed
in 2000, the Manipur (Hill Areas) Autonomous District Council Act. This helped to ease one of the major grievances of the hill population, but the act was never brought into force and in 2006 was replaced with the maligned 1971 act. In 2008 the act was amended once again and these amendments were seen as further stripping autonomy from the hill areas.

The Manipur Government announced elections to the hill councils in late 2009. In April 2010 a number of Naga civil society groups led by the All Naga Students Association of Manipur and the umbrella United Naga Council called for a boycott of these elections (Samom, 2010: 33). The Manipur Government was undeterred and scheduled the elections for late May. In response the boycott became a blockade of the two main highways into Manipur, National Highways 39 and 53. This cut off Imphal from the rest of India.

Muivah attempted to bring the peace and reconciliation tour to the same districts and also visit his home village of Somdal in Ukhrul District. The Manipur Government announced they would block Muivah from entering the state. Crisis meetings were held between members of the Manipur Government, the Government of Nagaland, and the peace negotiators from the Indian Government. Meanwhile Muivah waited on the Nagaland side of the border between the two federal states while these deliberations took place.

A number of crucial events took place in the first days of May 2010. Meitei organisations in Imphal protested against Muivah’s visit, including the Meira Paibis, the Meitei women’s association discussed earlier. Protestors in Imphal supported the decision of Chief Minister of Manipur, Ibobi Singh, to stop Muivah. They also blamed Naga groups for the blockade of the valley and the ensuing hardships. The blockade by Naga civil society organisations and members of the hill communities had now been in place for 25 days.

Communities from all over the hills converged on Mao Gate to welcome Muivah, stationed just a few kilometres away, and protest against the Manipur Government. Those supporting Muivah attempted to stop security forces from reaching the gate. On May 6 an enormous gathering of Naga women organised by the Naga Mothers’ Association and the Naga Women’s Union staged a sit-in protest on both sides of the border. As tensions escalated Manipur state police tried to stop the demonstrators from reaching the border post and fired tear gas and bullets. Footage of the shootings shows crowds of protestors running to the side of the road to find shelter. Over 70 people were injured. The crisis escalated when the police shot and killed two Naga teenagers, Neli Chakho and Dikho Loshou. Video of the shooting quickly circulated through the Internet and for a time was posted on YouTube, though it was removed by mid-2011. Naga protestors reinforced road blockades with trees, tyres, stones, and trenches. The Indian Army,
also present at Mao Gate, vowed to clear the road, but as one journalist caught in the blockade reported they ‘had no idea how to deal with this army of women’ (Bhattacharjee, 2010: 36). The uncertainty that followed meant many protestors who had come to Mao Gate could not return home and as many as 4000 persons were estimated to be displaced in the weeks that followed (Kikon, 2010: 41).

After the shootings the blockade of Imphal held for six more weeks. In the meantime the controversial elections went ahead. In some Naga constituencies bandhs ensured very low voter turnout and in several constituencies incumbents had no opponents. Meitei civil society actors held further protests in Imphal, demanding the Manipur Government take action to end the blockade. After the blockade was finally lifted the situation for Nagas and Meiteis altered little. As a local journalist, Anjulika Samom notes, ‘the blockade and Muivah’s proposed visit have left a deep mark on the psyche of the people as well as the political equations of this tiny state’ (2010: 33). Mao Gate shows the incompatibility of the imaginations of neighbouring communities as seen through what Jilangamba calls the ‘simplistic, homogenous and unilinear view of the past’ (2010b: 39). Jilangamba sees this view as offering ‘threatening and one-dimensional choices (that) not only encourage ethnic tensions, but also limit political expression only to ethnic-based articulations’ (2010b: 39).

Sadar Hills

Less than a year later the Sadar Hills Districthood Demand Committee (SHDDC) called for a weeklong blockade of two highways connecting Imphal to India in one direction and to the border with Myanmar in the other. The SHDDC demanded the upgrade of the Sadar Hills district to a revenue district – giving the majority Kuki community in this area a higher level of territorial autonomy. Nehginpao Kipgen notes that the Sadar Hills demand has been made since 1972, and the Manipur Government made promises in 1997 and 2000 to change the status of the district (2013: 31). Haokip cites the Kuki Chiefs’ Zonal Council meeting in September 1970 as the origin of the demand (2015: 95), based in part on the colonial delimitation of the Sadar subdivision in 1933 with headquarters based at Kangpokpi (Oinam, 2003: 2037). The SHDDC dates from 1974. Counter-claims of indigenous status by Naga communities when compared to ‘migrant’ Kukis, usually based on colonial gazetteers, have made the creation of a district a controversial decision and one the Manipur Government has delayed lest it aggravate interethnic relations (Shimray, 2001).
In June 2011, a new leadership was elected to the SHDDC and they demanded the fulfilment of past promises by the end of July the same year (Haokip, 2012: 96). The blockade began in July 2011 with the support of local chiefs from Kuki villages and various civil society organisations. Things got out of hand when protestors torched vehicles that had violated the blockade and when a truck lost control and killed three women after being pelted with missiles by the SHDDC volunteers (Hueiyen News Service, 2011a). Local government offices were burned in locations along Highway 39 a few days later (Hueiyen News Service, 2011b). In response the Manipur Government implemented Criminal Procedure Code Section 144 (CrPC 144) – a law used across India to prevent the assembly of more than five people.

As the blockade began to receive more attention, Naga organisations, such as the All Naga Students Association Manipur, the United Naga Council and the Tangkhul Katamnao Saklong argued that any agreement about the status of the Sadar Hills requires the consent of the Naga population living in the area. In mid-August the Naga People’s Association held an emergency meeting of Naga associations, chiefs, and public leaders to safeguard Naga territory and to condemn ‘any hidden agendas and communal designs’ (Hueiyen News Service, 2011d). The response from various Naga associations evoked the Naga-Kuki tensions of the 1990s and the misalignment between territorial claims of one ethnic group and the plural population in this part of the state. Kuki organisations, such as the Kuki People’s Forum, criticised the involvement of Naga organisations in what they saw as an issue between Kukis and the government (Hueiyen News Service, 2011f).

At the same time the Manipur Government was under pressure from drivers’ associations and traders to provide safe passage for their vehicles. After the death of a truck driver on August 13 the All Manipur Road Transport and Motor Worker’s Union called a strike. Nothing in Manipur moved and the impact of the blockade intensified. Through the rest of August 2011 and into September the SHDDC escalated their protests, holding sit-ins and mass prayers on Indian Independence Day (conventionally a day of protests and strikes throughout Manipur), while a group of 40 women wearing black went on a hunger strike in the Sadar Hills (at Kangpokpi, Saparmeina, and Motbong) (Hueiyen News Service, 2011e). The involvement of school children in protests drew particular attention, leading to the charge in the Imphal press that they are being used as ‘human shields’ (Sangai Express, 2011a). Talks between the SHDDC and the Manipur Government stopped and started. When these faltered the SHDDC appealed to the Prime Minister of India, the President, and also staged protests in Delhi itself – national recognition being a common tactic for many of the communities in the
borderland to legitimise territorial claims and gain leverage with their respective state governments.

In an unusual move the SHDDC also sought the patronage of the titular king of Manipur, Leishemba Sanajaoba, in a ceremony at the palace in Imphal (Sangai Express, 2011b). The photographs of the event show several prominent Kuki senior citizens, one of whom I was fortunate enough to interview two months later, and members of various Kuki associations presenting gifts to the king, himself a very marginal figure in contemporary Manipur (Raj, 2011). The idea that members of one of the tribal hill communities would seek the approval from the last remnant of the Meitei royal family to increase their autonomy appears to contradict the dynamics of hill-valley politics. However, the move was pragmatic; after almost three months of the blockade the SHDDC needed all the support it could get, especially in Imphal that was wilting under the shortages and inflated prices, and also strategic in that any alliances between Meitei and Kuki, even with a powerless figurehead of a defunct kingdom, would isolate Naga opposition to the movement.

Protests and counter-protests continued in the Sadar Hills, and to a lesser extent in Imphal itself, and Naga groups staged a counter-blockade and a ‘silent rally’ in Imphal. Vendors mobilised against the blockade highlighting their economic hardship, including shutting down one of Imphal’s main markets. One vendor’s association (Manipur Keithel Nupi Marup Ibeni) pressed the government to make the highways ‘blockade proof for all times’ (Hueiyen News Service, 2011g). In early October the Minister for Consumer Affairs and Public Distribution inspected food stocks and claimed the city had only 10 days of food remaining, but that people should not panic – a statement that unsurprisingly triggered widespread panic (Hueiyen Lanpao, 2011c). A memorandum of understanding between the SHDDC and the Manipur Government was signed on 31 October ending the three-month blockade, though it was still some days before vehicles began to move freely along the road. After the blockade was lifted the press featured daily announcements at the numbers of empty trucks leaving Imphal to and the numbers arriving to restock the city with food and fuel. The memorandum agreed to grant district status as ‘early as possible’. Three years later Kuki groups were once again protesting the failure for the district to be granted.

**Belonging and the Blockades**

Mao Gate brought hill-valley politics back to the centre stage of Manipur’s politics. The territorial claims of the Nagalim movement and the territorial
integrity of Manipur’s existing boundaries cast Naga on one side, Meitei on the other. It brought back the memories of the protests in 2001 and the 18 Martyrs killed on the same issue, a tragedy memorialised in Imphal and in the observation of State Integrity and Unity Day as discussed in the previous chapter. The Sadar Hills evoked the similar fissures between hill and valley, yet more importantly it reawakened the tensions, hostilities, and memories of the Naga-Kuki violence of the 1990s, violence that led many families to flee the hills and settle in Imphal. The ‘success’ of the blockades in terms of their longevity, though not necessarily their outcome, gave hill communities a powerful tool at their disposal. The blockades also exposed the fragility of connectivity. With more and more food, goods, and materials coming from east across the international border and west from India the blockades demonstrated the vulnerability and insecurity of Imphal.

The blockades drove up the cost of goods, especially food and fuel. In particular non-Manipuri traders, many of whom are members of the Marwari trading community active throughout India, were subject to accusations of hoarding and profiteering. During the blockades the indigenous population, whether tribal or non-tribal, felt particularly insecure at the notion that outsiders controlled a large portion of their food supply – even when the traders in question were born and raised in Imphal. This insecurity lingered through to the zenith of the ILP movement in 2013-14 when violence targeted at this community escalated.

The blockades affected all traders. Without goods arriving in the city from India there was less to sell. Small-scale traders could not travel back and forth to the border with Myanmar and the vendors who buy and re-sell these goods in Imphal also faced depleted stock. With many residents unable to work they spent less on non-essential items, and even these items became hard to obtain as the blockades wore on. The Consumer Development and Public Distribution Department ended up organising mobile markets that went around to different neighbourhoods with essential commodities sold out of the back of trucks under state police guard. They also tried to fix prices for commodities, though policing this proved difficult. Student unions took up the task of policing vendors and acting on overcharging in response to perceived government ineptitude or unwillingness.

As fuel shortages became more severe and as protesting transport workers went on strike, school buses and other urban transportation stopped running. Students stopped going to school, many of which closed. Some of the private schools in the western and southern parts of the city discussed at length in chapter 6 remained open during the period as the students stayed in hostels on campus or nearby. In fact, remaining open during blockades
is a selling point for some of these schools, as discussed in chapter 7. People with jobs stopped going to work or went infrequently – especially if they had to commute for some distance. Workers in the informal economy missed out on day labour. Those who could went back to their villages. Hospitals ran low on drugs, and for a time in 2011 the two main public hospitals suspended surgical operations owing to lack of oxygen – a circumstance that furthered a lack of faith in the public system (Hueiyen Lanpao, 2011). Those with the means found ways around the blockade. Air traffic was unimpeded and businesses with spare capital could fly supplies in. The black market thrived. Connections could secure things like construction materials, gas cylinders, and fuel.

Personal safety was even more precarious than usual during the blockades. It was not just the armed forces and underground groups that posed a threat; residents of communities seen as responsible for the blockades became targets of harassment by other residents. For instance, members of targeted communities reported that they were sometimes refused goods by vendors and shopkeepers from other ethnic groups. In response, residents tried to buy goods from members of their own ethnic group where possible, concentrating their movements in their neighbourhood. Networks of underground groups, politicians, civil servants and traders were necessary to ensure the flow of food and fuel into neighbourhoods. The plural city suddenly became very tightly bound and the ethnic composition of each patch of the urban landscape became the defining feature of each space.

In conversations during fieldwork the blockades would often come up when discussing neighbourhoods, work, the black market, the cost of living, safety and interethnic relations. The hardships of everyday life experienced during those periods are unlikely to be forgotten quickly, especially given that the city was blocked for almost 6 months in an 18-month period. The fabric of interethnic relations was damaged. However, the rhythms of everyday life resumed and communities also resumed their interactions with one another: in the workplace, at festivals, in the market, as friends and in mixed families.

I learned about life in the blockades from Flora. Flora lives in Nagaram, a Tangkhul Naga neighbourhood very close to the centre of the city. The highway to Ukhrul passes the entry to Nagaram: fitting, as Ukhrul is the Tangkhul heartland. The stretch of businesses on the highway feature shops run by Tangkhuls and a strip of fruit and vegetable vendors crouched under umbrellas selling meat, fruit, and fish. Nagaram was founded in 1961 as a Tangkhul ‘village’ close to Imphal. A large foundation stone sits on the
periphery of the neighbourhood facing the main road and in 2011 a new monolith was unveiled celebrating the golden jubilee (50 years) of settlement. Foundation stones are a vital part of place-making and for tribal communities they are necessary symbols for making claims of longevity and legitimacy over a patch of Imphal. As development projects are accelerated, evictions enacted and contested, and compensation negotiated, foundation stones and settlement dates are important tools for engaging the state. This is even more crucial for communities with no other evidence of rights to the land apart from a history of occupation.

The southern border of the neighbourhood meets the highway and the houses here are well established, usually made from cement, with outer walls, drainage and cars parked in front. The northern and western ends of the neighbourhood spill out into fields and wetlands. Despite being hemmed by urban settlement on all sides, the back of Nagaram is a patchwork of agricultural land, wasteland, and construction. The land here was bought by a Tangkhul politician from a few Meitei families eager to sell and move out of the flood plain. Looking at the neighbourhood using satellite imagery, the unexpected patches of green stand out among the density of settlement. The green is rapidly being ‘filled in’ with modest dwellings made from bricks, corrugated iron sheets, and bamboo thatch, as well as different combinations of all these materials. Nagaram is growing as more Tangkhuls move to the city from the hill areas or settle in the city after living outside the state.

Nagaram certainly has the feel of a village. Election posters for local Tangkhuls running for office, advertisements for healing missions from visiting theologians from Korea, and announcements for community events in Ukhrul are pasted onto the outer walls facing the main laneways. There is a bilingual Tangkhul/English daily newspaper distributed in Nagaram and elsewhere in Imphal. And there are few non-Tangkhuls in the neighbourhood, especially in the evenings and after dark.

Flora lives in Nagaram with her mother and other relatives are often staying in the house while they conduct affairs in Imphal. Like many people in Nagaram, Flora also has a family home in the hills and she returns there often, especially now the road is in better condition and the route relatively safe from ambushes by underground groups and harassment by the armed forces (though there are a number of checkpoints). Her house has a garden and small pond within the outer walls and a completed ground story along with a half-completed upper floor. She keeps her pet dog within the compound and once remarked to me that dogs go missing in tribal neighbourhoods, hinting that it might be caught and eaten.
Flora loves the neighbourhood. She is passionate when she speaks about it and the ways in which Tangkhuls have made a home in the city. She brings me around the neighbourhood every time we meet, showing me new houses and telling me stories about the residents of existing ones: the house of a politician alongside the house of a well known underground figure, the houses with drinking dens in the back, the house of a retired local sporting star. Everyone in the neighbourhood knows her, too; we always stop to chat to children she has tutored, friends from church, a well-known Tangkhul singer and aspiring politician. Nagaram has a very strong sense of place; a sense of place based on belonging and exclusion.

During the Mao Gate blockade Flora’s life was very difficult. She worked on the other side of the main market, a distance of only 5 kilometres, in the offices of a not-for-profit. Despite the distance she had to pass through neighbourhoods of several different communities, and with Nagas, and Tangkhuls in particular (Muivah is a Tangkhul), being blamed for the blockade, the journey became riskier as the blockade wore on. As fuel became scarce and more expensive it was harder to get any transport in the city, so she had to walk through Imphal’s ethnic patchwork. At other times this was not an issue, but during the blockade and as a member of a community singled out in the counter-protests, this could be a hazardous journey. There were also soldiers and police everywhere, also a deterrent. Like many other people across the city she stopped going to work.

The neighbourhood turned inward. Fewer people ventured out. Residents from other ethnic groups did not want to venture in. Flora related the story of going to the main market to try to get food and not being able to find any rickshaw puller willing to take her back to Nagaram or anywhere near it. In the final month of the blockade Flora stopped going to the market as vendors from different communities refused to sell to her. Invisible lines separating patches of the city were drawn along roads, gates, and boundary walls. Social relations replicated these divisions.

Goods did come to the neighbourhood through networks activated by local politicians and by underground groups as well as the periodic mobile markets organised by the government. Nagaram was in a more fortunate geographic position than some neighbourhoods as it was on a highway out of the city. Thus, vehicles that managed to get through, whether through pre-arranged connections or by paying bribes to the collection of organised and ad hoc people blocking the highway, were unloaded here before meeting the counter-protestors closer to the city centre.

With many people staying home from work they were not getting paid. The goods being sold (cooking fuel, firewood, food) were at high prices and
hard to afford. In this environment a significant number of residents left Nagaram to return to villages in the hills. Flora too decided to return to her village for a few weeks, afraid that as the neighbourhood emptied out it could be more vulnerable to violence from other residents or raids by the armed forces. Leaving the valley was a frightening journey. Communities in the hills were blocking traffic from entering the city; communities in the valley were doing the same in the other direction. In Flora’s case her vehicle passed through with only minor incidents (a few rocks thrown), especially when compared to some other stories of vehicles being stopped and the passengers being removed.

Flora returned soon after the blockade was lifted. However, it took her a long time to move about the city in the same way as she had done prior to the blockades. When I saw her almost a year later she was still very cautious about spending long periods in non-tribal areas. Yet she admitted this was probably the same for other communities. The city had become a collection of small enclaves. For Flora this evoked a much deeper fear that one day all the non-Meitei residents would be forced to leave Imphal and return to the hills. With the hills unable to reabsorb this population and with many members of the population ill equipped to create livelihoods back home, communities were preparing by purchasing land in the foothills of the valley, and in some cases, outside Manipur.

Interethnic tensions and outright violence have taken place in the past, the Naga-Kuki violence of the 1990s and the 2001 protests against the Naga ceasefire being the most pertinent examples that not only shaped the politics of Manipur but the demographics of Imphal. The blockades of 2010 and 2011 cut off a plural city; plurality that emerged, in part, from the violence of the previous decades. The blockades sought to damage the Manipur state but also the majority Meitei community. Yet members of the ethnic communities behind the blockades also suffered as residents of Imphal. Neighbourhoods were even more important as spaces of belonging, safety, and exclusion. Furthermore there was a discernable undercurrent of instability to interethnic relations in the city. It seemed any random incident could trigger interethnic tensions. And this is what happened in December 2012 during what became known as the ‘Momoko’ incident.

In December 2012 in Chandel, a town 90 kilometres from Imphal, Meitei actress Momoko Khangembam was assaulted and molested during a concert at a local high school by Livingstone Anal, a member of the NSCN-IM, who also fired shots at other performers who tried to intervene (Sangai Express, 2012b). Livingstone then absconded and security forces began a search operation. Condemnation of the incident was swift and came from actors associations,
members of parliament, women’s organisations, and from the NSCN-IM leadership (Sangai Express, 2012b). The initial reaction suggested a level of solidarity among the main ethnic communities. In an incident that could have triggered the kinds of hill-valley and Naga-Meitei tensions of 2010, the response from across the spectrum of ethnic groups was universal condemnation. However, protests in Imphal in the following days singled out Livingstone and the NSCN-IM. One frequently photographed placard in the Imphal protests on December 20 read: ‘We condemn the barbaric act of NSCN-IM’. The incident provided an opportunity to voice grievances with the NSCN-IM, with the deliberations between NSCN-IM and the Indian Government that have consequences for the future boundaries of Manipur, and with their actions in Imphal. Various organisations supported calls for an infinite bandh until Livingstone was brought to justice. The bandh brought life in Imphal to a standstill once again. Teargas was used on the protestors and a journalist, Nanao Singh, was killed by police fire. Blockades in the streets of Imphal were set up using debris, garbage, and tree branches to block movement thought the city run by men and women, mostly from the Meitei community.

At the same time hundreds of migrants from Manipur living outside the state returned home for Christmas and were stranded in Imphal, awaiting transport home to the hill areas. If Mao Gate and Sadar Hills showed the vulnerability of the city to blockades started in the hills, the Momoko incident showed the dependency of the hills on transit through the city. Notable tribal organisations including the All Manipur Christian Organisation and the Kuki Inpi Manipur asked that the bandh be lifted for Christmas. It wasn’t. Some of the hill communities began to accuse the protestors of targeting Christian communities and counter-strikes were called in the hills. The Manipur Government was targeted for failing to produce Livingstone and by some hill communities for failing to quell the interethnic turn in the protests. By mid-February things had died down though Livingstone remained at large.

I was in Imphal for the first few days after the Momoko incident. On the day following the incident the first rumours of blockades on traffic leaving the city were circulating. In the mid-morning I walked to the stretch of highway in front of the Tampha Hotel on the Indo-Myanmar Highway where several of the private long-distance bus companies sell their tickets and collect passengers. There was already some uncertainty about what was going on. Buses lay idle along the highway with no one loading anything onto the top. Cargo to be transported to the hills was strewn on the pavement. Young men from the hills dressed like Korean soap stars with dyed spiky hair and coloured jeans sat on their luggage tagged with labels from the flight that arrived from Delhi that morning. A group of women with infants waited around with bags
of Christmas shopping. Small crowds had developed in front of the bus ticket offices and the salesmen shouted instructions into telephones and did their best to answer the questions coming from the stranded passengers. With little else to do, many travellers retreated to the pork and rice hotels across the highway; where I also spent my morning among shrugging shoulders having pessimistic conversations about the fabric of interethnic relations in the city.

During a conversation over purple rice with a group of Imphal residents going to see family in Karong, a town between Imphal and Mao, David, a hotel worker of mixed Naga-Kuki parentage, offered his take on things. David was sporting a black eye. He explained he got into a fistfight the night before. He wasn’t really sure what it was about, but at during times of tension ‘everyone wants to fight anyone they see’. David gestured to the immobile buses over the road and commented: ‘This is how we live in Imphal now. Waiting for blockades to end. While the rich just take a plane’.

Feeling very self-conscious I headed to the airport the following day. There were blockades and protestors at different points on the highway, though they let the small auto-rickshaw I was in pass through. There was very little traffic, though a few private cars were on the road. After arriving home a few days later I telephoned my friend Romi to see how things were. She said I was lucky to have left that morning. The city has once again ground to a halt and tribals heading home for Christmas were being stopped. ‘It’s like last year’, she said, ‘everyone is in their own neighbourhoods or with their relatives waiting for it to pass’. And pass it did.

The blockades demonstrate the ways in which the urban landscape becomes an arena for territorial politics to play out. Imphal’s plurality is aggravated in these moments but also enables communities to feel belonging and safety in their own enclaves. The feeling of safety comes, in part, from excluding ‘others’. Successful place-making in the city appears to hinge upon the degree of exclusion as much as a sense of belonging. For residents in mixed neighbourhoods safety and belonging are more fleeting, but these neighbourhoods can also hold together. The interethnic exclusion of 2010-12 dissipated somewhat in 2013-14 as a larger project of exclusion was reinvigorated; the exclusion of non-Manipuris; the majority of whom dwell in Imphal.

**Indigenous Politics**

Migration of non-Manipuris into the state has been a contentious issue for over a century. For the purposes of this section I will use the term non-Manipuri to refer to the collective of diverse migrants lumped under the
local term *mayang*. *Mayang* is racialised category referring to ‘mainland’ South Asians from India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, many of whom have been in Manipur for several generations while others have come to Manipur after periods settled in other parts of the borderland, such as Assam and Meghalaya. For instance, some of the Nepali settlers in and around Imphal left Meghalaya after ethno-nationalist campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s evicted them. Similarly some of the Bangladeshi migrants in Manipur arrived after fleeing violence in Assam. *Mayang* usually does not refer to tribals from other parts of the borderland that have migrated to Imphal, nor usually to Burmese. *Mayang* are cast as foreigners, evoking the sovereignty of the former kingdom rather than the contemporary Indian state. To put it another way, *mayang* are foreign to Manipur even if they are citizens of the nation-state in which Manipur is now a part. Imphal is the epicentre of a broad movement to restrict migration of *mayang* into the state by introducing (or re-introducing) the ILP. I will use the term non-Manipuri in this chapter as I wish to counterpose it with Manipuri, itself a concept being reconstructed through the ILP movement.

The idea of non-Manipuri as a distinct group also depends upon some recognition of Manipuri – a category that is often used interchangeably with Meitei and thus excluding 40% of the state’s population. In the last decade ‘indigenous’ has become a common term to assemble the tribal and non-tribal population in a single category and attempt a unified position on restricting migration into the state. One of the most powerful organisations involved in the ILP campaign, the United Committee Manipur, even breaks indigenous down to ‘Indigenous Meitei and others’ and ‘indigenous tribals’ to further the sense of shared fate at the hands of the migrant wave.

The history of pre-colonial migration into Manipur involves captives, slaves, imported religious instructors and courtiers, volunteer migrants and inter-marriage into the various Meitei *yeks* or clans. The colonial era brought traders and labourers from other parts of the Empire in large numbers along with the establishment of a Foreigners Department to regulate and tax migrants, a history that others have covered in detail (Banerjee, 2012; Irene, 2010; Parratt, 1980). The main issue here is that regulation of migration into Manipur is not new and its history is continually evoked in contemporary campaigns for the ILP, though often neglected is consideration of flight from Manipur by non-Manipuris in the decades since the 1980s (Banerjee, 2012: 105-6).

1950 is a watershed year as the permit system for foreigners was dismantled following the Merger with India: a deeply symbolic surrendering of sovereignty exemplified by the loss of legal mechanisms to control
movement in and out of the territory. After the Merger, Manipur came under Article 19(1) of the Indian Constitution providing all citizens freedom of movement and the freedom to settle and reside anywhere within India’s borders. However, Clause 5 of the same article provides exceptions where existing laws imposing restrictions is in place and the state can make a law imposing ‘reasonable restriction’ in the interest of the general public or for the protection of any Scheduled Tribe. As is now clear the population of Manipur includes Scheduled Tribes in the hills but not in the valley.

Manipur experienced rapid population growth in the decade 1951-61, the decade after the permit system was lifted. The Statistical Handbook of Manipur records population growth at 35% in that period – almost 15% higher than the national average, followed by 38%, 32%, and 29% in the three decades that followed to 1991 (Manipur Directorate of Economics and Statistics, 2002). Population growth was closer to the national average in 2001 (25% and 22%, respectively) and was much lower in the 2011 census at 18%, matching a drop in the national-level growth in the same period (17%) (Census of India, 2013). In sum, following the lifting of permits the population of Manipur grew much faster than the national average. In the last two decades it has dropped and moved closer to the national average.

The movement against outsiders depends upon two linked arguments supported by a range of demographic data on the one hand and prophetic scenarios similar to the future depicted in 23rd Century on the other. The first argument is that the population of non-Manipuris is growing faster than the indigenous population and will soon exceed it. This is due to uncontrolled migration and a higher birth rate among migrants when compared to the indigenous population (UCM, 2005: 29-50). The United Committee Manipur, an organisation at the forefront of the movement for the ILP, argues these factors will ‘threaten the very existence of the Manipuri identity’ (2005: 64). The second argument is that the quality of life in Manipur is negatively affected by the growth of this population as they dominate business though access to capital, the mid and bottom end of the labour market by working for lower wages than locals and in jobs locals are unable to access or unwilling to do, and by threatening the culture and traditions of a numerically small population/s. The presence of outsiders is exacerbated even more by the economic hardships of life in the disturbed city.

With this in mind it may seem odd that there is such a strong ‘pull factor’ in the disturbed city. I have often wondered what continues to attract migrants to Imphal, given the dire local economy and the routine violence of everyday life. Yet people continue to arrive, guided by promises of work, stories of returnees who have spent time there, the opportunities
from border trade, and by the centrally funded infrastructure projects that require labour for building cantonments, border roads, and civilian infrastructure. It is also interesting to consider the flow of migrants into Imphal at the same time as locals leave the city for other parts of India and beyond. During my research with Northeast migrants living in Delhi respondents would often speak of the unequal exchange of intelligent and skilled indigenous people contributing to the economies of metropolitan India, a brain drain of significant proportions, to be replaced by unskilled labour from the same heartlands, members of the armed forces, and central government bureaucrats (McDuie-Ra, 2012a: 85).

The validity of the arguments about the influx of migrants into Imphal is not my concern here; rather, I am interested in the ILP movement as a declaration of who belongs in the city, who decides, and what action is taken to shape the urban landscape along these lines. There have been so-called ‘uprisings’ against non-Manipuri migrants in 1980 and 1994, spearheaded by the All Manipur Students Union. However, the issue has picked up such momentum in the period from 2011 to 2014 that the most recent activism can be characterised as unprecedented.

The most recent incarnation of the movement began in 2011 when the Chief Minister of Manipur, Ibobi Singh, promised the state assembly that he was willing to implement the ILP system in response to a private member resolution by a member of the Communist Party India, which was then part of the ruling alliance (Samom, 2011). In June 2012 there had been no action and the Federation of Regional Indigenous Society (innocuously abbreviated as FRIENDS) began a series of actions on the first day of the assembly session. In the months that followed, momentum grew and other organisations (including the Manipur Peoples Party, the Meira Paibis, different vendors and workers associations) staged their own actions targeting the Chief Minister of Manipur urging him to introduce the ILP. An umbrella group, the Joint Committee on ILP (JCILPS) was formed in July 2012 and assumed the vanguard.

The politics around introducing the ILP warrant brief attention. The ILP requires non-indigenous people to apply for a permit to enter the state, to work, and to settle. As mentioned above the ILP is in place in other parts of the borderland, including Mizoram and Nagaland, and has been previously in place in Meghalaya. According to the Constitution of India the Union Home Ministry needs to implement the ILP. One of the main reasons the movement has not yet succeeded is that the Home Ministry refuses to veer away from the boundaries set out in the Eastern Bengal Frontier Regulation of 1873. The Act is the colonial law upon which the ‘inner-line’ was based and
in contemporary India an ILP can be instated where previously promulgated under the 1873 regulation. Indeed, the then Minister of State and Home Affairs Mullappally Ramachandran cited the 1873 regulation in September 2012 in rejecting the proposal for the ILP in Manipur (Sangai Express, 2012a). The state government can, technically, impose the ILP but as inter-state migration falls under the Union list, any state government would not be able to enforce the law on violators. Resolutions were passed, delayed, and blocked in the state assembly during 2013 while the Indian Government held firm on the 1873 line being the only basis for the ILP. Still, the JCILPS and other groups lobbied the state government to pass a resolution and to meet with the Indian Government on the issue, while also directly lobbying the Indian Government and encouraging Manipuri migrants based in Delhi to do the same.

During fieldwork in Imphal I would come a range of actions calling for the ILP. Banners calling for the ILP could be found hanging from the entrance to the main market with slogans like: ‘Implement the Inner Line Permit System in Manipur. Save Indigenous People’. Sit-in protests were held in different neighbourhoods throughout the city. Various groups held rallies and bandhhs. And the issue was a constant in sessions of the state assembly and in media coverage of local politics.

At first it was possible to experience these events: to stand in the crowd, to chat with participants, to witness the tense encounters between Manipuris and non-Manipuris, to observe the armed forces cordoning off a street for yet another rally. However, during later periods of fieldwork in 2013 and 2014, it felt impossible to pin down what was going on. The sheer number of actions taking place on the issue was staggering. There were so many organisations involved, so many different forms of protest from hunger strikes to market shut downs to ‘black badge’ campaigns, and – by 2014 – violence against non-Manipuris that I felt overwhelmed. Even tracking the events through the media and through friends in Imphal proved a challenge as almost every day there was some mention of ILP activities.

JCILPS, student groups, and certain underground groups began blocking the entry of non-Manipuris into the state, setting up checkpoints on the roads, boycotting travel companies that let non-Manipuris enter on their buses, and protesting the proposed railway extension into Manipur at Jiribam – an action synchronic with 23rd Century. They also turned to monitoring non-Manipuris already in city, demanding identification papers, detaining and forcibly evicting anyone who could not vouch for their identity. In August 2014 the JCILPS lunched a ‘verification drive’ calling on volunteers to assist with checking identity cards and notifying of
any fakes (Sangai Express, 2014b). Boycotts were called on non-Manipuris businesses, on businesses hiring non-Manipuris, and landlords renting to non-Manipuris. For a period in August and September 2014 a curfew on non-Manipuris was in place and enforced by civilians – an extraordinary shift in the spatial control of city streets. Electoral rolls were scrutinised in the lead up to the 2014 national poll and suspect names were identified and tracked down. The name and voter identification of suspect persons was often published in the newspapers. The Deputy Chief Minister, Gaikhangam, suggested that the government would set up ‘flying squads’ to monitor the influx into the state. Violence was widespread, both in actions against non-Manipuris, including an attack on Telugu students at the National Institute of Technology campus in Imphal in September 2014, and by the security forces against protestors. Several key activists from JCILPS were arrested, some on charges of association with underground groups – always an option for the authorities in the disturbed city, and others with no charges (Roy, 2014).

The position of the civilian government at the state level was inconsistent with the Deputy Chief Minister and Chief Minister adopting different positions. While the Deputy Chief Minister supported monitoring non-Manipuris, the Chief Minister Ibobi Singh was less forthcoming. Ibobi negotiated with the ILP movement but promised little, trading the release of members for a suspension of monitoring and curfews. At such moments, the Manipur Government was trapped between the expectations of the Indian Government, especially the Home Ministry, to align with their steadfast opposition to the ILP and insistence on the 1873 line – not to mention the consequences of failing to protect Indian citizens targeted in the agitations in Imphal, and the groundswell of local support for the ILP and escalating acts of defiance and violence to force the civilian government into action. The result was a stalemate. The movement for the ILP did not exactly fail. The demographic pressures experienced by ethnic minority communities in borderland polities ensure that it will remain on the political agenda until actors pursuing greater sovereignty for Manipur are comfortable that they can control movement and settlement of non-Manipuris. However, the stalemate shows the inertia of governance that can develop in the disturbed city – in the sensitive space. Overt support for the ILP and the violent agitations for its implementation could cast the Manipur Government as separatist and counter its desire to display loyalty in the face of decades of separatism. To put it another way, as various actors in Manipur have sought secession from India and from Manipur itself, the state government has had to prove it loyalty and obeisance to the laws of India.
As the tensions escalated, the police stepped in to try to protect non-Manipuris. Perhaps the most striking measure was the establishment of a relief camp at Dharamshala – also referred to as Gurdwara Sahib after the Sikh temple that takes up part of the building – in Thangal Bazaar, Imphal's commercial hub. On September 12, 2014, the Imphal West police moved non-Manipuris from different parts of the city into the safety of the ‘camp’. The photographs of the inside during this period evoke painful scenes of displacement: scores of young men and boys spread out on mats and sheets on the marble floor, other sit in small groups passing the time, bottles of water and rows of rubber sandals the only other objects in the room.

Establishing a relief camp in Thangal Bazaar marks this space as a safe haven for non-Manipuris. The growth of the non-Manipuri community in this part of the city can be traced back to the British era (Singh, 1998: 183-84). As a recognised area of the city for non-Manipuris it is where new migrants from outside the borderland arrive and seek information, food, and temporary accommodation. There is a high concentration of non-Manipuri businesses, places of worship, and schools. When I visited it during my early periods of fieldwork, prior to the escalation of the ILP issue, it felt like a discreet zone within the city, an island of tolerated necessity for supplying the city with goods and cheap labour. As a relief camp the boundaries hardened between the area around Thangal Bazaar, where non-Manipuris could exist as a majority, and the rest of the city ‘out there’ where their presence is noticeable and temporary in neighbourhoods, markets, and colleges.

The relief camp represents a crisis point in the ILP where exclusion of non-Manipuris took material form in a camp under police guard. Even in the weeks and months around this crisis point, non-Manipuris continued to work and look for work in the city. Long-standing businesses continued to operate, though not without incident or fear. Streets corners on main roads were still frequented by non-Manipuri day labourers, some with paint rollers, some with harnesses for construction sites, some with a few tools. Their existence during this period was no doubt chronically insecure, but in many ways life at this end of the economy is perpetually insecure and worse without work.

In an era of connectivity that has transformed the borderland from a frontier to a corridor and recalibrated Imphal as the major urban centre through which goods and people flow between Southeast Asia and South Asia, the demands for the ILP reveals the limits of connectivity and the desire for exclusion. Imphal is the epicentre of a counter-movement to control the mobility and activity of a certain group of people. What does the demand
for the ILP reveal about Imphal – about space, belonging, and exclusion? As discussed in the previous chapter, the armed forces and the civilian government control urban space from the top down. This control is contested by residents who reclaim space for memorials and rituals and by the creation and maintenance of place in neighbourhoods. The ILP further demonstrates the ways that residents seek to control space by excluding non-Manipuris from the city, evicting those deemed illegitimate, and controlling the movement of the rest. Action by organisations and volunteers is deemed necessary in the face of inaction, or insufficient action, by the civilian authorities. In this context residents take spatial control into their own hands.

However, there are alternative ways of reading this. The ILP movement is a challenge to the Indian Constitution and the conditions under which Manipur was made part of the Indian Union. Manipur may be part of India but supporters of the ILP challenge the inclusion of their territory in a national zone of free movement and settlement. The fact that advocates seek a resolution through the imposition of a colonial law is testament to the lack of options for ensuring territorial control in the borderland. The ILP movement has also provoked an adjacent argument about whether Meiteis could be included as Scheduled Tribes and therefore be excluded from Article 19 and exercise their own territorial control over the valley areas of the state. The argument for tribal status is also part of a drive for greater recognition of Meitei as indigenous people, as having ‘mongoloid’ features, as having pre-Hindu religious traditions, and as Tibeto-Burmans like most, but not all, of the tribal communities of the borderland (Haokip, 2015). It is the colonial category ‘tribal’ that has denied this form of recognition.

Conclusion

In excluding the non-Manipuri population from the city, the ILP issue also constructs the notion of a shared indigenous identity, or at the very least a sense of who is legitimately entitled to dwell in the city. Whether intentional or accidental it constructs the parameters of Manipuri identity and affixes these to the territory of the present federal state boundaries. Membership of this category grants the right to the city. The indigenous Manipuri category, and perhaps a genuinely felt shared identity among those subject to it, questions interethnic hierarchies and rivalries. It also makes for an interesting comparison to the blockades discussed above. During the blockades the fissures between tribal and non-tribal communities were at the heart of attempts at spatial control on a different scale, between hill and valley.
Imphal is small. Within five years there were two lengthy blockades of the city that inflamed interethnic tensions and a broadly supported drive to evict non-Manipuris from the city. The blockades divided the indigenous population in the city; the ILP issue brought these communities back together, perhaps not in a deep or substantive sense, but at the very least in an instrumental sense. It also brought other marginal groups into the fold. A striking example was the sit-in protest by members of Imphal’s transgender community at Sagolband Salam Leikai in the southwest of the city in late August 2014 in support of the ILP (Khangembam, 2014b). As might be expected, the community lives a marginal existence. In an environment with strict codes of moral behaviour and gender roles, transgender resident in Imphal can find themselves with limited economic prospects outside the beauty and fashion industries, as the targets of violence and sexual abuse, and with difficult relationships with families, clans, and tribe. To publicly identify themselves as a community and as supporters of the ILP was a remarkable manoeuvre, simultaneously legitimising the community, their presence in the city, and their position in favour of the ILP. To put it another way, the transgender community was able, even fleetingly, to become part of mainstream Manipuri society. At the sit-in at Sagolband Salam protestors held signs commonly seen at other sit-in such as ‘Save Indigenous People of Manipur’, ‘We Support ILP’, but also others clearly identifying themselves, such as ‘We Are Transgender People [Who] Strongly Support ILP in Manipur’, and ‘We Do Not Want to Be a Minority’. The last one may have been referring to the claim of the ILP movement that indigenous Manipuris will become a minority in their own lands, but when held in the hands of a transgender protestor it also contains a further statement about inclusion and the unexpected pathways to belonging.