Borderland City in New India

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Part 2
Liberalising the Frontier
In downtown Imphal there is a major intersection where five roads meet near the Khothong Pukhri Achouba, a large public pukhri and important landmark. The traffic circle is busy during the day and usually staffed by local police in a small shelter raised above the traffic. It is a major route for the city’s auto-rickshaws taking passengers to and from the market. To improve traffic flow, ropes and steel barricades are used to block off certain streets at different intervals. Police threaten disobedient drivers with bamboo sticks, though the threat can be muted by subtly dropping some rupee notes on the road near the police post. There are also several eateries and pharmacies clustered around the traffic circle, feeding the dual addiction of the city’s youth to fried chicken and Spasmo Proxyvon. A short stretch of road joins this traffic circle to the main highway to Myanmar where there is also a traffic circle with a police shelter, known as LIC point after the Life Insurance Corporation of India building on the corner. This is the main entry point for vehicles bringing goods from outside the city into the market area. The flows of cars, bikes, rickshaws, bullock carts, tractors, and trucks (though they are supposed to go by a different route) cause traffic jams throughout the day. All of this makes it a crowded and slow-moving patch of the city – the perfect place for large billboards and a patch I return to often during fieldwork to look at what is being advertised; from watermelon festivals to fashions shows to new private schools.

In recent years private telecommunications firms, such as Airtel and Aircel, have covered much of this patch with signage. They have even branded the police traffic shelter, taking turns it seems to have their logo above the harangued officer on duty. An enormous billboard for Dalmia Cement featuring Mary Kom, the Olympic boxing medallist from Moirang about 45 kilometres away, with the slogan ‘Our Commitment to the Nation: now in the Northeast’ has featured at different ends of this stretch. Mary, a national celebrity but with local roots, features, and status is the perfect messenger for a national firm trying to crack the Northeast market. Cement is a competitive industry given the desire to cover much of the borderland in it and given that the region hosts a successful cement firm, Star Cement, out of Meghalaya which has used Northeast musicians such as the late Bepin Hazarika, Mami Varte, and Lou Majaw in its advertising. Northeast faces on advertisements for national brands is perhaps unsurprising given the desire to access the consumer markets of the borderland. Billboards featuring Indian celebrities are more unusual – though there are a few in the
main commercial areas on advertisements for soap, phone companies, and banks. As with all signs in Imphal, whether featuring a Northeast singer or a Bollywood star, the logo and slogan that one would see elsewhere in India is accompanied entirely or in part by a translation in Meitei and written in the Meitei Mayek script. It is very uncommon to find a sign without Meitei Mayek script somewhere on it, and those without it don’t last long and are dismantled by ethno-nationalist groups.

The frontier is liberalising, or being liberalised. Indian capital is gaining a firm foothold. On arriving in Imphal the barrage of Airtel signs, the signal on my cell phone handset, and the money I use to recharge it indicates that I am in India, but the Meitei Mayek script on the billboard that reminded me to recharge, the unique script on the familiar blue and green sign of the State Bank of India identifies the ATM where I withdraw cash, and the sign on the kiosk where I bought the voucher remind me that I am in Manipur. Localisation of national advertising is common elsewhere in non-Hindi-speaking India, but in Imphal it is required. And it is enforced from below. Liberalising the frontier requires concessions. Groups enforcing the use of the script demonstrate a form of spatial control and make a claim to sovereignty by marking the landscape.

This chapter begins part two of the book. Part one explored spatial control and contention in Imphal through belonging, control and exclusion. Part
one sought to sketch life on the ground in the disturbed city, and to relate it—loosely—to the idea of sensitive space and the ‘interwoven projects of rule’, to return to Dunn and Cons’ phrase, experienced and contested by residents. In the disturbed city where sovereignty is fragmented and diffused among state, non-state, and quasi-state actors, creating and maintaining place is challenging. Yet in the neighbourhoods, memorial sites, and drinking dens of the city a sense of place is possible. Part two focuses on dual connectivity and the ways this shapes the disturbed city and vice versa. In the chapters that follow I argue that flows east, to and from Southeast Asia, and flows west, to and from India are harnessed, pursued, and localised in ways that counter the state-directed connectivity project. At the core of the chapters in this section is recognition that Imphal, and to an extent other parts of the borderland, are no longer—if they ever were—isolated frontiers. Imphal is being recalibrated in the context of dual connectivity with deep impacts on the city, its landscape, its people, and its diaspora. Part one sought to draw out the highly localised politics of a borderland city that has experienced decades of militarisation. Part two asks what happens when this city is subject to greater connectivity across the nearby international border and inwards deeper into the nation-state from which many of its residents have sought secession.

This chapter analyses the recalibration of Imphal as a gateway city to Southeast Asia and to India under the Look East, and later Act East approach of the Indian Government. The gate opens in both directions. Imphal’s geographic location, for so long used to justify military intervention in the ‘troubled periphery’ (Bhaumik, 2009), now sees it re-imagined as a key node along a corridor connecting the dynamic economies of Asia. Yet I am not solely interested in the connectivity project from the ‘top down’ but the ways connectivity takes local forms and the ways the state-led project to create a gateway city is challenged from the ‘bottom up’ in ways that reflect the fragmented sovereignty and diffuse counter-hegemony discussed in part one. Official discourse on connectivity focuses on the potential of the borderland, and of Imphal, in this new regional order. Imphal is a potential generator of economic growth and a potential consumer market. Yet realising this potential requires the paternalism of the Indian state and willing local governments capable of creating an environment for investment, an environment that requires stability, security, and financial incentives. In this chapter I compare the official discourse seeking to create a gateway city in Imphal with local practices that reshape connectivity amidst the politics of the disturbed city described through three examples: the campaign for Meitei Mayek script on all public signage, the clothing trade as
a way of utilising connectivity to make do, and the attempts to block the ASEAN-India car rally. These three examples offer alternative perspectives on the gateway city from different non-state actors and show, in turn, the opportunities connectivity affords for these actors to make sovereign claims in the face of market expansion, to adopt new livelihood strategies, and to bargain with the state.

New India and Its Frontier

Harvey defines neoliberalism as ‘a theory of political-economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade’ (2005: 2). The role of the state is to provide the institutional structures to support this and guarantee the functioning of markets. This process has led to what Harvey terms ‘creative destruction’ of previous institutional frameworks, divisions of labour, social relations, and welfare provisions, among other things (2005: 3). Neoliberalism in India – usually referred to as liberalisation and closely tied to the maturation of India’s democracy (Kumar, 2008) – has been undertaken in uneven and often paradoxical ways since 1991, driven by internal and external political forces and has been analysed at length from scholars in a number of disciplines (see Aghion et al., 2008; Bhaskar and Gupta, 2007; Corbridge and Harriss, 2000; Kohli, 2006; Sengupta, 2009). In a general sense, liberalisation has compelled a shift in the role of the state as provider under Nehruvian socialism to a champion for private investment and market penetration, albeit with extreme variation at the federal and local levels and in different sectors of the economy and society. Liberalisation in India contrasts ‘old’ Nehruvian India and ‘new’ liberalised and globalised India – at least rhetorically and symbolically (Kaur, 2012; Kohli, 2012). In practice, liberalisation measures are undertaken with parallel growth in new regulation and reregulation in certain sectors and by certain subnational authorities, particularly federal state governments (Hsueh, 2012; Jenkins, 1999). Academic focus on new India produces a fascination with consumerism, workplace cultures, the middle classes, diaspora, and popular culture on the one hand, and the ascendancy of corporate India, special economic zones, resource extraction, and new inequalities on the other (see Fernandes, 2006; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2009; McCartney, 2010; Oza, 2006). As Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan argue, the focus of much scholarly attention on neoliberalism in India has
been more about the ‘decline of the developmental state than about the state that is emerging in its place’ (2011: 3). With this in mind I am interested in the form liberalisation takes in the borderland, specifically Imphal. Within the vast quantity of literature on liberalisation in India there is little consideration of the borderland, where state presence appears firmly embedded in the security apparatus, systems of parallel governance, and strategic state-led development and economic dependency. Thus the push for liberalisation receives very little grounded analysis (see McDuie-Ra, 2009b).

The internal borders of the Northeast region have been rearranged several times in response to violent and non-violent agitations between 1963 and 1987, though arguably the formation of the Bodo Territorial Council within Assam in 2003 signals another phase in internal reorganisation. The creation of small dependent units has been termed ‘cosmetic federalism’ by Baruah (2003), referring to the granting of a formal federal statehood by the Indian state, while at the same time ensuring a high degree of control over these units. Military and political control are discussed in part one of this book; here my focus is the economic relationship between the Indian state and Manipur.

Manipur’s economy has a low level of industrialisation. Agriculture comprises 32% of net state domestic product and employs over 50% of the workforce (Manipur Commerce and Industries Department, 2013). The economy is characterised by high unemployment, low public and private finance in both agricultural and industrial sectors, miniscule tax revenue, infrastructure challenges, corruption – fed in part by the security approach of the Indian Government that seeks to cultivate loyalty among local elites as well as the local malaise, reliance on exchange rather than production, and the second-worse electricity supply in India (after Jammu and Kashmir) (Manipur Commerce and Industries Department, 2013; Manipur Directorate of Economics and Statistics, 2007). According to the Reserve Bank of India, Manipur’s fiscal performance is the second worst in India, behind only Arunachal Pradesh (Reserve Bank of India, 2014: 34-35, 42-43). Manipur is considered a ‘special category state’ and depends on finance from the centre for its annual budget transferred directly (as much as 89%) and also in the form of grants, loans and other schemes coordinated by the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDONER) and the North Eastern Council (NEC). Funds released to special category states are 90% grants and 10% loans payable over 20 years – very attractive terms for state governments like Manipur. In the period 2010-14 Manipur also received funds from Delhi for infrastructure development under the Border Area Development Program,
the Non Lapsable Central Pool of Resources, and the Special Assistance Plan (Manipur Planning Department, 2015). Clearly, Manipur is completely dependent on India, economically. Thus to what extent can the state be seen as shifting or even retreating in the face of liberalisation in Manipur?

A brief discussion of the official discourse on liberalising the frontier is needed in order to contrast it with localised practices ‘from below’, as it were. The opening of the border with Myanmar in 1995 did little to allay a sense within Manipur that dependency on the Indian state – and the security priorities that underpin this dependency – was the main driver (or saboteur) of its economic fortunes (Sharma, 2009). In contrast, new India enables a vision of a new Northeast constructed through the twin tropes of potential and paternalism. Imphal is embedded within a larger imagination generated in Delhi and reproduced, with some variation, in the state capitals of the borderland. Unlike other parts of India where land, coasts, rivers, and forests have been exploited, the Northeast is imagined as almost virginal; a place full of valuable resources that local people cannot, or will not, utilise. The potential for growth and profits are concentrated in extractive industries and, somewhat contradictorily, ecology and biodiversity. Federal states like Manipur are encouraged to tap this potential by courting private investment.

For example, at the North East Business Summit, an annual meeting organised by MDONER and the Indian Chamber of Commerce (ICC), representatives from the state governments in the Northeast meet with potential investors and seek to ‘sell’ their state. The briefing report produced for the 2013 summit by the ICC and global finance firm PricewaterhouseCoopers, India’s North East: Diversifying Growth Opportunities (ICC/PWC, 2013), features an image of a car park in Spain on the cover – presumably to imply the potential for cement-based infrastructure. It also reflects the aspirational statements bandied about in the Northeast and in Delhi, such as: ‘As multiple avenues for growth and development emerge, it is of paramount importance that the region, as a collective identity, embarks on a vibrant journey to realise the dreams of a better future’ (ICC/PWC, 2013: 2). There is an attempt to differentiate among the states. For example, ‘All the eight states have different developmental prospects and resources to support their efforts in contributing to the regional as well as national economy’ (ICC/PWC, 2013: 5). Throughout the briefing report states are compared based on their level of food production, forest cover (the less the better as it implies more farm land), fertiliser use (the more the better), agricultural productivity, length and type of road (measured through a road-density index), length of railway, power-generating capacity, and education levels.
The Northeast’s proximity to international borders is also a sign of great potential for investment commonly referred to as India’s Look East Policy built on the post-Cold War foreign policy of former Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral (Murthy, 1999; Yahya, 2003). It is very difficult to escape the term ‘Look East Policy’ in Imphal where it has become a metaphor for new economic opportunities, border crossings, a staple of media reports and political speeches, and part of the language of savvy elites. Barely a month goes by without a seminar, forum, or briefing framed by the term in the assembly, at the university, or in one of the city’s hotel conference rooms. Within the Look East Policy, Imphal is seen as the gateway to Southeast Asia and from Southeast Asia to India. The policy has evolved through a number of key documents and political champions.

The Look East Policy is expanded upon in the flagship North Eastern Region Vision 2020 (NEV2020) policy document written by MDONER and released in 2008 (MDONER, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). NEV2020 pushes cross-border trade as a way to alleviate poverty and create new opportunities. This is seen a way of fixing the geography of Partition and ‘opening’ the landlocked borderland to markets with apparently insatiable appetites for goods produced in Northeast states. As I have argued elsewhere (McDuie-Ra, 2009b), the NEV2020 agenda contains contradictory imperatives of promoting mobility across international borders while also seeking to further state (in this case central state) control of territory through formalising cross-border trade through legalised crossings, customs posts, permanent border demarcation, and border fencing.

The report refers to ‘underdevelopment’ as the region’s ‘economic imprisonment’ (MDONER, 2008b: 260, 274) and argues that to achieve peace in the region a ‘paradigm shift in development strategy’ is needed towards ‘people-centric programmes based on harnessing the natural resources of the region’ (MDONER, 2008a: 18-19). At the crux of this ‘new development paradigm’ are exploiting the region’s natural resources, gas and petroleum reserves, hydropower potential, creating an hospitable climate for investment, border trade, and undertaking significant amounts of public investment in infrastructure (MDONER, 2008a, 20-21).

Potential requires a paternalistic central state to manage liberalisation. Federal states are called upon to provide the following: ‘Free and unhindered mobility of goods and services (infrastructure) across the region as well as within the region; well-defined property rights; and law and order and security of life, such that markets can function and reflect the true scarcity costs of goods and factors’ (2008b: 282). NEV2020 sets the normative framework for guided liberalisation by the benevolent central government; however, there are other mechanisms to help enact this process. The North East Industrial
and Investment Promotion Policy 2007 (NEIIPP) is an initiative of the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs funded from 2007 to 2017 to encourage private investment to transform the entire Northeast into a Special Economic Zone. It provides incentives for private investors (mostly for a ten-year period) for new investments and for the expansion of existing investments including: 100% tax exemption, 100% duty exemption, up to 30% capital investment subsidy, interest rate caps on loans, insurance reimbursement (a major incentive in the Northeast where firms fear instability and violence will ruin their ventures), and special incentives for the services sector, biotechnology, and power generation (CCEA, 2007). Finance is coordinated through the North Eastern Development Finance Corporation (NEDFi), established in 1995.

The Industrial and Investment Policy of Manipur (2013) is based on the NEIIPP and offers the same basic subsidy levels with an additional 21 subsidies and exemptions covered by the Manipur Government. Of particular interest are capital subsidies for any enterprise set up within 40 kilometres of the international border, various offsets to the costs of additional finance (such as interest rate and stamp duty subsidies), power subsidies, transport and storage subsidies for small producers and for perishable goods, and seven years of exemption from Manipur value added tax.

The incentives for investors are extremely attractive, but uptake of the policy and the finance is low (see McDuie-Ra, 2014b). The first report on the NEIIPP in 2010 showed only one project receiving funds in Manipur, and that was a transport subsidy for a rice mill (MDONER, 2010: 244). In the five-year period 2009-13 only five memorandums were filed in Manipur, the first step to applying for and securing NEIIPP funds (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2014: 230). Notably Manipur has a large number of registered micro, small and medium enterprises which are supported through a different scheme – though still less than neighbouring states (MSME, 2014). The NEIIPP was suspended indefinitely in late 2014.

Violence, extortion and instability are obvious disincentives, indeed NEV2020 reflects this view: ‘Many of the problems of the region stem from weak governance, which has contributed to the rent-seeking, “easy-money” culture, and created a law and order situation which has deterred investment’ (MDONER, 2008a: 19). However, the sheer number of different actors, institutions, and visible and invisible partners in any venture makes it difficult to pinpoint where the breakdowns occur and indeed in whose interests liberalisation takes place. Alongside conventional political and business elites are figures of traditional authority, high-ranking members of the military and security establishment, and leaders of underground and ethno-nationalist groups who can also profit from preparing or enabling (or choosing not to
obstruct) ventures. Members of the armed forces are participants in land deals, black market trade, and smuggling. Occasionally they are caught, as in February 2013 when Colonel Ajay Choudhury, the Public Relations Officer of the 57th Mountain Division, was caught in Manipur smuggling pseudoephedrine tablets into Myanmar (Laithangbam, 2013). The reality that a high-ranking army officer was involved in smuggling was unsurprising; it was the fact that state police caught him that really made news in Imphal.

Ministers and bureaucrats go to lengths to demonstrate to Delhi that they are taking the prescribed measures to make Manipur more investor friendly by hosting trade fairs and investment forums, and by formulating new industrial policies. By demonstrating intent politicians can seek further financial support and/or recognition from Delhi. To put it another way, by showing willingness and openness to private capital, the state government can make claims to (more) public capital. For would-be investors, buying into the rhetoric of potential and pledging to invest in the region can enable access to subsidies and incentives. Actually implementing the promised investment is another matter. And it can always be abandoned due to instability or extortion. Performing a long preparation for liberalisation can be as important as actually liberalising.

Following the election of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Narendra Modi to the office of Prime Minister in 2014 – seen as an endorsement of aggressive liberalisation modelled on his time as Chief Minister of Gujarat (Chhibber and Verma, 2014) – the Northeast borderland is once again touted as a site for intensified market penetration, an untapped consumer market, and a gateway connecting India to Southeast Asia and China. In 2014 the Look East Policy was re-launched as the ‘Act East Policy’ following Modi’s visit to Myanmar. Modi said of the shift, ‘a new era of economic development, industrialisation and trade has begun in India. Externally, India’s “Look East Policy” has become “Act East Policy”’ (Modi in Parameswaran, 2014). While his supporters gush over the proactive turn, what exactly differentiates the new approach is difficult to determine beyond further commitment to infrastructure development and connectivity. The former Indian Ambassador to Myanmar, V.S. Seshadri, wrote in the national newspaper The Hindu:

There can be mutual benefit if both India and Myanmar can work together to truly transform the evolving connectivity corridors into development corridors ... It will be useful for the two sides to discuss the required soft infrastructure – transit and transport agreements, the necessary border trade and warehousing arrangements and how to ready the businesses for the new opportunities. Both sides have a strong interest in expediting these projects. They can bring significant benefits to the Northeastern
States of India and the western part of Myanmar that is also much less developed. Effective trade and transportation links can improve market size for potential investments. This can further build on the border region development projects being undertaken by India in the Chin state and the Naga-administered zone of Myanmar. (Seshadri, 2014)

Despite the shift from looking to acting, the scenario is discussed in almost identical terms to the NEV2020. Regardless of actual content, or lack of it, the centrality of connectivity in Delhi’s approach to the borderland ensures it will be on the agenda through the coming decade. Writing in *The Diplomat*, Downie argues that despite the complex array of factors undermining the potential of cross-border trade, persistence by the Indian Government may ‘shape the behaviour of, the various players of Manipur’s political economy – interest groups in the central government itself, state authorities, the security establishment, and local underground and civil society players’ (Downie, 2015). He adds, ‘the benefits could be enormous: a more stable and prosperous Manipur, emerging overland trade corridors to ASEAN, and new diplomatic leverage in East and Southeast Asia for other priorities. That is truly Acting East’ (Downie, 2015). In this scenario the strong hand of the Indian state is needed to disciple the unruly border polity and help its denizens pursue their potential.

In addition, liberalisation of the borderland casts the region as a market full of consumers. For example, the Indian automobile industry has the Northeast in its sights as a growing market, as does retail, hospitality, education, airline, telecommunications, and information technology industries. Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers Deputy Director General Sugato Sen is quoted in the *Economic Times* as saying ‘the North Eastern market is very fertile. I think the future of this region is very bright. Opportunities are there for auto makers’ (Economic Times, 2013). As a market for consumer items, the Northeast is another kind of frontier, the last domestic market to crack.

Consumption brings peoples of the borderland into the common domestic market and into equivalent standing with other citizens. A 2013 article in the business media outlet *Live Minit*, which also produces and distributes the Indian edition of the *Wall Street Journal*, presents a typical articulation of this view. The article begins with the following: ‘India’s Northeast is known for its tropical rain forests, tribal cultures and handicrafts, Assam tea, flaming hot peppers and outbreaks of ethnic unrest. Now, the region is emerging as a magnet for upscale apparel and accessories labels that are
seeking to tap the growing demand in states such as Assam, Tripura and Manipur’ (Tandon, 2013). The article goes on to quote a representative of L’Oreal in India who states 'Consumer behaviour in these states and the level of awareness is similar to that of the big cities' (Ghosh in Tandon, 2013). A consultant from PricewaterhouseCoopers adds, ‘It’s a brand-conscious and fashion-forward market. So it’s a natural progression for fashion brands to get there’ (Nath in Tandon, 2013).

When the Northeast is discussed as a potential market it is usually Assam that is being referred to rather than states like Manipur. This is unsurprising given Assam’s accessibility and population of 30 million. Its largest city, Guwahati, hosts the Northeast Consumer Awards founded in 2010; an initiative sponsored by the Apex Body of Industry Indian Chamber of Commerce and several media outlets including the Hindi-language daily Dainik Purvoday. The 2013 awards, based on survey data among consumers, recognised the achievement of firms like the State Bank of India, Tata, Airtel, and Britannia for their success in selling lots of things to people in the region. In a cover story, Northeast Today magazine reported glowingly on the awards as ‘a unique way of saluting those brands that have caught the imagination of [the] aspiring generation of Northeast India’, and pointed out ‘the vital role that consumers play in the advancement of our Northeastern economy’ (Northeast Today, 2014). Through consumerism and the penetration of big brands to the region, Northeast people are viewed as equivalent citizens, part of a common domestic market. To paraphrase the L’Oreal spokesperson quoted above, it makes them similar to people in big cities elsewhere in India – quite a change from ‘tropical forest dwellers’ prone to unrest.

Indigenising Indian Capital

What does the expansion of the domestic market look like in the disturbed city? If the borderland is seen as a new frontier for Indian business, how does this function in the urban landscape of Imphal? To put it another way, how is new India manifested in the landscape of a city where old India is resisted? Here I return to the enforcement of the Meitei Mayek script discussed at the start of the chapter as an example of the ways Indian capital is subject to local politics of place, ethnicity, and claims for sovereignty.

The main organisation demanding and enforcing the use of Meitei Mayek is the Meetei Erol Eyek Loinashillon Apunba Lup, Kangleipak (MEELAL). MEELAL has been at the forefront of a movement to revive Meitei Mayek and eradicate the Bengali script that had become the main written form of
Meiteilon, the Meitei language, over the last century. The Manipur Government approved a standardised Mayek script for ‘re-introduction’ in 1980 (Manipur Gazette, 1980). Re-introduction was slow during the 1980s and 1990s: it was not a compulsory part of the school curriculum, it wasn’t a prerequisite for government employment, there were few qualified teachers, and few printing presses featured the script. The ban on Hindi in 2000 provided a boost for the indigenous language campaign and accelerated the campaign for the Meitei Mayek script.

On April 13, 2005, members of MEELAL and the Kangleipak Communist Party, one of Manipur’s underground groups, protested in favour of the implementation of the script. They gathered outside the Manipur State Central Library, a repository for historical records of the Manipuri Kingdom. The library is located between two heavily fortified buildings, the Raj Bhawan (Governor’s Residence) and the Electricity Department. Local media reported 20 people entered the library and ‘poured kerosene over every available paper materials and books from about ten jars before setting them afire’ (Sangai Express, 2005). The library was severely damaged and many historical documents were lost. Two suspects were arrested nearby, both Meitei Mayek teachers. Donating to rebuild the library has since become a philanthropic norm, with diaspora associations, the Assam Rifles, anti-AFSPA activist Irom Sharmila, and others giving money or books.

The fire was widely reported in the national and international media. The tone of the coverage intimated that barbarism was at work. A BBC report on the fire included a quote from prominent Manipuri lawyer Koteswar Singh who labelled it a ‘Taliban-style act’ (Bhaumik, 2005), the New York Times spoke of a ‘mob’ (Sengupta and Kumar, 2005), and the Asia correspondent for The Economist referred to the library fire as the work of ‘fascist loons’ (2007: 50). A month after the fire the Manipur Government agreed to implement Meitei Mayek in the school curriculum from Class 1. This date (May 18) is celebrated annually in Imphal and prizes are awarded to the school children in Meitei Mayek writing competitions. In less than a decade the outrage at the attack on the library has turned into a cultural celebration.

MEELAL has been very successful in getting the print media, advertisers, and government departments to publish in the Mayek script alongside Bengali or Latin scripts. New technology has also enabled the script to spread: Mayek apps are available to download onto smartphones, the script can be downloaded onto computers, and some locally made mobile phone handsets feature Mayek keypads (while I have seen these in person, I have not yet been able to track down the manufacturer). Yet there is still a fundamental problem in that many people can’t read the script. This leads
to the curious situation of school age children being able to read signage and media that older people cannot. To address this MEELAL offers Mayek courses throughout the city. Morning and evening classes are advertised on posters (written in Latin script) in markets, neighbourhoods, and outside colleges. These are accompanied by a slew of free online tutorials and resources, many available through the E-Pao media platform. As a result, public use of the Bengali script has reduced noticeably in Imphal, though change is a little slower outside the city. In the hills the Bengali script was rarely used in the first place.

The power of MEELAL is boosted by its alignment with other movements: Meitei ethno-nationalism in its various guises, the ban on Hindi language, and the ILP movement discussed in the previous chapter. Like these movements there is a certain level of anxiety about connectivity underpinning the campaign for the script. The idea of a vulnerable and vanishing culture is crucial to their message. Connectivity opens the gate – metaphorically and materially – to new forms of cultural domination as well as reinforcing old ones that altered the culture in the past. MEELAL has campaigned for all communities indigenous to Manipur to be educated in their own languages; and thus they have positioned themselves as protectors of vulnerable cultures of all indigenous groups in Manipur. This has seen MEELAL turn its attention to all ‘alien languages’, even suggesting books written in any Manipuri language featuring ‘alien words’ be banned (Sangai Express, 2013a). For a time volunteers were confiscating such books from Imphal bookstores.

English is on MEELAL’s radar, however, unlike the campaign against Bengali script that sought eradication, MEELAL seeks a balance between English and Meitei on all public signage. In 2012 MEELAL set an August 27 deadline after which no signs using only English would be allowed. MEELAL activists and volunteers have enforced this ban. For instance, in October 2013 at a product expo funded by the Industries Development Council and the United Nations Development Program, over 30 banners were burned for not including Mayek and the expo was shut down until organisers complied (Sangai Express, 2013b).

The compulsory use of Meitei Mayek shows the ways the urban landscape is marked, claimed, and reclaimed as Manipuri territory. It shows the ways in which liberalisation in the frontier is to be negotiated with non-state actors according to their vision about the place of the city and the polity as a sovereign territorial unit distinct from India. In her study of political graffiti in West Bengal, Chattopadhyay explores the ‘territorial implications of wall writing’ as ‘a sort of visual disorder, one that refutes a given order of
the city’ (2012: 128). Chattopadhyay sees this as a largely positive exhibition of subaltern activity ‘by crafting a political vernacular that is different from the proper language of the state or civil society’ (2012: 132). It helps to create political subjectivity through a ‘specific form of publicness’ (2012: 138). Born out of the spectacular act of burning down the State Central Library, the compulsory use of Meitei Mayek refuted the old visual order of the city and ushered in a new one. Unlike the political slogans discussed by Chattopadhyay, the new visual order in Imphal places little importance in what is written – indeed everything from washing machine advertisements to spirit-healing announcements appear in Meitei Mayek – and every importance on the script in which it is written. The script distinguishes this place from others, this territory from the nation-state that claims it, and the people who can read it from the other inhabitants of the city. Everyone must comply, from the national telecommunications firm to the small tailor’s shop.

The issue of the script would come up in conversations with friends and respondents during fieldwork in Imphal. Some are supportive, seeing no other way to reintroduce an otherwise lost element of Manipuri culture, some are more circumspect and fear the consequences and implications for policing other aspects of everyday life, some are bemused at the fuss and don’t give it much thought, some seem resigned to it; after all, much worse things have happened in the city in living memory. Friends would often joke about not knowing the Mayek script, or make a big show of asking kids to read things for them, or wonder aloud what other things from the past will also become compulsory for Imphal residents. Others talk about the political economy of the Mayek movement – creating work for hundreds of transcribers and inspectors. Occasionally friends from non-Meitei communities would raise the script as an exemplar of valley domination, though this view was not as common as I imagined. As one friend from the Vaiphei community, one of the smaller hill ethnic groups, put it to me, ‘I never learned the old one, so I doubt I will learn this one’.

The compulsory use of Mayek illustrates a spatial imagination, whether broadly or narrowly shared, that connects the contemporary urban landscape to an historical polity – the Manipuri Kingdom prior to external intervention, and to aspirations for future sovereignty. This spatial imagination challenges the vision of connectivity shared by proponents in the Indian Government and businesses seeking to enter Manipur. Seeing the script marking otherwise uniform content with the cultural graffiti of ethno-nationalism helps to produce and reproduce a place-based subjectivity. It may not vanquish the armed forces or the Indian state, but it does force recognition of past, and possibly future, sovereignty.
Gateway Livelihoods

The official vision of large infrastructure projects, industrial development close to the border, and high-volume legal cross-border trade is slow in coming. While the focus of government at various levels is on creating an investor-friendly environment, residents are taking advantage of connectivity to find new ways of making do. One of the most conspicuous livelihood strategies is involvement in the clothing trade. Connectivity opens up new possibilities for making a living, or a supplementary income, by selling clothes in Imphal. While this trade is a far cry from the imagined benefits of connectivity promoted by the NEV2020 and the Look East Policy, it has transformed the urban landscape in various patches and characterises dual connectivity of the borderland city for its poor and middle-income residents. Bales of clothing come through India, mostly Kolkata, and from the border with Myanmar at Moreh, much of the latter from Namphalong Market on the Myanmar side of the border.

Second-hand clothing is sold almost everywhere in the city. At times it appears whole localities have been given over to the trade. In the dry season rows and rows of bamboo racks are lined up in front of shops, along pavements, between telegraph poles and in unused or un-open lots along main roads, such as Konung Mang Road, a main north-south thoroughfare through the city. Jim, a friend who lived in Checkon (a locality on one side of the road), remarked once when we were driving through the area, ‘there are enough clothes here to clothe the entire world’; as if even living among it did not halt his disbelief. There are designated second-hand clothing markets such as Independent Season Market at Kangla Lambi, areas with clusters of second-hand vendors in permanent shops such as in Paona Bazaar opposite the Mapal Kangjeibung (Polo Ground), spaces that have become second-hand clothing markets without any official status such as the courtyard in front of the Rupmahal Theatre or the grounds of the Manipur Public Library (not the same one that was burnt down), and hundreds of street vendors who move around the city, occupy territory temporarily (though sometimes regularly), and navigate the various state and quasi-state actors who seek to control space in the city and will fine, imprison, beat, and blackmail them.

During fieldwork I spent time with second-hand clothing traders in different locations. I sat around in shops in the main bazaar areas talking and snacking, I visited temporary and seasonal markets that popped up and disappeared again, I met middlemen and wholesalers, I visited storehouses for the vast number of bales, and I witnessed licence checks and associated extortion among mobile vendors. I spent the most time in a shop run by
Dipen located in Paona Bazaar near the now empty Friends’ Mini cinema, which also doubles as a storehouse for second-hand clothing wholesalers described at the start of the book. The demise of the cinema after the ban on the Hindi language emptied the space, and the demand for second-hand clothing from the West and Asia has filled it again. The whole area is popular for second-hand clothing. Shops such as Abethoi’s Korea Market and City Second Hand Market at the Manipur People’s Party Shopping Complex ensure a steady flow of customers.

Dipen’s shop is made from wood and is raised a foot or so off the ground. Inside there is enough space for him and one or two others to sit among the piles of clothing. The best items are displayed on hangers around the inside and outside of the shop and folded at waist-height at the front of the shop facing the street. Dipen was a veteran of the industry whose career in clothing corresponded to the opening up of the city in the 1990s. He started out selling second-hand clothes in 1997. His first spot was in the public library grounds. Later he was part of a group of vendors who lobbied to get the space in the Manipur People’s Party Shopping Complex before going out on his own. He has seen many vendors come and go over this fifteen-year period. Almost everyone has given it a try; even (allegedly) a famous Manipuri film actor, Bonny (Gurumayum Bonny Sharma), once sold second-hand clothes. Vendors may have other work and many see it as a temporary strategy. When people in the city are out of work or out of luck, they try to get money together to buy or split a bale of clothing and then sell it wherever they can.

When he started out Dipen mostly sold clothes to tribals. The tribal population of the city had grown following conflicts in the hills in 1990s and as the population grew second-hand clothes markets began popping up. This reflected certain perceptions of the way tribals dressed – in Western clothes, their relative poverty – especially those who had fled to the city from violence in the hills, and their different (alleged) notions of cleanliness – which meant they accepted second-hand clothes. Meiteis, in contrast, were perceived as less interested in second-hand clothes for the inverse reasons; traditional clothes bought ready-made or tailor-made, ceremonies and rituals required purchase of new clothing, and second-hand clothes were seen as unhygienic. I was retold this same story several times from other vendors. Like many things in Imphal, the story was woven around the ways fundamental differences between tribal and Meitei communities are popularised. Yet what explains the softening of this divide? What explains second-hand clothing being sold across Imphal to and by members of all different ethnic communities? There are different answers.
One evening sitting in Dipen’s shop he gestured to a Meitei woman in a traditional *phanek* (sarong) and *innphi* (shawl) walking along with her daughter (presumably) who was wearing tight, yellow-coloured jeans and a bright red blouse with shoulder pads and matching red lipstick. Dipen gave a commentary as they browsed, positing that the contrast between the older and younger women illustrates a general turn away from traditional clothing, local versions of Indian clothing, the embrace of foreign fashion among the young, and perhaps most significantly, the rapidly accelerating cost of living.

I saw this in action one evening in Dipen’s shop. We were eating some *bora* with a mutual friend who had introduced us, and a young woman dressed in a short skirt and T-shirt with a black-and-white motif on it came to the shop with two of her friends. She wanted a skirt. As there are no consistent sizes or labels on anything, Dipen passed her a tape measure to measure her waist right there on the road. Doing it himself would unsettle moral sensibilities. The woman called out the measurement and Dipen pulled out a pile of skirts of similar sizes and measured the waist to see what fit into her size. She chose a denim skirt that was too big, paid 70 rupees ($1.20 USD), and took it across the road and into a laneway lined with tailors – women and men – who sat in the open behind sewing machines.

It was part demand and part supply. Getting clothing was now very easy compared to the past. The bales weight 100kg and have 200 or so items
inside. They usually contain one type of clothing, such as men's pants, or women's jackets. They also have an indication of the origin of the clothes, and the grade (A, B, C), which can also determine the price. Bales from the United States, Canada, and Korea fetch the highest prices, while those from other places (or bales with no place of origin) are sold for much less. From these 200 items, Dipen usually finds 30-40 good quality items. He sells the rest to mobile vendors or to vendors in smaller towns. Other vendors mentioned that as the cost of bales was going up rapidly, they needed to sell more to make a profit, so they sometimes held on to lower-quality items. Sometimes they doubled as mobile vendors, going to particular spots on Sundays or in the evenings to sell their lower-quality stock.

During my visit in mid-2013 Dipen had just received stock from Canada. The shipment had a lot of sportswear from high school and college teams. Dipen explained that these are popular because the synthetic material meant they dried faster in the wet season. He also had a lot of women's clothes that had come from Korea, mostly jeans and skirts. And business shirts for men, many of which were white, which he had trouble making look clean. His winter stock was different. Lots of used coats, mostly with Chinese and Korean labels. Like many vendors I met, Dipen liked bales from Korea best. The stock cleared quickly and it was usually clean and good quality. There was demand for things with Korean labels on them. It was common to see people walking around Imphal with T-shirts with Korean writing on them, coats with embodied labels on the corner, and, most popular of all, puffer vests, many of which had the names of Korean firms or of particular occupations, such as ‘safety officer’ and ‘traffic control’. Many items from Korea don't have writing on them, but it is important for vendors to be able to show a label on the inside or some other proof of Korean origin to be able to charge more. The price for a bale of Korean clothes had nearly doubled in the last three years to almost 60,000 rupees ($1000 USD) by 2013. The rising price of buying stock was a problem, but so too was the proliferation of those selling clothes and the stock of new clothes coming across the border. When I went back to see Dipen a year later, in mid-2014, he had given up second-hand clothes trading and sold new clothing from Moreh – the border with Myanmar. He was mostly selling jeans and T-shirts made in Thailand.

Indeed new clothes shops are becoming more common in Imphal, especially in malls and in ‘showrooms’ (stand-alone shops) – not just in the main bazaars but also in different localities. These come from Thailand and China across the border at Moreh but also from the garment factories of Myanmar and, in the case of factory seconds, from Bangladesh via the
distribution markets and centres along the Siliguri corridor that connects the Northeast to the rest of India through a narrow tract of land. There are also global and Indian brand name stores opening in Imphal: Reebok, Levi’s, and a Woodlands, to name a few. But these shops are very expensive. Still nothing compares to the tide of second-hand clothes that threatens to submerge pavements, public buildings, and any spaces left unattended.

Poor and middle-income urban dwellers utilise connectivity for livelihoods generated by the clothing demands of the cosmopolitan and fashion-conscious population of Imphal. The constant flow of second-hand clothing into the city provides opportunities for mobile vendors, especially for women, many of whom are widows or have migrated from outside the city for work. However, in a city where control of space is enacted by state, non-state, and quasi-state actors, peddling second-hand clothes can be a hazardous livelihood strategy. During fieldwork I was introduced to mobile vendors by members of a local NGO, Women’s Action for Development, and was also fortunate enough to have access to a survey they undertook with 200 mobile vendors. The survey, along with time spent observing the everyday lives of mobile vendors, linked connectivity ‘from below’ to poverty, to violence past and present, and to the dynamics of spatial control in the disturbed city.

The local police, licenced vendors, and selhunbi (a community moneylender) harass unlicensed vendors. Vendors repeatedly pay bribes to police and VDF to leave them alone or to recover seized stock. If they don’t pay they can spend time in jail. The Manipur Government periodically launches drives to rid the pavements of vendors; an explicit part of their urban development strategy as discussed in chapter 2. ‘Fake’ self-help groups also prey upon vendors by setting up cooperatives to purchase licences or permanent places in a legal market and then disappearing with the contributions. Another scam reported when I was in Imphal in 2013 saw vendors being asked to provide information to a cooperative, the founders of which secured a grant from the government and then kept the money – paying off bureaucrats along the way. For vendors there are few ways of knowing who is legitimate and who is not. During the day plain-clothes men with no obvious authority ask for bribes from clothing vendors outside the Khawairamband Keitel, one of the new indoor markets in the centre of the city. They may be off-duty police, selhunbis, VDF, members of underground groups, or none of these. The ambiguity of authority poses dilemmas for those being solicited; it is almost impossible to know who can be challenged, who can be trusted, and who can be ignored. Dual connectivity floods the city with more goods to sell, yet selling them involves navigating the overlapping and often opaque micro-sites of power and attempts at spatial control.
However, vendors keep coming into the streets everyday, transforming the urban landscape. In some locations vendors have managed to firm their claim to a spot in the city, creating a safe space for selling clothing and other goods. This may not always mean the place is legal, just that there is limited harassment. In some cases vendors end up occupying parts of the city. During the renovation of the Ima Keithel Market (mothers’ market) in central Imphal during 2008-10, a temporary market was created across the road on the site of an old hospital that had been demolished. During the renovation licenced vendors from the Ima Keithel were permitted to trade there and moved back into the Ima Keithel when it was finished. Before the civilian authorities could reclaim the temporary site, unlicensed vendors occupied it. Four years later they remain.

Connectivity did not create vendors. Yet connectivity has meant there are more goods to peddle. At the same time migration to Imphal brings more people to the city from other parts of Manipur and other parts of the borderland seeking work. Some work in construction, some in sex work, some traffic narcotics, some start self-help groups, some sell vitamins door to door. Hundreds sell clothes. In the disturbed city where space is controlled by state, quasi-state, and non-state actors clothing vendors are the spatial rebels. They set up virtually anywhere, put up with almost anything, and transform patches of the city into impromptu markets. The constant demand shows the desire for fashion of a certain kind, with certain origins, and reflects a certain cosmopolitanism of the borderland.

Closing the Gate

Liberalising the frontier recalibrates Imphal from an isolated city – the end of the road – to a gateway city very much on the road. The road is the Asian Highway, a project with considerable history now under the stewardship of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP, 2013). For India the highway aligns tidily with the Look East Policy and aspirations of NEV2020. It is the material manifestation of the Look East rhetoric. Connectivity along the highway is dual, and it is not only increasing flows of goods and people between the borderland and Southeast Asia but between the borderland and the rest of India. The implications for Imphal are considerable. On the one hand, increased flows of goods and people reduce dependency on the Indian Government. On the other hand, Asian connectivity is a state project where sovereign governments contribute infrastructure, goodwill, and symbolic gestures to
boost economic growth. It locates Imphal firmly within India's territory, its gateway east: a possession on its frontier.

The ASEAN-India car rally was held for the first time in 2004 starting in Assam, travelling through Manipur to Myanmar, Thailand and through mainland Southeast Asia before reaching Indonesia. Atal Vajpayee, the former Prime Minister of India (1998-2004) and former Minister for External Affairs, proposed the rally. Vajpayee was a keen proponent of stronger connections between India and ASEAN members to improve economic prospects, to hedge Chinese influence, and to better secure the borderlands (Chatterjee, 2007; McDuie-Ra, 2009b; Yahya, 2003). Prior to the start of the first ASEAN-India rally a conference was held at the Indian Institute of Technology in Guwahati. At the conference the then Secretary General of ASEAN, Ong Keng Yong of Singapore, made a speech that exemplifies the notion of transforming the frontier through connectivity. During the speech he noted:

The North East Region with its abundant natural resources and strategic geographical location is certainly poised for economic development when the region is opened up and make accessible to the rest of the world ... [T]he First India-ASEAN Car Rally would open up the frontier and landlocked areas of India and ASEAN, linking our peoples at the common borders ... Transportation is vital to open up the geographical and mental space for economic growth ... [L]et me emphasise once again that the India-ASEAN Car Rally is not merely a social encounter between ASEAN and India but a trail-blazing beginning. Let’s ensure that concrete steps are taken to forge greater cooperation for the development and prosperity of the peoples of India and ASEAN. (Yong in ASEAN, 2004)

Yong is clear that being landlocked is a hindrance, but also that opening the ‘mental space’ is necessary to realise the potential of borderlands in both India and ASEAN, reflecting a common refrain in India about the local obstacles to potential growth.

The rally did not take place again until 2012 when it was timed to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the ASEAN-India dialogue partnership and began in Indonesia and ended in Guwahati in Assam, though it was officially ‘waved off’ in Delhi. At the ceremony in Delhi the then Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh gave a speech echoing that of Yong eight years earlier:

This rally symbolises the vision of an ASEAN-India community where people, goods, services and ideas can travel freely between us ... [O]ur
future will be driven by the bonds of connectivity we build in the coming years. These physical bonds will be strengthened by digital links, which will help our younger generations to network better. Together, this web of linkages will help unleash the vast economic potential of our region, accelerate development and deepen our strategic partnership ... For India, nowhere will this benefit be more pronounced than in our Northeastern states and I would encourage the establishment of institutions linked to the India-ASEAN relationship in the Northeastern states ... While we flag down this Rally, we are also flagging off a new journey of closer cooperation and a deeper strategic partnership, not only for the benefit of our people, but also for peace, progress and prosperity in our region and the world. (Singh in ASEAN-India, 2012)

The rhetoric was virtually identical. I was in Imphal and later Guwahati during the car rally in December 2012 and can attest to the fanfare created for the arrival of the cars – each representing a different ASEAN country, plus India, along with support vehicles. The flags of ASEAN nations were erected along the highways in the cities. Bamboo gates were constructed on the roads for the cars to pass through adorned with the ASEAN-India slogan ‘Progress and Prosperity’ and the logos of the various event sponsors, mostly Indian firms and government ministries, as well as a Vietnamese steel and construction firm (Tôn Hoa Sen). Locals lined the highway at different points to watch the cars pass through and catch a glimpse of the future. The rally passed through Imphal where the Chief Minister of Manipur, Ibobi Singh, waved off the cars from Kangla Fort under heavy security. Ibobi echoed the Prime Minister and spoke of the strategic location of Manipur as a gateway city to India and to Southeast Asia for transnational connections by road and potentially by air and rail, before a Manipur cultural dance troupe took over the proceedings.

In Guwahati the cars entered the National Games stadium on the outskirts of the city where, following more speeches about the future prosperity of transnational connectivity, the crowd watched cultural displays, daredevil motorbike stunts, an Air Force show, and various flag-waving exploits reminiscent of a closing ceremony of a major sporting event. The display was very state-centric – sovereign national territories celebrating ‘potential’ and the transformation (or potential transformation) of the frontier into a corridor. The symbolism of the rally drew the borderland into international diplomacy as a constituent chunk of sovereign India and its gateway. The borderland could share in the potential of eastward connectivity but only when participating in a larger project with two parts; enclosing the borderland within India’s sovereign territory and benefitting
from the relationships that India forms with other sovereign territorial units and their associations. An interesting side note to this is that in 2013 an ASEAN-India Centre was opened in India to fuel the ASEAN-India partnership. The centre is located in Delhi at the Research and Information System for Developing Countries, a think tank under the Ministry of External Affairs, suggesting the future trajectory of official connectivity will be decided a long way from the borderland.

The ASEAN-India rally in 2012 had a happy ending; India’s control of the territory it claims was demonstrated. The cars passed through unharmed. The Manipur Government played along, willingly given the potential benefits of connectivity, and non-state actors with the power to disrupt resisted doing so. But only just. In the days leading up to the rally passing through the international border at Moreh and onto Imphal, activists demanding a Kuki state threatened to prevent the rally from passing along National Highway 39, also refereed to on more optimistic maps as Asian Highway 1. The Kuki State Demand Committee (KSDC), an unarmed Kuki organisation formed in 2010 to pursue a separate federal state for Kuki communities carved out of the present boundaries of Manipur, pledged to block the rally before it could reach Imphal. There are 15 or so armed groups representing different Kuki groups alongside several ‘aboveground’ groups like the KSDC (Thangboi Zou, 2012). Members of the KSDC gave a press conference in Churachandpur – the largest Kuki town in Manipur – on December 11, just four days before the rally was due to cross the international border, stating that not a single vehicle would pass through Kuki territory. As the Sadar Hills blockade a year earlier held for over three months, this was a pledge to be taken seriously. The Sadar Hills movement discussed in chapter 4 called for upgrading the status of the district, whereas the proposal in late 2012 was to revisit the idea of a fully-fledged Kukiland state carved out of Manipur. As reported in the daily newspaper *Hueiyen Lanpao*, members of the KSDC stated:

> We are aware that this rally was proposed by the Indian Prime Minister to strengthen India’s economic ties with ASEAN. However, we feel such ties are hollow and at best exploitative of our rights on our territories and our rights to develop as a people are denied and [not] give[n] proper recognition. We shall have no obligation to uphold India’s commitments and honour unless the issues of our land rights are settled to our satisfaction. We stand firm on our resolution to launch ‘quit Kuki land’ against the Indian government if our politically humble appeal to have our rights recognised in the Constitution of India is treated with disdain. (Hueiyen News Service, 2012)
Earlier in December a map was released to the press with the proposed Kuki homeland shaded green. The green areas encircled the Meitei areas in the valley and left the other hill communities with lands in the north of the state. The map caused consternation among communities in the valley and among other hill communities, especially Nagas. The threat to launch a ‘quit Kuki land’ campaign stirred memories of the violence between Naga and Kuki communities in the 1990s, wherein members of both communities were involved in violence to render territories ethnically exclusive (Oinam, 2003; Tohring, 2010). Naga organisations such as the United Naga Council welcomed the car rally to counter the Kuki position and encouraged Nagas to welcome the cars as they passed through ‘Naga areas’ (Times of India, 2012).

The threat of blockade was taken seriously. Residents began stockpiling supplies of food and fuel, prices in the market rose quickly, and politicians called for calm. During the days between this statement and the arrival of the rally cars I experienced a very odd ethnographic moment. I still cannot determine whether the circumstances were purely by chance or by design. A friend and journalist, Yangnu, had arranged to meet me in the restaurant of an Imphal hotel where I was staying. The hotel lobby was crowded with armed men from various Manipur security forces and some paramilitary troops guarding the entrance. This is not uncommon in Imphal as hotels are often where politicians and other VIPs hold meetings. As I entered the lobby from the stairwell I didn’t pass through the security and I slipped into the restaurant and waited for my friend. In a small alcove in the corner of the restaurant – a spot shielded from the lobby – were three men from the hills dressed in very typical clothes for well-educated men of their age; suits, woollen sweaters and ties. The restaurant was otherwise empty. I saw Yangnu talking her way through the security in the lobby and pointing at me through the glass doors. She sat down at the table and motioned that we should sit silently.

Several minutes later a very senior member of the Assam Rifles in uniform entered the restaurant with his assistant and sat down with the three men. They greeted each other respectfully, shaking hands and enquiring with each other about the journey to Imphal before ordering tea. The common language between the men was English given the men from the hills did not speak Hindi and the paramilitary officials (presumably) did not speak the relevant local language. The party began to discuss the blockade of the ASEAN car rally. On cue the staff in the restaurant increased the volume of the background music. The music played was the hit songs of Bryan Adams – a favourite in the Northeast along with ABBA and Boney M. As the Canadian crooner sing ‘All for Love’ the suspension of the blockade was negotiated. We took this as our cue to leave a place where we probably should not have been in the first place.
Once out on the street my friend was bursting with energy, ‘See, see! The real politics happens with the paramilitary. Not the government. It’s good you saw that.’ I never found out exactly who was in that room and we didn’t discuss the incident until Yangnu telephoned me the next day to tell me to look at the newspapers. The blockade was cancelled with the press reporting that the Indian Government had promised the KSDC and other groups a high-level dialogue by February 2013. (As it happens, the dialogue failed to take place, leading to further blockades. However, the rally was saved.)

At first glance the position of the KSDC challenges territorial claims over Kuki lands by India and by the federal state of Manipur. The politics appear to be a display Manipur’s hill versus valley politics with the Indian Government being used as leverage – and a target for activism given the power of the Indian state to grant the territorial status desired by the KSDC. Yet the claims are also about the territorial politics between hill communities as discussed in chapter 4, and about control of the lucrative informal taxation of vehicles on the Imphal-Moreh highway. Given the stakes, mostly symbolic, of eastward connectivity for the transformation of frontier to corridor, the power of local groups to cut off connectivity gains new significance; the scale jumps. Eastward connectivity makes this stretch of road a new artery of vulnerability for India, a new opportunity for leverage with the state, and for making political statements ‘from below’. In other words, if Kuki activists were just blocking off Moreh from Imphal the issue would be localised; yet blocking off Indian from Southeast Asia heightens the scale of the territorial claim and highlights the fragmented nature of sovereignty in the borderland.

For Imphal as a city, eastward connectivity puts the city on the road to Singapore, to Bangkok, to Kuala Lumpur. Faraway places that figure prominently in local aspirations for a better life. Even Mandalay in Myanmar is mentioned as a destination for direct buses and international flights from Imphal – a place to go and just be somewhere else, somewhere better (regardless of the reality). The ASEAN-India car rally brought these places to the city in brightly painted cars plastered with national flags and sponsor logos, suggesting a connected future. Imphal may be on the road to somewhere but the road crosses lands subject to multiple claims. The higher the stakes in this future, especially when the Indian state is involved, the more valuable the route becomes for communities seeking to make claims on territory, for autonomy, against authorities, or to just get a seat at a table where the rearrangements of territory will be discussed; as was the case with the KSDC in 2012. Being able to control the gateway city, to shut the gate, as it were, enabled the KSDC to bargain with the state, though in the
end the negotiating was done with the armed forces demonstrating the fragmented sovereignty of the disturbed city.

Conclusion

India's liberalisation has been analysed at length from virtually every disciplinary angle. The concept of new India as a political, social, and economic entity distinct from earlier versions of state and nation – and the limitations of this idea – are central to this analysis. Regardless of one's position on the extent to which new India is identifiable and replaces a cogent old India, one must recognise the ascendency of liberalisation is an eminent ideology – whether endorsed or opposed – in national and subnational policymaking as well as in visions about the future of India. Attention to neoliberalism in the borderland has been limited owing to the dominance of security and state-led development in its governance. Neoliberalism is harder to see with such an overwhelming state presence. Rhetoric about looking east and acting east has been around for decades in both Delhi and the Northeast states (Haokip, 2015). Connectivity has slowly been implemented through symbolic gestures such as the India-ASEAN car rally and material changes such as the opening of the land border with Myanmar and the arrival of national and international capital and its trappings – billboards, advertisements, and consumer goods. The recalibration of Imphal from a frontier city to a gateway city is central to this project. However, the disturbed city is an atypical space for the market to penetrate.

This chapter has explored the liberalisation of this sensitive space – a space where the decline of the state takes on new meaning in a polity where state control is partial to begin with; where old India has been strongly resisted. Through the examples of the campaign for Meitei Mayek script on all public signage to mark capital with a statement of sovereignty, the clothing trade as a way of utilising connectivity to make do and rebel against attempts at spatial control, and the attempts to block the ASEAN-India car rally exposing the heightened scale of vulnerability for India, I have explored the local practices that reshape connectivity amidst the politics of belonging, control, and exclusion established in part one. The following chapter takes this notion of liberalising the frontier further by looking at the endogenous liberalisation of the health sector and the creation of a 'health city' – a hub for world-class healthcare from surrounding borderland polities on the outskirts of dysfunctional Imphal where struggles for electricity, water provision, and sanitation characterise everyday life.