Borderland City in New India
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Julia pointed out the car window at the stacks of timber by the roadside. ‘It is admissions time’. We were driving back to Imphal from Ukhrul in June 2013. A little farther down the winding road through the denuded hills there was an even larger stack of timber being loaded onto a truck. Julia added, ‘And probably there have been some new government posts advertised’. Since I had last seen her three years earlier Julia had moved from human rights activism to working as a consultant for the Manipur Department of Education. She had grown tired of the deplorable state of public education in the hills and had recruited a team of returnee migrants from the Tangkhul Naga community of Ukhrul as fieldworkers. Her team of ten men and women, mostly in their 20s, travel to all parts of the district, often on foot, to inspect and document schools and talk to community members.

I had promised to run a workshop on migration with the team in Ukhrul, also a chance to see some friends based in the town and take a break from Imphal. After listening politely to me for a while members of the team started talking about their own migration experiences and what they were witnessing happening in the district. Teachers appointed to rural schools didn’t show up, private operators started schools in the town, parents borrowed money or sold timber or land to send their children to these schools, those who could sent their children to Imphal for secondary studies, and then, hopefully outside to Delhi, Bangalore, or Kolkata. In a district of 184,000 people, there were over 50 private schools. Some of these were no more than a single room on the upper floor of a house, some were implicated in the trafficking of children out of Manipur, and some were well run and had qualified and dedicated teachers. All charged money. Distance increased perceptions of quality. Thus for many parents in the hills, schools further away were considered to be better and could give their children a better chance. As private education shifts from a privilege to the norm, the hills are targeted by people lending money, offering to buy land, timber, livestock, and by recruiters from different education providers. A pattern reproduced in Imphal itself.

I was getting an idea of the initial steps families took in moving their children to towns and onto Imphal. Steps that culminated in the large numbers of migrants from this district I had met in the malls, spas, and call centres of Delhi. Most importantly for the argument in this book, I was beginning to understand how in just a few years the southwestern periphery
of Imphal had gone from rice fields to a mini-city, a model education city to match the health city discussed in the previous chapter.

I did not want to leave the meeting with the project team but Julia was eager to get back to Imphal. It was a big day. Her research was to be published in one of the daily newspapers. A list of all the teachers who had been appointed to posts in the District but had been absent or had appointed a proxy to attend in their place was to appear on the front page. The plan was to shame the teachers and begin to orchestrate a shift in the ways teachers are appointed and retained in the state.

On the drive down from the hills she discussed typical practices she had discovered, some of which are unique to the education sector and others that reflect a general pattern of the way jobs are acquired in the public sector, and increasingly in the private sector too. A post in a school is advertised and the Department of Education is flooded with applications. To secure the post applicants must pay a bribe (between $1000 and $5000 USD). With lots of people offering bribes it is possible to offer a large sum and still miss out. The more desirable the post, particularly if it is in Imphal, the higher the amount needed. If an applicant does not have the necessary qualifications then the amount will be even higher. Applicants thus need to secure a large sum of money to land the post. For this many applicants, though certainly not all, borrow money or sell assets. Once the post is secured some (though not all it must be stressed) teachers do not attend their job, sporadically attend, or attend for only parts of the day. Often they are working as private tutors or teachers in private schools – indeed during interviews with private education providers in Imphal I was told repeatedly that school teachers seek out jobs in schools in order to recruit potential students for more lucrative private tuitions – mirroring the ways doctors recruit patients in public hospitals for their own private clinics. By being employed in the public school system they are better able to demonstrate their credentials to potential students and their parents. By doing so these teachers undermine the public system and simultaneously increase demand for private tuition from students to pass exams.

There is also a practice of appointing proxies. A teacher will spend the day working elsewhere, or not at all, and pay another person a portion of their salary to appear at the school. Often the proxy is unqualified and has little incentive to actually teach. The Manipur Government has responded by steadily increasing teacher salaries in the public sector, though this seems to have raised the stakes for securing a post and provided teachers with more salary to distribute to proxies. Julia’s research shows that this is worse in the hill areas, where many teachers do not want to be posted so many
never show up – hence the naming and shaming in the newspaper. The pattern is common across the state. And naming and shaming has become more common, especially in the print media where it is typical to see absent teachers named and their identity card numbers published. Furthermore non-state actors, including student unions and some underground groups undertake physical inspections of schools in various towns and urban localities and take action against absentee teachers directly or report them to the government and monitor their response. The most well-known and sustained campaign is the *Eikhøi Lairik Ningthīna Tamsi* (loosely translated as ‘Let’s Study Correctly’) run by the Manipur Students Federation since 2007.

Add to this scenario the practice of teachers requesting money or ‘pre­sents’ to award high marks, teachers leaving the state to work in other parts of the borderland and beyond where the conditions are more stable, routine closures of schools for *bandhs*, schools closing during blockades, and the mobilisation of school children in mass protests such as calling for the ILP (chapter 4) and it becomes clear why the public school system in Manipur has been declared ‘near impossible to run’ (Salam, 2014). The issue is not lack of schools. Indeed Manipur has a relatively high number of schools per 100,000 head of population: 150 elementary and 31 secondary compared to a national average of 97 elementary and 14 secondary (Planning Commission India, 2007: 37-38). The issue is quality of education and facilities, attributes that the Manipur Government allocates funding to address, but which either fails to materialise in schools or has minimal impact on the demand for private schooling (see Manipur Planning Department, 2012).

So parents, whatever their means, aim to send their children to private schools. Despite the extreme financial pressure this can create, the desire for education and the mobility it promises is so widespread in the society that the private education sector is unlikely to diminish in importance nor is the decline of the public system likely to be stemmed anytime soon (see Singh, 2011). This has had profound impacts on the urban landscape of Imphal and reveals the ways in which connectivity plays a role in resituating the city, and Manipur generally, within India.

This chapter is about the boom in private education provision in Imphal. I am less interested in the policy and education quality dimensions, which while important and perhaps reflective of the breakdown in institutional and social life in Manipur the last 30 years, are beyond my field of expertise and beyond the scope of this book. I am interested in the emergence of Imphal as a hub for private education in the borderland; much like the health sector discussed in the previous chapter. Like the health sector the
boom in private education appears counterintuitive. Imphal is a militarised, contentious, and often dysfunctional city, yet enormous swathes of land are now occupied by relatively expensive private schools that draw pupils from all over the city and from other parts of the state. Private coaching classes are run out of private homes. Education agents all over the city offer admission to universities and colleges in South India, Thailand, and Eastern Europe. Education providers from outside Manipur, mostly from other parts of India, recruit students from Manipur – most noticeably at the large education fairs held in Imphal in the spring. As with the health sector, providers and users of private education usually discuss its growth as a necessity; a way of making do in response to the rotten and corrupt public system; though clearly the private sector has its fair share of corruption in different ways. Yet the idea of cleansing, of starting anew, is very powerful.

If the health sector positioned Imphal at the gateway to Southeast Asia and demonstrated a localised version of the Look East Policy, the education sector is its inverse. The demand for learning the national curriculum, especially at the higher secondary level (class 11 and 12), is a crucial factor in the boom. The national curriculum is needed to qualify for tertiary study in other parts of India, where many students from Manipur can apply for reserved places. It has long been common for students with adequate support, whether from family or through scholarships, to study outside the state for higher secondary school and then progress to tertiary studies. With the growth in the provision of higher secondary schooling using the national curriculum in Imphal itself, it has become more affordable when compared to going outside and thus is equipping more and more young people from Manipur with knowledge of the national curriculum and opening the pathway to migration west to India. It is an illustration of the inward pull of citizenship, significant in the present conjuncture given the long history of resistance to Indian citizenship in Manipur.

Sangaiprou

The boom in private education has transformed the city, especially in the southwest. The main area being transformed lies between three main roads that run southwest and south out of the city: National Highway 150, Mayai Lambi Road, and the Indo-Myanmar Road/Asian Highway 1. Land that was, even in the time I have been visiting Imphal, peri-urban farmland has become a dense conglomeration of schools, hostels, and small shops. Infrastructure has been slow to catch up and brand new four-storey schools
with reflective glass can be found at the end of muddy tracks across waterlogged rice fields. During fieldwork I focused on Sangaiprou where changes to the landscape are stark, recent, and where the idea of the education city takes its most striking physical form. The epicentre of the boom is outside the municipal boundary and outside Imphal's 27 wards. It crosses into the so-called ‘outgrowth’ area (Naoriya Pakhanglakpa ‘Census Town’) but also into areas of paddy fields and small farms. The education boom is extending the boundaries of the city.

Sangaiprou is where the oldest and most reputable Catholic secondary schools are located. As one teacher told me, ‘no one can compete with the Catholic Schools up to class 10’. Proximity to the best-known schools led to a boom in this particular area from the mid-2000s. Many of the entrepreneurs who started schools were return migrants. Having spent time outside studying and working in other parts of India, returnees with some capital returned to invest in the sector. As the private education industry has boomed it has become attractive to returnees looking to make a living back home. The Manipuri diaspora has a huge public profile. Its members are frequent contributors to the local media offering their insights on living outside the state and reflections on home from afar. Many of those involved with starting schools have studied business or worked in marketing or similar fields outside the state. Successful entrepreneurs are usually returnees who have honed their skills and experience in other ‘more developed’ parts of India and beyond, and the very visible diaspora housing, large, multi-storey houses funded through earnings sent back from family members working outside the state (discussed in chapter 2), help to fuel the popular perceptions of the returnee as a person of status who makes things happen. Returnees also have a social standing in Imphal that helps facilitate trust, gain access to loans and finance, and open doors with officials. Of course a great many migrants return unemployed, in debt, and with few connections to make anything happen at all.

In Sangaiprou the various stages of the education boom can be seen during a brief walk through the back blocks that lie between the main roads. Labourers shovel soil and stones into damp earth making mounds to build upon. Corrugated iron sheets, steel construction rods, and bricks lie in piles at the edge of unsealed roads. Brightly painted brick walls with glass and nails embedded in cement along the top mark the boundaries of more established compounds, though inside some the buildings are still a few floors from completion. Functioning schools with names like Herbert, Zenith, Children Ideal, Comet, Modern English, Little Flower, Shemrock Bubbles, Standard Robert English, and Kids Foundation occupy buildings
of various sizes and styles; some with brightly painted bricks, others with mirrored glass, others with patterned concrete and tiles. Hostels are found in similar buildings with walls, gates and guards and also within local houses. Some houses advertising hostel accommodation have extra floors or outbuildings added. Electricity poles and walls are plastered with advertisements for tuitions, hostel rooms, and – after exam results – banners strewn between walls and poles featuring headshots of successful students with details of their grades and position in the state in various subjects. There is also evidence of a bust accompanying the boom. Empty buildings with the school or hostel name faded or painted over, buildings sinking into the soil or with parts of wall missing, and vegetation and cattle reclaiming seldom used lots.

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

Initially it was difficult to research the industry. Principals and directors would happily show me their school, let me meet students, and talk about what they did. Yet they were much more reluctant to talk about finances, private tuition, staff recruitment, land acquisition and relationships with the government and underground groups. This is understandable given that private schools are accused of poaching teachers, ruining the public system, profiteering from tuitions, and of corruption in the registration of schools (money makes this happen quickly or can deter unwanted inspections of facilities or finances). Relations with underground groups may involve loans, taxation, and extortion. Land issues have also proved highly contentious with claims that the land had been illegally purchased in bulk and resold without many landowners and occupiers being informed. This will be discussed further below.

Respondents were also confused at my interest in schools. One respondent admitted to me that he was wary that I might be trying to start my own school and he wasn’t ready for foreign competition. However, after hanging around Sangaiprou long enough and through existing networks in Imphal I was able to conduct in-depth conversations with education entrepreneurs. Most helpful of all was Longjam. I met Longjam through the relative of a friend. Longjam taught private tuitions from 5 in the morning until 9, and then worked as a teacher at a secondary school, and in the evenings he visited the new higher secondary school he was constructing in the fields in Sangaiprou.

We first met at his house in Sagolband Moirang, a mostly Meitei neighbourhood between the city proper and the education city. The house had been extended and took up the entire lot, the outer walls forming the boundary with the street. We sat in a very new looking reception room on the ground floor in heavy wooden chairs with carved motifs in the back and arm rests that are popular in middle and upper-middle class homes. As with most other respondents from the industry our meeting began slowly. Longjam was very softly spoken and our meeting contained some long silences that I occasionally tried to fill but eventually let them be. After half an hour we had covered most of the bases and I was getting ready to leave, tired from the uncomfortable chair and conscious that Longjam was taking time out from teaching tuitions to meet me. As I got up to leave I joked about how he needn’t worry about me starting a school. He made some comment about Imphal people being too suspicious. He was an outsider too, from a small village right near the foothills in the east of the valley. I knew this
village as the birthplace of a close friend who now lived outside the state. Longjam grew up with his brother. Though these kinds of coincidences happen a lot in a small place, Longjam acted quickly. He arranged to have his teaching commitments for the day covered by a colleague and encouraged me to shelve any plans I had. ‘I will show you what is really happening’, he said and led me to his Maruti hatchback and politely asked me to open the heavy gate leading to the street.

After touring the area Longjam took me to the school he is building in the back blocks of Sangaiprou. We went up to the roof on top of the third floor and looked out of the landscape, the fields turned bright green from days of rain gradually being swallowed by red bricks and grey cement, the hills to the east visible at intervals between buildings. This was where the newest construction was taking place. Longjam showed me where he was going to hold various classes when the building was complete. The school was going to be for class 11 and 12 and concentrate on preparation for engineering and medicine exams, because as Longjam said and many others have repeated, ‘that is all people here care about’.

I wondered how he was going to set himself apart from all the schools that seemed to be offering the same all around us. He gestured to the landscape below, ‘many of these are not good schools. By the time parents find out someone has already made some money’. Success in this market depended upon showcasing successful students. There are two main ways of presenting this. The first is to profile one or two high achieving students in the most recent exams, the second is to show the number of ‘first divisioners’ and to show an increase in the number of this cohort year to year. The top students become well known faces in the city following exam results, and the schools that produced them are quick to advertise the fact taking out advertisements in newspapers, billboards, and putting up banners to profile these students. Neighbourhood associations do the same, erecting banners and even billboards to congratulate the successful students from a particular locality thus perpetuating the high achievement culture. Local celebrities, usually actors and sportspersons, also bequeath awards to high achieving students, usually those from poor backgrounds. The government holds ceremonies for place-getters and gives scholarships to study outside the state. Even the armed forces present awards to the top students.

New schools without a record of achievement have to stand out by offering extras. Longjam noted the key extras were secure hostel accommodation and minimal interaction between boys and girls outside class, small teacher-student ratios, streams that group high achieving students together and provide extra support for weaker students, and promoting the national
curriculum. There is one fee for the ‘regular batch’ and a higher fee for the high achieving batch, referred to as the ‘super batch’ at Longjam’s school, who are introduced to the medicine and engineering examinations early and prepared to pass them. He was also planning to have weekly interaction with parents so they can be very involved in everything that goes on.

The quality of teachers is important and good staff hard to keep. They could earn more in the public sector since the government increased salaries, but the private sector offered even better chance to recruit children for private tuitions with smaller class sizes. Many of the buildings in Sangaiprou house tuition and coaching centres as well. Teachers were often poached to go to new centres with the promise of higher pay and smaller class sizes. In this scenario there was not much support for weaker students. Longjam insists that established schools screen applicants very carefully so that their overall performance does not lag and they can produce more ‘first divisioners’. Thus competition to get into schools is fierce. Parents of poorly performing students have a difficult time gaining admission to some schools and either offer to pay higher tuition or turn to newer schools that need to build up their student numbers. Many unscrupulous operators are said to prey upon parents with limited knowledge of the sector. These operators usually don’t last more than a year or two. Other schools fail when they try to have too many students and too few teachers.

Other residents make money from running hostels in their houses, opening shops near schools and hostels, extra coaching on top of extra coaching, and as agents helping students apply for further study outside. Yet the biggest cost to starting a school is acquiring land. And conversely those able to supply land, usually by first acquiring it at a low cost, are said to make the most money in the industry.

**Schools versus Paddy**

The drive to build more schools in close proximity to Imphal situates the education boom right in the middle of the politics around land and food production. Imphal’s rapid expansion, at its most intense in Langol (as discussed in the previous chapter) and Sangaiprou, as well in the north beyond Mantripukhri, has transformed the edge of the city. Diminishing agricultural land is a contentious issue throughout Manipur exacerbated by overlapping systems of land tenure and title loosely aligned to hill/valley and tribal/non-tribal divisions, poor record keeping and the closure of the Manipur State Land Use Board, and a history of mass land acquisitions by
the Indian Government, mostly for military use, and the Manipur Government, for development projects (Das, 1989). The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act was implemented in 1960 to make title and transfer of land simpler in the valley. Various attempts have been made to extend the law to the hill areas, which tribal communities have strongly opposed (Tarapot, 2003: 212-13). A 2014 amendment to the act makes it easier to convert agricultural land of half a hectare (or less) for non-agricultural purposes by putting the decision for or against conversion (‘diversion’ in the policy) to a district committee to assess the ‘likely benefits’ and legislating only minor penalties for violations (Manipur Revenue Department, 2014: 2).

However, no rules are applicable in the case of acquisition of agricultural land by the state government for which there are no legislative barriers (2014: 4).

Somewhat contradictorily the Manipur Legislative Assembly passed the draft Manipur Conservation of Paddy Land Bill in July 2014. The bill seeks to prevent paddy land being used for another purpose; paddy land being differentiated from other forms of agricultural production. Critics have argued the bill does not provide protection for land that is not classified as paddy, but used for food production, and also encourages the conversion of forest and wetlands into food growing areas to create or maintain title (Yumnan, 2014). Furthermore, the New Land Use Policy, also proposed in 2014, seeks to reduce the area of the state under shifting cultivation, the main form of production in the hill areas, seen as harmful to the environment (Manipur Planning Department, 2014: 6-7). In the contemporary borderland, environmental rhetoric is used to the same effect as older arguments that used backwardness, persistent poverty, the undesirability of mobility, low yields, and inefficiency to deride shifting cultivation and the communities that practice it (Karlsson, 2011; O’Brien, 2002; Van Schendel, 1992). The New Land Use Policy contains provisions to ‘rehabilitate’ shifting cultivators (Manipur Planning Department, 2014: 11-12).

Government plans to reduce shifting cultivation in Manipur are sensitive because they align with hill/valley and tribal/non-tribal distinctions. Recognition of the need to address the loss of paddy fields is happening alongside renewed attacks on other forms of production, especially shifting cultivation, and alongside plans to accelerate commercial agriculture in Manipur to compete in the markets of Southeast Asia (Manipur Planning Department, 2014: 10-12).

In the last decade several groups have taken action on declining agricultural land, most notably the Heingang Kendra Loumi Lup and the Conservation of Paddy Lands and Natural Resources Protection Committee (CPL). The CPL mentions ‘the rampant construction of schools, brick fields,
hospitals, development of roads by farm lands, and even churches’ that have rendered high yielding farmland useless (Peoples Chronicle, 2014). Some of these structures are illegal or have been purchased from someone other than the rightful landowner, usually referred to as ‘land-grabbing’ in Imphal, though the scale is much smaller than implied in the way the term is used in other contexts (De Schutter, 2011). Much of the agricultural land is not being transferred from smallholders to commercial entities on a large scale, it is being transferred from smallholders to other smallholders for a completely different usage; and this is what concerns the CPL given the state is already dependent on imported agricultural produce – a highly vulnerable position for residents in Imphal when the city has been cut off for months at a time during blockades. Acquisition takes place through multiple small transactions; some of which are legal, some illegal, and others that are legal on paper but involve some coercion. These don’t mobilise protesters in the same way as large land-grabs despite being more common. In contrast the last decade has seen affected resident challenge large land acquisitions for the expansion of the airport, Manipur University, and for the proposed railway.

The profusion of imported rice, much of it from faraway states like Karnataka and Andra Pradesh, and the difficulties finding local rice varieties in the markets epitomises the anxiety around land-grabbing for many Imphal residents. Incidentally the rice yield in Manipur is only slightly below the national average at 2100 kilograms per hectare (Manipur Planning Department, 2013: 4), but the area under cultivation is small and the accuracy of figures is recurrently disputed. The trade in food from outside the state has long been dominated by non-Manipuris, and thus food insecurity and identity insecurity are intertwined. Dependency on non-Manipuris for food is often raised in arguments for instating the Inner Line Permit (ILP). Cheap food, mostly packaged, also comes from across the border with Myanmar and includes food manufactured there but also from Thailand, China, and even Korea (the stock of Choco-pie biscuits in Imphal seems endless). As this is a different type of food, manufactured over unprocessed agricultural produce, it doesn’t figure in the exclusionary politics around the ILP.

In areas like Sangaiprou notices pasted onto walls of granaries and warehouses interspersed among the new buildings read ‘Save Agricultural Lands. Save Manipur’. The same signs can be found in other areas on the edges of the city where farmland is being redeveloped. The issue highlights sharp divisions between the agrarian population of the valley, especially on the outskirts of the city, and the new purveyors of private capital investing in education and also hospitals, spiritual retreats, and shopping malls. The
dynamics of connectivity are also at play. The boom in the private education sector that requires this land is driven by the desire of residents to leave Manipur and pursue aspirations for a better life in other parts of India. The desire to leave is also symptomatic of life in the disturbed city, where violence, surveillance, insecurity and limited livelihood opportunities (or perceptions thereof) push many young people to leave, and a higher secondary education, as well as vocational training, is a crucial component. With a large diaspora outside the state from all of the different communities of Manipur the pathways for migration, and to some extent return, become well established in the last decade (see McDuie-Ra, 2012a: 95-96). Citizenship, reservations in education institutions, and better connectivity mean most migrate to other parts of India even if they have dreams of going elsewhere.

**Recruiting in Imphal**

Every May since 2002 Imphal has hosted Edufest billed as ‘North East’s only reputed education fair’. Edufest is held at the Thau sports ground in Thangmeiband, a short walk from the new State Assembly building and in the same block as DM College, for decades the finest educational institution in the state donated by the Maharani (Queen) Dhanamanjuri Devi in 1946. During the fair, when the Thau ground is crowded with thousands of visitors and the surrounding landscape is plastered with banners, a profound juxtaposition of old and new can be seen. DM College is built on the site of Kabaw Leikai, a settlement of captives, migrants, and settlers from the Kabaw valley in Myanmar that was once under the control of Manipur (Kabui, 1990b). It has several neat single-storey brick and cement buildings with high arches and angled roofs resemble similar buildings throughout former British colonies, particularly the University of Medicine in Yangon (Lanmadaw campus).

The college grounds are expansive by Imphal standards and are one of the few nominally public spaces in the city. They are used daily by residents for recreation, badminton, for grazing polo horses, and for worship at two important Sanamahi sites. The grounds evoke a particular vision of an independent Manipur, one where royal rule would be restored – still a possibility when the college was opened in 1946. It also represents an old elite world; royal patronage, a small portion of the population entitled and interested in higher and tertiary education, and far more limited geographic imaginary. If one wanted to enter Manipur’s public sector one could gain the
necessary qualifications within Imphal. During Edufest the outer wall of this space is decorated with laser-printed banners advertising a multitude of colleges, vocational institutes, and universities in other parts of India. The advertisements feature photographs of young people dressed as air stewards, doctors, and corporate workers making their fortune somewhere else.

In 2014 Edufest was held in the badminton hall. Inside booths staffed by personnel from the institutions seeking to recruit students were neatly set out in rows. Prospective students sat for consultations and in some cases were able to apply on the spot. Most exchanges took place in English. The visiting recruiters rarely speak any of the languages of Manipur and many of the prospective students don’t speak Hindi. Universities and colleges advertise their own credentials but also advertise the corporations that have recruited their students. For example, at the booth for a private university based in Punjab, some 2500 kilometres away from Imphal (around the same distance as Hanoi), there is a banner that lists 80 of the ‘300+ Global and Indian Superbrands’ that have recruited students. A quick scan of the list shows mostly banks, insurance firms, and information technology firms. At another booth the corporate logos of firms that have recruited students are featured. The sight of these well-known logos is clearly intended to add legitimacy to the institution promoting them; suggesting a pathway from Imphal to the university to these ‘global’ corporations.

While a few well-known private universities feature, many of the booths are rented by specialist colleges outside major cities or new universities that have yet to establish a reputation. For these institutions Imphal, and the borderland more generally, is an important recruitment ground. Some feature information on the numbers of students from Manipur on their campus. Others advertise features like air conditioned rooms and buses, affiliation with international universities (some of which appear similarly specialist, new, or with names deceptively similar to well known institutions), and extensive lists of degree programs offered. Prominent at Edufest 2014 are vocational institutes, particularly for the airline and hospitality industries. There are also more generic ‘skills’ training institutes; featuring pictures of air stewards, gainfully employed people holding clipboards, and the requisite male in a lab coat with a stethoscope. The motto of one reads ‘Be a Global Citizen’. At a booth for the ‘World’s No. 1 air hostess training institute’ there is a banner featuring the starting salary of previous graduates alongside a picture of a woman in an air steward uniform pulling a suitcase on wheels. There are also local vocational training institutes and schools with a presence at the fair, including the hospitality training school run by Imphal’s flagship private hotel.
Edufest is not without competition, though many of the same exhibitors reappear and the list of sponsors is consistent across the events. Each June over the same 12-year time span Edu-options has been held, an event of similar size that specialises in getting students admitted on the spot. Since 2005 Education Fair has been run a few weeks after, and Edu-Expo has been run since 2011 twice a year. Edu-Expo has made attempts to localise its advertising and features young people from the region on its outdoor advertising; there are no obviously Indian doctors and engineers. An Education Fair has taken a different approach and features pictures of Korean television actors on its banners, rolling several of the key signifiers of the good life into one message; education, upward mobility, and pan-Asian celebrity (see McDuie-Ra, 2012a: 170-73).

Recruitment of students takes place year-round on billboards, through local career consultancies, and through recruitment agencies. Common advertisements include those for nursing colleges, mostly in South India, and colleges and universities offering engineering, medical, and business degrees throughout India, and advertisements for ‘groups of institutions’ that are plastered with logos of global partners but make it unclear whether they offer education or employment or both. These come and go from the cluster of billboards along the northern boundary of Kangla Fort near Khuyathong crossing along the Nambul River and around Nityaipat Chuthek.
junction. Local training institutes and recruitment agencies can be found in most commercial areas of the city and also place advertisements in the print media. During 2013 and 2014 I noticed a number of billboards advertising private boarding schools in the Himalayas; Dehra Dun, Darjeeling, Kurseong, and Kalimpong. They promote the mountain environment, extracurricular activities, and English medium education. These schools have a reputation for being very expensive and for educating the children of the old colonial and Indian elite (see Sacareau, 2007).

Imphal is an emerging market, aided by the demise of public education and the desire of the wealthy and aspiring to access ever more exclusive education for their children, for which they must either have financial means or obtain them. For poor and middle income households borrowing money, selling land or other assets, and sending siblings to other cities where one works so the other can study are common strategies to afford private education. Households with more means often aspire to education with higher costs and undertake some of these strategies but may also be able to find other ways of paying. Popular perceptions of the lifestyles of those able to extract from the state, and the private sector to an extent, extend to their children. Thus the children of ‘big men’ are assumed to attend the best schools in India and beyond – lifestyles that necessitate the continuation of corrupt practices. Everyone it seems is making do, taking risks and seizing opportunities for an uncertain future. There are happy and sad endings. Families who have sacrificed a great deal need it to pay off. Remittances sent back from children working in India or abroad can provide this pay off. But often the payoff is not realised. Imphal is also home to return migrants looking for work, or those who never left in the first place, unable to pass out from high school or unable to afford further education.

Imphal is part of a national education market. This may sound obvious but given the measures taken to differentiate Imphal and Manipur from a common Indian market discussed in chapter 5, the place of Imphal in the national education market is significant. Edu-fest and other fairs place Imphal within a domestic education scene. In this scene Imphal is India’s education frontier. This is a different market that one might encounter at an education fair in metropolitan India, where foreign universities (including my own) compete to attract a different group of students – those able to travel abroad for their study. This high end of the market also contains unscrupulous operators, immigration-based incentives, and unfulfilled promises, and many families get into debt to participate (Baas, 2007, 2014; Hawthorne, 2014; Robertson, 2011). Places in renowned public institutions in India – the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi University, and
Jawaharlal Nehru University for instance – are still sought after by students in Manipur, but these places are finite and highly competitive. They don’t need to recruit; students come to them. Imphal sees a different end of the education market. The institutions sending staff to education fairs in Imphal mostly represent domestic private universities and vocational training institutes. The number of private universities has grown rapidly in response to government incentives (mostly from state governments), to meet domestic demand, to realise potential profits, as a corporate social responsibility exercise, and in response to calls to shake up the sector (Guha, 2007). There are between 187 and 316 private universities now operating in India and multiple times more colleges and vocational institutes (UGC, 2014). The lower number is the number of private universities officially recognised by the University Grants Commission (UGC). The larger number includes so-called ‘deemed universities’, or ‘deemed to be universities’ which are autonomous institutions that are treated as universities by the UGC. This includes legitimate institutions as well as fly-by-night operators and everything in between. Critics argue that private universities focus on ‘looking good’ and invest heavily in infrastructure and flashy facilities rather than academic quality (Nayak, 2013: 156).

Regardless, private universities need students. The borderland is an emerging and increasingly reliable market supplying this industry. There is still a frontier sensibility to the ways education is marketed in Imphal. Promises made at education fairs and through brochures don’t always materialise. Deceit can go further in a place where the desire to leave is pervasive and the opportunities to do so limited. This is not to suggest that deception is the defining characteristic of selling education in Imphal. Most often it is a combination of lower tier institutions being pitched to people who may have doubts but for whom being ‘outside’, whether in Meerut (Uttar Pradesh) or Trivandrum (Kerala), is so important that it is worth the risk. This likely plays out in other parts of India (see Kumar, 2014), however, what makes it so remarkable in Imphal is that it reveals emerging dynamics of connectivity at work in ways completely unintended by the policymakers who tout the idea. The brain drain from cities like Imphal can hardly be a vote of confidence for the exciting future projected for the region.

As studying outside the region becomes more desirable and attainable, local institutions, especially government colleges and Manipur University (which is a central government university), miss out on potential students and vice versa. Students end up in lower tier institutions thousands of kilometres away when they could have received a cheaper (and possibly better) education in Imphal. Though corruption claims, especially in
admissions, looms over local colleges too. Manipur’s interethnic politics are also a factor. The conversion of Manipur University from a state to a central university in 2005 brought a boost in funds and salaries for staff. This also meant adopting central university policy, most controversial of which was implementing the national quota for tribals, which reserves 7.5% of university places, and removing the state quota of 33% places for tribals (Gonmei, 2013). Many tribal students unable to gain admission to Manipur University or put off by its seeming ethnocentrism have chosen to study outside the state. There is also a movement to establish a tribal university in Manipur, which has been granted, but has undergone rounds of contentious negotiation and protest before and after its completion that are beyond the scope of this chapter.

Conclusion

The micro-politics of urban transformation impelled by the desire for education and the financial savvy of those able to provide it is extending the boundaries of the city; a phenomenon witnessed elsewhere in India (see Chatterji, 2013; Raman, 2014). Yet in Imphal the booming private education sector is happening in a violent city where the state does not have a monopoly on the control of space, a city that periodically grinds to a halt from bandhs, protests, and blockades. As seen in the early chapters of this book, Imphal resembles a conflict city (see Beall et al., 2013). Such cities are not supposed to have high-tech health facilities and a booming private education sector. Reading this apparent contradiction became confounding as my time in Imphal went on. I will close the chapter by recalling a fieldwork episode that best illustrates the challenge of making sense of Imphal when read from places like Sangaiprou.

One Saturday I accompanied my friend Sonia to collect her children from a school in Sangaiprou. The school is located at the end of a raised access road off National Highway 150 passing right through the education city. We drove along the access road and on either side lay paddy fields full of water on this summer day. New construction is taking place around a hundred metres away, and a sign on the frame of a building advertises another new school coming soon. Between the gate and the school building scores of Maruti Omni vans were parked. These hold about 10 people, and even more with some creativity, and operate as school buses. As is often the case in Imphal many of the vans had registration plates from other states. Imphal is a popular destination for stolen cars from other parts
of India that are resold on the black market and also ‘legalised’ by being resold by dealers who can smooth over the paperwork with the relevant authorities. When we arrived at the gate we could not get past all the vans so we walked between them. Each van serves a group of parents who pay the driver directly. The driver collects the children in the morning from their neighbourhood and then drops them off, works doing other jobs, and then goes to collect the children at the end of the day. In the past children would walk to their neighbourhood public school. This was now considered unsafe. Also, children travel much further to school than in the past, the neighbourhood public school system having almost disappeared and the new schools being built further out of the city.

The school building was impressive. Built over three floors in a semi-circle, it was made of brightly painted bricks and had an enclosed play area and a garden; all behind a heavy gate and high fence. We arrived early and waited with the van drivers and other parents in the shade outside and talked about the school. Sonia liked this school because they had small classes, good teachers, and didn’t do the kind of rote learning she remembers from her school days. Indeed, placards featuring an outline of the education philosophy of the school were featured near the entrance. As we waited two men in state police uniform armed with machine guns walked to the gate followed by a parent, ‘a minister’ whispered Sonia, and a further two armed men behind. Like us they waited at the gate for school to finish.

The scene confounded me. Was this thriving school out in the fields, one of many in the vicinity, sign of a society that has healed or one that is broken? The abject failure of the local state to control corruption had badly affected the public school system, among other aspects of social and economic life. Similarly the disruptions caused by bandhs and blockades by non-state actors exacerbated the problem. Violence and impunity for the armed forces produced a lived environment that people were desperate to leave, and education has been normalised as one of the best ways to get out and either stay out or come back with some capital to get ahead. These were all symptoms of the disturbed city; where sovereign power is deployed for territorial control, security, and to showcase development projects leaving other aspects of governance to decay.

The scene could also tell a different story. Is this resilience? Making do on large scale? Or even of the ‘new politics’ of middle class community participation in governance outside the sphere of conventional representative democracy (see Harriss, 2011)? A decaying public education sector, part of a larger public malaise, necessitates action – particularly in a society where education is highly valued as a means to migrate and generate remittances
but also as an end in itself (Singh, 2011). Action on education appears to transcend class boundaries. People will generally do whatever they can to access it, as the piles of timber by the Ukhrul-Imphal road illustrate. Even when education does not bring the desired return it is a signifier of being modern and of at least giving oneself, and one’s children, a better chance than the ones available in the past and the present. Unlike the situation for some other communities in India, notably Dalit communities studied by Jeffrey et al., (2004, 2005) it is not the expansion of state affirmative action policies that have broadened the appeal and uptake of education (and its unrealised promises) but uncoordinated private activity in spite of the state. Tuitions, private schools, and private investment in education, all of which further the decline of the public system, can be rationalised as necessary in the face of state dysfunction and corruption. Outside providers have taken note and come to Imphal several times a year to offer places in institutions far and wide. Potential students gather information and make a decision about where to apply based on their scores, their means, and perceptions of the quality and opportunities on offer. Yet not all consumers are equal in this marketplace, those with lower scores and/or lesser means have fewer choices; some have none at all. In effect it resembles an extreme neoliberal scenario. One arrived at almost by accident.

Clearly there are related elements at play: disturbed city, dysfunctional governance, a resilient population, and aspirations for success outside. Sangaiprou and the education fairs provide a powerful physical manifestation of the private education boom. Decaying public schools visible throughout the city provide a stark contrast: buildings in poor condition, few pupils, and sometimes just a caretaker and no teachers. There are healthier examples; especially some public secondary schools and colleges, including DM College mentioned above. The flipside of the boom are much less visible; household debt, education scams, qualified young adults with no work, and the loss of peri-urban farmland. Even less visible is the murky world of land transactions, corruption in school licensing, and taxes paid to underground groups. The privatisation of the education sector still depends, in part, on the dysfunctional state apparatus and the other sources of power that make things happen in Imphal. In other words it is doubtful whether such a boom would be possible without the ‘transgression and erosion’ of sovereign power characteristic of sensitive space (Dunn and Cons, 2014: 104), the defining character of the disturbed city. Yet these transgressions are unlike protests, smuggling, squatting, rebel memorials and hunger strikes. They come in the form of schools promising to meet aspirations that transcended class in contemporary Manipur, aspirations the state cannot enable.