



# **INFRASTRUCTURE OF INJUSTICE**

**STATE AND POLITICS IN MANIPUR AND  
NORTHEAST INDIA**

Raile Rocky Ziipao



# INFRASTRUCTURE OF INJUSTICE

This book examines the dynamics of infrastructure development in Northeast India, especially Manipur, from a socio-anthropological perspective. It looks at the pattern and distribution of infrastructure in the region to analyse the impact of education, roads and health care on the livelihoods, ecosystems, governance and social futures of communities.

The volume examines the infrastructure deficit in the conflict-ridden state of Manipur, focusing especially on electricity and roads. The author shows how problems arising from poor infrastructure are further complicated on account of corruption, insurgency, ethnic unrest and the politics of marginalisation. Looking at the discourse around development in the northeast, the volume also highlights the structural inequality in Manipur and other states. It further shows how infrastructure development can become a means for enabling trade, creating markets, diluting boundaries between varied ethnic groups and connecting people.

This book will be useful for researchers and scholars of development studies, economics, social anthropology, sociology and public policy – particularly those interested in India's northeast.

**Raile Rocky Ziipao** teaches in Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati Off Campus, Nagaland Regional Centre. He was the former Raghunathan Family Fellow, Harvard University. His research interests include critical infrastructure, political economy of development, northeast studies and tribal and indigenous epistemologies.



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# INFRASTRUCTURE OF INJUSTICE

State and Politics in Manipur  
and Northeast India

*Raile Rocky Ziipao*

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TO OUR PARENTS, YAONAI AND RAILE,  
WHO RAISED US AGAINST ALL ODDS



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## PREFACE

My interest in the study of infrastructure began in my home village of Hii-mai (Purul). During monsoons, the roads are not drivable, and electricity is so irregular that in some places, there are electric poles with no wires. People have to climb to the top of the mountain for cell service. To get to school, students have to walk for miles. When I go to other parts of the country, the infrastructure is much better. I began to wonder why infrastructure is so bad in tribal-dominated areas. Hence, I began my research project to understand the politics and social dynamics of building infrastructure. In the sensitive social and political context of India's border and frontier regions, it is crucial to research the impact of infrastructure development on ecosystems, communities and livelihood.

Infrastructure entails connectivity, circulation of goods and movements of people. It establishes ideas, crosses socio-cultural boundaries, maintains and expands social intersections and deepens community relations. However, in a state like Manipur, characterised by persistent social conflict, infrastructure is an extremely political issue. From an academic point of view, infrastructure provides deep insight into issues of access, inclusion and exclusion, equity, social justice and state policy and practice. Drawing from my ethnographic study of these processes, my analysis gives primacy to infrastructure within the development discourse and argues that infrastructure development has always been an act of power, which at different times has been leveraged for and against communities. While it smooths relationships, connects people, enables trade and dilutes boundaries between varied ethnic groups, infrastructure also rigidifies boundaries, ruptures relationships, hinders trade and commerce and disconnects peoples.

Broadly, one can map out three perspectives on knowledge production: (1) the perspective from above stemming from the long venerable tradition of the western and brahminical world views, 2) the perspective from below echoed from the subaltern studies and 3) the emerging perspective from the Tribal Intellectual Collective India (TICI), what came to be called perspective from within. This book is premised within the framework of infrastructure of injustice wherein I echoed the perspective from within. The focus of the

book is on roads and electricity. Although there are other areas of critical infrastructure, such as airways, waterways, railways and telecommunication which are equally important, these are either at the nascent stage or yet to be developed in Manipur. And, therefore, they have had minimal impact on the political and economic power play in the state. The infrastructure of roads and electricity has been the most politicised in the border state and most visible upon breakdown, thus presenting a rich subject of study. The responsibility for the development imbroglio in the conflict-ridden border state of Manipur lies with multiple agencies. Yet each of the stakeholders finds an excuse for the lack of development, and the general tendency amongst them is to blame the others. In a nutshell, Manipur's development resonates with a scapegoat syndrome.

The book is a majorly revised version of my doctoral work at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. I am indebted to many precious supports in the process of preparing my manuscript. I am afraid I will not be able to mention them all. Needless to say, I owe an intellectual debt to Professor Virginus Xaxa. I was one of the fortunate budding researchers to be supervised by Professor Xaxa for my M.Phil and Ph.D. His instructive insights helped me to formulate my study into a researchable one and to create a space to learn, unlearn, relearn and think beyond the obvious. Though I feel immense gratitude for him, I fell short of words, and I can only say, thank you sir. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Bodhi S.R. He always gave me intellectual direction with his insightful and thought-provoking ideas to think beyond common sense and shaped me to engage in the realms of meaning making. I have learnt so much from him, especially on deepening the perspective from within. I am equally thankful to Dr. Alex Akhup for his invaluable insight on issues in Manipur. My sincere appreciation and gratitude to TICI for giving me a space to share my ideas and deepen my understanding of the lived and shared reality of non-caste societies (tribes) in India. Interacting and engaging with them has been a great learning experience and a source of much intellectual enrichment.

I am thankful to Professor Ajantha Subramanian, Harvard University, for her keen interest in my work and agreeing to be my advisor during my post-doctoral fellowship at Harvard. Professor Sai Balakrishnan, Harvard University, shared with me her rich and invaluable ideas and insights in many conversations about my manuscript. I am particularly grateful to the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute, Harvard University, for offering me the Raghunathan Family Fellow (2017–18). My appreciation to Professor Stephen Kingsley Scott for allowing me to audit his course *Infrastructures and Their Imaginaries*, where I was introduced to a range of literature on infrastructure.

This manuscript would have just remained a proposal without the community's encouragement and commitment. I would like to acknowledge the insights I gained during my fieldwork interacting with different communities.

## PREFACE

I am thankful to those who have given me their valuable time to share their ideas, perspectives, opinions and lived and shared realities. All my major arguments in this volume are built from their voices. Thank you all for helping me translate my proposal into a book. I shall continue to write for the cause of the struggling communities, through which we can grow together collectively.

I would like to acknowledge and express my gratitude to all my peers who have contributed in different ways in shaping my manuscript. Needless to say, I am indebted to Dr. Joseph Riamei, Dr. Dominic Leo, Dr. Roluahpuia, Dr. Moses Thangal, (late) Andrew Lathuipou Kamei, Hitoho Sumi, Richard Kamei, Zach Yanthan, Hinatoli, Pavei, Lallian, Chongnei Moi, Aashish Khakha, Danii Victor, and Philemon Shangne, amongst others, for they did not only contribute to my research but also created a space where research became a joyful experience. Thank you all. Alomi S. Yephthomi was generous in helping me read the proof.

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*Raile Rocky Ziipao*

# ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Alternative Arrangement
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADC	Autonomous District Council
AH	Asian Highway
AMUCO	All Manipur United Clubs' Organisation
BADP	Border Area Development Programme
BRO	Border Road Organisation
BRTF	Border Road Task Force
CDA	Contractor Dealing Assistance
CM	Chief Minister
CMC	Constitutional Making Committee
CSO	Central Statistics Office
GoI	Government of India
GoM	Government of Manipur
HAC	Hill Area Committee
ICC	Indian Chamber of Commerce
ILP	Inner Line Permit
JONGL	Jubilant Oil and Natural Gas Limited
KCP	Kangle Communist Party
KNA	Kuki National Army
KNF	Kuki National Front
KNO	Kuki National Organisation
KRA	Kuki Revolutionary Army
MANIREDA	Manipur Renewable Energy Development Agency
MGNREGS	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
MIMSTEC	Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MLR&LR	Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reform Act
MNPF	Manipur Naga Peoples' Front
MoDONER	Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region
MSPCL	Manipur State Power Company Limited

## ABBREVIATIONS

MSPDCL	Manipur State Power Distribution Company Limited
MSRRDA	Manipur State Rural Road Development Agency
NEC	North Eastern Council
NER	North Eastern Region
NH	National Highway
NHAI	National Highway Authority of India
NHPC	National Hydroelectric Power Corporation
NNC	Naga National Council
NNL	Naga National League
NPCPR	Non-lapsable Central Pool of Resources
NPMHR	Naga Peoples' Movement for Human Rights
NRRDA	National Rural Road Development Agency
NSCN (I-M)	National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isaac-Muivah)
NSCN (K)	National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Khaplan)
NSS	National Sample Survey
PLA	Peoples' Liberation Army
PMGSY	Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
PREPAK	Peoples' Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak
PWD	Public Works Department
R-APDRP	Restructured Accelerated Power Development and Reform Programme
RGGV	Rajiv Gandhi Grameen Vidyutikaran
RMSA	Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan
SDSA	Senapati District Students' Association
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SOC	Social Overhead Capital
SPA	Special Plan Assistance
STDCM	Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur
UCM	United Committee Manipur
UNLF	United National Liberation Front
UPF	United People's Front
ZRA	Zomi Revolutionary Army
ZRO	Zomi Re-unification Organisation
ZUF	Zeliangrong United Front



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# INTRODUCTION

## Infrastructure of injustice

This book disentangles the pattern and distribution of infrastructure in Manipur, a chronically conflict-ridden state, with a specific focus on roads and electricity. Although there are other areas of infrastructure, such as airways, waterways, railways and telecommunication, which are equally important, these are in their nascent stage and, therefore, have had a minimal impact on the political and economic power play in the state. Disparately, the infrastructure of roads and electricity has been most politicised in the border state. My analysis gives primacy to infrastructure within the development discourse and argues that infrastructure development has always been an act of power, which at different times has been leveraged to smooth relationships, (dis)connect people, enable trade, create spaces of contestation and dilute boundaries between varied ethnic groups.

Infrastructure entails (dis)connectivity, goods, people and ideas, as well as the maintenance and expansion of social relations. However, in a chronic conflict state like Manipur, infrastructure also provides a basis to understand the issues of access, inclusion and exclusion, equity, social justice and other contemporary practices and processes of the state. Over the years, studies of infrastructure from a socio-anthropological perspective in the form of an ethnography of infrastructure have offered a new theoretical lens to understand the materiality and forms of infrastructure and its relationship with society, power dynamics, authority, everyday politics, governance, emblem of exclusion and social future, amongst others. However, the fundamental question remains, what is infrastructure? To address this, it may be worthwhile to begin with the argument from Start and Rudleder's (1996) seminal paper, 'Steps towards an Ecology of Infrastructure'. They hold that 'infrastructure is a fundamentally relational concept. It becomes infrastructure in relation to organised practices'. Hence, they suggest we ask 'when' not what is an infrastructure. Drawing from this perspective, road becomes road infrastructure only when it is constructed and maintained regularly and fit for traffic. They also presented a list of infrastructure's constitutive dimensions, including embeddedness, transparency and reach/scope, being learnt

as part of a membership, conventions of practice/standards possessing an installed base and becoming visible upon breakdown (Star and Rudleder, 1996).

Socio-anthropological work on infrastructures began to draw together a set of diverse interests in technology, in material relationships and in material agency, fostering close relationships between science and technology studies and ethnographic approaches to the analysis of technological system, social change and development (Harvey and Knox, 2015). Larkin (2013: 329) posits, 'Infrastructure also exist as forms separate from their purely technical functioning, and they need to be analysed as concrete semiotic and aesthetic vehicles oriented to addressees'. For him, infrastructure occupied a peculiar ontology that 'they are things and also the relation between things' (ibid.). Thus enabling the movement of other matter. Hannah et al. (2015) makes a similar argument by theorising that contemporary infrastructures are critical sites through which social and political systems are given form and performed. While they promised circulation and distribution, at the same time, these precarious assemblies also threatened to break down and fail. The material and political lives of infrastructure reveal fragile relations between people, things and the institutions (both public and private) that seek to govern them.

The materiality of infrastructure on the one hand and the dimension of aesthetics on the other hand offer an enriching theoretical lens. Echoing from the Aristotelian concept of *aisthesis*, Buck-Morss (1992) noted that it does not refer to the mental appreciation of a work of art but to a bodily reaction to lived reality. 'Aesthetics in this sense is not a representation but an embodied experience governed by the ways infrastructures produce the ambient conditions of everyday life: our sense of temperature, speed, florescence, and the ideas we have associated with these conditions' (as cited in Larkin, 2013: 336). Infrastructure creates a sensing of modernity (Mrazek, 2002), a process by which the body, as much as the mind, apprehends what it is to be modern, mutable and progressive (Larkin, 2013). Building large infrastructure projects, such as mega dams, railways, airports, highways, economic corridors and waterways, amongst others, is seen as developing for modernity. The post-independence Nehruvian state embarked upon industrialisation for a prosperous and modern India with Nehru terming such projects as, 'temples of modern India'. The primacy of this vision was building massive infrastructure projects that focused on select industries, such as irrigation, power generation and heavy industries. While on one hand such large infrastructural projects are seen as heralding the arrival of modernity and economic development, on the other hand, these 'temples of modern India' are more often than not a reflection of the exclusion, displacement and marginalisation of certain communities.<sup>1</sup> This brings us back to infrastructure as a relational concept, as posited by Star and Rudleder (1996).

Edwards (2003: 186) argued that ‘infrastructures simultaneously shape and are shaped by – in other words- co-construct, the condition of modernity’ and serve the interest of the state and dominant communities’. For Anand (2011), infrastructure is the material articulation of imagination, ideology and social life, while de Boeck (2012) referred to infrastructure as a system of built forms around which the public thickens. Stewart (2011: 452) saw the materiality of infrastructure as an affective experience of ‘worldling’ and ‘attunements’ where ‘incommensurate elements hang together in a scene that bodies labour to be in or to get through’. In all cases,

infrastructures are built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space. As physical forms, they shape the nature of a network, the speed and direction of its movement, its temporalities, and its vulnerability to breakdown.

(Larkin, 2013: 327)

Scott (2009) makes the case for infrastructure, such as construction of bridges and all-weather roads, forest felling, accurate surveying and mapping and the telegraph, which provided a means of quick communication as ‘distance-demolishing technologies’, making it possible to project their power and technological prowess to the highland communities resisting colonial expansion.

This book takes a critical position in order to unravel multiple ways of seeing infrastructure. Theoretically, it is located within the framework and concept called *infrastructure of injustice*. It analyses the materiality of infrastructure, but in conceptualising this phenomenon, I am positioning it within this concept called infrastructure of injustice. It, nevertheless, dovetails well with the socio-anthropology of infrastructure and political economy of development literature. In addition to this domain, I elaborated on and added the dimension of conflict, injustice and lived experience into the studies of infrastructure. The book presents the intersection of development studies, socio-anthropology of infrastructure and science, technology and society.

### **Infrastructure of injustice**

It is beyond the scope of this book to discuss the theory of justice in detail. Hence, I shall limit my discussion to what is relevant in the context of justice and injustice of infrastructure. The liberal-utilitarian principle of social justice espouses that the ‘greatest happiness of the greatest number’ in the context of infrastructure in Northeast India would amount to injustice to those communities that are at the margin of the state and the dominant communities. Hence it is problematic to conceptualise justice from the perspective

of utilitarianism in this study and more so in the domain of infrastructural distribution. John Rawls critiqued and bemoaned the utilitarian conception of justice. For Rawls (1971), 'justice is the first virtue of social institution' wherein he theorised 'justice as fairness'. Echoing from Rawls's theory of justice in the context of infrastructural accessibility and distribution, infrastructure in Manipur and Northeast should ensure a fair or just manner amongst different social categories (here tribals and non-tribals). If one community appropriates all the resources and avails all primary goods, including basic infrastructure, for itself, then this would amount to injustice. Rawls's conception of justice as fairness provides the basic structure of the argument. This basic structure becomes unfair when one community appropriates the benefits of all goods and services. Hence, the benefits of infrastructure should be fair and just for all communities, irrespective of their social location and geographical terrain within a nation-state framework.

It is also interesting to note the conception of social justice as propounded by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in the context of Indian society, which is marked by a pervasive caste system. His concept is based on the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity in all social categories. For him, social justice would mean to annihilate the caste system based on graded inequality and removal of all inequalities existing in the society. Echoing Ambedkar's perspective, infrastructural justice would mean equal access to all infrastructure facilities irrespective of caste, tribes, creed, religion, gender, etc. When certain social groups support a dominant caste-appropriate infrastructure and deny access to other social groups, this is injustice. Fair and just distribution of materiality amongst varied social categories in India and the northeast in particular is one way forward to address the question of infrastructural injustice. Differential access to material resources or physical infrastructure (roads, electricity, telecommunication, hospitals, schools, colleges and universities, amongst others) based on social location and power dynamics is the hallmark of Indian society and germinates social exclusion. Xaxa (2008) posited that differences have been the hallmark of Indian society. These differences emerged as the result of various long and complex historical processes. Hence, it is imperative to address the historical injustice meted out to certain social groups, such as tribes/Adivasi and Dalits in India.

Amartya Sen, in his seminal work titled *Idea of Justice*, dealt with the concepts of justice in early Indian jurisprudence between *niti* and *nyaya*.

Among the principal uses of the term *niti* are organizational propriety and behavioural correctness. In contrast with *niti*, the term *nyaya* stands for a comprehensive concept of realized justice. In that line of vision, the roles of institutions, rules and organization, important as they are, have to be assessed in the broader and more inclusive perspective of *nyaya*, which is inescapably linked with the

## INTRODUCTION

world that actually emerges, not just the institutions or rules we happen to have.

(Sen, 2009: 20)

He further augments his ideas about justice by deepening the capabilities approach. This approach of Amartya Sen is seen primarily as attributes of people, not of collectivities, such as communities. However, he also posits that the capabilities approach has a 'concern with people's ability to live the kind of lives they have reason to value brings in social influences both in terms of what they value and what influences operate on their values' (Sen, 2009: 244). The central idea of justice is indeed the removal of all injustice in the society. The prevalence of injustice in India can be found at all levels, ranging from poverty to structural inequality. In this domain, tribes/Adivasis face injustice at a much greater degree than other social groups in India. Tribes in Manipur and other northeastern states echo similar experiences where they bear the brunt of infrastructural injustice. In the words of Amartya Sen at an event hosted by the Asia Society Northern California (2010),

Neglect of tribals is a huge spot on India's pursuit of justice. I very much rebel against the view saying we ought to do something about it otherwise they would join the Naxalites (*insurgent in the case of Northeast India*). The reason we should do something about them is precisely because it's matter of justice.<sup>2</sup>

(Emphasis added)

Justice thus refracts the ideology of development. Hence addressing the historical injustice meted out against certain social groups in India would echo the development of justice.

Social scientists pay scant attention to the materiality and form of infrastructure that manifests injustice. How is injustice embedded in infrastructure? One way forward to unearth this phenomenon in relation to tribes is through the lens of the decolonial perspective<sup>3</sup> or what came to be called the 'perspective from within' by the TICI. The socio-politico-economic issues plaguing tribes in India are too complex for the existing dominant social theories to adequately address the issues of situating, as well as explaining, the reality. Hence, it is imperative to approach from different perspectives, drawing on the experience from indigenous studies across the globe. Indigenous people in South America assert concepts such as perspectivism<sup>4</sup> and decolonial thinking. In North America, the focus is on decolonial method, while indigenous scholars from South Africa engage with decolonisation and indigenisation processes. The Maori's of New Zealand, especially the writings of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, posit decolonising methodology as the way forward. Indigenous people from Australia assert truth telling, healing and decolonisation of the stolen generation by the colonisers. The seminal

work of Boaventura De Sousa Santos (2014) titled *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* gives an emancipatory approach to knowledge production and departs from the Eurocentric critical tradition.

In the context of tribal/Adivasi/indigenous studies in India, Bodhi and Jojo (2019: 6) succinctly summed up that until about early 2000,

it was going through an interregnum crisis: as in the old was dying and the new not yet born. However, in the midst of this theoretically saturated state, a minor historical rupture took place and the contour of the new is beginning to unravel, framed around the perspective from within.

The connotation, concept, category and usage of the term *tribes* in this study is markedly different from what is commonly understood in Europe/western or caste-centric anthropological writings, which categorise tribes as savage, barbarian, backwards people without histories, amongst others. Tribes in this book refer to non-caste societies in India and people with a distinct history, culture, tradition, identity, autonomy, sense of territory/boundary, intrinsic relationship with nature, varied mode of production, political entity and victims of several waves of colonialism. The book analyses the social and political processes of infrastructure building which breed injustice at the same time, and it builds on my research work in Manipur from 2013–17.

Tribes in Manipur, as elsewhere in the country, were (are) experiencing waves of colonialism or, in other words, layers of colonial power imposing themselves. The first layer fundamentally took place with the British. In the pre-British period, what is today commonly known as Northeast India consisted of various kingdoms and independent village republics (or what Yonuo called village-states) ruled by various kings and chiefs. Geographically and politically, the region falls into two broad categories – namely, hills and valleys. The hilly regions predominately inhabited by tribes were neither ruled by kings nor followed the monarchical system. They had their own system of autonomy and were self-governed.<sup>5</sup> The hills were outside the control of valley administration, and they flourished more or less as an independent region (Roy-Burman, 1961).

Invasions and expansion of kingdoms were part of the history of the region, as elsewhere in the country. Burma (Myanmar) was a rising power in the early 19th century,<sup>6</sup> making repeated invasions into the Ahom and Manipuri kingdoms. This led the Ahom and Manipuri kings to seek assistance from the British East India Company, which was then based in Calcutta and had already established the Bengal Presidency in 1765. British India responded, and in preparation for the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824–26), roads were constructed for the military campaigns in the region. The Burmese army was defeated in the war, which eventually led to the signing of the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826. This treaty between the East India Company and the king of