With the passing of the 86th constitutional amendment in 2002, the Government declared elementary education a fundamental right, which is a landmark development in the history of relationship between state and its children. The shift of elementary education from being present in the directive principles of state policy to fundamental right however poses huge challenges since making education a fundamental right requires various disadvantaged groups to be socially empowered in enabling to exercise their rights as right bearers. Furthermore, when education is made fundamental right, ideally, education becomes a justiciable right wherein one’s educational right is to be interpreted in the light of other rights.

Northeast India lies in the geo-political periphery of India. The region is ethnically the most diverse region, with 350 communities in India, with diversity of languages and dialects. Despite its tremendous diversity, they share common features distinctive from the rest of India having cultural affinity with Southeast Asia. After the British withdrawal from the Indian sub-
continent, in the Northeast India, many ethnic insurgent movements, with a common claim ‘right to self determination’ from the Indian nation state emerged. Often than not, the insurgent movements in the region are treated with repressive violent state forces, using the infamous Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958 that grant the Indian armed forces extra ordinary powers to forfeit anybody’s life on mere suspicion with impunity. Currently, among all Northeastern states, Manipur is synonymous with AFSPA. Quoting South Asia Terrorism Portal, Anubha Bhonsle mentions about 42 identifiable underground insurgent groups, operating in the state of Manipur. Given the magnitude of insurgents operating in the state, it is natural that large swaths of the state’s territory belong to insurgent outfits, who also run a parallel economy through extortion. The unstable social basis of the state and the competition it faces from various powerful factional ethnic groups push the state to compromise its autonomy, finding itself pulled in different directions, with little capacity to govern. Today, more than ever before, political unrest in the state has moved to the street protest, public curfews and blockades and institutional closures, causing huge challenges to educational opportunity of children and young people on a progressive scale.

About NIAS Wednesday Discussions...

The NIAS faculty meets every Wednesday morning for academic discussions on various topics. As envisioned by Raja Rammana, the Founder Director of NIAS, and pursued by his successors, the Wednesday meetings present the ongoing research, work-in-progress, and new/innovative ideas from the research studies of the faculty and the young researchers.

This Forum provides an excellent space to present one’s work and also receive feedback and comments. Besides NIAS faculty and doctoral scholars others from outside the Institute also take part in these discussions.

Prof. Sangeetha Menon (smenon@nias.iisc.ernet.in) coordinates these meetings.

Locking down Imphal valley by protest demonstrations, the death of nine people and a young student in the early summer of 2015 prompted me to recapture several violent eruptions in the state since the early 2000s and how these violent eruptions not only killed young students, but also systematically destroyed learning opportunity for children and youth. In the winter of 2000, 10 civilians while waiting for bus at Malom bus stop on National Highway No 159, were shot down in cold blood by the Assam Rifles after a bomb explosion had taken place, injuring two security personnel.

The massacre sparked widespread protest in Manipur and Delhi led by iconic Irom Sharmila, supported by large number of students and human right organisations. Iconic Sharmila, fasted for 16 years protesting the infamous AFSPA. After a short span, Manipur plunged into endless flames in the year 2001 after Naga insurgents signed ceasefire agreement with the NDA government for ceasefire extension in the Naga inhabited districts of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. During the months’ long protests, thousands of school children led protested, burnt school textbooks and reading materials. In the protest, 14 youth died in
police repression while several injured. After a short span, in the midnight of summer of 2004, Assam Rifles, after brutally torturing and raping a young woman, was shot death. In utter shock and disgust, Manipuri Mothers of Women Torch Bearer protested naked in front of Kangla Fort, where Assam Rifles Army was stationed. Huge number of students and civil society groups protested for months, while a young student committed self immolation with a pleading message of repealing AFSPA.

In 2009, the cold blood murder of a youth in fake encounter at Imphal market and a bystander pregnant woman in broad day light was followed by widespread condemnation and protest that resulted to educational deadlock, shutting out over 3,000,00 students for more than three months. In the same year, Indian army conducted Operation Summer Storm to root out insurgents from Keibul Lamjao, a National Park, located at Loktak Lake. During the operation, besides displacing thousands of villagers, children were prevented from going to school, withholding the regular functioning of schools and denying the right to education to more than 1,168 children.
Occasional participation of students in sporadic protest movements are also collaborated from my carefully crafted field narratives conducted during the period of 2007-2009. My interaction with students of class VIII from Don Bosco school, Imphal west reveals high proportion such as 70 percent of them participating in all forms of protest demonstrations against violence in the state, however disgruntled with insurgent organisations that use them as effective weapons of protest.

Of late, insurgents too started committing rampant human rights abuses in the form of kidnapping, killing of individual teachers, students and extortion. Teachers and officials are forced to pay taxes to insurgents by surrendering a part of their salary. School head teachers bargain hard with different armed groups regarding payment of taxes, surrendering part of school funds and salaries. From school narratives, I discovered funds and school materials are partly handled by insurgents. In an environment of systemic violence, death and destruction where there is no value for life, children and young people are forced to live with a glut of commoditized violence, casting a dark shadow on their lives and aspirations. Teachers and students confront periodical educational emergency, stripping of teaching-learning opportunity, due to which students loose learning opportunities, academic year, self-esteem, confidence, values, and a life of immense possibility.

Schooling and educational right for children, therefore cannot be treated in isolation. Education as fundamental right is related to other rights. Realising the goal of educational right for all is, therefore not possible without societal reforms as education in inextricably woven into the complex interplay of social, economic and political processes.