

Conflicts of The North-East State Manipur : An Analysis

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Abstract

Manipur in India's north-east has long been driven by conflicts among ethnic groups on issues of exclusivity, dominance and integration. Identities that shape conflict are not necessarily primordial but are a creation of political necessity and administrative convenience. In recent decades, as the Naga-Kuki conflicts and later between the Kukis and Meitei demonstrate identity conflicts have been waged not merely on questions of land, immigration and settlement, but also on the overweening fear of loss of identity itself.

Key words: *Ethnic conflict, demography, social-identity.*

Introduction:

Since May 3, the northeastern Indian state of Manipur has witnessed repeated inter-ethnic clashes primarily between two local ethnic communities, the Meitei and Kuki. The violence has resulted in over 75 deaths and the burning of at least 1,700 buildings (including homes and religious sites). More than 35,000 people are currently displaced as well, with many now living in one of the 315 relief camps in the state. As the fighting continues, these numbers may also be rising. While the violence in Manipur is some of the worst witnessed in the state in decades, it is not an unfamiliar occurrence in India's Northeast, where the identities of different ethnic communities have repeatedly been weaponized to serve the interests of a powerful few. Any moves toward peace building in the medium- to long-term will have to reckon with what has long been a weaponization of colonial fault lines — as even decades after India's independence, very little has been done to foster understanding between different communities regarding one another's history, culture and traditions.

Manipur, which means “Land of Jewels,” consists of a valley surrounded by mountain ranges. The state is home to 39 ethnic communities following different faiths, including Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, as well as Indigenous religious traditions such as Sanamahi. Opposition to the manner of Manipur's merger with India in 1949

laid the groundwork for the nascent stages of resistance and separatist movements and remains at the heart of the dispute between New Delhi and many restive portions of the Northeast. To quell this resistance, the Indian government imposed the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act in 1958. The act provides broad-based powers for the military and paramilitary groups to “[maintain] public order,” in “disturbed areas,” which have been primarily applied to regions of the Northeast and Jammu and Kashmir. The act has been criticized by rights groups and contributed to a deep trust deficit between the state and central government in Manipur, while the central government argues it has been necessary for maintaining order in areas with a history of insurgency — some predating India’s independence. In the Northeast (and elsewhere), the central government has also emphasized the threat of foreign support for separatist movements.

Today, the region features multiple conflicting claims to ethnic and communal homelands and armed insurgent groups to defend those claims. In Manipur, there are at least four valley-based armed groups, several Naga groups and nearly 30 Kuki armed insurgent organizations. The proliferation of armed groups contributed to the sense of a **“war within a war”** in the state.

The most recent violence began after the Manipur High Court asked the state government to consider Scheduled Tribe status for the Meitei community, which is the majority population in Manipur. This status would ensure protection within the Indian Constitution and allow the Meitei expanded access to benefits, including reserved seats in government.

The Meitei community in Manipur had long requested this status. However, there were strong concerns that such a move would deepen ethnic divisions, particularly with the Kuki and Naga Indigenous communities. Indeed, soon after the court announcement, a rally was held in protest by the All-Tribal Students Union of Manipur on May 3.

What is Manipur’s ethnic composition?

- The State is like a stadium with the Imphal Valley representing the playfield at the centre and the surrounding hills the galleries. The valley, which comprises about 10% of Manipur’s landmass, is dominated by the non-tribal Meitei who account for more than 64% of the population of the State and yields 40 of the State’s 60 MLAs.
- The hills comprising 90% of the geographical area are inhabited by more than 35% recognized tribes but send only 20 MLAs to the Assembly.

- While a majority of the Meiteis is Hindus followed by Muslims, the 33 recognised tribes, broadly classified into ‘Any Naga tribes’ and ‘Any Kuki tribes’ are largely Christians.

Conflicts in Manipur:

Broadly, the types of conflict that have been haunting the State can be divided into two–

1) Internal conflict which includes inter-community and intra community conflict for resource dominance, power and identity reconciliation,

2) Conflict between state and non-state actors, which implies conflict between insurgent groups and state for secession of Manipur, or for greater autonomy of a particular region. Both types of conflict affect greatly normal life and educational environment in the State.

A. Internal Conflict: Internal conflict in this paper refers to the conflicts that arise within and among the ethnic groups in the State. The State of Manipur is home to thirty-three (33) recognised tribes and many other non-recognised tribes, besides ‘Meitei’, the dominant community living in the valley districts. As a consequence of dominance over economic and political power by the Meiteis for long, after getting statehood in 1972, the processes of polarization of different tribes into two broader groups as– ‘Naga’ and ‘Kuki’ have intensified in the State to safeguard their respective economic and political interests (Singha, 2012). Within the State, the number of internal conflicts among the ethnic communities has increased significantly in the recent past, especially since 1980s in search of identity as also economic and political power. In their seminal work, Collier and Hoeffler (2002) have also warned that the ethnic polarization of community (dominance of one group makes up 45% and more population) is likely to cause more conflict. Without going into the causes, consequences of internal conflicts in Manipur since 1990s.

B. Conflict between state and Non-state Actors: Here, the conflict is directed against the state by armed groups. The Indian army, including the Assam Rifles, the Border Security Force, the Central Reserve Police Force and the Manipur Police, are currently engaged in fighting against armed rebels in Manipur. With the growth of separatist movement, Manipur was declared as a ‘disturbed area’ in 1980 and subsequently the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 was also imposed (Harriss, 2002). There are allegations that the very Act (AFSPA) being misused by the members of the state forces, as the Act allows the armed forces to shoot anybody on mere suspicion of being an insurgent. The Act also empowers even the lowest rank security functionaries e.g. Sepoy to shoot anybody on

mere suspicion being an insurgent and also protects them against any criminal liability in this regard. Besides killing, there have been innumerable cases of enforced disappearances of young children by the state forces (Manoharan, 2012). About 34 per cent of the region's total fatalities have been from Manipur in the last ten years, as a result large sections of Manipur people are living in a vicious web of insecurity. Often, common people of the State are being caught in the cross-fire between the forces– state and insurgent groups, diverse insurgent groups, conflicting ethnic communities, etc.

This article is about to internal conflict of state which is ethnic, cultural in nature and to save the identity of itself. So here are explained some of the reasons of conflict.

Demand Of Schedule Tribe Status

The Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur (STDCM) began demanding ST status for the Meiteis in 2012. The Meiteis were recognised as a tribe before the merger of the State with the Union of India in 1949. The ST status is needed to “preserve” the community and “save the ancestral land, tradition, culture, and language” of the Meiteis. In 1972, the union territory of Manipur became 19th state of India. The Meiteis need constitutional safeguards against outsiders, stating that the community has been kept away from the hills while the tribal people can buy land in the “shrinking” Imphal Valley (Apprehension of Meities that creation of Greater Nagalim would lead to shrinking of Manipur's geographical area). The Meitei have been gradually marginalized in their ancestral land. Their population was 59% of the total population of Manipur in 1951 and has now been reduced to 44% as per 2011 Census data. The Naga and Kuki movements fuelled Meitei nationalism. Concerns over demographic change and shrinking of traditional Meitei areas started to surface in the 1970s. During the period 2006-12 came the demand for an Inner Line Permit (ILP) in Manipur, to bar outsiders. The free movement of the Kuki-Zomi across Manipur's porous border with Myanmar fanned fears of demographic change. In Manipur, the government is the largest employer and the reservation for STs in jobs amounts to an unfair advantage. Infrastructure development (like railways that would open Manipur further) has made insecurities worse.

Tribal groups are against ST status for Meiteis

The Meiteis have a demographic and political advantage and are also more academically advanced. ST status to the Meiteis would lead to loss of job opportunities and allow them to acquire land in the hills and push the tribals out. The language of the Meitei people is included in the Eighth schedule of Constitution and many of them have access to benefits associated with the SC, OBC or EWS status. Kukis and Nagas point out that tribal areas are 90% of state's geographical area, but the bulk of its budget and development work is focused on the Meitei-dominated Imphal valley.

The conflict stems from decades of contestation over land and natural resources, fuelling deep-seated resentment among both the Meiteis and Kukis. Manipur is one of seven states in India's Northeast region, often referred to as the "seven sisters", which are connected to the rest of the country by a narrow strip of land that skirts Nepal and Bangladesh. The region, which consists of a mosaic of ethnicities, languages and cultures, many of them tribal, is home to some of India's oldest separatist insurgencies. Many of these erupted soon after independence in 1947, partly as a result of the administrative chaos the British colonial rulers left behind. Today, most of the region's insurgencies are dormant, limited to practicing extortion or stuck in various stages of slow-moving peace processes. Some of the remaining armed groups now operate largely from rear bases on the other side of the porous Myanmar border.

Though, as noted, the Kukis are mostly Christian and the Meitei mostly Hindu (small numbers of Meiteis are Christian or Muslim), the violence has occurred over ethnic rather than religious divides. The Nagas, another tribal community in Manipur that is mostly Christian, have not been involved at all, while Kukis have attacked fellow Christians who are Meitei living in or near majority-Kuki areas. Some Meitei leaders have nonetheless been trying to portray the turmoil as religious, seemingly for reasons having to do with national politics: they are trying to rally support among Hindus elsewhere in India, including within the federal government.

Manipur is home to more than 30 ethnic rebel groups, all made up primarily of men, who were originally all fighting for homelands of their own. They can be broadly divided into three categories: Naga, Meitei and Kuki. The Naga outfits, which also operate in the neighboring state of Nagaland, were the first to arise as organized armed insurgents, in the 1950s. The main faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, the biggest Naga insurgency, struck a ceasefire agreement with the federal government in 1997, and is still in talks with New Delhi. The Meitei groups, which appeared soon after the Naga militant outfits, have not entered into peace discussions, though they are much less active than in the past. The security forces refer to them as "valley-based insurgent groups". The Kuki militant groups emerged only in the early 1990s, as a response to Naga attacks, but they signed a tripartite Suspension of Operations agreement with the federal and state governments in 2008. Since then, the Kuki militants have been confined to thirteen camps, with their arms under lock and key. Much weakened, the remaining Meitei and Kuki militants have diluted their initial demands. They engage mainly in extortion, rather than rebellion, and play an active role in mainstream politics, though some continue to seek various degrees of autonomy within India's federal structure. The legacies of these insurgencies,

however, haunt the state's political and social life, including amid the present unrest. The violence threatens to reignite separatist fires. Now physically separated from the Meitei, the Kuki have resurrected an old demand to create an autonomous administrative unit with its own elected representatives and laws within Manipur.

Possible Solution and Way Ahead

A close reading of the Treaty of Sanjenthong (1873) and the Treaty of Moirang (1875) shows that in these agreements 'Sumkam's (son of Raja Goukthong, a Zomi raja) territorial jurisdiction extends upto Moirang, and the (Meitei) Maharaja rules over the rest of the plains'.

This supports the historical Zomi-Kuki tribal presence in Moirang as a negotiated agreement. Article 371(C) of the Constitution, added via the 27th Amendment Act of 1971, divided Manipur into hill and valley areas, giving special protection to territories with tribal settlements keeping this early historical status in view.

The Nagas' and the Zomi-Kukis' fight for separation from Manipur is a longstanding demand. Manipur has seen many wars among the region's ethnic groups. The most recent conflict is, in some ways, a culmination of the irreconcilable differences between these populations.

To stop this repeating and seemingly unavoidable cycle of violence, the government of India must look at viable options. It must review not only what the tribes demand but also what the Meitei majority wants—an independent Kangleipak, concentrated in the central plains of modern-day Manipur, which is approximately 1,800 sq. km. This may ensure peaceful co-existence with the Nagas, who will occupy the northern hill districts, as well as the Zomi-Kukis, who inhabit the southern hill districts of Manipur. All people can then live peacefully, and in turn work for the development of their respective regions.

Immediately, the biggest challenge before the Government of India is to find a long lasting and permanent solution to the various dimensions of violence that have been plaguing this north eastern state. The vitiated atmosphere has been spreading the fear of insecurity among the people and irreparably hampering the process of economic development.

The government needs to adopt a more holistic approach to dealing with the problem. What is called for is a two-pronged effort aimed simultaneously at curbing the insurgency on the one hand, and resolving the ethnic conflict on the other. Though resolution of the conflict and permanent peace ought to be top priority, the powers that be would do well to realise that there is a vast difference between long-term reconciliation and short term peace-making. The increased presence of the armed forces and the paramilitary, may do well to quell the violence and

restore calm in the short term, but would provide no long-lasting solution to the deep-rooted problem which would facilitate the process of permanent reconciliation.

A Round Table dialogue needs to be initiated. The aggrieved parties do have a right to be heard as equal partners. This could go a long way in removing misconceptions and arriving at a platform from where the destination would be not just peaceful coexistence but mutual co-operation, bonding and ever-lasting peace. At this point, the demand for an autonomous Kukiland within the boundaries of the state of Manipur, is an option well worth considering. Side by side, the need of the hour is a long-drawn-out programme of economic emancipation, necessarily including creation of employment opportunities, industrialization, trade promotion also.

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