

**CONFLICT AND PEACE IN MANIPUR (NORTH-EAST INDIA)**

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Abstract

North-East India comprises of eight states- Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Compared to other states of the mainstream India, the states in North East India have their distinctiveness historically and culturally. Due to this uniqueness, North East India is considered a miniature Asia. However, the fascinating aspect of this region is disturbed by the ethnic conflicts and political instabilities that are rooted in this region. It is found that the state of Manipur is the most conflict-ridden state among all the other states. Manipur, a small state, within the mainland India, is a region where democracy is freely practiced yet only in the facade where the citizens are denied of their due rights. Such deliberate and unmindful acts by the so called democratic government defying the sensibilities of the masses lead to several conflicts, thereby making the region highly prone to political instabilities and confusions. This paper will highlight the main causes that would finally help in building such conflicts and instabilities. Solutions to resolve them in an understandable way for the welfare of the masses thereby contributing to the peaceful settlements of innumerable conflicts in this region of Asia will also be discussed.

Keywords: *Pre-colonial condition, Religious dichotomy, Post colonial situation, Nagas, Plebiscite*



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North-East is a blanket term that consists of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Because of its tenuous historical and

geographical nexus to the mainland India, this region is little acknowledged and generally quite misconstrued by the rest of India as the hotbed for insurgency. It is inhabited by conglomeration of akin peoples, a farrago of cultures, religions and languages. It is attached to the rest of the country by a narrow strip of land just twenty kilometres wide which is known as the Chicken's Neck.

Manipur also known as Kangleipak/Sanaaleibak/Meitrabaak is a state in North-eastern India, with Imphal as its capital city. Its people include Meetei, Pangal (Muslims), Bishnupriya Manipuris, Naga, Kuki and many other ethnic tribes who speak different languages of the subdivision of the Tibeto-Burman family. It is surrounded by Nagaland to the north, Mizoram to the south, Assam to the west and Burma to the east. It spreads over to an area of 22,327 sq. Kilometres. Manipur, before being a part of India, was one of the kingdoms of the South and Southeast Asia. The history of Manipur dates back from nearly 3000 B.C. Nongdaa Lairen Pakhnagba was the first king who ruled Manipur in 33 AD. Manipur has its own conventional way of living. It has rich culture featuring martial arts, dance, theatre and sculpture. Its verdure with the temperate climate makes it captivating to tourists. Due to its natural beauty, Manipur is known as the 'Switzerland of India'. The seasonal Shirui Lily at Ukhrul, Dzuko Valley at Senapati, Sangai (brow antlered deer) and the floating islands at Loktak Lake are some of the extraordinary things found in Manipur. Modern Polo, which can be called a royal game, also originated from Manipur. Yet, despite of all these rich heritage and heart throbbing landscapes, Manipur is riddled with innumerable conflicts damaging its harmony and equilibrium. Foreign travellers to Manipur must gain special permission to enter, as it is considered a 'sensitive area' due to its political troubles and geographical location. Having presented a brief scenario on the history and culture of Manipur, now we are going to discuss on how such a god-gifted land defiled by the presence of various conflicts and instabilities ended up being a 'sensitive zone'.

Pre-colonial Condition

The roots of conflicts can be traced back to the pre-colonial political situations in Manipur—a valley region and village-based autonomous authorities in the surrounding hills. The two survived side by side under subordination, mutual assistance and existing peacefully together. In the hills, society was still largely localized and there was little sign of an exclusive political rule. It was upon this initial condition of different institutional system that the colonial state began its state-fashioning undertaking, a dynamic that would have deep significance for the forthcoming politics of this state. Due to its geographical isolation and

the limited prospective for economic extraction, there was a frail case for the kingdom to be annexed and integrated into the colony. Yet the British required to sustain a presence and have power over this mighty kingdom on the colonial India. Manipur had in the past acted as both a link to and a sense of balance against fierce Burma. After the British defeat of the Burmese, a political agency was established in the state in 1835 to retain affable relations with the kingdom and thwart the recurrent encounter between Manipur and Burma. Internal disagreement in the ruling/royal family and intimidation they posed to colonial interests led to the formal seizure of the Manipuri kingdom in 1891. Annexation was followed by governmental changes, most notably in land revenue and judicial systems. These methods led to the stable and established settlement of agricultural land, an even mode of taxation, and the arrangement of a convoluted administrative system and judicial courts to implement new laws. Constitutional changes also meant that the state ruler, the Raja, now dispensed the Manipur State Durbar (MSD), and was bound by the latter's decisions. The huge adjoining hills were not concerned about too much—colonial administrators relied on the Manipuri King to keep village chiefs submissive. Post 1891 reforms in administration were curbed to the valley. Though the hills would be discernible and incorporated in the Manipur state periphery, little was made to infiltrate them even administratively. No efforts were done to integrate the hills into the state-wide judicial or land revenue systems or to persuade hill communities to be represented in state-level governing institutions that were being set up. Villages were left to stay behind in independent self-containment, guided and ruled by their own sets of usual codes and practices. The revolt of the Kuki chiefs against colonial policies in 1917 led to moves for the chiefs' suppression. This was followed by some attempts to break through the hills managerially and to connect more directly with communities there. But these two fell short of establishing unswerving associates with society that was achievable through centralized institutions. Institutional duality in Manipur was toughened with the establishment of break-up administrative systems for the valley and the hills. The state, by following different policies for the two continued and produced many fresh divides between hill and valley communities, thus preventing the likelihood of the growth of a common civic space. This would have grave implications for social solidity in Manipur and ultimately for the authenticity of the state among the people. Exacerbating the pressure of these methods on the power structure in the state was the way in which colonial agents administered Manipur through an intense form of oblique rule. Thus, there was always a division between the valley and the hill communities which finally resulted to the shaping of

different view points on policy making of the state. This is one of the key factors of conflicts and instabilities in Manipur.

Religious Dichotomy

Religious dichotomy between the Meiteis and the tribals may have facilitated to the already existing conflicts. The rise of exclusionary caste Hindu practices in the valley also intensifies the differences between the valley peoples and the hill peoples. Most of the tribals embrace Christianity as their religion and conviction. Hill peoples are large groups of culturally diverse minority existing in perturbed coexistence with culturally different neighbours in the lowlands. Thus, the concept of minority and majority arises. The elites in Manipur are incapable to systematize politics inclusively so as to bring all communities, within the valley as well as those in the hills into the state construction. Despite advocating secular agendas, the politics was narrowed to the valley. That state power vested in the exclusivist Meitei elites, mostly Hindu, strictly condensed the state's authority in the eyes of the hill-based tribal populace. Successive call-up by Meitei state leaders to build a society based on their restricted individuality—in part to facilitate them to capture political power away from central forces then in demand in the state—aimed further estrangement of the minority tribal communities in the state. Alongside, and as a counter act to Meitei mobilization, tribal groups invested further assets in community-specific political organizations to gain support for community-specific administrative benefits. The hesitant intergroup contests over power, resources between hill and valley groups and amongst the hill groups themselves using the ethnic ethics, further punctured in identity attachments among all sections and shaped conditions for manifold ethnic contestations. This had stern consequences for the state's already patchy social structure.

Post-colonial Situation

Manipur came under British statute as a princely state. During World War II, Manipur was the picture of several fierce battles between the Japanese and the British Indian forces. The Japanese were trampled before they could cross the threshold of Imphal, which was one of the turning points of the war. After the war, the Manipur Constitution Act of 1947 established a democratic form of government, with the Maharaja as the Executive Head. Maharaja Budhachandra was summoned to Shillong, capital of the Indian province of Meghalaya in 1949, where he signed a Treaty of Accession merging the kingdom into India. Subsequently, the Legislative Assembly was dissolved and Manipur became part of the Republic of India in October, 1949. Consequently, Manipur lost its autonomy, the elected ministry was dissolved,

and an Indian representative was allotted to run the state. The merger was never ratified by a popular vote. Since then many separatist activities have been dynamic in Manipur with the institution of various outfit organisations. These militants consider the merger as illegitimate and unlawful and many in the Manipuri intelligentsia express resentment about the way it was brought about. Manipur was not incorporated into India not at par with other member state of the Indian Union, but as a 'Part C state', afterwards upgraded into a Union Territory. Evocative of the identification theme were the protest movements demanding position of a full-fledged state for Manipur under India's centralized structure, which it acquired only in 1972. The situations of Manipur's merger with India in October 1949, when it was deprived of the autonomy it had enjoyed, has vexed the post-colonial politics of Manipur and led to various conflicts in the state.

The Matter of the Nagas

The matter of the Nagas of Manipur poses the most alarming impediment to the reconciliation process today. The chance that their state might now be completely split behind their backs in covert negotiations between the Government of India and Naga insurgent leaders of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim led by Thuingaleh Muivah and Isaak Chisi Swu (NSCN-IM) is a source of colossal apprehension in Manipur. That Manipur geographically in a miniature valley enclosed by hills that make up the bulk of its territory—and that is where most Nagas reside—adds to this sense of concern. Meiteis, an ethnic term that distinguishes Manipur's lowlanders from the hill peoples, today experience beleaguered and disillusioned by the identity discourse of the Nagas that threatens a radical dwindling of the state's territory. Meiteis resent that Nagas are allegedly trying to annihilate their state. Since Nagas achieved a state of its own within a short period of time, even when historical states like Manipur did not, their intentions have now run feral even frightening the territorial integrity of other historical and highly developed states like Manipur and Assam. Meiteis are critical of Manipuri Nagas who recognized with NSCN-IM. It is most regrettable that sections of some tribes who claim to be Nagas and whose ancestries are deeply rooted in Manipur and whose parents shed blood for Manipur are now working with an outfit (NSCN-IM) whose objective is to tear down Manipur. In 1994, when the Nagaland Assembly called for the amalgamation of all Naga areas, the Manipur Assembly unanimously adopted a pledge to defend the territorial integrity of Manipur. Fascinatingly, the Chief Minister of Manipur then was a Tangkhul Naga, Rishang Keishing. Manipuri street protests against the ceasefire began as soon as the present ceasefire came to effect on 1 August, 1997 between the

Government of India and NSCN-IM. On 4 August, 1997, thousands of people participated in a protest rally in Imphal and the Manipur Legislative assembly passed a decree protesting the extension of ceasefire. The atmosphere that energised the impressive protest in Manipur after the June 2001 proclamation of the ceasefire having 'no territorial limits' is best captured in the words of Manipuris. The people of Manipur obviously felt that their apprehension was now becoming proper apparently referring to the dread of a prospective crumbling of Manipur. Feeling extremely deceived, they rose in protest against the central government's mindless decision. When the news of the signing of the 14 June accord in Bangkok reached Manipur, there was a universal scepticism. Murkiness was writ large on the people's faces. The disbelief and gloom soon gave rise to an unprecedented manifestation of strong and irrepressible protests. In quest of guarantees from the Indian Government that Manipur's territorial integrity would not be sacrificed for Naga peace has now become a foremost subject matter in Manipuri Politics. The protests included general strikes, social prohibit of the political parties, blazing of the Indian national flag and of effigies of Indian political leaders. There were police firings, deaths and injuries and major destruction of public property including important ones such as the State Legislative Assembly building. Many Manipuri Naga left the tense Imphal valley for the hills. The protests calmed down only after India's Home Minister, Mr. L.K. Advani asserted on 27 July 2001, that the three words 'without territorial limits' would be removed from the agreement signed with the NSCN-IM concerning the extent of the ceasefire. There is a demand now for an alteration of the Indian Constitution to assure the integrity of Manipur's borders. 'No alien force nor internal contradictions can break the territorial integrity of Manipur'.

Socio-economic Challenges

Socio-economic challenges over the past decades have exacerbated intergroup contestations and conflicts. With attempts to eliminate unemployment problems, leaders face a challenging assignment trying to accomplish aspirations of the masses. Conflicting identity contests have toughened attitudes, deterring efforts to bring negotiated solutions to these problems. With state action controlling most resources, however small, contestations around the state for allocating of those resources continue incessantly, recurrently causing collapse in inter-community affairs. These dynamics have added to political instability, further creating ethnic differences and leading to escalation of conflicts. Since the late 1980s, there has been increasing political instability in Manipur. There have been ten alterations of ministries in eighteen years when there should have been just four. Political instability has also created

chances for non-state forces, many restoring to violence, to play their role in mobilizing support along distinctiveness and ethnicity. With the frequent change of government during the decade of 1990s, the worst ethnic violence occurred in Manipur—Naga-Kuki(1992-6), Meitei-Muslim(1993) and Kuki-Paite(1997-9) clashes. These violences create grounds for the continuing alienation and isolation of communities and the nourishment of secessionist violence.

Poor Performance of Political Institutions

Another ground for the conflict and instabilities in Manipur is partly due to the poor performance of political organization and the poor governance of the political leaders, predominantly the violation of the federal laws by the Central State and the surfacing of the patterns of ‘cosmetic federalism’ so to mention the words of Sanjib Baruah—the national state’s centralizing tendencies and its dominant power to chop sub-national territories—that explicates why rebellions and conflicts, clashes, disagreements and contestations have occurred so recurrently in this region.

Peacebuilding

Having discussed in details some of the key factors of the genuine causes of conflicts in Manipur, now the question is how to tackle with such conflicts that are cropped up from various reasons. The most important and foremost condition for resolving the prevalent conflicts in a peaceful way is first of all to elect our representatives wisely and it is with them the dignity and moral authority of politics and good governance lie. This is specifically what has been missing in Manipur’s and politics all these years. The politicians should start treating politics seriously and make an effort to do this. Only then will the respect and reverence they deserve follow. Burma and Manipur have all the features for success and development: industrious people, fertile terrain, thick woods, good farming climate and enormous natural resources of oil, gas and water besides coal and limestone(in Burma)—all the necessary requirements for a region to achieve success. Yet these regions are always hindered by the frequent conflicts and political instabilities. What is really needed are men and women of far sighted vision and good sense who can enthuse the changes and pilot their communities in these challenging tasks of conflicting and retrograde situations. With support and co-operation there are chances of deleting the most obstinate of problems.

Another peaceful solution to deal with the insurgent or militant organizations in Manipur as well as with the NSCN-IM particularly is the disarming and termination of all insurgent groups in the light of a proposed negotiated settlement. For a firm settlement, it is necessary

that the insurgent groups must agree to disarm at the same time. The requirement then is to try and bring in all the militant outfits operating in the regions on a negotiating platform, if peace is to be fulfilled. “Peace is not just a matter of the absence of violence. It is also necessarily about removing the potential for violence – namely the uncontrolled possession of weapons”. For a lifelong peace solution to any problem, the solution will have to be explicit through a two-way discourse; peace through dialogue.

Dire need in this area is their economic, social and educational development. Introducing some kind of village and district councils in each area where the educated and sensible leaders, perhaps, may be one of the best ways to associate with the administration. There should be a connection of local level system to the national level peace building process to endorse strengthening of voices from grass roots to the national platform, to link community groups and leaders, networks of women to district, state and national level networks; to link with peace building networks, district and state conferences and assembly, awareness events, exposure and exchange visits, youth meetings, and media engagement.

And the last but not the least way to grapple with these various conflicts is Plebiscite—the direct vote of all the members of an electorate and are asked to either accept or reject a particular proposal on an important public question such as a change in the constitution. This will enable the government to be serious on their decision making and provide them a second thought to deliver laws and policies based entirely on “bringing the question back to the people”.

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