



ISSUE BRIEF

No. 245

August 2020

...Still the Strangers*: Need for Convergence in Manipur



Major General VS Ranade is an alumnus of the National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla. He was commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery in 1984. He commanded a Field Regiment, a Sector of Assam Rifles in Eastern Sector and a Mountain Division in Northern Sector. He is presently serving with the National Security Guards as Inspector General (Operations).

Manipur in India's north-east has long been riven by conflicts among ethnic groups on issues of exclusivity, dominance and integration.

– Bhagat Oinam

Introduction

The present ethnic groups of Manipur vis. the Meiteis, the Naga tribes, the Kuki Chin tribes, and other sub-communities are the descendants of migrating people and Manipur, with its central valley, provided the perfect ecological setting for building-up of a civilisation.

The origins of each community are shrouded in mystery or one can say contested by others as there are no authenticated written records or history

* ...inspired by the Book “Strangers No More” by Sanjoy Hazarika.

Key Points (Manipur)

- The origins of each community are shrouded in mystery.
- No authenticated written records or history is available.
- The intermingling of communities is prevented by ethnic baggage, social compulsions, and traditional ethos.
- The trust deficit between the Nagas, Kukis, and Meiteis remains one of the root causes of turbulence in Manipur.
- The government needs to address this issue of ethnic identity and make a sincere effort to resolve the horizontal conflict.
- The resolution of the horizontal conflict will automatically resolve the vertical conflict.
- An inclusive solution is what the need of the hour is.

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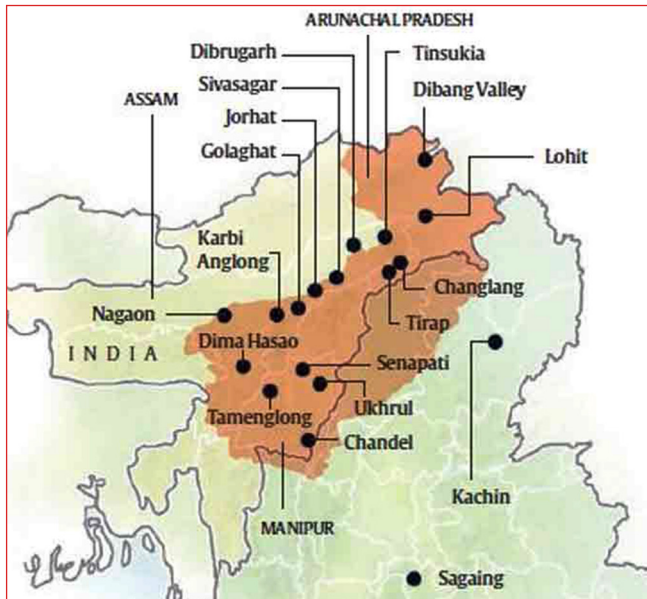
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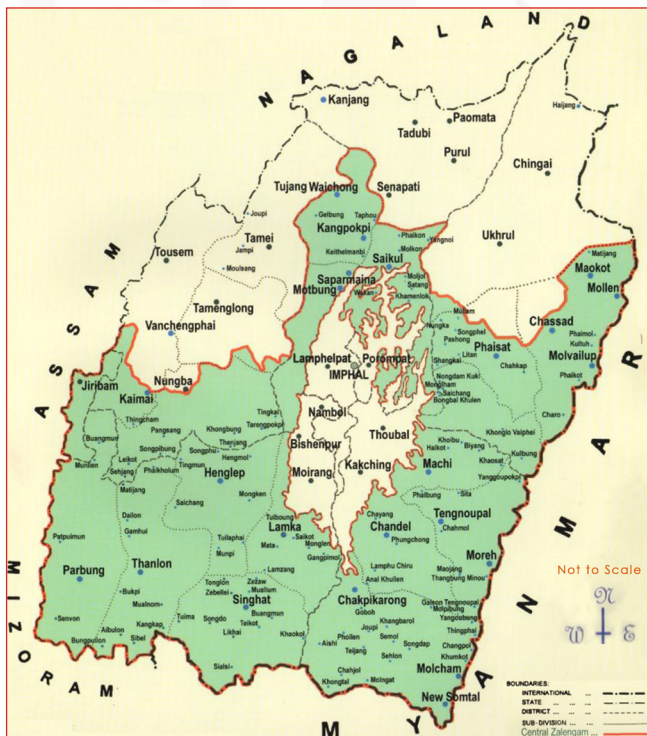
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...Still the Strangers:...

Map 1: Greater Nagalim, as the NSCN Originally Sought¹



Map 2: Proposed Map of Kuki State^{II}



available to prove it. The origins are primarily based on travelogues or the writings of British writers or their military history which has been and could be contested. The three communities, namely, Meitei, Kuki, and the Naga have their own historical verbal records passed down from tribe-to-tribe and each is basing or staking a claim on the state partially or wholly based, on these. The so-called historical evidences have not found favour with either of the communities.

Bifurcation or trifurcation into the present day major communities must have taken place over a long period, but this transition is lost to the history and now claimed by each of them through their folklore.

The Manipuri society lacks inclusiveness of the Manipuri identity. The course of history has been one in which the Meitei valley dwellers dominated almost completely, so much so that the “Manipuri” identity has today come to be almost synonymous with the Meitei identity. The intermingling of communities is prevented by ethnic baggage, social compulsions, and traditional ethos. “Manipuri” no longer instils belongingness to the state of Manipur but a community. This is the basic bone of contention—the identity crisis among the communities of the state.

Divergence Dynamics

Meitei

Manipur has the distinction of being one of the oldest civilisations—about 2000 years old. Manipur remains a plural society with its population divided by deep rifts of ethnicity, culture, language, and religion.¹ It is a society of three communities with disputed historical baggage, which none of the three communities agrees to. The larger group, the Meiteis claim the state, while the other two being migratory claimants. On the other hand, the Kukis and the

¹ Political representation of the Areas demanded by Naga groups as Greater Nagalim, demand map published in E-PAO on November 3, 2008.

^{II} Published in E-PAO net on November 27, 2012.

Nagas stake claim based on their folklore and certain historical evidences, stating that they have been residing in the land since ages. The historical accounts of each community are well known and fiercely maintained by each of them. The separation of each community continued, whereby each occupied a space in the state and developed as their own. The larger group, the Meitei, felt it as an intrusion into their lands while the other two—Kuki and Naga—claimed to be the rightful owners of the land. Meitei tradition indicates that the Manipur valley was occupied by several tribes, the principal of which were seven in number vis. (i) the Ningthouja or Meitei, (ii) the Angom, (iii) the Khumal, (iv) the Moirang, (v) the Luwang, (vi) the Sarang-Leishangthem, and (vii) the Khaba-Nganba. Khumal appeared to have been the most powerful and after its decline the Moirang became prominent, and ultimately the Ningthoujas or Meiteis subdued the whole and the name Meitei became applicable to all the tribes.²

Kuki

Kuki, a generic term, applies to the various sub-tribes, vis. Thadou, Paite, Hmar, Simte, Zou, Gangte, Vaiphei, Guite, Ralte, Sukte, etc. The word 'Kuki' is a generic term referring to an ethnic entity, that is spread out in a region straddling north-west Myanmar (Burma), the Chittagong Hill tracts in Bangladesh, and north-east India. In north-east India, they are mainly in the states of Manipur, Mizoram, Assam, Nagaland, Tripura, and Meghalaya; and in Burma, mostly in the Sagaing Division.³

In Manipur, they were known as Khongjais before the use of the term 'Kuki'. However, it is still unknown for certainty as to from where the term 'Kuki' has originated. There are three views regarding the origin of the term Kuki. These are as follows: (i) it is derived from a word applied to a system of cultivation by the Bengalis; (ii) it is derived from the Balochistan

word *Kuchis* meaning "wandering people"; and (iii) it is derived from the English word *Kooky* meaning "peculiar or unusual people".⁴

Naga

The Naga tribes are reported to have migrated to these places from further east, a few thousand years ago. The Naga settlements in the region are mentioned in the *Royal Chronicles of Manipur* and the Ahom Buranjies.⁵ Some authorities traced the origin of Nagas to the head-hunters of Malay and the races of Southern Seas, while the other authorities, traced it to China. The British who were acquainted with the Nagas, since the early nineteenth century (1832), studied the different tribes of Naga people. The Nagas are different in many aspects from other tribes in north-east India.⁶

Each community felt that aspirations of the people were not met and internal simmering started which ultimately gave rise to the vertical conflict between the authority and the communities, while the horizontal conflict was on from historical times. The political delimitation of boundaries divided the ethnic lineage to states and countries, while the dispute still continues. The identity crisis and need to protect the communities led to each raising armed militant groups which got embroiled with the authorities. The insurgency began as a subset to the ethnic and demographic divide and these groups took the colour of militant movement to primarily protect their community and not for the state as such. The ethnic trust deficit between the Nagas, Kukis, and Meiteis remains one of the root causes of turbulence in Manipur. It is a popular perception that the interests of one community are being mauled by the other community.⁷

Quasi-Balkanisation of Manipur took place whereby geographical territories were tacitly demarcated. The conflict which began as a horizontal conflict between

the communities went ultimately vertical i.e. against the authority.

Conflicting Divergence

Although, reportedly these tribes belong to the same racial stock, the communities have had glorious and rich traditions unique in itself, which actually led to the difference in their perceptions of lands and claims. They felt that there is a need to have their own sovereign lands, controlled and administered by them, for better protection of the community and its unique culture and then seek separation/independence within or outside the Indian Constitution.

The political movements seeking to realise the 'imagined' political space of the elites outside the Indian Constitution resulted in the emergence of the vertical conflict between authorities and communities. Similarly, the political movements seeking to realise the 'imagined' political space of the elites within the Indian Constitution led to the emergence of the horizontal conflict between the communities or the "Ethnic Triangle" in Manipur.⁸

Each community's demand has had "corresponding and conflicting effect" on the others and all three are interlinked through geographical, cultural, traditional, economic, and emotional space.

Nagalim

The purported objective of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isaac-Muivah (NSCN-IM) is the establishment of a *Nagalim* (Greater Nagaland), consisting of all the Naga-inhabited areas of neighbouring Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and some portions Myanmar, which it considers to be the rightful homeland of the Nagas. Its manifesto is based on the principle of Socialism for economic development and a spiritual outlook i.e. 'Nagaland

for Christ'.⁹ The establishment of *Nagalim* threatens to include large territories of three neighbouring States, namely, Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, along with some portion of Myanmar. The map of *Nagalim*, released by the NSCN-IM, claims the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills District of Assam. Besides, the map is also shown to include parts of the districts of Golaghat, Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, and Jorhat. It also includes Dibang Valley, Lohit, Tirap, and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh and significant parts of four out of the seven districts of Manipur, namely, Tamenlong, Senapati, Ukhrul, and Chandel.¹⁰

Zalengam

Demanded by the Kuki groups of Manipur, to carve out an independent state from Manipur, primarily including the Churachandpur, Senapati, Chandel, and Sadar hills district. *Zalengam*, meaning "Land of Freedom" in Kuki language, is the name chosen by Kuki nationalists in reference to the proposed state that would gather all the Kuki tribes under a single government in the future.

The Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and its armed wing Kuki National Army (KNA) were formed on February 24, 1988, to uphold "the right of the Kukis to govern their own affairs within a defined territory (statehood)"—one part in India and another in Myanmar. During the same year, on May 18, the Kuki National Front (KNF) was formed under the leadership of Nehkholun Kipgen at Molnoi village (Myanmar) to secure a separate "Kuki state". In the 1990s, the Kuki Defence Force (KDF) and Chin-Kuki Revolutionary Force (CKRF) were formed in different areas of Manipur by the Kukis to protect themselves and their properties from the raids of Naga militants. The Kuki Liberation Army (KLA)/Kuki Liberation Organisation (KLO), was also formed to fight for a separate Kuki State as its objective.¹¹

Meitei Dynamics

Meitei, in relation to neighbouring communities and its history from the past, remains a dominant community. This can also be inferred from the way how the Manipur and the hills (of present Manipur) came to be administered (separately) from 1891 to 1947. From 1947 to 1949 in Manipur, events moved at a fast pace—independence from Britain, interim government, enactment of the Constitution of the Sovereign State of Manipur, the first election of independent Manipur and then, the merger with the Dominion of India. However, on August 15, 1947 Manipur became an independent sovereign state with an obligatory treaty relationship with India by virtue of the Standstill Agreement and the Instrument of Accession which confirmed the continuance of the pre-existing agreements and administrative practices of British India while giving power to the Dominion of India on matters concerning foreign policy, communication, and defence.¹²

The issue, after Manipur became a part of India from 1949, was that the unequal relationship between the valley and hills became more pronounced under the arrangement of the nation-state. Meitei community is accrued with various means to continue their stronghold in political representation; yielding fruits of development; access to education, health, employment opportunities, etc. These features accorded them a stronger unequal relationship with the tribes in the hills.¹³ The tribal of the hills, namely, the Kukis and the Nagas feel that any move by the dominant community i.e. the Meiteis may not be in the interest of the hill people and they see the land reforms bill or the Schedule Tribe (ST) status for Meiteis with suspicion.

The Fallout

The warring factions maintained their agenda of protecting the community's aspirations and seeking

a political space in Manipur. The armed groups raised have turned into personal armies funded by non-state actors and outside powers. Under the garb of protection, these groups went into extortion, drug-running alongwith arms smuggling through the Golden Triangleⁱⁱⁱ from Myanmar. The State has been geographically divided into strongholds of these groups. The valley portion is controlled by Meitei groups, while the hills of Churachandpur, Chandel, Tamenglong, and Senapati are controlled by Kuki groups and their factions with splinters of Naga groups in Tamenglong and Senapati districts with the majority in Ukhrul district. The State is served by two national highways through Nagaland and South Assam.

The communities, based on their perceptions, outlined their agenda for the so-called struggle keeping the horizontal struggle “on” while upping the ante of vertical struggle. The demands are at loggerheads with each other and each is looking at political settlement of the demands, advantageous to their own cause. The fallout of these ethnic differences reflected on normal civil life of the people, the effects of which can be summarised as follows:

- (a) Identity crisis and aspirations of each community resulting in hill-valley divide and armed conflict with each other and with the government.
- (b) Demands of these communities within and outside the Indian Union.
- (c) Running of a parallel government, extortion, territorial control, and politico underground nexus.
- (d) Lack of development and progress.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Golden Triangle is the area where the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar meet at the confluence of the Ruak and Mekong rivers. The name “Golden Triangle”—coined by the CIA is commonly used more broadly to refer to an area of approximately 950,000 square kilometers. Most of the world's heroin came from the Golden Triangle until the early twenty-first century when Afghanistan became the world's largest producer.

Due to fractured perceptions and conflict-laden society, the development suffered, as none of the armed groups allowed the developmental works to start as they felt that their space is not being addressed to. Few of the demands raised by the groups give a clear perception of how parochial they were, and also gives the depth of the ethnic divide:

- Hill area development council to look into the developmental issues of hills—Kuki and Naga majority areas.
- Demand for Sadar hills district by Kukis.
- ST status for Meitei under the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution.
- Nagalim and Greater Nagaland.
- Kukiland/Zelangam for Kukis.
- Manipuri language in schools to be compulsory.

The list is endless, but what is glaring is that all these are ‘group-specific demands’. The tribal affinity to each of these groups compelled the diaspora to reluctantly support the groups in their quest for space. The convergence of these groups is crucial for a peaceful existence in the state.

The Meitei insurgent groups till date continues to wage an insurgency in the name of self-determination and restoration of lost sovereignty; the Kukis want a state within a state under the Indian Constitution¹⁴ and the Naga’s look for space in Manipur and fallout of the Naga Peace Process.

Convergence

The state of Manipur requires a mature political understanding and a consensus among the political parties and the three communities. The solution required should primarily include the Government of India, Government of Manipur, Government of Nagaland, all Naga factions, Coordination Committee (CORCOM), and other minor groups and people of

Manipur who have a stake in the state. At the outset, all these groups have to come on board to find a solution. They have to shed their inhibitions, apprehensions, and strait-jacketed demands. The actors need to find a solution within the framework of the Constitution of India. The communities are still looking for their political, economic, and ethnic space in the cauldron of Manipur. Extortion and coercion rules which has been very efficiently streamlined by using ethnic lineages, tangential ideology, and misplaced cultural linkages and are often quoted as traditional claims over the land from ancient times, needs a relook.

As a state, Manipur is an all-important fulcrum in the matrix of ‘Look East Policy’ and a land bridge to South Asian countries through Myanmar. Moreh, which is a small border town in Manipur, occupies an important position in India’s ‘Act East Policy’. Cross-border trade between India and Myanmar at Moreh has suffered because of various social and political problems. Ethnic conflicts, territorial boundary disputes among states, and the influx of illegal immigrants, are some of the major problems facing the Region.¹⁵ Manipur holds all ingredients to be such a state. What we need is a political solution and not military, to this socio-ethnic imbroglio.

Recommendations

Having seen the origins and the history of the state in general and each community in particular, it is felt that there is a need to address the issue compassionately. What we need is to get all the three communities on board for the resolution. This is an emotive issue with a lot of historical and cultural baggage which will require delicate handling and statesmanship. Few of the following steps which are recommended to be taken are as follows:

- (a) A team of interlocutors from all the three communities to be selected mutually by themselves.

- (b) A moderator, acceptable to all three, to steer the parleys.
- (c) A holistic approach to all the issues—ethnic, cultural, and demography to be taken to arrive at a commonly acceptable solution.
- (d) End and home coming of armed groups of each community.
- (e) Government of the day to take politically corrective steps to address the contentious issue of merger of the state.

The team must also focus on the strategic importance of Manipur in the fulcrum of India-China-Myanmar and its long-term implications. The government needs to address this issue of ethnic identity and make a sincere effort to resolve the horizontal conflict. The resolution of the horizontal conflict will automatically resolve the vertical conflict. An inclusive solution is what the need of the hour is.

Conclusion

This acrimonious relation between the communities gave rise to the armed groups under the pretext of protecting the community. Over a period of time, these groups became larger than life and started indulging in all the illegal activities and yet maintained the stance of revolution. The ideology which may have been there has now gone and illegal economic reasons further fuelled the movement. The strength of these groups is in staying divided and keeping the “divide” to gain for themselves and indulge in corruption. The common man and the populace are the sufferers here. The State has seen no development of any kind due to the fact that it oscillates between the communities or between the hills and the valley. Every move is seen as either Meitei or Kuki or Naga and never as “Manipuri”. Why can’t the Kukis, the Nagas, and the Meiteis of Manipur having the same look, same appearance, belonging to the same racial stock, and same linguistic group learn the survival game and make a common front under the common

identity as a Manipuri, and set a goal to look for a commonplace to live in.¹⁶

The citizens have suffered due to various bandhs and counter bandhs. Children, women, elders, and workers all have a stake in the future of the state and have suffered at the hands of these armed groups, purporting ideological-based struggle. These groups have no inclination to take forward the peace process or even participate. They do not want a solution. Hence, the very facet of life suffers. The state of Manipur suffers—all for identity crisis and ethnic fault line. Today’s Manipur seeks Convergence.

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CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)

RPSO Complex, Parade Road, Delhi Cantt, New Delhi 110010

Tel.: +91-11-25691308, Fax: +91-11-25692347, Email: landwarfare@gmail.com

Website: www.claws.in

CLAWS Army No. 33098