

Issues, Responses, and Consequences: An Analysis of Persistent Imbroglio in Manipur

Raile Rocky

Manipur, the land of jewel, is increasingly turning into the land of conflict zone. Various reasons are responsible for this transition. The complicated multidimensional issues, mostly violent in nature, that afflicts the land accounts for the land being distinct from other states in the region. Historically, the state has witnessed high level of violence, particularly armed insurrection and political violence directed, in equal measure against settlers, against different ethnic groups and the authorities, stemming mostly from ethnic and state subjugation. There has been a continuous engagement on the part of the state to address issues and crisis in the Northeast in general and Manipur in particular but it has remained unresolved till date. Using content analysis and historiography this paper analyses pertinent issues of boundary contestation, insurgency and ethnic identity, the nature of state's response and its consequences.

Keywords: Manipur, Insurgency, Conflict, Imbroglio, Issues, Responses, Consequences.

Introduction

Northeast India comprises of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. What distinguishes these states from the rest of country is the sensitive geopolitical location with the existence of diverse ethnic groups with different historical backgrounds. Predominantly there are two views of the North East viz. outsiders and insiders view. The former sees the region as a relatively unitary entity, delimited by India's boundaries with other countries and the later sees as an extreme diversity: of tribes, communities, languages, religions, customs, traditions and histories (Miri, 2007). However, diverse views about the region may be, the fact remains that Northeast as a whole is not a single entity with a common political destiny rather it comprises of eight sub-national states.

Historically, the region has witnessed high level of violence particularly armed insurrection and political violence directed, in equal measure against settlers, against different ethnic groups and the authorities, stemming mostly from ethnic and state subjugation.

Raile Rocky is with Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

tion. "It was among the first regions to demonstrate, on the attainment of Independence, signs of severe political crisis in the form of nationalist movement" (Hassan 2007: 1). "Furthermore, plagued with dreadful inter-ethnic clashes, ever-growing separatist demands and criminalized insurgencies illustrated by the press, the Northeast soon got tagged with the unenviable epithet of the 'sick man' of India" (Egreteau, 2007:5).¹ There has been a continuous engagement on the part of the state to address issues and crisis in Northeast but it has remained unresolved till date due to its complexities and cross cutting issues prevailing in the region, particularly in the state of Manipur. It is true that given the multifaceted issues, it is extremely difficult on the part of the state to come up with a solution which is acceptable to all ethnic groups. This article analyses some of the prominent issues prevailing in the state such as boundary contestation, insurgency, and ethnic identity and what has been the response on the part of the state and the subsequent consequences stemming from such response.

Northeast and its Discourse

Any attempt at understanding, either at the policy level or at the theoretical discourse, the root cause of any issue in the region by treating Northeast as a whole and taking it as a reference point will be futile given that the issues are multilayered and multidimensional. Misra (2000) points out that the very term used i.e. "Northeast", itself is problematic as the region represents varied cultural mosaic and has never considered itself to be one compact unit. He further argues that "one has to recognize that there are many different communities in the region and the dynamics of each single movement have to be taken care of, if any solution is to be achieved" (Misra, 2000). Hussain (2004) also makes a similar observation and states that "by bracketing the eight Northeastern state, with its diverse tribes, customs and cultures, into what is called the 'Northeast' we tend to ignore the distinct identity and sub-national aspirations of these ethnic groups". More so, such clubbing together of the region, in an attempt to look at it as a single entity, has led to stereotyping of the problem that plague the area (Haokip, 2011). "The North Eastern states of India may be looked upon as a political unit for the purposes of administrative convenience by the Government of India today, but historically at no point of time has it ever been a political unit, either culturally, economically or politically" (Sharma, 2004: 1). Haokip (2011: 113-114) further makes an observation on the issue and states that:

It is true that the northeastern region shares certain common problems like ethnic unrests, insurgency, immigration, drug trafficking, communication gap, etc. however, there are severe intra-regional differences in social issues and ethno-political aspirations. The region is, in fact, one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse region in Asia and each state has its distinct cultures and tradition.

The reorganisation and bifurcation of Assam into autonomous states and union territories, and eventually granting statehoods complicated the issue in the region, as many insurgent groups demanded sovereignty which were suppressed by the Indian state. For instance, the state of Nagaland was created in 1963 by joining the then Naga Hills district of Assam and Tuensang and excluded Nagas in Manipur in the state boundary.

Since then, Northeast India remained a contested region with different ethnic groups demanding either separate state within the Indian Union or Sovereign country like that of Naga movement. Of all the states in the region, the problems of Manipur displayed the most complex with cross-cutting issues and challenges.

Overview of Manipur

Manipur, a tiny state located at the Northeastern corner of India, was described by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as the “Land of Jewels” and “Switzerland of India” by Lord Irwin (Sharma and Usha 2001). However, the state has now become the land of conflicts. Manipur is an isolated hill-grit state stretching between 92°58'E to 94°45'E longitudes and 23°50'N to 25°42'N latitudes. It has 352 km long international border with Myanmar, to the southeast, and 502 km long border with the adjacent states of Nagaland on the north, Cachar District of Assam on the west and Chin Hills (Myanmar) and Mizoram on the south and the southwest and Surma Tract and upper Chindwin of Myanmar on the East. The altitude of the State above the mean sea level varies from 790 metres to 2020 metres.

Manipur lost her independence to the British India in the year 1891. From 1892 onwards it became a princely native state under the political control of Government of British India. Accordingly, the administration of the State was under a political agent who was vested with all executive powers. This British Paramountcy continued till 1947 when India got independence.

According to a merger agreement signed on 21 September 1949 between Maharaja Bodhachandra, the then king of Manipur, and the government of India, the state was merged into India as a part “C” State on 15 October 1949 and administered by the President of India through a Chief Commissioner. This was replaced by the territory Council consisting of 30 elected members and two nominated members was constituted on 16 August 1957. Manipur became a full-fledged state within the Indian Union with a Governor as the Head of the state on 21 January 1972 and the members of the Legislative Assembly was increased to 60.

“Manipur is a conglomeration of various communities... it is home to thirty-three recognised Schedule Tribes (STs) which broadly belong to the ethnic Naga and Zo (Chin/Kuki/Lusei) groups” (Gangte 2002, cited in Suan 2009: 268). According to 2001 Census, the Meiteis constitutes the majority group inhabiting 10.2 percent of the total geographical area of the state which accounts for about 65.8 percent of the total population of the state. Conversely, the Naga and Zo people occupy 89.98 percent of the total geographical area and accounts for 34.2 percent of the total population of the state. They are represented by twenty (out of sixty) and one (out of three) elected members in the state legislative assembly and the Indian parliament respectively. Meiteis are confined mostly in the plain districts (popularly known as valley) and Naga and Zo are confined to hills districts of the state. “Manipur is a classic case where ethnocultural boundaries broadly coincide with territorial space” (Suan, 2009: 268). Like many other insurgencies in the Northeast, Manipur insurgency movements too followed in the line of ethnicity.

Tribal groups struggling for recognition and/or secession from the Union of India as well as ethnic groups violently fighting against one another are a part of everyday life in Manipur (Egreteau, 2006). Over the years, Manipur has become the most eloquent illustration of inter-ethnic fighting between minorities which has turned into a settling of scores between various criminal groups (ibid. 2006: 52).

Issues in Manipur

Issues in Manipur are complex, multi-dimensional, multilayered, deep rooted and intractable, which have been protracted for more than half a century and this makes Manipur state characteristically different from the other Northeastern states. Some of the issues prevailing in the state are corruption at all levels, insurgency, counter insurgency, self-determination movement, ethnic conflict, trafficking, illegal border trade (includes drugs, arms and ammunition), increasing number of HIV-AIDS related cases, rising extortion, kidnapping, unemployment, public unrest, growing gap between hills and valley, state atrocities and political violence, political crisis, fake encounter, human rights violation, lack of development and infrastructure, dwindling of state-society relationship, and economic blockage. In the following paragraphs an analysis is made on some of the prominent issues in Manipur which has remained unresolved and elusive to both the state and civil society.

Boundary Contestation in Manipur

The British rule in India followed the policy of non-interference when it came to hill communities particularly in North East India and Manipur in specific. "The policy of non-interference was followed by area expedition that were resorted to in order to quell opposition of the hill communities to the colonial extension of commercial activities in and through their land" (Shimray 2001: 3674). Subsequently, tribal communities in Manipur, who predominantly inhabited the hill areas, were forcefully merged to the princely state of Manipur for the so called "administrative convenience". Eventually the hill communities in Northeast India were brought under different territorial administrative authorities and hence the concept of territorial politics was thus introduced, hitherto unknown to the hill communities (ibid.). Pre-independent Northeast Frontier comprises of Assam and the two princely states of Manipur and Tripura. The post-independent period witnessed reorganisation and redrawing of boundary in the region. For instance, the state of Nagaland was created in 1963 to appease the Naga movement for sovereignty. Similarly, the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act of 1969 provided a semi-autonomous Meghalaya and Manipur which were upgraded to statehood in 1972. This reorganisation leads to territorial politics and shatters all ethnic relations and their aspirations. The most prominent example of this case is that of the Nagas. They were divided and put under various administrative units viz. Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar. The Naga movement spearheaded by various armed groups and civil society organisation, particularly United Naga Council in Manipur shares the dream for Greater Nagalim and demands "alternative arrangement" outside the government of Manipur.

Manipur is clearly divided on the lines of hills and valley areas. Administra-

tively, the state is divided into nine districts. There are five hills districts dominated by tribal communities and three valley based districts inhabited by Meiteis. Administration in the hill areas were largely a village based autonomous self-governance, guided and governed by its own customary laws and practices and remained outside the state until the attainment of statehood in 1972. “The Manipur case was one of the extreme duality—a centralised state in the valley region and village-based autonomous authorities in the surrounding Hills” (Hassan, 2007: 6). The nature of differences between the hills and the valley complicates and strengthens the conflicts. “The resultant inter-group contests over power, resources and symbols between hill and valley groups and that amongst the hill groups themselves, using ethnic principle further drilled in identity attachments and created condition for multiple ethnic contestations” (ibid).

Hills areas in Manipur largely remain undeveloped and lack basic infrastructure and service like healthcare facilities, educational institution, public distribution system, transportation, etc. The average sex ratio and literacy rate of five hills districts of Manipur according to 2011 census is 948 and 76.48 percent; whereas four valley district stands at 1012 and 80.63 percent.² In the name of safeguarding tribal communities in the hill areas, many provisions and Acts have been passed and implemented by the Government of Manipur. The reservation policy for tribals in the public sector has been fixed at 31 percent as compared to their population proportion of above 37 percent. However, their actual share in public sector, as released by the Government of Manipur (2003b), is much lower: 20.3 percent in Medical department, 8.5 percent in education department, 21.80 percent in state police, and 16 percent in the Secretariat service. This imbalance is well reflected in the allocation of budgetary resources for the five tribal districts: 26 percent in the Education department, 25 percent in Health, 22 percent in Public Work department, 14 percent in Social Welfare, 12 percent in Agriculture (Government of Manipur, 2004). Hassan (2007) argues that the developmental skewedness in Manipur is due to the poor capability of the state agencies and the inability of its leaders to remain autonomous from powerful social forces among the majority community and reach out meaningfully to the minority groups.

State Intervention

The Government of Manipur has introduced separate laws, provisions and Acts for the tribal peoples (hills areas) in Manipur. For the administration of Hills areas the Government of Manipur has introduced: The Manipur Hill People’s (Administration) Regulation Act, 1947; the Manipur Village Authorities (Hill Areas) Act, 1956; the Manipur (Hill Areas) Acquisition of Chief’s Rights Act, 1967; and the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Councils Act, 1971 subsequently this Act was Amended in 2008 and renamed it as the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council, Bill 2008 and the word Autonomous was removed and many provision were cut down. Besides, a Hill Areas Committee (HAC) comprising elected members of the legislative assembly from the hill areas was in place since Manipur was a union territory (Bhatia, 2010). In spite of many such provisions and Acts after Acts, the gap between Hills and Valley continued to grow. The rights of the tribal people in Manipur were suppressed brutally, and any resistance or movements by the tribals for their rights were branded as a law and order problem in order to justify the

state's repression of tribal people and their rights. Moreover, Manipur is the only state in Northeast India where both the Fifth and Sixth Schedule of the constitution were not applied in the tribal areas. Hassan (2007) argues that "State power vested in an exclusivist Meitei elites severely reduced the state's legitimacy in the eyes of the minority tribal communities in the state."

Consequence

Tribal peoples of Manipur have been demanding the status of Sixth Schedule of the Constitution but their demands were continuously ignored by the successive governments. Instead they were humiliated with Acts which were against not only their wishes but were a threat to their age old customary practices. For instance, the government by introducing Village Authority Act, 1956, attempted to extend its control in the hill areas and to regularise the land holding system. Traditionally, village administration was carried out by nominating member from each clan in the village but the government introduced village authority whose members would be elected and whose size would depend on the number of taxpaying household in their respective villages. The practice introduced was not in any way conducive to the people yet it was enforced without taking into consideration the disastrous effect on the overall cultural relationship between various tribes and clans. This is one of the factors that led to the formation of more ethnic based insurgency group in the state as the state failed to meet the demands of the people in a peaceful and democratic way. The consequences of indifferent attitude of the government towards certain ethnic groups resulted in armed movement for protection of ethnic territory and natural resources. The Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council, Bill 2008 was opposed by All Tribal Students' Union, Manipur and carried out rallies, blockade, protest but the government finally conducted the election for district councils in 2010. "The unified demand of all tribal communities (despite protracted tensions between some of them such as the Nagas and Kukis, Paites and Kukis or Kukis and Zomis) was that the Act be modify to include the provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution" (Bhatia, 2010: 41). With the opposition from Meities and their indifference towards the tribals and their demand to strengthen local governance for more autonomy it has again resulted into ethnic tension particularly hills areas and the valley based ethnic groups in the state. The inability of the state to come up with amicable solution and existing ethnic contestations in the state lead to crisis and breakdown in state-society relationship. "As result, politics in the region has moved to the streets and protests, public curfews and blockades by public organisations, many with active support of armed groups, have become commonplace" (Sandhan, 2004).

Insurgency

Insurgency and insecurity has become a part of everyday life in Manipur. Egreteau (2006) argues that Manipur is the best example of 'an ethnically torn-out state that has slipped into criminality and indiscriminate violence'. In fact, it is true that even insurgency movement in the state follow the lines of ethnicity. Manipur is one of the most disturbed states

and has the highest number of insurgent groups.³ The state today is riddled with multiple conflicts wherein most of the conflict are in such a way that there are conflicts within conflict and so on to the point that even trying to understand a conflict has become quite impossible. However, before coming to the root cause of insurgency and state response, it is crucial to understand the term “insurgency”. There is no universally accepted definition of insurgency and the debate still continue as whether to include all forms of armed opposition that are visible within the definition or should it be confined only to those organised secessionist movement targeting the state. The popular definition describes insurgency as “an armed insurrection or uprising against an established civil authority, while the person engaging themselves in insurgency are called the insurgents.” Anand (1981: 28) described insurgency as “an extra constitutional, competitively progressive and variegated struggle launched against the incumbent authority by a consciously mobilised section of indigenous masses for the fulfilment of certain conceptual goals manifesting emancipation.”

Insurgency groups in the state can be broadly classified in the lines of ethnicity viz. a) The Naga, b) Meitei, and c) Kuki-Chin.

a) Naga based insurgent group

- Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah)
- Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim (Khaplang)
- People’s Support Group (PSG)

b) Meitei based insurgent groups

- People’s Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK)
- Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP)
- Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL)
- United People’s Party of Kangleipak (UPPK)

c) Kuki-Chin insurgents under Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and United Peoples’ Front - (UPF)

- Kuki Nationa Front (KNF)
- United Socialist Revolutionary Army (USRA)
- Zou Defence Volunteer (ZDV)
- Zomi Reunification Organisation (ZRO)
- Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA)
- Kuki Liberation Army (KLA)
- Kuki National Army (KNA)

Indeed, Mr. S.K. Sinha (Former Governor of Assam) remarked that so many insurgency outfits have mushroomed in the Northeast since independence that almost all the letters of the roman alphabet have been used to name them and this is very true even in the case of small state like Manipur. In order to have a better insight, one has look the root causes of the insurgency and what has been the response of the state.

The roots of the problem and demands of insurgencies in the state vary from secessionism to demands for state or sub-state within India, or to protect ethnic territoriality and natural resources i.e. land and cultural identities (Bhattacharjee, 2007). There is no common platform or meeting point of insurgency groups in the state as their causes

and demands vary and often clash with each other. Unlike Maoist movement,⁴ insurgency in Manipur does not focus on the question of development rather it is more of an assertion of ethnic identity and protection of territoriality, demands for separate sovereign state, and autonomy within the state. For instance, Meitei insurgency started due to the annexation of Manipur into the Union of India and they fight for sovereign Manipur state. Srikanth (2007) on the other hand argues that the anti-feudal struggles in the princely state of Manipur gave rise to Meitei nationalism. However, the case of Naga is again different from that of Meiteis. Nagas do not fight directly with the state of Manipur, rather they revolt against the Indian State. It is the case of failure on the part of the Indian political elites and dividing Nagas into different states.⁵ Naga insurgency groups fight for Greater Nagalim.⁶ Srikanth (2007: 42-43) has summarised the cause of Naga insurgent movement in the following way:

As they had little or virtually no contact with the rest of the Indians, the Nagas found it difficult to identify themselves with the Indian State and the Indian people. Naturally, they had their doubts and fear about the consequences of joining the Indian Union. Instead of being sensitive to their suspicions and feelings, the Indian political elite then acted like a big brother and used its armed forces to integrate the Naga inhabited areas with the Indian Unions as against the wishes of the Nagas. Therein lied the beginnings of Naga insurgency.

Nagas in Manipur shared the aspiration of “Greater Nagalim” and they are in conflict with the Indian State and not with Manipur state per se. However, Meiteis on the other hand are totally against the demand of Nagas for greater Nagalim⁷ rather, they want the integrity of the state of Manipur. Meitei insurgent groups such as People’s Liberation Army, PREPAK, oppose the Indian state and they do not accept the Manipur Merger Agreement of 21 September 1949 under which the state accede to the Indian Union, rather they seek self-determination (Chenoy, 2010). The Kuki-Chin based insurgent groups demand for more autonomy within the state. To complicate the issue, each insurgent group in the state invoke history, identity, religion, ethnicity, nationalism, human rights, international law, the principle of right to self-determination, the concept of time, the notion of territoriality etc. in order to justify their respective political mobilisation (Kangujam, 2011). Given this complex nature of insurgency, it is extremely difficult on the part of the state to come up with an amicable solution acceptable to all ethnic groups. I will now look into the state response to insurgency in Manipur.

State Response to Insurgency

For state “National Security” is the primary concern. Any disturbances and armed uprisings or armed struggles are considered as an assault and direct challenge to the legitimacy of the state. When modern state faces such situation, it uses its legitimate rights of violence and force to bring back normalcy of the law and order. It is the responsibility of the state to maintain peace, law and order. However, in the case of Manipur, the state failed to address the root causes of insurgency and rather dealt with the issue from the vantage of “law and order” problem thereby suppressing such movements with brutal force and violence. This was clearly reflected in their strategies to tackle insurgencies

and armed conflicts in the state. The State government along with the Central government used various strategies to address the issue of insurgency and the prominent strategy has been the security paradigm and security related development initiative. This consists of maintaining the status quo and putting insurgencies with the use of force to regain control and establish law and order (Chenoy and Chenoy, 2010).

Hill areas of Manipur, particularly Naga dominated areas were declared as a disturbed area in 1960 and subsequently the Armed Forces (Special Power) Act, 1958⁸ was applied. This was justified in the name of tackling and controlling the operation of Naga insurgency in the hill areas. Meitei insurgency re-emerged in late 1970s with a demand for self-determination and against to the merger agreement of 1949. They unleashed a violent campaign in the valley. To tackle the situation, the government declared the valley region of the state as disturbed areas and imposed the AFSPA, in September 1980. AFSPA was first imposed in the hill areas and then to the entire state in 1980. In October 26, 1981 three insurgent groups namely the People's Liberation Army (PLA), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) and Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) were notified as unlawful organisation and fell under the POTA (Prevention of Terrorism Act) 2002, as a result, they are labeled as "terrorist organisation". Subsequently, United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) were also added to the list of unlawful organisation.

Counter-insurgency, crackdowns, and encounters as strategies to fight insurgencies in the state were effectively deployed by the government with full support from the centre. These activities are carried out both by the state forces and paramilitary forces deployed by Home Ministry. In the wake of this, many operations was launched such as "Blue Bird Operation" (1987-88), "Operation All Clear" (2004-07), resulting in the loss of many innocent lives and injuring thousands. Most of the initiatives such as peace talks, cease fire agreement and agreement on Suspension of Operations (SoO) are carried by central government in New Delhi rather than government of Manipur. For instance, when the Central government signed an agreement with Kuki insurgency groups for SoO, the government of Manipur opposed the move justifying that "any arrangement contemplated or finalized for SoO and subsequent negotiation will not be acceptable to the state government if these involve discussion/negotiation about issue relating to the territorial integrity of the state or adversely affects the interest of its people, at any stage or in any way".⁹ Currently Kuki-Chin based insurgent groups are under the Suspension of Operations since 2008 and NSCN(IM) is in cease fire agreement since 1997 and they are in the process of talk (i.e. Indo-Naga Peace talk).

Consequence

The straight forward approach in tackling insurgency problem in the state is purely on law and order paradigm. This leads to various protest and creates unrest in the state. Citizens are caught in the cross-road of insurgency and counter-insurgency measure adopted by the state. Prior to imposition of AFSA in the state, there were only four insurgent groups i.e. one in the hill areas and three in valley. However, there was mushrooming of insurgency after AFSPA was imposed in the state. It might seem too rash and narrow to attribute the mushrooming of insurgency to the imposition of draconian law,

AFSPA, but again it will be unintelligent not to consider such possibilities and completely untrue to deny that the callous nature and response of the state resulted in the formation of various insurgencies. The number of insurgency groups jumps from just four to thirty five in Manipur. Bhattacharjee (2007: 4) argues that,

The failure of the Indian state to politically tackle the problem at initial stages and to eliminate the conditions for the new demands and the groups to emerge is believed to be the justifiable reasons for the multiplicity and sustenance of the menace that the region has already suffered for such a long time.

The strategy of militarisation in the state resulted into formation of more insurgent groups and loss of innocent lives rather than bringing peace in the state. The society as a whole has been protesting for the removal of AFSPA in Manipur and atrocities committed by armed forces. Thousands of innocent lives have been lost and there is unrest and insecurity in the state due to imposition of this Act. According to Hanjabam (2009) compilation from 1980 to 30 May 2007, 2675 civilian and 1314 militants were killed; 2061 civilians were injured in counter-insurgency operation and 865 militants surrendered. According to Centre for Development and Peace Studies data, in 2009 -2010, there were 424 militants, 101 civilian, and 25 security forces were killed.¹⁰

Civil society organisations in Manipur such as Meira Paibis (women activist group), the Kuki Women's Union, Naga Women's Movement etc. has been carrying out various campaigns and demonstration for restoration of peace and removal of AFSPA in the state. The famous campaign of hunger strike against the AFSPA which was launched by Irom Sharmila has already passed a decade and has caught international attention but the government of Manipur and the Centre remain a silent observer. Even though various civil society based organisation have played a significant role in the state for restoring peace, protection of human rights, campaign against draconian laws, there is always an element of ethnic identity and conflicting interests of those organisations.

The structural violence emerging out of the creation of social and political structures has deprived people of Manipur their rights in terms of safety, respect, participation, economy, identity and culture.

Ethnic Identity

Ethnic politics has overshadowed development discourse in Northeast India. However, ethnicity is an important factor that influences the complex social and political relations in the region (Barbora, 2002). Manipur is a conglomeration of various ethnic communities. These groups can broadly be classified into three communities viz. The Nagas, the Kukis, and the Meiteis. Manipur is home to thirty three recognised Schedule Tribes (ST) belonging to ethnic group Naga and Zo (Kuki-Chin-Mizo). Meiteis comprise of Meitei-Pangal (Muslim) and Meitei (Vaishnavite Hindu). Manipur has emerged as a conflict zone due to assertion of ethnic identity and rights among the three struggling communities. These ethnic communities compete and contest to carve out their exclusive political space through ethnic mobilisation which leads to ethnic conflict. The Nagas fight for

their political space defined in terms of Greater Nagalim and United Naga Council (UNC)¹¹ demands an alternative arrangement outside the Manipur State, the Kukis on the other hand demand Kuki land and also a separate district of Sadar Hills. The Meiteis, however, assert Manipuri identity or pan-Manipuri and protection of territorial integrity and sovereignty of the state. Every ethnic community in state assert its rights and often clash with others. For instance, Nagas are totally against the creation of Sadar Hill district for Kukis, Meiteis are against the demands of Nagas for an alternative arrangement, Hmars and Paite are fighting for their identity within Kukis. Each ethnic group justifies its own stand and their cause and blame each other to the point that the phrase “everyone is equally right and everyone is equally wrong” amply describes the situation in the region.

Oinam (2003) argues that identity formation by more than 30 communities and tribes harping on exclusivity, integration and dominance, often results in several forms of conflict that would provide ground for several observations and narratives, that may not even have meeting points. To complicate the already conflict prone state of Manipur, the other more pervasive conflict is that of inter and intra-ethnic conflict which is prevailing on a large scale. In early 1990s, ethnic conflict in the state upgraded to the internal wars and became bloodier when three major ethnic armed outfits namely Nagas, Meiteis and Kukis entered into a fierce conflict for gaining power (Egreteau, 2006). The bloodiest ethnic conflict in the state was witnessed between Kukis and Nagas in 1993 that continued till 1996. Thereafter, there was a series of ethnic conflict such as Kuki-Paite (identity conflict), Meitei and Pangals (Muslim of Manipuri), tension between Nagas and Meiteis.

Shimray (2001: 3675) has articulated in-depth on the issue of ethnicities. He argues that the emergence of distinct ethnicities in Manipur is a consequence of the following factors:

- (i) distinctive social and cultural identities manifested by all social groups in the state;
- (ii) limited social and cultural interaction between the different ethnic groups despite the physical and linguistic affinities among them, and (iii) heightened importance of historical and religious differences in political struggles against the dominance of larger and more powerful ethnic groups.

The state too is caught on the cross road on the issue of ethnic diversities and conflict. As ethnic violence in the state exists alongside inter-ethnic contestations over natural resources especially land and protection of ethnic territoriality. As a result the state finds itself pulled in different direction with no ability to provide a solution which would be acceptable to all ethnic groups. I shall now look into the response of the state to the issue of ethnic identity and demands.

State response and Consequence

The recent ethnic clash between the Nagas and the Kukis represents the complex nature of the conflict and the helplessness of the state in resolving such issue. With both side claiming their inalienable right over the land with equal justification and force has put the state in an awkward situation. The Kukis demand for an up-gradation of Sadar Hills

to a full-fledged revenue district has been going on for the past two decade. The demand intensified with the Kukis resorting to economic blockade, which continued for 92 days, paralysing the state. However the state's assurance and promise for a solution to the demand of the Kukis led to the Nagas resorting to similar tactics, which was even longer than the Kukis, to prevent the formation of a district on the ground that the Kukis have no right in usurping the ancestral land of the Nagas.

With the government caught in the middle and with the solution delayed, the Kukis further intensified their protest in the form of burning down government offices, schools, destructing public infrastructure, goods and services, protest, public rallies, and hunger strike. Finally, the government of Manipur in October 2011 agreed to upgrade the Sadar Hills to full-fledged revenue district. As expected Nagas in Manipur responded with protests. The UNC strongly asserted their stand not to accept bifurcation of Naga areas without the wishes and consent of the Nagas asserting that, the Nagas have been resisting arbitrary encroachment and creation of artificial boundaries of their land since colonial period and hence any attempt on the part of the government of Manipur to create Sadar Hills will not be tolerated (UNC, 2011). "Formerly, Sadar Hills had belonged to the Nagas but because of the policy followed by the Manipur Maharaja and British political agent's, this settlement was given to the Kukis in order to act as a buffer between the Meitei and Nagas' (Honray, 1981:31, cited in Shimray, 2001: 3677). The UNC again asserted that the Nagas had signed four MoUs with the Government of Manipur, wherein the MoU of 1998 stated that the resolution to the conflict on the issue of Sadar Hills will be brought about through a consensus of the people's concerned in the interest of bringing about lasting peace and harmony between the Nagas and Kukis.¹² As a result of both party's reluctance and non-negotiable stand, the issue till date remain unresolved. Thus Sadar Hills remain a contentious issue between Nagas and Kukis with the government unable to find any solution.

Concluding Remarks

The quest for peaceful coexistence of various ethnic communities in Northeast India and Manipur in particular, has led various people from different field, discipline, and walks of life to examine and question the idea of state: its role, legitimacy and nature, and many a times, subsequently blaming or crediting the state for lawlessness or political crisis and resistance movement. While trying to understand the complexity of the issues and providing answers on how and what strategies/solutions should be, various academicians, scholars, activists and those concerned with complex issues in Northeast have critically looked at various factors, which they perceive as either promoting or impeding development, such as the political nature of state, institutions, systems, market, dominant ideologies, relations between various nationalists and so on.

The Pro-state view the existing and prolonged issues as a case of political isolation, economic underdevelopment, poor infrastructure, maladministration, rampant unemployment, and widespread poverty in the region. However, issues in Manipur go beyond the question of development. For instance, Nagas in Manipur didn't raise the question of development rather their concern is with the issue of ethnic territoriality and the dream of greater Nagalim. It is also true to the case of Meitei insurgency; they are fight-

ing for the sovereignty of Manipur as a whole. It is essential to look into the root causes of every issues prevailing in the state to bring an amicable solution. Srinkanth (2007) argues that mushrooming of ethnic based insurgency in the region is due to the failure of the ruling elites of the newly formed states in coming out with pragmatic strategies to deal with the existential dilemmas of the affected native communities, gave birth to ethnic identity movements.

Many scholars attempts to explain Northeast's enduring instability and violence. Weiner (1989) pointed out that it is due to the weakening of modern political institutions to deal with local religious, linguistic, caste and regional concerns that led to sectional contestations resulting in the spiral of community conflict and violence in India generally and in the Northeast. Shimray (2004) argues that the unequal power structure and intra-community competition over resources account for the region's many conflict. "The shape this breakdowns take, depended on how well Central authority was institutionalised and how willing ruling groups were to share power and resources with mobilised groups" (Kohli 1998: 7). Scholars like Baruah (2005), and Chandhoke (2005) argues that it is due to the poor performance of political institutions in India, particularly the violation of the federal principle by the Central state, and the emergence of the patterns of cosmetic federalism – the national state's centralising tendencies and its overriding power to cut up sub-national territories – that explains why rebellions have occurred so frequently in the region. Hassan (2007) argues that "Ethnic grievances, deinstitutionalisation of the Central polity, 'cosmetic' federalism, and 'ethnic mapping' may explain intensification (or decline) of group conflicts in India, generally."

The complex issues such as insurgency, ethnic violence and contestation, divide between hills and valley prevailing in Manipur and the inability of the state to come up with amicable solution prevailing in the state led to crisis and breakdown in state-society relationship. The state considers this as a law and order problem and addresses through militarisation and security related development scheme but it fails to solve the prolonged issues as the state is not willing to recognise the prevailing political issue in Manipur as a normal issue.

Notes

¹ Prominent inter-ethnic clashes being the Naga-Kuki (1992-96), and the Kuki-Paite (1997-98), Meitei-Pangal (1993) conflict in Manipur; Hmar-Dimasa violence in Assam (2003), tribals communities-Non Tribal communities violence in Tripura (1979-1980); and the ongoing inter-tribal conflict in Nagaland and Manipur.

² The average was calculated based on the provisional table released by Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India. Accessed on 21 March 2012, http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/prov_data_products_manipur.html

³ There are 33 active insurgency groups operating in the state. Out of thirty three, five armed groups fell under the POTA (Prevention of Terrorism Act) as a result, they are labeled as "terrorist organization". They are People's Liberation Army (PLA), (KCP), (PREPAK), (UNLF), Kanglei Yawol Kunna Lup (KYKL). Incidentally, all these five groups belonged to Meitei base insurgency.

⁴ ‘We are fighting for the socio-economic demands of the people as well as for the qualitative change of the very basic structure of the society. In course of revolutionary struggle, forming united fronts and even fragile strategic united front. We have to strive hard to mobilize masses in the war against their enemies and build own army and establish stable base areas and march forward to build a strong united front. In general people and Maoist revolutionaries do not want violence or armed confrontation with anybody. In unavoidable condition only they take up arms and resist their enemies and they are waging liberation war by learning from the history. So, we see this as a war of self-defence (Ganapathy, 2010). For details see, Jan Myrdal and Gautam Navlakha (2010, January), In conversation with Ganapathy, General Secretary of CPI (Maoist), Unpublished interview.

⁵ Nagas were divided and put into different states even though majority of Nagas remained in the state of Nagaland. Four districts in Manipur are dominated by Nagas, two districts are again dominated by Nagas in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagas are also found in Assam and Bangladesh.

⁶ Fighting for integration of all Nagas inhabited areas and sharing the same dream of imagined “Greater Nagalim”.

⁷ There was a huge protest by Meiteis when the Centre Government extended cease fire agreement with NSCN (IM) without territorial limit in June 2002. As a result, the centre government withdrew its decision and cease fire was limited only to the state of Nagaland. This also resulted into intensification of ethnic cold war between the Nagas and Meiteis in Manipur.

⁸ This Act permits arrest without warrant, with whatever force necessary, of any person against whom suspicion exists. Under this Act, all security forces are given unrestricted and unaccounted power to carry out their operations, once an area is declared disturbed. Even a non-commissioned officer is granted the right to shoot to kill based on mere suspicion that it is necessary to do so in order to “maintain the public order”.

⁹ The Minutes of the State Cabinet meeting as quote in Outlook. Outlook, 12 December 2005, Available at <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?229503> (accessed on 14 March 2012)

¹⁰ For details see CDPS data. Available at http://cdpsindia.org/manipur_assessment.asp (accessed on 14th March 2012)

¹¹ UNC is an Apex body of Nagas in Manipur. The tripartite talks between Government of Manipur, Government of India and UNC fails to result any positive change as all the stakeholder does not compromise on their stand.

¹² Available at <http://e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=21..090811.aug11> accessed on 21 March 2012.

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