

## **Drugs, Small Arms Proliferation and its Casualties: The Tragedy of Commons in Manipur**

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The paper is an attempt to delve into the nexus between insurgency and contra-band narcotics in Manipur by analysing some of the communal clashes in the state and the geopolitical changes that resulted in the present situation. It discusses the close relationship between drug trafficking and insurgency in the state contradicting some of the popular beliefs and claims about the involvement of insurgents in regulating and banning drug trafficking in the state. It also look into the effect on the common people in the political, economic, social and identity issues of the tribals in the hills of Manipur.

**Keywords:** Drugs, Small Arms Proliferation, Manipur, Insurgency

Insurgency has engulfed the state of Manipur for the past five decades, making it one of the most disturbed areas in India. Compounding this is the proximity of Manipur with Myanmar which shares a 358 km long border on the east, and the National Highway 39 leads directly to the “Golden Triangle”, where an estimated 8–10 percent of the global production of opium takes place, from which the purest form of heroin is manufactured (UNODC, 2007). One should also note that Myanmar is one of the important conduits to traffic arms to the North East and other parts of the country and have always been a safe haven for insurgent groups from North East India.

From from time to time, India’s Myanmar policy and vice versa has been fluctuating due to several happenings in both the countries, such as regime change and threat perception (of China) etc., the outcome has always been augured ill and well for both the countries.

Operation “Golden Bird” in April 1995 was an unfortunate failure for Indian diplomacy as India made a move that enraged the Junta in power. The military operations along the border by the Myanmarese army in 2001 and the ensuing raid of four Manipuri rebel camps, the apprehension of top brass officials belonging to the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), and the ousting of a large chunk of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN-K) from their bases is a significant leap in the security concern for the region. However, the failure to endorse such good gesture from a neighbour with appropriate initiative by the Indian authorities spells misfortune for the citizens of

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the North East, especially Manipur, as it had led to the release of the important leaders without much vindication and the maintaining of a robust route for arms and narcotic trafficking at the vicinity of Indian hot bed due to failing governance.

### **Conflicts and Small Arms Proliferation**

Conflict in Manipur has been the result of the tauntification of others history by each ethnic group, easy availability of instruments for skirmish, and the ever failing governance since its statehood in 1972. It has been silently at war within and outside the purview of the people, which is complex, multi-dimensional and deeply rooted to the sentiments of the people. It is vertical as well as horizontal, where non-state actors engaged with the state armed forces and with themselves through factional fights and differences in opinions and demands.

The 1980s saw the emergence of People's Liberation Army's (PLA), which is known to be one of the most effective insurgent groups in South Asia. Large areas of the Imphal Valley were under their indirect control and were acclaimed the world over as the perfect example of Maoist Guerrilla fighters and it was they who ushered in India's first and Asia's second urban insurgency next to the Saigon experience (Mentschel, B, N: 2007). The 1990s have seen much bloodshed and conflicts in the state attributing to the sudden proliferation of ethnic insurgent groups based on tribe or even clan. The first ethnic conflict was the Naga-Kuki conflict from the latter part of 1992 through 1997 which claimed more than a 1,000 lives, resulting in huge property and rendering many as internally displaced and refugees in their own state.<sup>1</sup> This was followed by the sudden proliferation of armed groups amongst the Kukis in response to the hegemony and tactical superiority of, primarily, the NSCN-IM. Prominent amongst them were the Kuki Libreation Army (KLA), Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA), United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF), etc., amongst others. This was possible due to the arms cache easily smuggled and available at the Myanmar border. Here in this route, guns like the M16, Kalashnikov series, Rocket Rropped Grenades (RPG) and other automatic assault rifles and grenade launchers are easily available at manageable prices.

At the heart of Manipur by the mid-nineties, a clash between the Meiteis and Pangals (Muslim) broke out in 1993 resulting to large number of deaths and tension between the two communities. Following the massacre of Muslims by the PLA and other Meitei insurgent groups, some militant Islamic outfits like North East Minority Front (NEMF), Islamic National Front (INF), Islamic Revolutionary Front (IRF), United Islamic Liberation Army (UILA), Islamic Liberation Front (ILF), and People's United Liberation Front (PULF) were formed to counter the challenge of Meitei insurgents (Upadhyay, 2005). This was followed by the Zomi-Kuki ethnic clash in 1997-98 which was as bloody as the previous ethnic clashes, resulting in collateral damages amounting to an estimate of 1,000 lives, with 4,600 houses torched and hundreds of thousands of rupees-worth of property destroyed (Sahni, 2011). The worst affected area in this ethnic conflict has been the district of Churachandpur.

The two intra-tribal ethnic clashes were concluded with an uneasy truce between the ethnic communities and the situation between the warring tribes has been in dormant since then (Hangmi, 2010). Beside the internal conflict, the armed groups have always

been in conflict with the state machineries and law enforcement agents which resulted in extra judicial killings, human rights violation from both sides and kidnapping for ransom, and the primary victim of these conflicts has always been civilians.

As rightly mentioned by Josh Sislina “Light Weapons - Small arms such as AK-47 rifle, mortars and grenade launchers are the mainstay of ethnic conflicts”.<sup>2</sup> In order to sustain this on-going conflict, the armed groups have to find a source of fund that could not be depleted over time. This is where the drug-arms nexus comes into play. It has come into limelight that the major armed groups in the state could not sustain their operations due to the mounting pressure for accountability of Government spending and loss of vital support from the masses. This leads to acute shortage of funds for the continued insurgency and the incomes generated from the money minting industry at gun point or the tax collected amounted to little for the huge military expenditure. Drug trafficking becomes a good option to acquire huge profit without much capital and due to the heavy demand in the black market. These groups deal and peddle in drugs not only in the state but also to other parts of the country and even beyond. The recent arrest of Napoleon Thokchom, a Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) cadre, along with 200 kg of banned ephedrine drugs worth Rs. 2 crore on his way to New Delhi’s Indira Gandhi International Airport on April 2, 2011 speaks volume about the nexus of gun toting activity and the drug cartel (Shivananda, 2011: 8).

### **Narco-insurgency: The New Movement**

The nexus between drug trafficking and gun running in North East India has been increasing of late. Though not becoming pervasive and a visible phenomenon, it has reached an alarming state but not much attention is being given by the state. While the drug money is used to procure arms, arms sale in turn go to finance drug trafficking.<sup>3</sup> This new venture resulted in the protection of drug traffickers by the insurgent group in connivance with the cartels because of the huge cuts paid to the insurgents towards the protection provided by them.

As against the claim made by Binalakshmi Nepram Mentschel, in many cases the insurgent themselves became traffickers working hand in glove with the drug mafias. Insurgent groups like the Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) and the Kanglei Communist Party (KCP) adopt drug trafficking to fund their organisation and activities in order to regroup and set a positive image by not indulging in extortions from the masses<sup>4</sup> - an immediate result of the success of Operation All Clear, 2003 in flushing out major militant stronghold in Manipur. The NSCN-IM and NSCN-K have also been controlling the NH-39 leading to Moreh, an important town for legal and illegal conduits of goods. It has been observed that the groups are engaged in collecting 20 percent tax on the value of drugs and other goods passing through their area.<sup>5</sup> One should remember that this is an important route leading from the notorious “Golden Triangle”. At times the traffickers are often the leaders of insurgent groups across the border like the Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA), which supply heroin in exchange for arms to fight against the army in Myanmar.<sup>6</sup>

The ethnic cleansings/clashes that took place in Manipur also have an added dimension. While many view that the conflict between the Kukis and Nagas arises due to

land disputes etc., what actually sparked off the incident was the result of a bitter struggle to control drug trafficking and smuggling of contraband through the border town of Moreh. The NSCN-IM controlled this illegal commerce till the Kuki-Naga clashes erupted in 1992. The Kukis captured it from the Nagas, but the NSCN-IM remained determined to drive its rival out of Moreh, as well as out of Kuki settlements in the Naga dominated hill districts. The tragedy of such conflict lies in the fact that it had been communalised and taken into communal lines, which resulted in the death of more than a 1,000 people and an enormous loss of property with over 2,000 houses gutted down to the ground.<sup>7</sup> In Churachandpur, the ethnic conflict that entails the Kukis and the Zomis saw the systematic use of heroin by the Kuki National Front (KNF), more or less knowingly, to weaken the ZRA in particular and the Zomis (Ghosal, 2003).

### **Impact of the Narco-Insurgency Venture**

The implication on the people and the society in Manipur is tremendous and increasing. With the number of drug users estimated about 40,000-50,000, nearly half are injecting drug users (IDU). Cases of drug abuse is fast rising in the state of Manipur with 12 percent of drug addicts in the age group till 15 years, 31.32 percent in the age group of 16-25 years and 55.88 percent in the age group of 25-35 years.<sup>8</sup> In Churachandpur, a child as young as 13 years of age can be found addicted to one or more drugs. Apart from the hard-core regular drugs, youths also opted for cheaper and easily available pharmaceutical drugs such as diazepam, spasmoproxyvon, relipent and certain painkillers that give the required anesthesia almost equal to the pushing of heroin. Another alarming trend of the state is that most of the drug users, especially the IDUs, share needles; this, coupled with women drug users becoming female sex workers to pay for their habits, led to the rampant and unprecedented spread of HIV/AIDS in the state during the last 10 years. Street violence and other social crimes have recorded a steep rise; although a visible drug related organised crime or conflict between the insurgents have not been officially recorded. At the political and bureaucratic front, the narco-insurgency venture has occupied almost a total immunity with the insurgent leaders influencing the politicians and the bureaucrats, even when there are arrests made in connection with drug trafficking, the accused in most of the time goes scot free due to their strong nexus with the bureaucrats and politicians. On the contrary, despite the nexus between the drugs-insurgency and the politics of the state, many of the insurgent groups are engaged in operations and overt activities on a drive against drug addiction and the drug trade per se. This had somehow successfully covered up their larger venture by frequently punishing petty peddlers and individual drug pushers. The groups such as the NSCN-IM, UNLF, KYKL, ZRA, etc., were prominently perceived as committed to fighting drug problem and other social evils by the myriad simpleton citizens of the state.

At the economic level, the impact of narco-insurgency is huge. While the number of drug addicts keep increasing at an alarming rate, the expenditure incurred by a person to a household often leads to heavy indebtedness even up to the extent of selling of land and houses. The tribals other than the Nagas in Manipur had particularly suffered a huge set back in terms of their identity and solidarity; the ethnic clash during 1997-98 between the Zomis and the Kukis in Churachandpur district can be attributed to the

proliferation of arms in the area. As the already armed Kuki tribes from the Naga-Kuki conflict started dictating terms upon the Paite-Zomis who were not ready to accept the nomenclature Kuki and rather forged a new nomenclature – Zomi (Suan, 2011). This resulted in the formation of a new-armed group for the Zomis, adding to the already long list of insurgent groups in the state and a bloody ethnic conflict ensuing the huge economic loss for both the constituent tribes. Though the conflict was concluded with a peace accord, the situation still remains largely tense, with both the tribes suspiciously looking at each other.

Today, with most of the insurgent groups, including the NSCN factions, are under ceasefire agreement and Suspension of Operation (SoO), the signatory groups have to abide by the ground rules requiring them to stay at their designated camps with arms locked up; the number and intensity of violence have decreased to a great extent. However, to ensure lasting peace the state should make more effort in fighting the drug trafficking problem by taking advantage of the ceasefire agreement and keeping in mind that much of the armed groups had parted from the path of violence and slowly choosing a democratic way of solving their demands. The Government of India should also grab the opportunity to forge more meaningful diplomatic ties with Myanmar while it became all friendly and democratic to ensure lasting peace and development in this region, by keeping the leverage of “the fear of Chinese dominance” and the wealth of the west through her.

The Government should give due importance to the problem of drug trafficking in Manipur, and recognise the close linkage between drug trafficking and insurgency. By controlling this illicit activity it can eventually weaken the funding, and all the while looking for political solution with these groups. The insurgent groups should also be responsible enough to see how their illicit drug trafficking activity have on the long run on the society, if at all they are concerned about the people they claimed to protect and fight for.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> PS Haokip (1998). “Zale’n-gam: The Kuki nation”. KNO Publication, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Mentioned in Mentschel, “Armed Conflict, Small Arms Proliferation and Women’s Responses to Armed Violence in India’s Northeast”. p. 8

<sup>3</sup>Sinha, S.P. (2012). “Northeast: The Role of Narcotics and Arms Trafficking”

<sup>4</sup>Shivananda, H (2011). “Nexus of Drug Trafficking and Militancy Exposed at New Delhi”. IDSA Comment.

<sup>5</sup>Sinha, S.P. (2012). *Op cit*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *South Asian Terrorist Portal*. Retrieved from <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/manipur/backgrounder/index.html> on 17 December 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Guide lines for the implementation of the project “Awareness and Education for the Prevention of Drug Abuse and Alcoholism in Manipur”. Nehru Yuva Kendra.

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