

Nexus between Conflict and Development in India: A Case of Manipur

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Abstract— India's North Eastern-most State of Manipur is facing onslaught of armed conflicts, ethnic violence and social upheavals, etc, and this jeopardizes the State's overall development process in the last three to four decades. The present study has explored that the social upheaval in the State is basically caused by institutional failures. It is also found that conflict that has been looming in the State for long is an offshoot of lack of economic resources and unequal power relationships between the communities. It can be solved unilaterally by the government with the help of economic and political mechanism, not by force.

Keywords—Conflicts, Development, Identity, Institutional Structure

I. INTRODUCTION

UNFORTUNATELY, the best works of the present any standard economic models have little attention on to the conflict, identity and contestation in dealing with economic development policies. Recently, some extensive debates over the causal relationship between conflict and economic development have been made and their correlation was found to be a negative [27]. India's North Eastern-most State of Manipur has been facing onslaught of armed conflicts, ethnic violence and social upheavals, etc, for about sixty-years and this upheavals jeopardized the State's overall development process to a great extent [(4); (7); (25)]. The similar issues in other sister states in the region have almost been settled or at the stage of controlled. Therefore, conflict resolution has become need of the hour.

The paper attempts to analyse why is the government (centre) apparently benign with other sister states of North Eastern Region (NER) when dealing with public demands while it appears to be malignant in Manipur? What factor(s) led to mass uprising in the State of Manipur and remains unsettled so long – are also raised in this paper? Further, the paper tries to find out some possible alternative ways and means to solve conflict in Manipur.

II. BRIEF PROFILE OF MANIPUR

Manipur covers an area of 22.3 thousand sq km with a total of 27.2 lakhs population as per 2011 census. The State came under the British rule from 1891 till 1947. On 14th August 1947 Manipur regained its sovereignty from the British one day before India got independence and on 15th October 1949

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Manipur was annexed to Indian Union as part 'C' State [(25); (26)]. Ultimately, the status of full-fledged statehood was given on 21st January 1972 and became 20th State of Indian Union. Geographically, the State consists of two regions – hill and valley. The former consists of five districts – Ukhrul, Tamenglong, Churachandpur, Chandel and Senapati, with a total area of 20.09 thousand sq km (9/10th of the State's geographical area), and the latter region covers State's four districts – Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal and Bishnupur, with 2.24 thousand sq km of the State's total geographical area (1/10th of the State's geographical area). Interestingly, the valley area is inhabited by 61.5 percent of the state's population, and approximately 38.5 percent of the State's population lives in the hill region which covers 90 percent of the State's total geographical area. The community or ethnic group inhabits in the valley is known as *Meitei*, a non-tribe community including small fraction of population of Meitei Pangal (*Meitei Muslim*). On the other hand, a total of 33 recognised tribes with other sub-tribes inhabit in the hill areas of Manipur [11]. Though different tribes and sub-tribes in the hills speak their own dialects, Manipuri (*Meitei-lol*), the mother tongue of *Meitei* community, is used as lingua-franca of the State as *Meitei* is the dominant community in the State. Manipur borders with the nation of Myanmar on the east and the Indian States of Nagaland on the north, Assam and Mizoram on the west, and a portion of Myanmar and Mizoram on the south.

III. GENESIS AND TYPES OF CONFLICT IN MANIPUR

As mentioned above, development processes cannot be preceded unless and until social, political and cultural institutions are placed in a proper order. Though it is very difficult to quantify, the role of these non-economic institutions has been recognised as very significant for attaining sustainable economic development. Chaotic social and political institutions often translated into violence or social upheavals in Manipur. Consequently, it leads to negative impact on States' economic condition [4]. It means, violence/conflict breaks down economic structure and impoverishes society. At present, in Manipur, a large section of people are living in the web of insecurities which are not created by them. Delving deeper into the causes, one could ascertain that this is in fact largely caused by failure of the state [1]. The three main types and causes of conflict and violence in Manipur are given below.

A. Defects of Meitei Community

Meidingu Pamheiba (1708 – 1747 AD) became the king of *Kangleipak* (earlier name of Manipur) on 23rd August 1708

AD. He was influenced by *Hinduism* and with the help of *Shantidas Gosai*, a preacher from Sylhet, now in Bangladesh, converted himself from the *Sanamahi*, the original religion of Meitei to the *Ramanandi Sect of Vaisnavism* (Hinduism) in 1710 A.D. [32]. King Pamheiba expelled all his *Maichous* (scholars) and people who opposed to this new religion (Hinduism) to far away from the central valley or the kingdom, *Kangla*, the fort situated in the heart of the State capital – Imphal. Further, as an effort to popularise Hinduism and to make it as a state religion, on a full moon day of October (*Wakching* in Meitei), in 1729 AD, he collected all the Holy books (*Puya*) related to *Sanna-Mahi* religion and burnt them completely, devastated the ancient Manipuri (Meitei) scriptures and cultural history. This is known as *Puya-Meithaba* among Meiteis till today and the day is being remembered as *black day* in Manipur every year [24]. King *Pamheiba* wanted to rewrite the Meitei/Manipuri history in the line with *Hindu* mythology. To intensify further his movement, he leveled the people who defied Hinduism, as *untouchable* or *backward* community. For instances, the '*Loi Communities*' of Manipur which are believed to be the earliest known settlers of Manipur, also known as the *Chakppa*, the ardent followers of the traditional religion (*Sanna-mahi*) were chased out to the far-flung areas by the King (but remained in the valley) on the ground that they refused to embrace Hinduism [24].

However, the communities who did not assimilate with the Meitei are the different communities (*tribes*, at present) in the hills. They continued to follow their original religion (e.g. *Tingkao Raguang Chap* of *Kabui community*), and recently converted themselves into *Christianity* after the arrival of British and Christian Missionaries [29]. Still, some of the tribes are practicing their traditional faiths till today. Nevertheless, the socio-economic conditions of the tribes are relatively weaker than the valley (Meitei) due to prolonged neglect of their basic needs, lack of proper infrastructures and economic resources. Like *Loi Communities*, they were also treated as untouchables by the Kings, one after another and subsequently by the *Meitei* dominant community in the State as well, on the same ground. This is the genesis of division between the two communities (Tribe/hill and Meitei/valley), and it led to revolt against the Meitei dominant group and demanded for self-determination, greater autonomy [12]. This religious and ethnic differences are important social cleavages; the social response to this heterogeneity could generate violence and civil war [19]. Besides, not much care and attention was given by the King of Manipur as well [12] and despite different reservation policies of job, education, land regulation, etc., the economic and political power of the hill communities were still relatively weaker than the Meitei due to limited presence of the state for long. Tribal organisations believed that they have been excluded and the state government has not been fair in distribution of resources to their areas. The poor condition of educational and health services, adverse economic conditions and poor infrastructure in these areas have often been the source of tribal complaints and their consequent anti-state mobilisation [13], and led to anti-Meitei movements. In this

process, they resort to call for economic blockades in the National Highways (NH 39 and NH 53) that are passing through hill areas to put pressure on the government to redress their grievances [31].

Slowly, the demand for separate States and greater autonomy demand of the tribes have emerged. To trace the origin of the same, the demand for merging *Mao area* (Northern part of Senapati District of Manipur, bordering present Nagaland) into Nagaland was initiated in the pre-statehood period and formed tribal revolutionary movement thereafter [26], but not as large as the present scenario of inclusive of all hills/tribes of the State. Besides, religious, economic and political factors, the other important factor that helped to divide the two communities – is the *Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act 1960* (MLR&LR Act 1960). The very Act does not allow valley people/Meitei to buy or own land and cannot settle in the hill. However, the law does not hold good for the hill people.

B. Contestation for Land and Resources

When *Meitei* insurgent groups (mainly United Nations Liberation Front or UNLF) started fighting for sovereignty or independence of Manipur in the early 1960s, the Naga insurgent group led by National Socialist Council of Nagalim-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) was also fighting for *Greater Nagaland* [34] demanded for merging all the Naga dominated districts of Manipur with the present-day Nagaland. With the intensification of Naga integration movement in the recent years, the polarisation of hill communities into two – Kuki and Naga, and division between hill and valley have deepened [(28); (31)]. However, after realising the failure of their dream (NSCN-IM), their demand has now narrowed down to a mere separate administrative arrangement of the community within the Indian framework, but separate from the Manipur government [(19); (28)]. However, some of the complex problems arise by their demand. It can be analysed in few equations—

1. If the aspiration of NSCN-IM or Naga, for separate arrangement [33] is granted, *Kuki* group (equally strong tribal group in the State) will not remain silent as we have seen 135 days economic blockades in 2011 on the issue of creating the *Sadar Hill* area as a revenue district (refer Fig. 1, left side with red area).
2. At the same time, *Kuki* group is also fighting for independent homeland by bifurcating Churachandpur district and a portion of Senapati district (*Sadar Hill* portion) and Chandel districts from the present-day Manipur [6]. However, the dilemma that confronted here is – if the *Kuki's* demand is met, will Naga remain silent, as half of the Senapati district (*Naga's* proposed capital) is losing from their hand [31]?
3. *Hmar* (another tribal group lives in Churachandpur district, bordering Mizoram) is also demanding for merging the district with present-day Mizoram [22], which *Kuki* claims it (*Churachandpur*) as their homeland. This is again resulted in fratricidal clashes, which have then spread into the communities at large.
4. Alternatively, if the two major hill communities – both Nagas and Kukis compromise themselves over the

issue of Sadar Hills area of Senapati district and jointly demand two separate States (one each of Kuki and Naga respectively) by bifurcating hills from the State, will the Meitei satisfy with the four valley districts – Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal and Bishnupur districts? Meitei will not leave easily for two reasons. One, as the National Highways (NHs) are passing through the hill areas and control over the NHs will be out of the hands of Meiteis. The Highway blockade by the hills/tribes is one of the most difficult problems encountered by *Meiteis* community even the administration is controlled by them. It is the only means of transporting essential commodities (food, petroleum products and life saving drugs, etc.) from the other parts of the world. Secondly, besides, Meitei armed groups are taking shelter in the hills, the dream for independent Manipur including hill region is also getting lost.

5. If the fourth option (one each state for Naga and Kuki) is granted, two more issues will come up: One, the *Jiribam sub-division* of Imphal East district, which Meitei community dominates (marked- *Jiri* in Fig. 1), should also be given a separate State, as it is not possible to reach this sub-division by crossing other two States. Two, if the hill areas (Districts) are separated from the valley, will the thousands of hill people living in the valley leave the valley, as no *Meitei* is allowed to own or buy land in the hills under MLR&LR Act 1960?

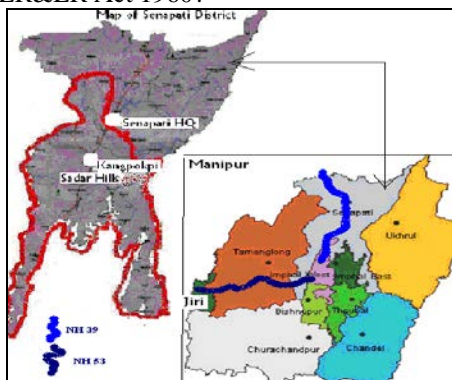


Fig. 1: Controversial Sadar Hill area in Manipur

C. Demand for Sovereignty and Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act

With the growth of separatist movement, Manipur was declared as a 'disturbed area' in 1980 [15] and subsequently the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 (AFSPA) was promulgated. There are allegations of the very Act being misused by the members of the state forces, as the Act allows security forces to kill anybody (even the lowest rank – a Sepoy) in mere suspicion of anti-national and no complain can be made against them. Besides killing, there have been number of cases of rape and enforced disappearances of young children by the state forces [20]. Therefore, the Act has resulted gross violation of fundamental human rights in Manipur in the last few decades [(8); (9); (10); (19)], and consequently leads to unprecedented people's uprisings. For instances, the agitations like, self-immolation by student leader Mr. Pebam Chittaranjan, naked

demonstration of women agitators and hunger strike by Miss Irom Sharmila Chanu for more than a decade. Besides, many unwanted atrocities have been done by the security forces under the pretext of the AFSPA, e.g. rape and murdered of Thangjam Monorama by paramilitary Assam Rifle.

Though the Act was enforced in the hill areas initially, at present, it is not practically operational in the hill districts of Manipur. Knowing the consequences and with the growing demand of the civil organisations, the Government of India set up a five-member committee in 2004 under the Chairmanship of Justice B.P. Jeevan Reddy, former Judge of the Supreme Court of India to look into the issue. The committee submitted its report in 2005, and recommended for the repeal of the Act (Part IV, pages 67-81). But the government has not removed this Act, and continues to deploy excess security forces at the ratio of 1:40 (1 security personnel for every 40 civilians) in the State [17]. Due to the defects of the Act, the problem of insurgency and its related fatalities have increased significantly in the last two decades.

In spite of socio-ethnic sensitivity and political instability, the concerned issues are not addressed in political and democratic terms but government tries to control the State with the might of armed forces [1]. Excess militarization with no protection of the people, limited development initiative and unequal administration mechanism, etc. leads to self-alienation and frustration of the people of the State. Prolonged deployment of the security forces and the longevity of extremism in the State often reinforced people's perception that the "insincerity of government" in resolving the conflict is also well acknowledged [16].

IV. WHY IS THE CONFLICT NOT SOVED

The complex issues that have been confronted by the State and society while taking development initiatives in the State can be summarized as follows— *Meitei* armed groups seeking an independent homeland (pre-merger status), opposed to the territorial divisions demanded by Naga and Kuki groups [21] is getting momentum in the recent years. Goals of the various *Meitei* movements generally are similar to those of other groups already discussed. However, the different dimension from other neighbouring states is that the *Meitei* armed groups are fighting not only for a separate homeland, but also to return to traditional religion, cultural practices including eliminating the Indian script for writing. In this context, some significant movements that have attempted to restore the traditional *Meitei* religion, the *Senamahi* and *Meitei script* in the recent years [6]. They (*Meitei* armed groups) have also been trying to make a unified command by integrating all the armed groups of eight NER (e.g. ULFA of Assam, NLFT of Tripura, etc.) to fight against the government of India for a common goal of separation/freedom from India. This strategy is noticed by the Government of India as well [e.g. India's national events like Independence Day on August 15, Republic Day on January 26 are being boycotted by the major armed groups of NER]. Above all, no *Meitei* armed group has shown their willingness to have political negotiation (to settle within the Indian framework) with the government in the five decades of insurgency movement [6]. Also, the some of the major *Meitei*

armed groups have sought to project a *pan-Mongoloid identity*, and they have built linkages with other groups across the boundaries in this context [22]. It is a great threat to India's internal security and integrity.

However, the tribal armed groups of Manipur (Kuki and Naga) do not cooperate to the movement of integration of the insurgent groups of NER initiated by the Meitei armed groups, as they are against the Meiteis, demanding for separation from the State or Meitei, but not from India [26]. Knowing these realities and keeping the threats posed to the nation in mind, Government of India has devised a mechanism to use one community against the other. Therefore, the communal conflicts in Manipur have increased significantly in the recent past. For instance, a number of tribal armed groups are actively collaborating with Indian troops against the Meitei armed groups [5]. Probably, this is the reason why, state security forces do not interfere in the communal and fractional conflicts in the State [26], and conveniently centre (government) washes off their hands in this regard, and saying that it is a "state's affair" [18]. Evidences are numerous. To mention a few – altogether 800 people were killed, 480 wounded and 5713 families had been displaced during the bloody Kuki-Naga conflict in the 1990s. In 1997, in the Kuki-Paite clash, altogether 162 people were killed, 93 got injured, 71 were kidnapped and 3521 houses were burnt [14]. In 2011, Manipur was cut off from the rest of the world for a straight of four months (135 days) due to the economic blockades called on by Kuki and counter blockade called on by Naga over the issue of territorial dominance in Sadar Hill area of Senapati district [2]. The present divide and rule policy of the government further aggravates and multiplies social upheaval [25] and widen the gap between the hill and valley. Also, the Government of India has been making dual commitment to different communities in the State, and plays delaying tactics in dealing with the conflicts [26]. On the other hand, the Naga community accused the Central government of appeasing the Meiteis and blamed for not settling the Naga issue for the sake of Meiteis [31].

Initiative of State government is very pathetic and they are hypnotized by the party high command in the centre (Delhi). It is also clear that some of the social groups and leaders have benefited from the high levels of subsidies paid out by the centre [15]. For instances, at present, most of the contract works meant for development of Manipur are jointly carried out both by armed groups and political leaders (involved directly or indirectly). Therefore, the State government is often termed as a percentage government in Manipur. They cannot be called as *people's representatives* as the votes can be bought by money and muscle power. For instance, in 2007, the 9th Manipur Legislative Assembly election was decided by 37 percent of voters only, and it was also bought by the means mentioned above [2].

It is also explored that the mere improvement in the state's income and some facial innovation alone is unlikely to alter the conflict situation significantly without addressing its causes directly [23]. Therefore, after analyzing the complex equations of social upheaval of Manipur, it arrives at a conclusion that the problem is not a permanent and irreparable one. *Nash Equilibrium* condition can be achieved if the political will and institutional structures are placed in proper order. To curtail

social upheaval, ethnic conflict and frequent economic blockades in Manipur, some of the possible recommendations are given below.

- As there is limited road connectivity in the State – between hill and valley, and inter- state connectivity (Manipur and other neighbouring States), development of road network in the State is the need of the hour. As there is only one road (NH 39) linking the State with the rest of the country and is often interrupted by the hill communities for their various demands, the need for opening other two highways (NH 53 and State Highway 150) is very essential, i.e. 1) National Highway 150 (approx. 350 km) connecting Kohima, Jessami of Nagaland; Ukhrul, Imphal, CCpur, Tipaimuk of Manipur; and Aizwal of Mizoram, 2) National Highway No. 53 (approx. 240 km) that connects Imphal (Capital of Manipur) and Silchar in Southern Assam. This can bring better communication/connectivity among the States and will bring inter-personal relationship between the hill and valley. Similarly, the timely completion of the ongoing construction of railway line (approx. 150 km) that connects Jiribam, a border town of Manipur near Cachar district of Southern Assam to Toupul of Manipur, about 35 kms in the west of Imphal (Capital city of Manipur) is very important. This would definitely relief the people of Manipur from the clutches of economic blockades to a great extent, and brings varied communities closer to one another. Even, Meitei may allow the demand of hills (separate arrangement for the hills), provided the rail and road communication is well developed and it is ensured that the hill people do not disturbed the highways.

- The *Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958* is to be repealed permanently from the State. People of this State should be given a right to life. Government should initiate peaceful means to solve the conflicts and public demands of Manipur. Thousands of innocent people in the State have been victimized by this Act. Instead of imposing this inhuman Act, government should create infrastructural facilities, income and employment generating facilities as a sign of love and oneness to the people of Manipur. It will definitely reciprocate positively from the people of Manipur.

- Government (centre) should be honest and have strong will to solve the institutional drawbacks that have been hampering the State's overall development for long. Government should not apply dual policy for appeasing few sections of the society. Often, genuine movements of the civil society are being politicized and consequently, the movements get lost on the way. For instance, Oinam [3] confirmed that how the leaders of two civil organisations in Nagaland and Manipur— *Naga Hoho* and the *Ima Keithel* women organisation respectively succumbed to the pressure exerted by the contending forces. As a result of which, basic objectives of the movement have been distorted on the way. Therefore, instead of applying divide and rule policy, government should initiate unconditional developmental works, irrespective of individual community's interest, irrespective of political party. At the same time, civil society should also support the initiatives taken up by the government.

- Modification of MLR&LR Act 1960 is important, allowing valley people (non-tribes of Manipur) to live in the hills is also an urgent need of the government so as to bring peaceful co-

existence among the varied groups of people, between hill and valley. For this purpose, Meitei should also come down from the class (community) hierarchy system, do away the caste and religious differences, especially the segregation of community on the basis of caste and religion.

● Warring communities and the armed groups should also understand that the separation is not the panacea for the problems faced by them. Development cannot be determined by a mere demarcation of geographical area. Also, the demand for autonomy or separate arrangement does not ensure that there will not be any further sub-division of the State. We should not forget that there is *centre-periphery* difference anywhere under the sun. Therefore, alternative ways are to be explored for sustainable development of the society.

V. CONCLUDING NOTES

Despite some basic commonalities, development level among the communities in Manipur is asymmetrical in nature due to asymmetric institutional structures [29]. Though, the other neighbouring states had been the victims of a large number of conflicts, ranging from self-determination to ethnic clashes and so on, for long, they are by and large peaceful at this juncture (e.g. signing of *Mizo Accord* in 1986 in Mizoram and ceasefire agreement between armed groups and state in Nagaland in 1990s) However, in Manipur, no tribal community is happy with the Meitei due to the factors mentioned above. Besides, the magnitude of upheaval and other social conflicts in Manipur has been increasing day-by-day, primarily caused by divide and rule policy of the government. However, the present conflicts and social upheavals of Manipur can still be solved if government takes seriously with proper institutional mechanism like economic, political and infrastructural policies.

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