

## POLITICS OF ETHNIC PLURALISM AND TERRITORIALITY IN MANIPUR: CLAIMS AND COUNTERCLAIMS

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*Abstract: Manipur is a land of diverse cultures settled by various ethnic communities for centuries that has evolved into a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multicultural society. However, land and territorial conflicts continue to be the contested space of proliferating community conflict in the state. The signing of the Naga Framework Agreement, the stiff opposition from the Meiteis, and the creation of new seven districts revealed the nature of contestations of territorial politics in the state. The article delves into the claims and counterclaims of the politics of pluralism and territoriality of Meiteis and Nagas in the state. It also aims to explore the complexities involved in situating the politics of pluralism and territoriality in the state.*

Key Word: Pluralism, Territoriality, Framework Agreement, Civil Society

### Introduction

In India, pluralism has been the tradition from the ancient time, and continued to be one of the important values in the society. The post colonial Indian state facilitated the growth of pluralism through modern institutions, and bureaucratic social structures. Despite the fact that Manipur had been a princely state, conceited of its history and culture, the advent of the modern liberal state marked the heralding of multiple identities struggling for self-determination in their territorially concentrated geographical areas. Different ethnic groups based on different ascriptive identities constantly sought for self-determination, and also for equitable recognition and power sharing arrangements, thereby posing a threat to the state territorial and administrative integrity. Territorial dimension of identity politics has also been increasingly manifested in the state. The article delves into the claims and counterclaims of the politics of pluralism and territoriality of Meiteis and Nagas in the state. It also aims to explore the complexities involved in situating the politics of pluralism and territoriality in the state.

Despite the fact that Manipur had been inhabited by different groups in unity and peaceful co-existence since time immemorial, the arrival of the colonial rule, and the subsequent merger with the union of India promulgated the rise of ethnic politics and territorial claims. Manipur was an independent kingdom in the past. With the arrival of the colonial rule, Manipur lost her independence to the British in 1891 in the Anglo-Manipur war, and became a princely state under British India. On October 15<sup>th</sup> 1949 the princely state was merged into India as a Part C state, and on 21<sup>st</sup> January, 1972 Manipur became a full-fledged state. Despite the fact that the state has been territorially consolidated under the Indian union, the existence of multiple ethnic identities that presupposes their own separate social space and territory before the arrival of the colonial rule has been apprehension of the state. Manipur has been inhabited by the Meiteis, Nagas, Kukis and Pangals (Meitei Muslim). There are many other tribes within the Nagas and the Kukis, and also other small communities whose social and cultural space has been separated from the Nagas and Kukis. The Meiteis constituted the majority, and therefore they have been dominating the social, cultural and political identities of the state. Despite the fact that the state has been inhabited by different ethnic groups, the exclusive claim of the Meiteis domination in the valley often contradicts the idea of pluralism and state integration. On the other hand, the Nagas exclusive claims of their inhabited territory in the hills for creating greater Nagaland projected the disintegration of Manipur state. Besides, some Kuki organizations also demanded Kuki homeland. Pluralism and Integration demand inclusive projection of the idea of state. Therefore, inclusive political, social and cultural representation and development are necessary for maintaining ethnic pluralism and territorial integration.

#### The Meiteis Projection of Pluralism

Conversion of the Meiteis to Hinduism, and conversion of the hill tribals to Christianity has been an important landmark in the social, cultural and political history of Manipur. The impact of Hinduism has been reflected in the 'Hinduization of the Meitei polity in that the kingdom of Kangleipak has been changed to Manipur and the title of the king to Maharaja' (Kamei 2016: 174). The Hinduization of the Meiteis and the conversion of the hill tribes to Christianity have been responsible for widening the gap between the Meiteis and the hill tribes. Despite the fact that the Meiteis maintained exclusive dominance and control of the valley, the projection of

Manipur as plural societies often contradict the integration of the state. Integration demands proportional representation in the Assembly, equitable distribution of resources and development in the state. The concentration of infrastructural development and governmental offices in the valley has been responsible for the backwardness of the hill areas. The integrationist design of the Meiteis has been reflected in their series of demands to the Government of India and the State Government. The demand of the Meiteis to be included in the Scheduled Tribe list, and the passing of the Inner Line Permit System (ILPS) in the valley reflected the complexities involved in the projection of the state.

The hill area of Manipur has been protected by Article 371 (C) of the Indian Constitution in that non tribals has been denied for settlement as well as from carrying land transactions. Despite the fact that about eighty nine percent of the land is situated in the hills, immigration from Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal and migration from Indian states concentrated in the valley which consisted of about ten percent of the total land in the state. Therefore, the Meiteis demanded for the implementation of the ILPS in the state witnessing series of bandh and blockade resulting in loss of lives and destruction of public and private properties. The Meiteis agitation for the implementation of the ILPS resulted in the passage of the controversial Manipur People's Bill on 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2015 in the State Legislative Assembly. The passage of the bill in Assembly revealed the insecurities of the Meiteis at the prospect of being overwhelmed by an influx of migrants into their traditional homelands, and the deep divides amongst the ethnic populations themselves (Phanjoubam 2016, 2). The bill has many implications for the tribal communities irrespective of their ethnicities. Therefore, the bill has been strongly opposed largely by the Chin-Kuki groups in which some house of the ministers were burnt and destruction of public property followed by loss of lives. The Nagas, though shared the common aspirations in protecting the rights of the tribal by opposing the three bills, they have been dissuaded by the Naga Framework Agreement signed on 3<sup>rd</sup> August, 2015. Besides, the Nagas and Kukis shares conflicting territorial claims in the hills which has been expressed in their movement for separate state or nation. The bill has been withheld by the Government of India as it has been controversial. The fact of the matter has been that the bill aimed at bringing some changes to the existing land related laws in the hills. The tribal communities feared that it would infringe upon their rights and land holding system, and amount to the territorialization of the hills. The Meiteis continued their agitation demanding

for the implementation of the ILPS, sensitizing the issues with the tribal communities. The ILPS has been extended to the state of Manipur on 11<sup>th</sup> December, 2019, on the same day that the Citizenship Amendment Bill was passed by the parliament, and ILPS came into effect from 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2020. The ILPS has been extended to the state of Manipur as consolation to the protest of the Citizenship Amendment Act.

The demand of the Meiteis for Scheduled Tribe status has been largely projected on social and economic grounds that granting the Scheduled Tribe status would bring about an egalitarian society by bridging the gap between the hills and valleys. However, the tribal populations in the state has been apprehensive on the ground that their rights and privileges would be compromised if the dominant community such as the Meiteis is granted the Scheduled Tribe status, and more importantly, settlement of the Meiteis in the hills would accompany resulting in the marginalization of the tribal population. The creation of new seven revenue districts in 2016 has been a significant development, as five districts in the hills belong to the tribal inhabited areas. Despite the strong opposition from the Nagas, the Manipur Government declared the creation of the new districts. The Nagas has been against the creation of the new districts as it affects the territorial boundaries of their ancestral lands. Despite the fact that the Meiteis projected a pluralist view of society, they continue to maintain their dominant status in the state.

#### Nagas Political Collectivism: Integrationist or Accommodationist?

The Nagas struggle for self-determination is one of the longest struggles in Asia. The Nagas, comprising of about 40 odd language groups are concentrated in North-East India and North-West Myanmar. In India, the Nagas are inhabited in four States-Nagaland, Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh which constitute about 2/3 of Naga population i.e. nearly 3 million. In Myanmar, the Nagas are inhabited in the Somrah in Kachin State and Sagaing Division. In the North East, particularly for the Naga nationalists, the Indian nation-state building was a historical suspicion. The Nagas since their first encounter with the British in 1832, and the expedition that followed perturbed the Nagas, and their collectivism necessitated for self-determination (Venuh 2005: 30). The Nagas under the Naga Club submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929 and demanded for the exclusion of the Naga areas from the proposed reforms and pressed for self-determination should the British leave India (Yuono 1974,

126). This memorandum has been significant as it was the first collective expression of the Nagas to live together in the predisposition of the modern nation state building. In pursuance of the memorandum, the whole Naga areas were left as Naga Hills Excluded Areas, when the Government of India Act was passed in 1935. After the British left India in 1947, the Naga National Council (NNC) under the leadership of A.Z. Phizo began to frame policies for self-determination and demanded independence from India (Sema 1991: 152). The NNC has been able to consolidate the Nagas and made into a people's movement after the independence of India (Ao 2002: 47). Violence and militarization ensued in the Naga Hills, resulting in the loss of lives and destruction of properties. Therefore, the Naga church leaders condemned violence and therefore took the peace initiative (Zhimomi 2004: 67). The state of Nagaland was created in 1963 as part of the solution to the Naga insurgent movement. However, the NNC continued their struggle for independence. The signing of the Shillong Accord in 1975 engendered the eruption of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980 under the leadership of Isak Chisi Swu, Th. Muivah and S.S. Khaplang. Subsequently, NSCN was split into NSCN-K (Khaplang) and NSCN-IM (Isak-Muivah). By the late 1990s, the collective leadership of the NSCN-IM began to use the term 'Nagalim', denoting all Naga inhabited areas by differentiating from the state of Nagaland. Therefore, the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) has been officially used by the collective leadership.

The signing of the cease fire agreement between the Government of India and the NSCN-IM on 1<sup>st</sup> August, 1997, and the subsequent June 14, 2001 Bangkok Declaration, extending the ceasefire without territorial limits to all the Naga-inhabited areas in North East India led to the outbreak of the June 18<sup>th</sup> Uprising 2001 in Manipur resulting in the loss of lives, destruction of public properties and militarization. The Meiteis has been apprehensive that the Naga peace process might compromise the territorial and administrative boundaries of Manipur as the Nagas claim about eighty percent of the territory of Manipur as their inhabited areas and ancestral land. The Meiteis integrationist approach in order to safeguard the administrative and territorial boundaries of the state has been for the most part has achieved the ideological force and importance of safeguarding their interests. The changing contour of demographic composition in the state has also necessitated the discourse of pluralism, and peaceful co-existence in the state. The Meiteis political leaders and their rhetoric claimed that there are no Nagas in the state of Manipur.

The strong opposition from the Meiteis toward the Naga movement has been one of the biggest obstacles for the integration of Nagas inhabited areas under single administration. Exploring the possibilities of accommodating the Nagas of Manipur, the United Naga Council (UNC) in Manipur demanded for an 'alternative arrangement' for the Nagas of Manipur to the Government of India. The UNC demand for 'alternative arrangement' suggests some autonomy for the Nagas of Manipur without infringing the territorial boundaries of Manipur. The Meiteis strongly opposed to such demand of the Nagas fearing that changing administrative boundaries would eventually lead to the disintegration of the state territorial integrity. Besides, the demand has been not feasible as the Naga peace process demands the inclusiveness of all Nagas as reiterated by the Government of India. The UNC demand for 'alternative arrangement' has been an attack on the Nagas integrationist ideology, and is an accommodationist policy within the Nagas political landscape. The Meiteis also perceived such demand as an accommodationist approach of the UNC within the state of Manipur. However, the UNC demand does not limit to the accommodationist approach, as the demand of the Nagas includes integration of all Nagas inhabited areas.

The signing of the Framework Agreement on 3<sup>rd</sup> August, 2015 between the Government of India and the NSCN-IM has been another milestone in the Naga peace process. The inclusion of the of the working committee of the Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs) in 2017 which is comprised of seven Naga insurgent groups in the peace process began to unfold the complexities of Naga collectivism on identity and political imaginings. Despite the fact that the Government of India has made its stand clear that Naga solution would be inclusive, the divisions within Naga insurgent groups, political leaders and civil society organizations reveal the complexities of the nature of the peace talks. The NSCN-IM's strong stand on Naga collectivism projected the integrationist approach of the Nagas identity and political landscape, while the demands of the NNPGs reflected the accommodationsit projection. The NNPGs stand that Nagas of Nagaland state should not accommodate the Nagas from outside the state of Nagaland without the territorial integration of the Nagas inhabited areas contradicts the aspirations of the Naga movement.

The demand of the Eastern Naga Peoples' Organization (ENPO) in Nagaland for the creation of a separate Eastern Nagaland state has been another accommodationist design. The

Eastern Nagaland is comprised of four districts of Tuensang, Mon, Longleng and Kiphire inhabited by six tribes namely Chang, Konyak, Khiamniungan, Phom, Sangtam and Yimchunger. The ENPO sought the support of the Nagas and the NSCN-IM for the creation of Eastern Nagaland. The Government has initiated talks with the ENPO and offered development package, however, it has been rejected by the ENPO. Despite the fact that the ENPO demand a separate state, they have been supporting the Naga movement for self-determination. The demand of the Zeliangrong United Front, an insurgent group of the Zeliangrong Nagas inhabiting in the three states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland for a separate homeland within the Nagas political landscape has been another accommodationist approach. The Zeliangrong demand for homeland had been initiated by Rani Gaidinliu in the 1970s and 1980s. The demand for autonomy within the Naga political landscape by the various Nagas tribal bodies has been increasingly manifested in the Naga peace talks. Political leaders such as S.C. Jamir and his supporters do not recognize the Nagas from Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Myanmar, and has been propagating that Naga solution should confine to the state of Nagaland. Their rhetoric claim has been that there are no Nagas in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur. Such propagation does not come under the integrationist or accommodationist approach within the Nagas political landscape.

The clarion call of the NSCN-IM for Naga collectivism and the call for accommodating autonomy by other Naga insurgent groups and civil society organizations on the other hand in the Naga peace talks reflected the polarization of integrationist and accommodationist within the Nagas political landscape. The success of the Naga peace talks depend on the inclusiveness of all Naga groups on the one hand, and at the same, it is also speculated that certain accommodation or autonomy in the form of territorial council is granted for compromising the differences. However, the integrationist approach of the Meiteis in the state of Manipur has been in opposition to granting of any autonomy to the Nagas. The Government India clarified that the territorial integrity of Manipur would be protected while signing the final agreement of the Naga peace talks. Despite the reiteration from the Government of India, the Meiteis has been apprehensive as non territorial solution and administrative boundaries are likely to be affect the territorial integration of the state of Manipur.

### Concepts of Civil Society

Civil society in North East India and particularly in Manipur is a contested space deeply embedded in ethnic and group identities. The multiple existence of various ethnic groups aggravated a situation where the concern of civil society is formulated in the interest of the ethnic community. The ability of civil society to prevent the state from exercising absolute control is an essential condition. In North East India and particularly in Manipur the state does not favour the expansion of civil societies because the relations between state machinery and civil society often results in a compromise at the cost of the ruling elite. The interaction of the state with civil society in fact is necessary for the smooth functioning of the democratic system. However, the state often tries to charge the leaders of civil societies identifying and branding them as anti-social. This results in violent activities of civil societies in response to the authoritarian nature of the state.

In North East India the traditional forms of association such as tribes, ethnic groups and kinship are also accommodated as they have come to occupy a central position in the use of the term 'civil society'. In most cases, ethnic based civil society organizations such as the United Committee Manipur (UCM) and United Naga Council (UNC) are not voluntaristic but confined and obligatory binding authority on individuals. For an instance, the demand for the implementation of the ILPS by the UCM is considered as the mandate of the whole Meitei populations in the state. Similarly, the demand for Naga integration by the UNC is considered as the mandate of the whole Naga populations in the state. The individuals in this case have no freedom in the association or organization. Therefore, civil society organizations are considered as hot-blooded association of social groupings, which are based on ethnic interest by conceiving the idea that they are assimilated coercively. However, to some extent, the UCM, and UNC maintained a condition of civility, recognition of differences and dedication to peaceful measures for managing conflict.

The subordination of the individual to the ethnic group is also a common feature in Manipur. This is hindering in the democratic experiment and particularly in evolving a genuine civil society. In the Western liberal democracy, individual identity forms the citizens of the state. Therefore, associational life based on common interest is formed and in fact it reinforced the smooth working of democracy. The issue at stake is that in Manipur, individuals and groups are

not entirely free from their group loyalties and identities. Civil society organizations such as the UCM and UNC are working exclusively for the interest of their particular community. In the present scenario, the UCM supports the mass movement in the valley for the protection of the state from the demands of the Nagas, while the UNC supported the call for Naga integration with the rest of Nagas in Nagaland, Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. The UNC along with other Naga civil society organizations supporting the present peace process continues to seek opportunities and initiatives to strengthen political negotiations for a democratic and honourable settlement. However, the engagement of civil society organization is limited, as Manchanda observed, “the involvement of civil society remains adhoc, a reflection of the culture of secrecy in an underground organization and the historical experience of inter-tribal feuds and betrayal” (Manchanda 2005: 10). Civil society organizations are also sometimes involved in peace building. In many instances, they break the impasse between conflicting parties by bringing into a negotiating table.

### Conclusion

The issue of territoriality and the idea of pluralism continued to be juxtaposed by the demand for self-determination and autonomy movement in the state. The colonial policy of divide and rule continued to resurface in post-colonial India. The demand of the Naga insurgent groups for self determination that resulted in the creation of the state of Nagaland in 1963 left out large part of Nagas inhabited areas in the state of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. The signing of the Framework Agreement on 3<sup>rd</sup> August, 2015 is significant in this regard. There have been many apprehensions and speculations that Nagas inhabited areas might be granted some cultural autonomy or administrative autonomy. On the other hand, the Meiteis has been apprehensive that granting such cultural autonomy or administrative autonomy may eventually lead to the territorial disintegration of the state of Manipur. The contestation over land and territory has been the most difficult issue for the various ethnic communities who shared the geo-political space in the state. Therefore, the passage of the Manipur People’s Bill in Manipur Assembly in 2015 revealed the insecurities of the Meiteis not only from immigrants but also from the alarming settlement of the tribals (Nagas and Kukis) of Manipur in the valley. The bill also divulged the policies of the Manipur government in redefining the land related laws in the state and particularly in the hills.

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