

Predicament of Manipur: The Road Ahead

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Abstract

With its immense potential, Manipur deserved to be the crown jewel of India. However, it has become a victim of its history as well as its geography and this paper examines the major problems in Manipur. Insurgency has emerged as the biggest threat to Manipur; it has the largest number of insurgent groups compared to anywhere else in India. The proximity to the Golden Triangle of Southeast Asia has made Manipur a centre of drug trade. The fissures of inter-tribal dynamics within the social structure of Manipur and juxtaposed within the question of Greater Nagalim, pose a challenge to the existence of Manipur as well. This paper brings together possible solutions that can help Manipur achieve success against the multitude of problems that it faces today. It seeks to explain that the solutions are not administrative alone but social as well.

Keywords: Insurgency, Armed Forces Special Powers Act, Manipur, India

Introduction

The North East comprises of the contiguous Seven Sister States¹—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura—and the Himalayan state of Sikkim. These states are grouped under the MDONER ministry of the Government of India. Except for the Goalpara region of Assam, the rest were late entrants to political India—the Brahmaputra valley of Assam became a part of British India 1826², and the hilly regions even later.

These states cover an area of 255,511 km³, or about 7 percent of India's total area. They had a population of 44.98 million in 2011, about 3.7 percent of India's total. Although there is great ethnic and religious diversity within the seven states, they also have similarities in political, social and economic contexts. At the time of independence North East consisted of Assam, Tripura and Manipur. The state of Assam has seen many changes since Independence. In 1948, the Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA) consisting of districts bordering Tibet was separated from Assam. Nagaland was carved out in December 1, 1963 and Meghalaya followed in January 21, 1972. Mizoram also separated from Assam in 1972. On February 20, 1987, NEFA became a state, Arunachal Pradesh. While Tripura joined the Indian Union as a state on October 19, 1949, Sikkim acceded on April 14, 1975.⁴ Today these states combine to form North East.

Manipur with the city of Imphal as its capital has a total population of 2,166,788 persons according to the 2011 census. There are a number of ethnic groups in Manipur. The major ethnic groups of Manipur are the Meiteis, the Meitei Pangals (Muslims), Nagas, Zomis and Kuki. It is bounded by the Indian states of Nagaland to the north, Mizoram to the south and Assam to the west; it also borders Burma to the east.⁵ The Meiteis (Meiteis), who live primarily in the state's valley region,

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form the primary ethnic group (60% of the total population) but occupy only 10% of the total land area. Their language, Meiteilon (Meeteilon), (also known as *Manipuri*), is also the lingua franca in the state, and was recognized as one of the national languages of India in 1992. The Muslims (Meitei-Pangal) also live in the valley; the Kukis, Nagas, Zomis and other smaller groups form about 40% of the population but occupy the remaining 90% of the total land area of Manipur. Out of the total population of Manipur 46.01% follow Hinduism, 34.04% follow Christianity, 8.81% follow Islam and the rest follow others.⁶

Vaishnavism is the predominant form of Hinduism that is followed in Manipur. The Meiteis majorly subscribe to this form of Hinduism. There are accounts of Vaishnavism preaching in the Puranas but in the modern sense Vaishnavism acquired a predominant form in Manipur when the king of Shan kingdom of Pong gifting the Manipuri king Kayamba with the Vishnu Chakra. So the kings started to worship Vishnu around 1740's and very soon it spread among the Meiteis⁷. They don't worship only Krishna but the Radha-Krishna form. This predominant theme of religion is also reflected in the classical dance form of Manipuri dance which centers around Raas Lila.⁸ Christianity in Manipur started to spread in the 19th century onwards by missionaries. The 20th century saw the establishment of a few Christian schools which then introduced Western-type education in this part. Christianity is predominantly prevalent among the hill tribes.

Issues and Challenges

The historical richness of Manipur would rival any of the great Indian kingdoms which had existed throughout history. Western historians had often accused Indian history lacking a sense of linear sense of time. And yet the "Buranjis" maintained by the Ahoms in Assam and "Cheitoron Kumbaba" by the Manipuris run counter to the theory proposed by the Western historians. The earliest history of Manipur goes back to the 33-34 AD. Manipur came under British rule as a princely state (kangleipak) in 1891 and existed until 1947, when it acceded to the newly independent Union of India⁹. Today Manipur is far off from the cultural greatness and historical awe that it symbolized in olden times. Today Manipur is often quoted as story of failure of the policymakers however some faults of the Manipuri society as well.

And it is this context, that the present debate on the Inner Line Permit must be understood. Inner Line Permit was first drawn in a few areas of North East during the erstwhile British era with the intention of regulating movement of "British subjects" into certain areas of their dominions. This concept continued in the post-independence era and is today being seen in Manipur as a tool to saving their identity. North East has always boiled on the question of identity which is deeply rooted in the "us versus them" discourse fixed fundamentally to territory. And it is through this prism that Manipur must be seen.

Manipur is landlocked between Nagaland, Assam and Mizoram on the East and Myanmar on the West. There are three major highways connecting Manipur to the rest of India .They include National Highways 150 (Tipaimukh Road), National Highway 39 and National Highway 53.⁷Of these the highway passing majorly through the Naga inhabited areas i.e. NH 39(starting in Numaligarh in Assam and ending in the Indo-Myanmar border) is the lifeline for the Manipur state with major transportation and trade carried through this network. It covers a distance of 436 kms of which 115 kms is in Assam 100 kms in Nagaland and 211 kms in Manipur. It enters Manipur from Tadubi village in Senapati district in Manipur.¹⁰ It is this particular strategic location that has also become Manipur's greatest nightmare. Today the problems that are seen in the state of Manipur are many .Some of the most major issues are home-grown insurgency, removal of AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) and the issue of the greater Nagalim among others.

Insurgency in Manipur stuck roots early along with the rest of North East in the era after independence¹¹. While the reasons of growth of insurgency among various North East states are homogenous yet the course and the trajectory of the growth have been quite dissimilar. While the demands of ULFA (United Liberation Front of Asom) in Assam and NSCN-IM (National Socialist Council of Nagaland- Isak Muivah faction) in Nagaland have centered on secession and the question of sovereignty, the insurgency in Manipur has 2 different strands. While the hill tribes merely demanded a tribal state which would preserve their own cultural identity, the valley based populace majorly the Meities has demanded complete succession based on historical evidence that the Manipuri kingdom was never a part of the political entity called India until the British era.

Over a period of time however most of these insurgents and secessionists stopped their active operations against the Indian state. While they continued to hold to their arms the state in effect couldn't resolve this question. As such today the Manipuri society is one in which arms exist in the public milieu. When the state becomes too powerful to be an enemy the people turn towards each other and this is what has invariably happened. From 3 insurgent groups in the 90's among the Meities today there are 15 active insurgent groups who are out there to gain the spoils of the war.¹² Thus what we see today is large scale extortion, black-marketing and other actions which have crippled the Manipuri economy. For a state which has enormous potential in terms of gaining from the tourism industry, the Manipuri tourism story has failed to take off due to disarray in the economy of Manipur. The state has failed to take corrective measures to stop black marketing, extortion etc. It is common sight to witness parked cars outside petrol pumps for 5 days waiting in line to get their share of petrol. Such is the condition of the Manipuri economy today.

When discussing the armed insurgencies afflicting Manipur a special mention has to be made of the Kuki issue. The Kukis are an ethnic group that is spread throughout the Northeastern region of India, Northwest Burma and Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. In Northeast India they are present in all the states except Arunachal Pradesh. They are predominantly present in Manipur. The genesis of the Kuki struggle lie in the aftermath of the Kuki-Naga and the Kuki-Zomi struggle in the late 80's and the early 90's. With a demand to create a separate Kuki homeland for the Kuki people, these groups took up arms¹³. This demand for the Kuki homeland has further complicated the return of normalcy in Manipur. While most of these groups have announced a ceasefire yet repeated calls are made from the leaders of the groups towards a renewal of armed militancy if their demands are not met¹⁴. These repeated calls affect the ongoing negotiation process between the Government of India and NSCN (IM) since very often their "demands" have overlapping territorial aspirations.

The relation between arms and drugs trade has been one that occurs with alarming regularity. Manipur is no different to this paradigm. Manipur is home to 50,000 drug users including 34,500 intravenous drug users (IDU) while about 14,000 drug users are concentrated in Imphal alone, according to UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) reports. Injection drug use is common in countries neighboring the "Golden Triangle" (Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand), known for heroin export to other countries. The spreading of HIV and injection drug use outbreaks in countries neighbouring the Golden Triangle, especially the north-eastern Indian state of Manipur, have been associated with drug abuse, due to its proximity to the aforementioned Golden Triangle. There is a huge amount of money involved in this illicit drug trade including in the transportation to and from Manipur acts as the transit point for this illicit trade. Some of the armed groups have heavily invested in this trade and this has led to a gruesome turf war. The local civic society has taken a strong stand against drug trade and drug abuse but a lot more need to be done in this regard.

Armed Forces Special Powers Act or AFSPA as it is popularly known has been a thorn in the Indian polity for a large number of years now. The Manipuri lady Irom Sharmila has been fasting against repealing this act¹⁵. However the most important question of AFSPA removal, hinges around the fact

that whether the conditions which caused the invocation of AFSPA in Manipur have been addressed or not. It is in relation to this that the question of removal of AFSPA must be raised.

The final major contentious issue is the question of greater Nagalim. The road towards reconciliation with Nagaland is being hailed as one of the greatest victories of the Indian administrative system. Yet it is not clear as to how this peace deal would affect the question of Nagalim. North East has always witnessed a never ending assertion of political rights where the offshoot of one particular movement demands a more radical deal than the one which was obtained. Any serious expert of the North East can gauge that the Naga peace deal being harbored by Isaac-Muivah faction is not the end of the Nagalim question and neither is the question of non-territorial Nagalim the logical solution at this point.

The Naga society is one of diverse contours. It is in the backdrop of this premise that the present agreement between Government of India and the NSCN-IM must be understood. Thuingaleng Muivah -the leader of NSCN-IM -a Tangkhul Naga hails from Somdal village in Ukhrul district of Manipur. Historically it has been the Angami Nagas who have lead the Naga rebellion. Phizo Naga the godfather of Naga movement was an Angami Naga. It would be interesting to see how much the proud Angamis would accept a peace process driven by a Tangkhul Naga from Manipur. The Naga Hoho council and the Church which are powerful forces in Naga politics have been kept out of this whole Naga peace process. Such development does not auger well for Manipur which always becomes the burning ground for assertion of Naga muscle .The previous 100 days economic blockade of Manipur is a stark reminder of this fact. When the Naga's close down the Manipur highway it creates havoc on the Manipuri population. LPG prices shoot upto even record margins like Rs. 2000 per cylinder. Such regular occurrences further cripple down the already fragile Manipuri economy.

The demand centered around Greater Nagalim often manifests itself in NH39.The Nagas, who dominate Manipur's Senapati district through which NH 39 passes, block the highway whenever any dispute with the Meiteis, who are the dominant community in the state but are concentrated in the 1843 sq km Imphal Valley that accounts for only 8.25% of Manipur's landmass, arises. In 2010 When the NSCN-IM patriarch Thuingaleng Muivah wanted to visit his home in Senapati district, it saw massive protests in Manipur.¹⁶Eventually it lead to a blockade of Manipur which lasted for more than a 100 days. Whenever the Nagas block this lifeline, the prices of food, fuel and all other essential commodities skyrocket. In 2012 a 120-day blockade by the Kukis (another tribal group that had, in the 1990s, clashed with Nagas that claimed hundreds of lives) demanding a district be carved out of the areas they're concentrated in and a counter-blockade by Nagas caused a crunch of commodities and sent prices of LPG cylinders soaring to Rs 2,000.¹⁷ On an average, NH 39 faces disruptions about 60 days a year.

The Way forward

So the solution today to improving the condition in Manipuri has to be a multi-pronged approach, it cannot hinge on ILP (Inner Line Permit) alone. The first step towards this is a better law and order condition. This assertion of law and order however has to come from the local police rather than the army. The local police is always seen as more friendly that the army. Hence the local law and order and administrative machinery must act together towards solving the crisis. Today there are almost 15 different active insurgent groups operating in Manipur. Efforts must be made to remove arms from these groups. The government must make new amendments to the peace deals that are being signed with these groups. Removal of arms and ammunition must become the foremost priority. The administrative machinery must make concrete reforms so that basic services reach the average citizen bypassing the maze of black-marketing that exists today. The implementation of Aadhar and Direct Cash Transfer would be a welcome step in this regard. Power is a big let-down in the Manipuri

state, the state must make conscious efforts to improve the power scenario by working on power through the off grid sector. The MNRE (Ministry of New and Renewable Energy) can make conscious efforts in this regard.

With regard to the AFSPA, there is no doubt that AFSPA has to be removed .While it cannot be done in one stroke it must be done in stages balancing with action towards restoring law and order and putting it in the hands of the local administrative machinery. Any haphazard step at this moment will only complicate matters.

It is the Nagalim question which is perhaps the biggest roadblock to the Manipuri peace course. The peace process with NSCN-IM has to become more inclusive in manner so that future narratives are not left open. The Naga Hoho council must be brought into the peace discussions along with the Manipuri stakeholders .Apart from this there is no doubt that the peace process to Naga problem will be a long drawn one .The Manipur question will always be at stake .Hence so that Manipur does not become a hostage to Naga peace process question a highway must be billed through Assam which will have passage to Manipur. In this way Manipur can be rescued from being a hostage to Naga politics.

Conclusion

Manipur with its small population has always punched above its weight. If its rich cultural heritage is not amazing enough in recent times Manipur has emerged as a sports powerhouse. Boxing is one sport where Manipur seems to produce winners with an amazing regularity. The 1999 Asian Games is still fresh in the Indian memory. India had just lost an important bout with Pakistan in front of a largely hostile crowd in Kathmandu. Dingko Singh the boxer from Manipur arrived. He knocked out the Pakistani boxer and then ran through the stadium shouting and thumping his chest .The Indian flag was draped to his chest while the largely hostile crowd was quite. There is a lot at stake in the small Indian state of Manipur. In the end the need of the hour is a better drawn out process towards solving the question of Manipur.

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