
Ethnic Politics in the Hills of Manipur

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Abstract: *The escalating phenomena of political assertion and expressiveness along ethnic lines have become a major concern that necessitate urgent enquiry. Ethnicity not only has taken deep roots from the prevailing diversity but more often is projected to facilitate ethnic political aspirations. In the light of this, the aim of this article is to make a modest investigation to the prevailing competitive ethnic discourses and to underscore ethnic politics from such situation. This paper's focus is on the interaction between ethnic groups and the subservient relationship ensuing from ethnic political discourse in the hills of Manipur.*

Keywords: Ethnic, Hills, Kuki, Naga, Meiteis, Tribals, Militants.

1. Introduction

Every modern nation-state is to a greater or lesser extent ethnically divided. This frequently implies a potential for various forms of conflict - from armed conflicts to autonomist movements and political segregation along ethnic lines (Horowitz, 1985). Ethnic divisions often perpetuated by ethnic politics according to empirical democratic theory, and common sense understanding of politics, threaten the survival of democratic institutions (Mill, 1991; Rustow, 1970). In its most basic sense, ethnicity refers to the social reproduction of basic classificatory differences between categories of people and to aspects of gain and loss in social interaction. Ethnicity is fundamentally dual, encompassing aspects of both meaning and politics. Ethnicity is, however, a concept which refers to a multitude of socio-cultural phenomena.ⁱ In short, ethnicity can be an identity that demands no more than a sense of belonging.

In recent years, the process of capitalist modernization and globalization seem to have intensified ethnic competition and conflicts and have contributed to the rise of ethnic movements (Anthony D. Smith, 1979). So much so that, D. Ghai, Y. Ghai and D. Westendorff, in their article entitled

'Ethnicity, Development and Democracy', argue that ethnicity is perhaps the most important influence on third world social and political systems, inflicting discrimination on minorities, undermining order and development, even putting the very survival of some states at risk (UNESCO, 1992, quoted in Bekker, 1993:80). The term ethnic group or ethnic identity may be used in a broad as well as in a narrow sense. Ethnic identity refers to nominal membership in an ascriptive category, including race, language, caste, or religion. This is consistent with the broad definition now taken as standard in the field of ethnic mobilization: "Ethnicity easily embraces groups differentiated by color, language, and religion; it covers 'tribes,' 'races,' 'nationalities,' and castes (Horowitz, 1985; 53). In India, despite adoption of a liberal democratic polity after independence, communities and ethnic identities remained both powerful and assertive for wants of self-governance. As such, the assertion of ethnic interests and identities is gaining momentum, entering the discourse of electoral politics and justifying violence against others in Manipur.

With a geographical area of 22,327 sq. km. and located on the easternmost part of India, Manipur is composed of two set of landmass popularly known as the valley and the hills. The valley forms one-tenth of the total area of the state.ⁱⁱ Demographically, both Kuki group of tribes and Naga group of tribes mainly inhabit the hill areas that comprised of five districts. Largely, all the tribes (also locally known as tribals) come under two broad nomenclature as 'Kuki' and 'Naga'. On the other, the Meiteis predominantly inhabiting the valley constitute numerical majority and enjoys political dominion over other groups. Thus, Manipur exhibit as a diverse locale settled by numerous ethnic groups: the Meiteis, the Kukis and the Nagas besides other smaller communities.

Manipur remains a plural society with its population divided by deep rifts of ethnicity, culture, language and religion. Nevertheless, ethnic pluralism is a social reality inherited from past history but seem to persist as an integral part in more manifest form. It is likely that ethnicity will continue to play a salient role in the politics of Manipur with probably an increasing emphasis on ethnicity. As it appears, ethnicity here does not remain confined to the expression of

cultural or linguistic solidarity but rather develop into a political programme with territorial ambitions and autonomy. Of late, the region has become an arena of conflicts and contestations between culturally different groups.

The hill areas of Manipur comprise of five hill districts of which four- Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong and Ukhrul are claimed to be overwhelmingly inhabited by the Naga constellations. The population of the fifth- Churachandpur district is claimed to be predominantly settled by the Kuki group of tribes. However, the reality is that none of these five districts is entirely homogeneous in its population. In view of this, there is no one-to-one correlation between any one single tribe and the territory of on single district. The mosaic nature, instead of contributing to the rich composite culture has rather resulted in contestations among various ethnic groups. Lately, mobilisation and counter-mobilisation of identities coupled by competing demands have appeared to be the source of conflicts. Given the existing scenario, Manipur has turned out to be the most restive state in the region. So much so that, some scholars have labeled Manipur as a 'wounded land' due to multiple problems like social divide, political unrest, multiple armed groups contest, antagonism among tribes, ethnic intolerance and disputes over territory.

Much of the politics in the hills centres on the question of perpetuating one's ethnic identity and maneuvering political objectives. It may be alleged that politics in the hills is exclusively guided by ethnic aspirations. That is to say, identification and mobilization on ethnic lines have turned out to be a political strategy of bargaining to suit ethnic interests. The competing ethnic discourses in the hills between the Kukis and the Nagas is one such notable instance of such mobilization. Nonetheless, there are also resentments against the dominance of the Meiteis who constitute more than sixty percent of the population though confined in one-tenth of the total geographical area of the state.

By ethnic Politics in this paper, it is construed as the intended political discourse of group or groups to fulfilling ethnic interests and aspirations. Ethnic politics being a multi-dimensional phenomenon factor(s) determining ethnic

politics may perhaps differ from place to place and from one group to another. In view of this, the basis of ethnic politics in the hills of Manipur is credited to lie in the pursuit of ethnic interests. In this article, I will treat ethnicity as a sense of belonging having political intent to suit ethnic interests particularly. Thus, ethnic group or ethnic identity is differentiated from ethnicity from being merely ascriptive. It is only when such identifications are designed to serve as political ambition that the question of ethnicity became more stringent.

In Manipur, ethnic interest in the politics of the hills is largely an interest over land particularly over ethnic inhabited areas. This interest over ethnic settled areas subsequently vigoured and resulted in the desire for remapping the existing political arrangement based on ethnic inhabited areas. As far as this tendency is concerned, it is primarily associated with the demand for exercising a degree of self-governance through either achieving separate independent homeland or a separate state or a defined territorial council with acceptable autonomy specifically through extension of Sixth Schedule.ⁱⁱⁱ The current ethnic ferment in the hills can be meaningfully captured against the backdrop of independence or autonomy enjoyed by the tribals during the colonial era vis-à-vis the emergence of popular democratic urges from those segments that are yet to find appropriate political indemnity after India's independence. Over the years, competitions among the ethnic identities on the real or imaginary basis are expressed in the form of autonomy movements and demand for session.

In this study, the focus is to underscore how ethnic aspirations and collective identifications accentuate ethnic politics and further culminated in the conflict of interests. Altogether, thirty-four recognized tribes of Manipur are politically grouped as Nagas or Kukis.^{iv} The Kukis of Manipur include Aimol, Gangte, Hmar, Kom, Koirang, Mizo, Paite, Ralte, Simte, Sukte, Thadou, Vaiphei and Zou tribes.^v On the other the Naga group of tribes comprise of Anal, Chiru, Chothe, Lamkang, Moyon, Monsang, Maring, Mao, Poumai, Sema, Tarao, Tangkhul, Thangal, Zeliangrong. The Kukis are settled in Churachandpur district, Sadar Hills area (comprising of three Kuki majority Sub-divisions) of

Senapati district, western part of Tamenglong district, southern part of Chandel district, and southeast area of Ukhrul district. However, the Kukis are majority only in Churachandpur district out of five hill districts in Manipur, although there are Kukis in almost all the districts.^{vi}

Out of sixty seats in the state Legislative Assembly, forty seats represent valley-based constituencies whereas twenty seats represent the hill constituencies of Manipur. Herein, the Nagas solely represent Ukhrul and Tamenglong districts; on the other, the Kukis represent Churachandpur district though both share seats in Senapati and Chandel districts. However, in the valley, it is the Meiteis who are in a majority and they along with a few Pangals (Meitei Muslims) dominate all the seats.^{vii} In identifying the Meiteis as an ethnic group, the emphasis is upon a distinct group of people all of whom are known as by such name as all of them share certain features in common which in their entirety are not present in any other group. Similarly, the Kukis and Nagas are said to constitute as ethnic category because of the kind of features that they have in common.

Not only ethnicity and territoriality constitute as the core issue of contentions, the feeling of oneness among different communities is also deficient. There is a perception of an anti-hill tribe attitude amongst the Meitei social base in the valley. Thereby, the tribals accuse the Meiteis of excluding them from politics, the state's culture or even in social realm. Yet, the tribals are equally exclusivist in their attitude and perceptions. While they accuse the Meiteis of being exclusivist, the Nagas and the Kukis have never looked upon the Meiteis as one amongst them yet ironically blame the Meiteis for lack of sensitivity towards them. Furthermore, local politicians function as a mere consonance of their respective communities or tribal constituencies thus further entrenching the divides which then spill over to the armed movements creating a vicious cycle of relative deprivation and armed violence.^{viii}

Similar to that of antagonistic feelings and narrow political interest persisting between the Kukis and Nagas, the Meiteis too are apparently guided by their parochial ethnic interests. In spite of the tribal resistance against the Meitei policy of dominance and interference, there has been a dominative attempt of forcibly expanding their sphere of

influence. Mention may be made of the Manipur Land Revenue and Land reform Act, 1960,^{ix} Acquisition of Chiefs' Right Bill 1966^x etc. as some notable instances that continually emerge and render a contention between the tribals and the Meiteis. Seemingly, the tribals fear these moves by the majority Meiteis as it can gravely affect the existing tribal identity, land ownership system and the prevailing demographic profile.

Ironically, ethnic aspirations of the different groups in the State seem to be further intensified by ethnic-based militant movement which in turn appears to have added a further dimension to the already complex and restive situation. Due to narrow and intense self-identification as Kuki and Naga, issues concerning both the groups even fail to hold sway on common issues affecting the tribal as a whole. In other words, since all issues and demands are exceedingly determined and guided by ethnic connotations the question of consolidated tribal identity has failed to emerge to exert as political force of bargaining and to act as check and balances towards the Meiteis intent. It is in this background that the paper seeks to interrogate how Kuki-Naga identity issue has accentuated ethnic politics in the hills. In addition, the paper intends to examine how ethnic mobilization and counter mobilization in the hills can be attributed to the furthering of the prevailing competitive nature of politics.

Contextually speaking, ethnic politics in the hills of Manipur is the resultant of collective identification and mobilisation vis-à-vis territoriality and the inseparably guided ethnic aspirations. It is this discourse that has assumed to be a key issue that further intensifies ethnic movement. For instance, in spite of being recognized as a distinct Schedule Tribe by the government yet identification and alignment ensued further to form collective identity. As such, Naga identity though appears to be consolidated over the years is composed of different tribes who are linguistically and culturally varied. On the other, a number of tribes who exhibit cultural and linguistic affinity though not perfectly homogeneous are broadly identified as Kuki. Thereby, consolidation becomes essential not only due to the perceptive notion of common ancestry or shared history, but also for easier collective political bargaining against other

corresponding groups. Since ethnic movements in the region are characterized precisely by their claims to peoplehood or nationhood, and as this element of identifications are insubstantial and fluid, ethnic assertion may continue to remain indeterminate. Further, collective identifications or consolidations are alternatively employed as a precondition of realizing ethnic aspirations for autonomy and self-governance.

Anthony D. Smith in his article 'The Ethnic Sources of Nationalism' alleged that names are important, for not only self- and other-identification, but also as expressive emblems of the collective personality. Until a collective cultural identity receives a proper name, it lacks, in an important sense, a recognizable sense of community (both by members and by outsiders). Similarly, the ethnic situation and discourses in the hills of Manipur explicates the resurgence of Kuki and Naga as collective identity as having political connotation underneath. Hypothetically, I suppose this identification having stressed on the cultural adherents or certain similar attributes that exclude others, culminating conflict of interests among the hill inhabitants of Manipur as the basis of ethnic politics.

Of late, although ethnicity and ethnic politics have become a key issue and concern for policy makers and academicians, the emerging sense of intense identification as being distinct from one another are often argued as a resurgence of the previously prevailing phenomena even during the colonial period. The hill areas of Manipur have traditionally been a locale settled by Kukis and Nagas jostling for supremacy and dominance since time immemorial. Today, ethnic politics have become popular terms in contemporary politics of Manipur. So much so that politicization of ethnicity has taken deep roots in Manipur with culture, economic development and governance being impacted. In fact, there is no aspect of life of the people that has not been affected by ethnicity and its discourses. Nevertheless, consciousness is the motive force behind the formation of such ethnic identity. Of late, ethnicity has turned out to be an impulsive force behind one's language, culture, religion and shared history.

Needless to say, ethnic identity demands always turned into political issues, demanding either a separate

administrative unit or other political advantage for the ethnic groups concerned. As an impetus to the tribal demand for separate statehood, the tribals of Manipur argued that the merger agreement signed by the Manipur Maharaja could not and did not cover the territory occupied by the tribal Chiefs and their subjects, because the Maharaja of Manipur was not a tribal representative who had authority to act on their behalf, and the tribals were not his subjects.^{xi} In contrast, the Meiteis are of the view that although the then tribals enjoyed autonomy and independence, the hill areas form very much a part of Manipur. It is because of these varying historical interpretations among different groups that expanding one's realm of interest is viewed as intrusive and a threat to one's identity.

Over late, ethnicity has become a very decisive force in the identity formation of the Nagas and the Kukis. Ethnicity was first introduced in the governance of Manipur during the colonial rule when they separated the administration of the hill tribes from that of Manipur valley. The Maharaja was entrusted with the administration of the Meitei inhabited valley with the help of Manipur State Durbar while, the President of the Manipur State Durbar, a British ICS officer was to administer the hill tribes who were sub-divided into the Nagas and the Kukis. Thus, the contemporary manifestation of ethnic alignment is creditable to the British indirect rule that was introduced in the hills areas.

Accordingly, the British recognized the Kuki Chiefs and the headmen or the *Khullakpas*^{xii} of the Nagas who were authorized to administer their villages through the tribal customary laws. Herein, ethnicity was made an element of governance of the hill tribes. Thus, politicization of ethnicity was embedded in the colonial administrative system and the subsisting and sharpened trend may be attributed as a continued discourse. In the Hills, it was the chiefs' conclaves and ethnic associations that brought political awakening. Social exclusion of tribal communities in the early years of the twentieth century had led to their welcoming Christian missionaries in their midst. The latter brought education and a new worldview.^{xiii}

Much of the politics in Manipur seems to centre on the question of preserving one's ethnic identity especially through assertion of political autonomy demands.^{xiv} For

instance, the United Naga Council (UNC hereafter) which spearheaded the integration of the Naga inhabited areas of Manipur into the present state of Nagaland represents the Nagas of Manipur in the form of an organized political force. Similarly, Kuki Inpi Manipur (KIM hereafter) serves as an apex body for the Kukis inhabiting Manipur. Ethnicity being made an element of governance its overtones with a varying degree continue to endure even today.

Almost in the same manner Karl Marx predicted, the twentieth century has not been a period of revolutionary class struggles, but rather of ethno-nationalist conflicts. Correspondingly, Joseph Rothschild alleged that, "no society or political system is today immune from the burgeoning pressure of ethnic nationalism, with its possible legitimating or delegitimizing effects. Communist and non-communist, old and new, advanced and developing, centralist and federalist states must all respond to the pressure of this ascendant ideology.^{xv}

With three competing ethnic groups- the Meiteis, the Nagas and the Kukis engaging in a self-centered and articulated campaign of ethnic assertion and consolidation to expand their realm of influence, Manipur has of late become a political hotspot. No doubt, the salient feature of the social order of Manipur is perhaps its heterogeneity. These groups exhibit remarkable variation in terms of 'language and culture'. Identity formation by the communities and tribes harping on exclusivity, integration and dominance, often results in several forms of sanguinary conflict and intensified autonomy demands. Over the years, ethnic mobilisation and identification has surfaced as a process of emerging group interests rather than the manifestations of primordial interests and sentiments.

Ethnic mobilization by one group kindled and heightens the ethnic identity of another group. The assertion for greater autonomy by one group stimulated similar demands from other groups. Consequently, ethnic identity mobilisation and competing ethnic discourses has assume to be a contagious trend in Manipur. What is witnessed at present is not only the revival of primordial identities of the past; but also the construction of modern ethnic identities vis-à-vis the newly created nation-state of India. Paradoxically, most of the political issues and agendas are

intrinsically associated to the question of realizing a specific territory for self-governance of ethnic identity.

After independence of the country, the feelings of distinctiveness by different communities inhabiting the region have amplified and thereby various movements are being spearheaded to meet micro ethnic aspirations. No doubt, Manipur being inhabited by three distinct ethnic groups is often termed as a land of diversity. However, instead of contributing to the rich composite culture, ethnic diversity has rather ensued in furthering ethnic contestations and in mounting ethno-centric feelings among its denizens.

Particularly in the hills, mobilisation and self-identification constitute the core strategy of counter-balancing the sphere of dominance and capturing a sense of power. This is primarily because of the fear of hegemonic dominance by one group over another. This divide acquired as Kuki-Naga dimension. Nagas considering themselves to be more numerous and dominant than the Kukis in the hill areas have been motivated by the idea of self-governance. On the other, Kuki identity mobilisation being guided by linguistic and cultural connotations^{xvi} seeks to demand for integration of their inhabited areas for separate homeland or separate ethnic state as 'Kukiland'. Furthermore, Meiteis being the dominant community and having a long tradition of self-rule, motivated state-making leaders to sharpen their identity. However, embarking Meitei identity to fashion the politics of the state in their favour would also meant that such mobilisation process would exclude other communities in the state, all of which had maintained their coherence due to the enduring traditional authority structures. They in turn began to mobilize to counter the tendency of making Manipur a mono-artefact 'Meitei state'. The result was sequence of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation, which eventually turned conflictual. Today, this process is not only sharpened and channelized by political parties, but also by social and cultural organizations of the state.

In addition, various organizations including militants have increasingly begun raising demands for division of the state and separate administrative units for themselves particularly in the hills. With rising socio-economic challenges and the desire for integration, the cycle of

conflicts and rivalry has become interminable. Most importantly, the fear of ethnic hegemony appears to have led to the rising spiral of competitive mobilisation between different ethnic groups, social organizations and even militant organizations. Today, seeing the situation it compels us to say that there are bleak chances of people with different identities (ethnic background) to live together peacefully with varying degrees of tolerance and even generosity. In spite of some internal prejudices within the larger ethnic identity yet such differences do not necessarily deter one's movement against other ethnic group.

Initially, social organizations and community elites have been the most vigorous force in determining the course of ethnic movements. With the emergence of more extremist elements in the state, ethno-centric feelings, fear of domination and finally augmented by the demand for self-rule, the sign of peaceful co-existence is daunting. Ethnic discourse and speculation is faced with opposition from the other who seek to have sway over other. Much of the politics in Manipur centers on the question of identity. Political parties and social organizations in either state have used ethnic identities to mobilize support among their constituents. Not only these, there are constant and competitive struggles over who will define rules or who will regulate people's lives.

Besides competing discourses between the Kukis and the Nagas, it is also argued that the furtherance of ethnic discourse in the hills of Manipur also lies in the intrusive nature of majority Meiteis politics. Specifically, the tribals fear that in the name of "development" the state government wants to gain control over the hill areas that is considered to be the abode of tribals.^{xvii} Above all, the perceived feeling of relative deprivation in relation to the majority Meiteis and against each other sharpens ethnic divide and ethnic ventures. So much so that, no issue affecting both Kukis and Nagas is construed as affecting tribal interest and thereby consolidated tribal identity turns out to be a mere rhetoric.

Contestations over claims and counter claims over territory on ethnic lines have been building up since the British rule in the region. With the growth of modern consciousness among the hill people, belongingness to newly constructed ethnic identities were inseparably tangled with

the claims over territoriality. As much as some section of Kukis claimed a Kuki homeland, the Nagas too claimed large parts of Manipur as Naga territory. What is obnoxious about the Naga claim is the exclusive character of Naga territorial boundary, rejecting any counter claims with intimidating violence. Ethnic cleansing of the Kukis^{xviii} was an outcome of this politics.

Despite incontinuous and mixed nature of demographic settlements ethnic demands for separate homeland has appeared to be one of the most contentious issues. Besides the conflict of interests between the Kukis and Nagas over the demand for separate homeland, there are various areas where the two groups are at loggerheads. In other words, even a political demand concerning the tribal as a whole (both Kuki and Naga) or any of them is viewed as a threat by the other. With militancy strictly taking ethnic lines, the contentions and level of suspicion between the two grew considerably. That is, the existing degree of mobilisation and identification between Kukis and Nagas contributed to the growing conflict of interests and even irreconcilable on any issue considered to affect the tribal at large.

Due to mobilisation and counter-mobilisation of ethnic identities coupled with the politicization of ethnicity autonomy and liberation that a section of the population demands often remain unacceptable to another group. Contestations over sovereignty and territory often engendered and intimidate violence among various ethnic populations. Of late, this augmented situation has given rise to consequential ramification by making ethnic relations appear incompatible. Even ethnic conflicts are also the product of the demands for political recognition and the resistance to it. Conflict between ethnic groups in Manipur particularly in the hills is a zero-sum game, where one group's interests are in direct opposition to the other.

Ever since the introduction of a scheme to allow the tribals both Kuki and Naga in the hill areas to exercise a decentralize governance in the form of Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act 1971, alongside there was a demand for introduction of Sixth Schedule similar to that introduced in other states of the region. Ironically, although there was a cohesive demand for extension of Sixth Schedule by both

Kuki and Naga in the beginning, soon there developed a conflict of interests between the Kukis and Nagas as the demand was construed to meet narrow ethnic interest. In other words, directed by their own ethnic interests, the differences that emerged over the number of District Councils to be created have turned out to be an impasse for a collective endeavor. Consequently, these differences have not been able to develop cohesive assertion for extension of Sixth Schedule. Thus, the majority Meiteis opposition to such move coupled with the absence of organized insistence by both Kuki and Naga groups is perceived to be the reason for non-implementation of such demand. As ethnic identification unconstructively is so intense that even issue of common interests fail hold sway over the Meiteis.

Moreover, it may be recalled that in 1951 the administrative divisions of Manipur comprised of eight sub-divisions of which three were in the plains and five were in the hill areas. Apart from Thoubal and Jiribam, Sadar Hills was also a sub-division in the Manipur plains. It was in 1961 Sadar Hills having a total population of 72,039 was classified as a hill sub-division.^{xix} Sadar Hills issue had been lingering for more than three decades. It is a historical fact that six Autonomous District Council was given as package grant to when Manipur attained Statehood in 1971. All of them were upgraded into a full-fledged district after 1972, except Kuki dominated Tengnoupal and Sadar Hills. In 1974 Tengnoupal upgraded but Sadar Hills left out. It is so until today.^{xx} At present, the Senapati district has two Sadar Hills sub-divisions. That is Sadar Hills West sub-division and Sadar Hills East sub-division. The former has a total area of 476 square kilometer with the later having 765 square kilometer.

The areas of Sadar Hills were and are predominantly inhabited by the Kukis. The movement for granting of Sadar Hills a separate district has started some 26 years back, which at that point of time had no armed Kuki outfit for articulating the demands of autonomous homelands. The demand for creating Sadar Hills District by bifurcating the Senapati District of Manipur was made on the ground of the geographical complexities associated with the existing District headquarters of Senapati.^{xxi} Lately, the Naga ethnic armies construed it as a step towards the realization of 'Kukiland' which collide with the proposed 'Nagalim'.^{xxii} With

every aspirations and demands shaped by ethnic considerations, any demand initiated for one ethnic group is resisted by others who cohabit.

Today, the UNC of Manipur has become the apex body of the Naga community in Manipur. It claims to uphold the solidarity and the unity of the Naga people and to work for the betterment of the Naga society.^{xxiii} It coordinates the activities of various Naga organizations under its umbrella. Of late, the political turmoil in Manipur was aggravated by the demand of the UNC. In 1997, the UNC toeing the line of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Issac-Muivah (NSCN-IM hereafter) demanded for the extension of the cease-fire agreement provisions between the Government of India (GOI) and the NSCN-IM to all the Naga contiguous areas. It also openly supported the demand for Greater Nagaland and gave a call for action in all Naga inhabited areas of Manipur in support of the demand for the Naga political integration.^{xxiv} These demands and activities of the UNC have raised political controversy and caused suspicion, anger and resentment in Manipur. It seems that the UNC's position has changed and it is no longer a non-political entity. However, the political stance of the UNC has created antagonism among the three major ethnic groups of Manipur.

Even today, the Indian state is held responsible by the Nagas particularly by the UNC and NSCN-IM for creating a geographical space and minoritizing them is several state of Northeast India. They opined that the Indian state further divided the Naga area under its control, despite being a contiguous area in Nagaland, Assam, Manipur and Arunachal. It is in this context that the present day Naga movement aims to bring all Naga inhabited areas under one political administration.

The apex organizations of the Meiteis-All Manipur United Clubs Organization (AMUCO) and the Kukis-Kuki Inpi, Manipur vehemently opposed to the demand for the extension of the cease-fire agreement provisions to Manipur and the creation of Greater Nagaland. They alleged that the UNC was responsible for the social tension in the state and urged the state government to take appropriate step to avoid any untoward situation.^{xxv} There is deep division among the three communities in the state and they take intransigent

position on territorial issue. While Nagas want the merger of Naga inhabited areas of the state with Nagaland and Kukis for a separate state, Meiteis are for the territorial integrity of Manipur at any cost.^{xxvi}

The demand for 'Kuki State' within the framework of the Constitution of India was initiated as the political aspiration for survival of the Kukis. This was adopted as resolution no. 1 by the Kuki National Assembly (KNA) in its General Meeting held at Thingkangphai, Churachandpur, from 19th to 22nd January 1960.^{xxvii} The demand for Kuki State was deemed necessary to facilitate consolidation of various cultural and linguistically similarity groups whom perhaps constitutes minorities to have their own administration and their identity protected.

The Kuki-Naga conflict^{xxviii} in Manipur was a conflict emanating from contesting territorial claims. The Nagas alleged that the hill areas except Churachandpur district is their ancestral land and ought to be integrated with other Naga areas of Northeast India to form 'Greater Nagalim'. Similarly, the Kukis particularly the militants also claim that their inhabited areas form a part of their demand for separate 'Kuki-State'.

What often appears to be so irony in Manipur is that ethnic division and identification is further heightened by ethnic militancy. That is, even militancy and its formation in the state strongly entwined in one's ethnic identity. So to say, militancy is interpreted, in part, as an assertion of ethnic identity in Manipur. Paradoxically, different ethnic groups have different demands invariably inconsistent with each other. Today, both Kuki and Naga-based militants armed themselves in the pursuit of achieving territorial concession. Therefore, these discourses create a vicious cycle of violence begetting violence. Nevertheless, the core reason behind ethnic contestation and paranoid feelings between the Kukis and Nagas in the hills is primarily because of the overlapping and intersecting territorial demands asserted by both the militant groups to form their own ethnic homeland or separate ethnic state. Ethnic militancy are driven by ethnic competition over state power; as a measure of counterance towards others who could possibly emerged as a threat rather than high degrees of diversity; and as a

measure of asserting oneself to secure a definite political and territorial space.

With different militant organizations aspiring to safeguard their respective identity and achieve a definite territorial demarcation, ethnic relations in the hills particularly between the Kukis and Nagas is often filled with a sense of insecurity and suspicion. Presently, NSCN-IM is the main militant organization that seeks to represent the Nagas of the Northeast. Ethnicization of territory with expansionist design protagonized by the ethnic militants manifest in the form of demand for homeland such as *Nagalim* by NSCN-IM, *Zalengam/Kuki-State* by the Kuki outfit Kuki National Army/Kuki National Organisation (KNA/KNO), *KukiLand* by Kuki National Front (KNF), *Zogam* or *Zomiland* by another Kuki Chin outfit Zomi Revolutionary Army/Zomi Reunification Organisation (ZRA/ZRO), *Hmarland* by Hmar Peoples Convention (HPC) etc. and the mushrooming growth of ethnic armies which indicates potential aspiration for ethnic homeland. Due to belligerent feelings persisting between different militant groups, it may not be an exaggeration to say that the demand for autonomy is intensified.

The deep social divide, absence of united insistence towards the majority for the same goal exemplifies that every discourse are ostensibly ethnic in character. Further, the accentuating propensity of ethnic politics is the much stress of importance on achieving certain degree of political privilege based on shared ethnic attributes rather than shared civil rights. This is because every matter both social and political is ethnicized with no attempt to reach compromise without taking ethnic sides. In fact, so-called plural or polyethnic societies have often been described as deeply divided societies marked by perennial conflict and competition between discrete ethnic groups (Smith, 1965; Horowitz, 1985). We may say, ethnicity or as simultaneously used in this article 'ethnic identification' has become a decisive variable among groups in their relationship more so in their in their quest for political privilege. Perhaps, ethnic dichotomization in the region have been argued by different scholars, yet in this study the basis of argument is that the main structural source of ethnic politics lies on ethnicity vis-à-vis the competition between ethnic groups.

Thus, in view of the growing contestations and differences over political aspirations among the various ethnic groups, the state is seen to be non-accommodative to its internal aspirations particularly minority demands. Taking into account the existing differences and rivalries autonomy like Sixth Schedule may be employed to suit the varied and to meaningfully allow ethnic groups to exercise meaningful degree of self-governance. Paradoxically, the continued contests show how the state has been unsuccessful in incorporating those social forces into the state's apparatus. On the other, it may also be asserted that it is that narrow identity mobilisation which limits the state's autonomy and its capacity to govern and uphold the rule of law. In fact, ethnic related conflicts and violence have proved as the incapacity of the state to govern and manage its internal upsurges. On the other, the manner of identity mobilization too has serious consequences for intercommunity relations and hostilities.

Over the years, heightened contestations and intense demand for self-governance appears to be the outcome of perceived notion of fear of being minoritized by another ethnic group. This perception is further intensified due to the perception that a dominant ethnic group would later be reluctant to share power and might assume to be more domineering and oppressive. In other words, it may be asserted that the reason behind why politics in the hills of Manipur is often guided by ethnic interests is essentially due to the fear of being marginalized and the feeling of fear of relative deprivation that the group often presumes.

Conspicuously, the gravest threat to Manipur's internal cohesion and stability is the various stereotypes construed by each tribe or ethnic group against the other. The most viable way out would be to evolve a mechanism of political and social inclusion in political governance. Only then, the prevailing mistrusts and paranoid feelings among ethnic groups that have appeared to be a contagious phenomenon may considerably be abated. In conclusion, India being a multination state, policies concerning ethnic, linguistics, religious and other identity propensities needs to be outlined by speculating the Indian federal system particularly by examining whether the existing autonomy arrangements is suited to its diverse identities. If not, the

struggle for self-governance and the atmosphere of ethno-centrism would go on inward looking and ultimately be an impasse in democratic politics. India being a multi-ethnic state ethnic politics should be made compatible with the survival of a democratic system with certain institutional arrangements. Unless diversity secures a place in the governance, the multi-ethnic composition will continue to peril the state. Nonetheless, we cannot expect and ensure complete symmetry among ethnic populations, yet, there is need to strike a balance among different groups to circumvent ethnic antagonism and conflicts that often emerge from ethnic diversity.

Notes

ⁱ. Eriksen, T.H. (1991). Ethnicity versus Nationalism. *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 28, No. 3, p.264.

ⁱⁱ. The term 'state' in this article denotes the peripheral units or the states. For e.g. there are 29 states in India. On the other, the term 'Indian state' is broadly used to refer the country as a whole or the whole of nation.

ⁱⁱⁱ. Sixth Schedule is a special political arrangement design to cope with the escalating ethnic aspirations for autonomy in Northeast India. Particularly, this political schema was essentially intended to manage ethnic propensities in the then state of Assam for self-governance. Similarly, the tribals of Manipur have been demanding the extension of Sixth Schedule in the hill areas of Manipur. Even today, inspite of persistent demand by the tribals Sixth Schedule have not been extended in Manipur. As a mark of protest, the existing Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act 1971 that is similar to that of Fifth Schedule in its function and practice was stalled since 1989. It was only in June 2010 that election to the District Council in Manipur was revived without extension of Sixth Schedule provisions.

^{iv}. Oinam, B. (2003). Pattern of Ethnic Conflict in North-East: A Study of Manipur. *Economic and Politically Weekly*, Vol. 38, No. 21, p. 2033.

^v. Pukhrambam. (2006, June 24). The People of Manipur. *Manipur Today*, Vol. 7, p.23.

^{vi}. With regard to who forms majority in the five hill districts of Manipur, there are variances between the Kuki and Naga leaders. Going by the Naga perception the Kukis form majority only in Churachandpur district, in contrast it is alleged that there are no Naga population in Churachandpur and Chandel district. The so-called Nagas like Anal,

Lamkang, Moyon, Maring, Monsang, Tarao, and Chothe are perceived as Kuki linguistically and culturally. Thus, who ought to be called 'Kuki' or 'Naga' is a fluid and often contested viewpoint in Manipur.

vii. Ngalengam, NG. (2002). *Politics in Manipur: 1972-2001 A.D.* Unpublished Ph. D Thesis, Manipur University, Manipur, pp.73-5.

viii. Goswami, N. (2008). Manipur : In Need of Serious Perception Management. *IDSIA Issue Brief*, p.11.

ix. The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reform Act, 1960 was an Act to consolidate and amend the law relating to the then Union Territory of Manipur and to provide certain measures of land reforms. Though this Act was for the whole of the Union Territory of Manipur, the Hill areas were exempted from the purview of this Act. Section 1(2) of the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reform Act, 1960, categorically stated: "it extends to the whole of the Union Territory of Manipur except the Hill areas thereof." It allowed the prevailing land ownership system in the Hill areas unchanged and provided a major impetus to perpetuate their present land ownership system with all its maladies. It was only in 1975 that an amendment was made in this Act in line with the changing socio-economic scenario of the country. Section 1(3) of Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reform (Amendment) Act, 1975, empowered the state government to extend, by notification in the official gazette, the whole or any part of this Act to any of the Hill areas of Manipur as also might be specified in such notification.

x. Encouraged by the steps taken in the Chin Hills and Lushai Hills there was a demand for abolition of Chiefship in Manipur. The major defect in this policy of the government was the refusal to pay compensation to the Chiefs when the move for abolition of Chiefship was initiated. The Meiteis alleged that the King of Manipur was the owner of all lands and denies paying of compensation to tribal Chiefs. The theory of absolute ownership of rights of King over all lands in Manipur and the policy in the matter of Land Reforms that follows from this theory is found to be unconvincing to the tribals. The Bill was introduced again in 1967 divided the tribals and non-tribals members of the Manipur Assembly. While the former were in favour of re-drafting the Bill, the latter wanted the Bill to be passed without any amendment.

xi. Hitson, P.T. (2004). *Politics of Ethnicity in North East India: With Special Reference to Manipur*. New Delhi: Regency Publication, p.18.

^{xii}. The term 'Khullakpa' is a local parlance denoting the head of a village. This term is often used by the Meiteis to address a village head in tribal areas. It is a term used to address a village head among the Nagas. With regard to the Kukis, the term 'Ningthou' is rather a widely used term to address Kuki Chiefs.

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- xiii . Laldena. (1984). *British Policy towards Manipur 1891-1919*. (Directorate of Welfare of Tribals. Government of Manipur), p.41.
- xiv. Shimray, U.A. (2001, September 29). Ethnicity and Socio-Political Assertion: The Manipur Experience. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 36, No. 39, pp. 3676–77.
- ^{xv}. Rothschild, J. (1977). Observations on the Political Legitimacy in Contemporary Europe. *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 92, No. 3; also see his (1981). *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- xvi. Although some communities like Anal, Chiru, Koireng, Lamkang, Moyon, Monsang, Maring and Tarao have parted with the Nagas yet considering these communities as culturally and linguistically more closer to the Kukis are perceived to be Kukis. In view of this, the inhabited areas of these groups are dually included as both Kuki areas and Naga areas.
- xvii. Bhatia, B. (2010, July 31). Justice Denied to Tribals in the Hill Districts of Manipur. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 46, No. 15, p.38.
- ^{xviii}. The “Ethnic Cleansing” of the Kukis by the NSCN (IM) saw one of its worst manifestations on 13th September 1993 when fleeing Kuki civilians were intercepted at Joupi village in Tamenglong district and butchered in cold blood. The most gruesome incident took place at Taloulong village in Tamenglong district on 19th September 1993 when NSCN (IM) activists swooped down upon innocent villagers, forcing the adults to flee leaving behind small children under 10 years of age. Thereafter, NSCN (IM) activists hacked 13 children to death. For understanding of ‘Ethnic Cleansing’ refer, Haokip, P.S. (1998). *Zale’n-Gam: The Kuki Nation*, KNO Pvt. Circulation.
- ^{xix}. Singh, A.K. & Singh, M.R. (2008). The Sadar Hills Dilemma. In Singh, A. K., Sharma, R. & Sanasam, A. (Eds.), *Problems of Ethnicity and Identity in Contemporary Manipur and Other Essays*. Imphal: Centre for Ethnic and Identity Studies. p.41.
- xx. A Memorandum submitted to the Hon’ble Chief Minister, Manipur, for creation of Sadar Hills as a full-fledged District.
- xxi. Baruah, S. (2004). Citizens and Denizens: Ethnicity, Homelands and Crisis of Displacement in Northeast India. *Social Change and Development*, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 112.
- xxii. Nagalim is an aspired homeland of the NSCN-IM that consists of the present territory of Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh in addition to the Nagaland.
- xxiii. UNC. (2003). The Constitution of UNC (Amended) adopted in February, p. 1.

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- xxiv. UNC. (2001, August). Declaration of the Naga Peoples Convention held from 08-09 in Senapati District of Manipur.
- xxv. AMUCO urges UNC to Lead People in the Right Path to Avoid Conflicts. (1997, October 8). *Manipur Mail*, p.A1.
- xxvi. Haokip, T.T. (2005). Kuki-Naga Conflicts: Issues and Solutions. In Hussain, M. (Ed.), *Coming Out of Violence: Essays on Ethnicity, Conflict and Resolution and Peace Process in North-East India*. (p.143). New Delhi: Regency Publications.
- xxvii. Kuki State: A memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, on 24/03/1960.
- xxviii. Ethnic conflict between the Kukis and Nagas occurred in the mid 1990s in Manipur. This conflict was primarily due to competing ethnic discourse over territory. In other words, the conflict ensued due to overlapping and intersecting territorial claims by both Kukis and Nagas. For detail understanding of Kuki-Naga conflicts in Manipur, see, Tohring, SR. (2010). *Violence and Identity in North-East India: Kuki-Naga Conflict*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.