

# Internal Conflict in Manipur: Security concerns, beyond conventional Approach

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We take pride in being the enlightened species on planet earth and yet in our efforts to secure national boundaries or assert the uniqueness or superiority of our ethnicity we would transgress any ethical boundary to have the winning edge. That is a feeling that has gained strength during my recent visit to Manipur and hence this note. When security measures focus primarily on violence; its means, methods, and analysis or countermeasures it ignores - silent spectators in the conflict zone, active impressionable minds that are being moulded for life.

Manipur, a state in the north eastern region of India has been in a conflict situation for over four decades. The state has a population of over 2.5 million residing in 22,327 Sq. Kms of land 90% of the land is designated as hilly terrain and 67% of the population reside in rural areas. The population in the valley is comprised of Meiteis, Muslims and some tribal population, and a majority of the 33 ethnic tribal communities live in the hills. These ethnic communities are governed by customary law that influences cultural practices, land ownership and its utilization.

The sense of powerlessness experienced when the Kingdom of Manipur, a British Protectorate (1824), was annexed to India in 1949 has left a bad taste which many Manipuri's have never gotten over. When India got independence (1947), Manipur also experienced the same sense of freedom and set in place its own constitution - The Manipur Constitution Act 1947 and the Manipur Hill People Regulation Act 1947. Manipur had planned for an independent existence, but what followed was an India annexation in 1949 as a 'C' state (most princely states were constituted as 'A' states). The subsequent journey was not too smooth either, it took years of protests to get full statehood in 1972 and a long struggle to ensure the official acceptance of the Meitei language and script.

The historical presence of discontentment, and a diverse ethnicity that never found its way to peaceful co-existence has set grounds for conflict, be it as - between underground groups and the State, between and within underground groups and as conflict over power between ethnic groups. Over the decades discord has often taken a violent turn, leading to a loss life over the set mark of 25 battle related deaths per year of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program to designate it as an area under conflict. At times Manipur has crossed this mark by hundreds or more<sup>1</sup>.

That aside, there is the silent violence, which is far from pleasant for those who live with it. A Manipuri is exposed to the possibility of being caught up in sudden combing exercises of the armed forces (*present in significant numbers within the State*), the threat of a bomb blast or being caught in the middle of an exchange of gunfire between the armed forces and rebels or in armed disputes between the underground/militant groups themselves.

In 2015 between 1<sup>st</sup> January and 19<sup>th</sup> February, there have been 29 bomb blasts,<sup>2</sup> the location and timing minimizing the loss of lives. A loss of civilian lives can make things difficult for both the armed / paramilitary forces; and militant groups with a consequent erosion of public support.

This paper explores an interesting cauldron of issues as human rights violations, rebellion/militancy, corruption, the lack of emphasis on political and socio-economic security, the drug trade and a lack of accountability in Manipur where young inhabitants are growing up to turn citizens in Manipur..

## Securing the Territory and its People

The mere absence of war or violence is not the answer to the perceived elusiveness of peace. Decades have passed since Johan Galtung and others spoke of the limits of Negative Peace (absence of war) as against Positive Peace where justice, harmony and equity reigns. Yet, we hold on to Negative Peace, by especially seeking ways to sharpen our skills and to be on the alert to address violence with equally violent counter measures capable of collateral damage. Globally, this will ensure a solid foundation for the military industry, not Peace.

Chris Mitchell (1981) indicated the presence of an incompatibility of goals, attitude and behaviour, or perceived it to be so, among parties in conflict. Addressing this incompatibility through military security, ensures but a scope for expansion of military specialization, up-gradation of surveillance and its 'integration' within society. This, not so easily accomplished in a society with the presence of multiple ethnic groups, with varied positions on - territorial integrity, local governance and the task is multiplied by a tough and difficult terrain that makes it a challenge to demarcate spaces that can be technologically patrolled and controlled.

The solution to a difficult situation, for successive governments at the Centre, has been to largely rely upon the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, questionable within the democratic framework of India. It may have been fine for a colonial government to adopt the Armed Forces Ordinance; but haven't times changed?

The multi-ethnic composition with as many varied plans for their terrain makes that dependence, solely on, position based negotiations turn a limited view, in the long run. A focus on violent expression as a solution ignores the, but to be expected, reality of a growing sense of alienation, dehumanization, and discrimination. This clubbed with mis-governance makes Peace a challenging proposition.

Interventions by the armed or paramilitary forces often restrict itself to search operations, preventive arrests, summary execution (self defence or not) and extra judicial killings. What finally stays on in the minds of people is the extra judicial killings and not any civic action carried out by the para military.

With regard to extra judicial killings there are certain aspects that comes through:

- Nothing can explain bullet ridden bodies fired upon from all sides, at times in close quarters. If, elimination is the only solution, then all that a nation would need is trained snipers for cost effective security management, eliminating the need for surplus ammunition, personnel and infrastructure.
- Operation Bluebird (1987) is a remarkable example of the approach adopted in the region. The Central Paramilitary forces held a concerned village in terror for months in retaliation for being attacked and losing a large quantity of arms and ammunition. That surely cannot be the way to set up secure boundaries and build bridges of democracy. The state machinery remained helpless and intervention had to come by way of securing the legal rights of citizens, through a public litigation filed in the Guwahati High Court. The hearing was completed after five years but the judgement was kept reserved<sup>3</sup>. The use of excessive force is not a rare occurrence, in 2009 the indiscriminate use of gun power in broad daylight led to public protests and a subsequent decline of such instances. Excessive force can instil, fear, anger and revenge - Not Peace.

- Unlike as in a war against another state, both paramilitary forces and the local population have to survive here, side by side. This complicates the situation, for as indicated by Webel David, there is a possibility of the vicious circle of violence getting strengthened, when violence perpetrators are rewarded for acts of violence this instils feelings of revenge among victims and those sympathetic to them.
- It is the skill of the personnel at the ground and their sense to take the right call in a short span of time on a sudden outburst of violence that can restrict excessive damage.
- Human Rights agencies are trying to address concerns of individuals victimized or adversely affected by existing conflict. These agencies have come together under a platform known as Civil Society Coalition of Human Rights in Manipur to assert the human rights perspective at the national and international level. There is need for government to create a sense of accountability through speedy trials and the provision of compensation for deaths or injury to civilians. Isn't standing up for Justice a part of one's sovereign democratic rights within a nation? The nation also owes that to the armed forces for if it is injustice is all what they are capable off, then India would not be a functioning democracy.

(Pic. 1.)

## II. Asserting Ethnic Identities and Territorial ownership:

It is political aspirations linked to ethnicity that have resulted in as many as 35 underground groups. Over the years, the number of underground groups have but increased for internal rifts, with branches or separate entities being formed. The split, usually, occurring as a result of position based negotiations with Government of India, wherein some members disapprove of the tactical arrangement reached. On occasion, these groups have come under one umbrella to assert their stand against Government of India's policy or action.

Underground groups disdain criticism and may ensure intricate control over a specific area with fear as the main strategy. Their tunnelled vision is evident from the focus on financial management, involvement in smuggling of contraband/arms, collection of taxes, moral policing and the presence of over the board agencies that collect information, and focus on select issues. While part of the resources collected may go towards addressing some needs of the local people, the presence of local discontent indicates the gap is widening. Besides, they maintain a total silence on the quality of life of the powerless and about the silent violence experienced by marginalised groups. Discontentment- A strategic plan? .

Strong clan bonds have ensured unity among groups in the populace, but the question now is - for how long? The growing disparity between ethnic and within ethnic groups may pull the plug on that. A younger generation not so exposed to a nurturing on customary law and tradition may have but experienced the discrimination coming out of a lack of accountability in governance. Victims of displacement for development or of ethnic clashes turn vulnerable to human trafficking and in seeking out illegal ventures just to eke a living, may end up joining underground groups and/or being exposed to drug use/drug trade.

The focus on fear as a strategy, both by state and non-state actors, has led to a complex reality. The local population then considers this as their reference point and aims at avoiding friction with state and non-state actors, both emphasising on the brute might behind their presence. To think beyond

that is perceived as uncomfortable terrain.

This ground reality ensures a total lack of accountability be it in governance or the provision of services for health care or welfare. Both state and non-state actors have managed to assert the role of fear - far beyond their intentions?

But, Manipuri society is sharpening its survival skills, be it as ignoring the need for accountability, strengthening existing corruption through direct action, tactical support or by just being silent spectators. This works to the benefit of a minority elite from vested interest groups both within the governance machinery and outside.

### III. Cost of Selective Perception

The Government focuses on negative peace ignores structural, institutional issues that create silent violence within the system and violate the rights of marginalized groups. This has created a complex reality where:

#### a) Democracy – an illusive reality

Abraham Lincoln said “Democracy is of the people, by the people and for the people”. A different definition of democracy has emerged within the minds of people in Manipur; “B(u)y the people, For(ce) the people, and OFF the people”. Prior to every election any measure (*fear or monetary gain*) is used to ensure community participation and after being elected people find they are 'OFF' the frame of reference.

The focus of the central government is military security; the assumption seems to be that after peace is achieved the stability of institutions, systems of governance can be strengthened and mechanisms can be developed to give them legitimacy. This approach, is a long drawn struggle that turns silent torture for citizens especially the less powerful and marginalized groups. It provides an environment that is conducive to corruption, helps vested interests thrive and for nexuses to develop across and within various state and non-state actors.

The total disregard or indifference to political security is self-evident for even after decades the state is dependent on development aid from centre, which comes in without fail, delayed as ever. The total absence of effort to develop any local industrial units to facilitate growth, create trained human resources, ties down the local government even in terms of thinking towards change.

The current government is emphasising on the need for an Act East Policy instead of the Look East Policy. A limited, short term focus on capacity building in different spheres of development, restricts the scope for most local people to benefit from future development plans. Though it may be easy to set up infrastructure for training, finding any trainer of trainers would be an uphill task, especially for the rural areas or hill districts.

#### b) Absent or distorted Socio-economic Security

Socio-economic security is ignored by the state and non state actors. The absence of accountability is reflected in the difficulty with accessing potable water. This, though state has many water bodies including the largest fresh water lake in north eastern region along with reasonable amount of monsoon. To illustrate the same, recent newspaper reports focused on public unrest in Heirok village in Thoubal district for a scarcity of potable water. Thoubal district with an area of 514

Sq.Kms is endowed with rivers, lakes and other water bodies, and annual rainfall is 1306.80mm <sup>1</sup>. A visit to the locality in February 2015 indicated that women struggled to meet their need for potable water. (Pic 2). One of the economic activity undertaken by women is to collect pebbles, sand and boulders from river beds, this does not help address water concerns of the local population. (Pic3)

At present the planned development programme or utilisation of water resources focuses more on the needs of people outside, the needs of local people are largely sidelined.

It is left to student associations to assert views on issues as rising prices, the need to convert private colleges into government institutes, the public distribution system and the rise in educational fees. For example- A student association, The All Manipur Students Union (AMSU) calls for accountability and gets public support on select issues - inner line permit, restrictions on the influx of migrants or immigrants and use of original script of the Meetei language<sup>4</sup>. There have also been calls by All Tribal Students Union Manipur (ATMSU) to address the need for accountability with regard to planning and the implementation of education services in hill or tribal areas.

Students associations find it difficult to carry on intense advocacy initiatives while fulfilling academic aspirations and leads to a high turnover of individuals active in such agitations. But, they remain unable to continue with any sustained administrative or technical tussle with the government over a long period of time.

Meira Paibis's (women's movement) have been a force to reckon with in Manipur, their focus has been far more on the violence of state actors and at times on the price rise. A few formations stand up for certain issues of common concern to the local population.

Important issues for both present and future citizens of the state:

- Government schools have systemically turned dysfunctional with many having shut down. At the same time private schools are mushrooming in the valley area as are tuition centres. This limits options for the education of children from poorer families and from rural areas. As primary education is compulsory students are automatically given pass marks and government records naturally show an improvement in education till primary school.
- The elite send their children to other states or to private schools in Manipur and for private tuitions. A student ends up spending nine hours on rote learning at school and then tuitions. Tuitions have turned a thriving business with advertisements that try to entice 6 year olds (Std II) to seek their services.
- Government institutes in hill districts face additional problem of absentee teaching staff. School are dependent on human resource from the valley, who invariably join the service but report only to collect their monthly remuneration. The teacher contracts her/his job to a local person for a meagre amount.
- This lack of accountability has led to a situation whereby students are trafficked after being lured with the promise of a better education outside with boarding facility. Newspaper reports indicate such trafficked children as sent by their family for the contact person was

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<sup>1</sup> The only centre which records authentic meteorological records in the district is the Rice Research Centre, Wangbal. Rainfall recorded there in 1989 is 1306.80mm as against a mean annual rainfall of 1318.39mm during 1983-89. <http://thoubal.nic.in/about.htm>

usually someone known and working in another state. As the provision of educational services has not changed drastically, the present scenario may indicate an under reporting or difficulties in detection. Government intervention has been largely limited to creating awareness on the situation through wall posters and creating children's homes. The recent instance of a girl child running away from a children's home because of sexual abuse by a person in charge of institution indicates the situation is far from smooth<sup>5</sup>.

- While schools are mushrooming, only a select number of schools are allowed to enrol students for the final board exams for classes X to XII. This does create logistical problems and chaos as students have found their enrolment for exams turn invalid. Many of the schools permitted to conduct these exams are in the valley and that restricts girls of the hill districts seeking a higher education. The number of schools catering to girls are far less than those for boys.
- There is hardly any focus on career guidance other than educational streams as medicine or engineering for the elite, with huge donations paid to institutes within and outside the state.
- Health care service delivery is shaped by the same problems as the educational services of the State. Rural areas are burdened by a dependence on professionals from the valley area and this means erratic delivery or an absence of service. There is an attempt to use technology to facilitate access to health service, but extended hours of power cuts/load shedding raises questions. According to key informants the National Rural Health Mission has been able to bring about some positive change. Besides, each ethnic group turns to traditional systems of care for many common ailments, measures to strengthen those systems of care is limited.

#### c) Gender Rights and Customary laws or traditional practices

Women can enjoy a position of power under the watchful eyes of the elders or male guardianship. Historically women have acted as pressure group in matters of local governance and women from some ethnic groups do play a role as peacemakers (*Pukreila* in the *Tangkhul Naga* community). At the same time, independence or being self-sufficient is not encouraged with the woman's right of ownership being restricted to jewellery or movable property. Immovable property or right to land is beyond their reach<sup>6</sup>. Cultural discrimination is evident as a couple without a male child is known as *Suonmawng* (without a male issue) even though they may have many female children (ibid).

In conflict, women and children turn traumatised by displacement resulting of ethnic fights, security measures of the armed forces, broken families, losing a husband in a fight with the armed forces or to drugs or HIV infection. Widows or divorcees who find options limited may have to turn to sex work, get a job as a courier for drugs, contraband etc. Displaced populations living on the fringes of Imphal city express the helplessness of the situation, the use of drugs by adolescents or teenagers are taken as reality of life that any number of visits to detox centres cannot rectify. The news media has highlighted the fact that irrespective of the marital status women have, at times, to opt for sex work with the knowledge of the spouse.

Years of "democratic governance" does not seem to have benefited the girl child in the state, for while the adult population the sex ratio is 992 for 1000 males in 2011 (far better than national average of 940), the same cannot be said about child sex ratio, which has come down from 975 in 2001 to 936 in 2011. Most of the districts in the state reflect this discrimination, the worst probably being Chandel with the child sex ratio being 933 in 2011 as against 981 in 2001.

#### d) Strengthening the scope for corruption and illegal activities

The future outlook for youth remains bleak, while bribes do open up a spot in government or private enterprise for some, others need try their hand at alternate activities which for Manipur may be an opening with the underground groups, migration or taking up illegal activities – smuggling or the cultivation and trade in narcotic substances. In the case of couriers of contraband items or drugs it is the most disposable or vulnerable that are caught by the police or enforcement officials. The media reports on the involvement of women, drug users and children as a courier for drugs but the investigation into the trafficking of large quantities that highlight the nexus between corrupt armed or paramilitary forces, airlines staff<sup>7</sup>, and underground groups or local persons have been ignored or stalled.

Moreh, evolved as trade centre as local people sought an alternative to the exorbitant prices charged by traders from mainland India. The government, later, encouraged that development but not without hiccups, for security reasons there are frequent checks along the way that delay transportation for hours. This has been a bone for contention between the local people and the government. Drug trade in heroin occurs from Myanmar via Chandel district with Moreh playing an important role, the significance of the same indicated by the fight, in the past, among underground groups to be in charge and the trade continues with some occasional irritants.

Manipur is susceptible not only to trade but the illicit cultivation of the poppy plant. The combined forces of the Narcotics Control, Assam Rifles, Manipur Police or Border forces and police officials have been destroying poppy crops for the last three years or more. The area under cultivation has but increased systematically and this year around 136 acres of poppy cultivation was destroyed in Chandel district<sup>8</sup>. It is gathered that all border subdivisions of Chandel are susceptible to poppy cultivation.

Issues of concern with regard to drug trade management and security:

- It is customary laws that govern land ownership, its access and utilization and each ethnic group has its own village council to address issues within their village. The Autonomous District Council is only allowed to take care of the welfare aspects of community or at the maximum infrastructural development.
- The authority over land may rest with the village council, village chief, or the community at large. Only some have individual ownership, that too, only if they live in the village as otherwise they lose their right, at least temporarily. Against this ground reality who can be held accountable for the 136 acres of poppy cultivation?
- Mere focus on alternate development, through land utilization, for reducing poppy cultivation can be counter productive. For there have been attempts to access land in tribal areas, which lies beyond the control of the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reform Act (1960), for development or cooperative cultivation purposes. Such efforts may end up being more beneficial to non tribal than the tribal population. The tribal populations given the disparity in their development and human resources are rarely equipped to understand the intricacies of legal provisions in the long term. Any short term mortgage of this only resource that they have may lead to a further depletion of their ownership over resources,

plots that are mortgaged is often land temporarily abandoned as a part of the traditional *Jhum* cultivation<sup>2</sup> to be re-cultivated later when soil fertility returns.

- Another aspect to be focused on is presence of skilled labour, unlike cannabis cultivation, poppy cultivation is a labour intensive, skilled job and many trained workers would be involved in poppy cultivation and the processing of its opium.
- Rural areas of Chandel district remain sparsely populated, for example the Machi subdivision of Chandel district had only 282 households, the population of Machi village is 1,403 and Phaisi village has 56 households. This raises the question are trained workers being brought over from across the border to carry out different tasks?
- Who funds these ventures? Available information indicates the entire effort as being contracted out for cash and rice. Often when a field is contracted out the contractors usually take care of the initial investment, crisis costs and other related issues.
- What prevents such vested interest groups from sustaining conflict to carry on illegal activities. Won't the lack of focus by State and Central Government on silent violence provide a conducive environment for the same.

### Need for Change

The tug of war on position based negotiation that leads to an absence of dialogue is not working for the local population, certainly not for future generations who are losing out on the comfort of family, with the rising incidence of broken families. The disparity between classes will only grow if the present form of governance continues, this may even complicate the situation far beyond the expectations of underground groups. A conflict reality is what children have been born into and this frame of reference is continuously imprinted when corruption, money, power and useful links / associations are seen as part of the survival game. The children will learn at a very young age life is a conflict and the 'winner take all'.

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2 *Jhum* (Shifting) cultivation practice involves clearing vegetative/forest cover, drying and burning it before onset of monsoon and cropping on it thereafter. After harvest, this land is left fallow and vegetative regeneration is allowed on it till the plot becomes reusable for same purpose in a cycle.



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- 2 The Sangai Express, 29 Bomb Blast in less than two months Staff Reported 26<sup>th</sup> Feb2015
- 3 Ningshen Maireiwon 2012. Contextualising Socio-cultural and Political Life of Tangkhul Women in Tradition and Modernity in *State of Democracy in Manipur and other Essays* Singh Koireng Aheiban. Ruolkhumzo (Ed) Sunmarg Publishers and Distributors: New Delhi.
- 4 Urmila Ningthoukhongjam 2007 The Student Movement in Manipur, Akansha Publishing House: New Delhi
- 5 <http://www.thesangaiexpress.com/page/items/49388/girl-inmates-seek-justice>
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