

EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS IN MANIPUR: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Dr Jaskaran Singh Waraich, Dr. Anuradha Choudhary***

Abstract

This research paper investigates the entrenched issue of extremist movements in Manipur, characterized by asymmetric conflicts and intricate socio-political complexities. It aims to comprehensively analyse the causes, underlying problems, and potential future trajectories of these movements. The study delves into historical contexts, examines socio-economic factors, evaluates governance impacts, and explores prospects for peace. Recent violent incidents in 2023, sparked by contentious decisions such as granting ST status to the Meitei community, have intensified the state's law and order challenges. Consequently, this paper aims to unravel the root causes of extremism in Manipur, examining their impact on development while exploring governmental initiatives employed to address these persistent threats to Bharat's internal security in the Northeast region.

Keywords: Northeast, Manipur, Insurgency, Internal security, Extremist organizations

Manipur shares its borders with Nagaland to the north, Mizoram to the south, and Assam to the west, while Burma (Myanmar) lies to its east. It covers an area of 22,327 square kilometres, with Imphal serving as the capital of the state. As per the 2011 census, the total population of Manipur was 2,855,794 (Ministry of Development of North eastern Region, 2023). The central habitable region is the Imphal Valley, encompassing approximately 10% of the state's land area and primarily inhabited by the Meitei people. The surrounding

* Associate Professor, Department of Defence and National Security Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

** Assistant Professor, Department of National Security Studies, Central University of Jammu

hills are inhabited by hill tribes, classified as Kuki in the southern part and Naga in the north-eastern part.

The geography of Manipur has consistently fostered a division between the Hills and the Valley. It was once a princely state that following its merger with Bharat in 1948, became part C States, the earlier name for Union Territories (“Manipur shuts down against 1949 merger with Bharat,”2019). The Constitution-makers, acknowledging the substantial differences in the way of life and administrative structure of the North Eastern region compared to the rest of the country, established special institutional arrangements for the tribal areas in the region. This was done by granting them a high degree of self-governance through autonomous District Councils under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. But, the State of Manipur stands as the sole state among the seven sister states of the North Eastern Region where the provisions of the Sixth Schedule have never been implemented. The states in the North Eastern Region underwent reorganization through the North Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971. According to section 3 of this act, the state of Manipur was established in 1972. (Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances, 2008).

In recent times, identity issues have wielded significant influence over the emergence and escalation of conflicts. These issues pertain to collective identities based on factors such as language, religion, sect, caste, and tribe, where these affiliations assume primary importance. Identity issues are not exclusive to Bharat, they are a worldwide phenomenon although they prevail in a particularly intense form in today’s Bharat where communities based on language, religion, sect, caste and tribe have strengthened their identities. Conflicts stemming from such identity issues frequently result in violence. A recent instance of this occurred in the state of Manipur, where ethnic clashes erupted in 2023. Over the years, numerous lives have been lost in conflicts between various insurgent groups. This sensitive region of the country has been plagued by conflicts deeply rooted in its geography and history, the multi-ethnic composition of its population, and its political and economic circumstances, which have fostered profound discontent and ongoing conflicts.

The dynamics of these conflicts have encompassed a wide spectrum, ranging from insurgency for secession to demands for autonomy, from instances of sponsored terrorism to ethnic clashes, and to conflicts arising due to the continuous influx of migrants from across borders as well as from other parts of the country. (Ministry of Development of Northeastern Region, 2023).

Major Insurgent Groups

The roots of insurgency in the North-Eastern region are deeply entrenched in its geography, history, and a multitude of socio-economic factors. Approximately ninety-eight percent of the region's borders are international, indicating its fragile geographical connectivity with the rest of Bharat. Despite the region's population accounting for a mere 3 percent (around 3.90 crores) of the national population, its growth rate has exceeded two hundred percent between 1951 and 2001, leading to considerable strain on livelihoods and contributing to land fragmentation (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of Bharat, 2008).

While tribal nominally constitute 27 percent of the population of the entire region, excluding Assam, this percentage surges to 58 percent for the remaining states (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of Bharat, 2008).

In the case of Manipur, the emergence of militancy traces back to 1964 with the formation of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), which remains one of the most influential militant organizations in the state. The escalation of the separatist insurgency in Manipur has been primarily linked to perceived discontent regarding the purported "forced" merger of Manipur with the Union of Bharat and the subsequent delay in granting it full statehood (Leivon, 2022). The former kingdom of Manipur was integrated into Bharat in 1949, yet it attained full statehood only in 1972. Presently, one-fourth of Manipur, encompassing the valley, is home to over seventy percent of its population, primarily comprising the culturally distinctive Meitei community. The state was governed as a monarchy (later becoming a princely state) by Meitei rulers. However, the Meitei influence waned in socio-economic domains post-independence, with tribals assuming prominence largely due to reservations.

Furthermore, within a segment of Meitei society, there existed discontent about the state's merger with the Bharat Union, culminating in the Meitei insurgency starting from the 1960s.

Tribal constitute approximately thirty percent of the State's population and mainly belong to Naga, Kuki-Chin, and Mizo ethnic groups. Insurgency in Nagaland and Mizoram also had ramifications that spilled over into the state of Manipur. The cultural gap between the tribals and the Meiteis widened as almost all the tribes converted to Christianity by the 1930s. There was significant tension among the tribes concerning land and boundaries, and the conflict between Nagas and Kukis resulted in the loss of more than 2000 lives during the 1990s (Ministry of Development of Northeastern Region, 2023).

Subsequent years witnessed the emergence of several militant organizations, including the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the People's Revolutionary Party of Kanglepak (PREPAK), Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), and Kanglei Yavol Kanna Lup (KYKL) among others. These organizations, predominantly situated in the valley, have been advocating for an independent Manipur (Leivon, 2022). Additionally, in the neighbouring state of Nagaland, NSCN-IM stands as the most prominent insurgent group demanding a "Nagalim" (Greater Nagaland) for the Naga people, which includes specific hilly areas of Manipur. Consequently, the 'Nagalim' demand by NSCN-IM is considered a serious threat to the "territorial integrity" of Manipur.

Moreover, in the early 1990s, ethnic conflicts between the Nagas and Kukis led to the formation of various Kuki insurgent groups. Over time, these groups have shifted their demand from a separate Kuki state to advocating for a regional council. Furthermore, the prolonged militancy fostered the creation of smaller organizations such as the Zeliangrong United Front (ZUF), the People's United Liberation Front (PULF), and other similar groups. Recent report of Ministry of Home affairs stated that "The State of Manipur is affected by the activities of Meitei, Naga, Kuki, Zomi, and Hmar insurgent groups. A total of 23 insurgent outfits under two conglomerates (United Peoples Front [UPF] - 8 and Kuki National Organization [KNO] - 15) are currently under Suspension of Operation (SoO) with the Government of Bharat since August

2008. In 2021, 112 insurgency-related incidents were registered in the State in which 9 civilians and 5 SF personnel lost their lives. Counter Insurgency Operations led to the neutralization of 18 insurgents, arrest of 242 insurgents, and recovery of 113 weapons. Further, 20 cadres of insurgent outfits surrendered with 15 arms” (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of Bharat, 2022).

Manipur Violence 2023

The ongoing conflict between Meiteis and ‘tribals’ is an extension of the hills versus plains conflict. The Meitei community residing in the Imphal Valley has been deprived of special constitutional privileges granted to the Scheduled Tribes of Manipur and is prohibited from settling in hill districts under the state’s ‘Land Reforms Act’. However, there are no restrictions imposed on the Nagas and Kukis, who are largely Christian, to settle in the valley. The immediate trigger for the present violence in Manipur was the Manipur High Court judgment delivered on 27 March 2023. The court directed the state government to "consider the inclusion of the Meitei community in the list of Scheduled Tribes within four weeks" and to submit a recommendation to the Central Government in compliance with the judgment (Lakshman, 2023). However, this decision was not acceptable to other communities in the state that already have scheduled tribe status. Disagreements over this decision between the Meitei and other communities led to such gruesome violence in the state (“Manipur violence explained: History of suspicion between ethnic groups escalates violence,” 2023).

Currently, the Meitei people are categorized as Other Backward Classes (OBC) or SCs, and they hold dominance in more than half of the State’s Assembly constituencies. A majority of them identify as Hindu, while around 8% follow the Muslim faith. The community, represented by the Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee, Manipur, has been advocating for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for several decades. They argue that “they had been listed as one of the tribes of Manipur before it merged with Bharat in 1949 but that they lost this tag when the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 was drafted”. Asserting that they were consequently excluded from the ST list, they have persistently

pursued their demands. However, their demand has faced strong opposition from Adivasi students' unions, representing the existing 36 ST communities of the State, who argue that granting the ST status to Meitei would undermine the objective of safeguarding tribal communities through reservation (Lakshman, 2023).

Government Initiatives

The Government of Bharat is continuously striving to curb the menace of extremism and other significant insurgent operations that have afflicted the state. In 1980, the Central Government declared the entirety of Manipur as a “disturbed area” and implemented the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) to suppress the insurgency movement, which remains in effect till present (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of Bharat, 2023) (Leivon, 2022). Moreover, in 2003, Assam Rifles and the army conducted “Operation All Clear” in the hill areas, neutralizing most of the militants’ hideouts, with many of them relocating to the valley (Deka, 2021). In 1997 a major militant outfit of Nagaland, NSCN-IM, demanding part of Manipur's hill areas for their “Nagalim” demand, entered into a ceasefire agreement with the Government of Bharat, although peace talks between them have been ongoing (“NSCN (I-M) marks 25 years of ceasefire,” 2022). Additionally, Kuki outfits under two umbrella groups, the Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and United People’s Front (UPF), also signed tripartite Suspension of Operation (SoO) pacts with the Governments of Bharat and Manipur on August 22, 2008 (“What is the suspension of operations (SoO) agreement?” 2023) (Singh, 2023). According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, many smaller outfits have entered into the Suspension of Operation agreement with the state government, prompting the launch of rehabilitation programs for such groups. However, major valley-based militant outfits (Meitei groups) such as the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), People’s Liberation Army of Manipur (PLA), Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL), etc., are yet to engage in negotiations (Leivon, 2022).

Major Challenges in Restoring Peace

The Union Government's approach to achieving a peaceful settlement with militant organizations has proven to be counterproductive. Since the demands of numerous organizations conflict with each other, any conventional resolution with one group becomes a cause for agitation by other insurgent groups (Leivon, 2023). Whenever the government engages in peace talks with one insurgent group in the state, there's a tendency for another group to persist with armed insurgency, either by altering their nomenclature or forming a new group. Furthermore, the nexus between politicians, rebels, and criminals has been a significant factor exacerbating the state's crisis. To generate revenue, some extremist outfits have resorted to organized crimes like extortion, kidnapping, and contract killings. However, troublemakers exploit the unrest, posing as insurgents, to extort funds (Singh, 2023).

Additionally, most security issues are politicized by political parties to leverage the vote bank by instigating controversies ("Meitei Majoritarian Politics of the BJP in Manipur," 2023). Furthermore, major insurgent groups from neighbouring states like Nagaland remain active in Manipur.

Conclusion

Extremist movements in Manipur exhibit certain characteristics; they are asymmetric, vague, and fought through unorthodox means, deploying political and psychological methods. These conflicts eventually escalate into prolonged wars of attrition. Additionally, violence has arisen due to the failure of the state administration to provide security in the region. Furthermore, the ceasefire between the Union Government and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) had reduced violence to some extent in Naga areas but now fresh tension sparked as the NSCN insists on a greater 'Nagalim', encompassing four districts of Manipur. This demand faced staunch resistance from the Meiteis, resulting in violent agitation in 2001. The assurance to safeguard the 'territorial integrity of Manipur' has somewhat maintained peace in this aspect. In the southern parts of the state, Hmar's, Paite, and other tribes have engaged in violent struggles, partly for local dominance and partly for

their enclave in the form of a Union Territory called “Zomi”. The District Councils in the Hill areas have been non-functional since 1985, as most tribal communities advocate bringing these Councils under the Sixth Schedule. However, this demand is vehemently opposed by those in the Valley. In summary, Manipur remains a vibrant arena for multiple violent conflicts.

Moreover, many unofficial reports indicate that militant organizations virtually run a parallel government in many districts of Manipur and wield influence over the State Government’s decisions regarding contracts, supply orders, and government appointments. There are widespread reports of militant organizations engaging in extensive extortion and administering ‘courts’ to dispense justice in their areas of influence. This situation erodes people’s trust in the constitutional governance machinery.

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