

Manipur - The Way Ahead

Brigadier Dinesh Mathur (Retd)[®]

Abstract

The Ministry of Home Affairs must take on the responsibilities of reorganising and upgrading its security forces, especially the Assam Rifles deployed in the North Eastern (NE) so that they can perform their basic duties. Unfortunately, the full potential of this great force has not been fully realised. They are the mainstay of our country in NE states and would deliver, if purposefully utilised.

Introduction

For ages, the social fabric of Manipur was held together by two major tribes Meiteis and the Kukis, from May 2023 until very recently, Manipur has been the scene of bitter ethnic conflict, with no signs of violence abating soon or being brought under control. The filial bonds that existed earlier have completely broken down in the atmosphere of growing xenophobic insecurity and the ethnic animosity between the two tribes. The settling of old scores by pre-planned attacks on each other, rioting, molestation of women burning down of habitation areas, and thousands rendered homeless, all follow the same old pattern of the last three decades or even more. This time, of course, violence crossed all limits and has taken a heavy toll on the lives of both communities. What surprises one, is the fact that Manipur like each one of our North Eastern (NE) states enjoys a decent growth rate as compared to the rest of the country; has well-developed democratic institutions, good infrastructure and communications, transport, agriculture, and micro, small, and medium enterprises/small industries and per capita income better than the rest of the country. Then why is the region still as turbulent and unstable as it was during the times of the ongoing insurgencies between 1956 to 1980s?

[®]**Brigadier Dinesh Mathur (Retired)** an alumnus of National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, was commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery in June 1963. He has served in the Parachute Field Regiment and has held prestigious command and staff/instructional appointments. He retired in Dec 2000 after completing over 37 1/2 years of service. Has authored several publications on strategy and national security.

A brief genesis or background is necessary to put things in the right perspective. In the early years of the British Raj when the Great Game was being played, the need for secure frontiers was a prime concern for the defence of the British Empire. Consequently, a multi-layered northwest frontier with Afghanistan as the buffer and North-West Frontier Province emerged against Russia. On the open land frontier of the Raj in north and NE India against China, the strategic planners applied the same template and two/three frontier zones came up, once Burma was added to the Empire. Interestingly, both our NE states and Burma were governed from Calcutta till 1936; they came up in British India without Indian laws and administrative infrastructure.

Weak state infrastructures mean porous borders between the NE states Myanmar and Bangladesh; a free-for-all environment where the locals govern the sovereign territory on their whims and fancies. Here smuggling often exceeds foreign trade; the booming local economy is heavily dependent on illegal poppy cultivation in the 'jhooms', arms and ammunition, cheap electronic goods, and textiles which are freely available. These provide the opportune getaway to the youth between 18 and 35 years of age for easier 'business' employment options like gun running and narcotics trade.

Status of Signed Agreements with Central Government since 1963

- **1963.** Nagaland was formally inaugurated as a state based on the commitment to the Naga people by the PM.
- **1975.** Shillong Accord between Naga National Council and Centre. Breakaway factions like National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak–Muivah) [NSCN (I-M)] did not surrender their weapons and remained underground after AZ Phizo's death abroad.
- **1985 to 1986.** Mizoram Accord between Laldenga and Centre and Mizo insurgency ends.
- **1988.** The Tripura National Volunteers Agreement was signed ending the insurgency.
- **1993.** Accord with Bodo insurgents signed but with limited success.

- **1997.** Breakaway faction NSCN (I-M) calls off talks with the Centre.
- **2015.** NSCN (I-M) demands Greater Nagaland, a separate constitution and flag, and no surrender of arms raised but issues remain unresolved.
- **2022.** NE Treaty to resolve interstate border issues, like Meghalaya and Assam, Mizoram and Assam but is still awaiting resolution. A Suspension of Operations (SOO) agreement with Kuki–Zo leadership is yet to be implemented.

Narcotics smuggling

The poppy plant grown in jhooms, on hills bordering Manipur and Mizoram, is also transported by carriers as 'raw opium' (along with precursor chemicals sourced from Chennai) to the sheds at the collection points in Moreh in Manipur and Champai in Mizoram. This opium is processed in the Golden Triangle makeshift factories into profitable drugs such as heroin, meth, and yaba and sent back with fresh carriers. Consignments of heroin seized in Indian cities like Guwahati, Kolkata, and Dimapur, have originated from the Golden Triangle. With the Free Movement Regime (FMR) in place, smuggling has gone on for years now. One can only surmise that porous borders, gaps in domestic security, and the connivance of local officials, are responsible for this thriving trade. It is also a fact that NE states are among the top ten states of India affected by drug abuse. The gunrunning which also runs parallel to the narcotics trade should also be a matter of concern.

Indemnification of the Armed Forces

The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSP Act) 1958 grants special powers to security forces (Indian armed forces/paramilitary forces/police forces) in areas classified as 'disturbed areas'. This act empowers the security forces to arrest a person without a warrant, enter or search premises without a warrant, and perform other actions against activities prejudicial to national security. AFSP Act 1958 is being progressively withdrawn from Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland and the Inner Line Permit (ILP) is about to be withdrawn from Manipur, given the improved security situation. Coupled with this, aid to civil authority provides guidelines for the armed forces for the maintenance of law and order, essential

services, assistance in natural calamities, and any other type of assistance. Though it does not indemnify the armed forces, it has worked well so far.

Current Situation in Affected States

After the Hindu and Buddhist minorities in Bangladesh and Myanmar were systematically squeezed out into India in the early seventies, the turn of the unwanted surplus population of poor Muslims seeking greener pastures in NE states followed next. Vote bank politics ensured their absorption in states like Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur and Assam. Now, the Rohingyas from the Rakhine State of Myanmar joined in after their persecution there. Today, the changed demographics are one of the biggest problems faced by NE states today.

Manipur.

- There is a hue and cry in the country on the current situation in Manipur. If one has gone through the historical perspective from the earliest times, the Manipuri's are a very proud race. When the state acceded to the Indian Union in Oct 1949, it was the scene of bitter ethnic conflicts for various reasons. Of the 3 lakh population, 67 per cent is indigenous Meitei, some Thangkuls Nagas in the north and the remaining are Kukis. In consonance with the British policy of divide and rule, buffer zones created between two main warring tribes, have resulted in two separate habitation areas. The Imphal Valley plains are one and the other, the hills around it on its east and west. Affluence came first to the Imphal Valley, being part of the state's democratic apparatus while the hills remained backward, being autonomous councils.
- The Christian Nagas and Kukis consider themselves racially separate from the indigenous Meitei in Manipur, who are dubbed the plainsmen. While the indigenous Meitei are only looking for safeguards to preserve their independent cultural identity, the Nagas and Kukis feel, is at their cost. The local Zo tribals, some Tangkhul Nagas of North Manipur anti-social elements, and disgruntled elements sidelined from power along with overground NSCN sympathisers/ex-surrendered hostiles could not have found a better opportunity to discredit the Meiteis. It is well known that Tangkhul Nagas

and Zo tribals infected with fissiparous tendencies, aspire for Nagalim (Greater Nagaland) of their dreams, with more trappings of power and money. The role of Christian states like Mizoram and Nagaland to channelise the Rohingyas into Manipur cannot be ruled out.

- After the military junta took over in Myanmar in Feb 2021, there has been a steady influx of over 10,000 Myanmar Nagas and Kukis from Chin district in Manipur. More Nagas crossed into Manipur's Chandel district in Jul this year at a time when the violence was at its peak. Despite the state government's efforts, these illegal immigrants do not wish to return to their home country. Temporary shelters for 5,000 Nagas and Kukis have been set up by the government in the border towns of Moreh, Tengnoupal, and Chandel districts. The exodus of Nagas and Kukis is confined to the border areas in the hills alone and not to the Imphal plains.

Mizoram.

Zo is the name of an ethnic group of people that occupy North Western Myanmar, NE India, and NE Bangladesh normally known as Lushai, Chin, and Kuki (as known in India) each with a separate identity but collectively known as Zo people. The erstwhile Lushai Hills District (LHD) was carved out of Zo land and came to be known as LHD. Its remaining areas were carved out and annexed to the adjacent districts. One of the districts was administered from Sylhet in Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT) of British India and the other, Chin Hills, from Rangoon of British Burma. The Zo people have nothing in common with the plains people of Bengal and Assam and the Nagas, Kukis, or Manipuris (Meitei). However, all ethnic groups except Meiteis are from the same Mongoloid stock with close similarities in their culture and traditional habits. Some Zo tribes, like Paite and Hmars, distanced themselves from the Kukis and showed solidarity with the Mizos people, forming a distinct block of 18 odd tribes. This is one of the reasons why the peace accord signed with Laldenga still stands and the state continues to be peaceful.

After Myanmar security forces began flushing out operations against their rebels in Chin Hills in 2022, there were reports of 40,000 Myanmar nationals of Mizo origin and some Rohingyas,

inhabiting areas close to South Mizoram, having crossed over. There have been recoveries of smuggled arms and ammunition from them and reports of widespread misuse of Indian identity cards. In addition, very recently after the disturbances in Manipur, the exodus of 8,000 to 10,000 Mizo tribals from the north into Mizoram is also confirmed.

In addition, another 1,000 suspected Kuki insurgents from the CHT in Bangladesh have been pushed in by the security forces. With them, some sympathisers of the Kuki Chin National Front, Jamaa tul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya, a terror organisation are also believed to have entered South Mizoram. Most of the refugees are Kuki women, children, and elderly and their numbers are expected to go up in the coming months. Once they have physically charted the route through the difficult jungles of South Mizoram, these could subsequently be the routes/trails to smuggle arms and narcotics. The state government, in contravention of the existing policy on illegal immigrants (of Mizo tribes), has allowed them entry and wants the centre to act on humanitarian grounds. This means asylum for the refugees and the state exchequer to foot the bill for the basic amenities and shelter provided. The chief minister knows fully well that south Mizoram has neither the resources nor the living space to accommodate these refugees.

Estimate of Current Situation in Manipur

The NE region since early antiquity has been politically divided and that is what ails it now. The ongoing violence in Manipur does appear to be a simple riot between two tribal groups the Christian Nagas and Kukis and the Hindu Meiteis, because neither can indefinitely combat power with their limited resources. It is a fully orchestrated covert operation to achieve political and strategic goals by using all available resources beautifully timed to coincide with the run-up to the forthcoming general elections in 2024. The Manipur High Court provided the spark that ignited the fire for the Nagas and the Kukis who feel threatened by the decision to grant scheduled tribe status to the indigenous Meitei tribals despite the fact, that it is only a recommendation to the state government and the actual grant by the Central Minorities Commission is a way off.

De Novo Approach to Resolve the NE Tangle

While evolving a holistic approach toward national security management, two facts stand out clearly. The colonial-era security policy of underdeveloped borders, communication voids, and unmapped and unfenced boundaries is a thing of the past and the sooner this mindset goes the better. Myanmar and Bangladesh have an equally long history of insurgency in their provinces bordering Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram. With the situation in Bangladesh now quite stable, there is ample scope for backlash from communal disturbances from Myanmar, especially after the military coup and taking the China factor into account.

For the last seven decades or more, we have been facing the insurgency in the NE, thanks to the roots of this estrangement laid so carefully by the foreign missionaries. The Nagas and Mizos have always been opposed to the existence of the state apparatus and considered it interference in their existing tribal society, its well-established culture, customs, rites of passage, and traditional laws. Unfortunately, most tribals have not developed the desired loyalty to their state, what to speak of the country. Instead, the pan Mongoloid sectarian affinity is more pronounced and does pose a serious security risk.

Theirs has always been a free looking, fully educated society, a loose union of tribals of various denominations and regions, practicing various Christian faiths, such as Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Presbyterian, etc., competing with one another for their social upliftment. Except for Manipur which has a slender Hindu majority of 53 per cent, Tripura with 83 per cent Hindus and Arunachal with 31 per cent Christians and 29 per cent Hindus, the population is predominantly Christians. Each tribal belt in Manipur, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh practices its religions and customs and is not interested in conforming to what Hindutva, uniform civil code, or for that matter, any other scripture has to offer.

Tribal areas of Manipur, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh are imbued with group loyalties of varying degrees. What exists is a superficial form of nationalism in a subdued form, with a confused notion of opportunistic democracy or socialism/socialistic pattern of society promised by the party in power at the centre.

Regional parties, especially in our NE states, have always looked up to national parties, seeking alliances for the development of their regions. Otherwise, what ideology can a national political alliance like National Democratic Alliance or Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance offer to the hillman? Sadly, what is on display is the crass disunity and corruption at the national level, which percolates to its state's constituents.

All groups are convinced that they are better off under the Indian Union but the local general apathy is based on their fear of reprisals, if the tribal aspirations are betrayed. The day the administration becomes firm enough to guarantee the safety of loyal elements and inflict exemplary punishment on those who act otherwise, this fear psychosis will disappear. Tampering with their culture in the guise of social upliftment projects is best avoided. The centre must transform attitudes and scout for better ideas for devising multipurpose machinery for the economic, social, and cultural development of the NE states. Instead, a functional NE Council with a tangible and practical common minimum program, designed to benefit the local people, framed in the language of the tribal area must be executed rather than forcing a national-level policy down the throats of the gullible tribesmen.

Restoration of Peace in Manipur

The ebullience of the warring factions must be tackled firmly and decisively. What was required was a firm hand to deal with the disturbances at the very incipient stages so that the evil was nipped in the bud. Even now it's not too late for peace to be restored, through the institution of some decisions as below:

- Isolate Nagas and Kuki insurgent groups from the local Meiteis and disarm all three groups. Issue an ultimatum for the surrender of weapons looted from state armouries. Fix responsibility for the state's connivance in the looting of weapons. The formation of buffer zones is a bad idea as it creates more problems than solves them.
- Review the status of all accords signed so far with various insurgent groups and work for an early resolution of differences by following a mutually agreed timeframe.

- Review the efficacy of the ILP for entry and FMR for entry/exit in Arunachal, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram and if the situation warrants, rescind them immediately. These two have not strengthened the emotional integration between the plainsmen and the hillmen.
- Revoke the AFSP Act 1958 immediately. Declare the complete border area belt of 10 km with Myanmar and Bangladesh, as the newly disturbed area, with fresh ordinance to curb the trans-border moves to Myanmar.
- Complete border fencing on Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh borders with Myanmar on top priority. This would reduce cross-border crimes, smuggling of weapons, and the illegal narcotics trade.
- Establish proper check posts all along the fenced boundary with Myanmar and Bangladesh with proper manning by Excise and Customs Officials, foolproof communications, and administrations. Ensure adherence to Indian customs and immigration rules for entry/exit as applicable to the rest of the country.
- Implementing the Kaladan River project on priority, being a strategic asset to improve connectivity and interstate coordination. The proposed Common Markets at Guwahati and Dimapur are yet to function to facilitate trade between Bangladesh, Myanmar, and India's NE states.
- Complete pending works on connectivity with cross-border waterways, electricity, and other grids with our neighboring countries.
- Speeding up measures for the removal of disparity in incomes in the NE states based on a study by development/economics experts from Niti Aayog.
- Reinforce the local police resources with any state police force or the Rapid Action Force temporarily till the restoration of normalcy in Manipur.

Maintenance of Law and Order in Manipur

The maintenance of law and order is the responsibility of the state government. The police are the most visible symbol of state

administrative authority and provide much-needed credibility to the Manipur government. The Ministry of Home Affairs has the basic responsibility for the maintenance of internal security in the country and must deal with the consequences of responsibilities at the state and local level and must therefore play a proactive role in concert with the state government. Today, we have a full-fledged police force in all states, central forces like central reserve police force, Border Security Force (BSF), Indo-Tibetan border police, and central industrial security force to assist in law and order, National Disaster Response Force and State Disaster Response Force to take care of natural calamities and BSF and Assam Rifles for border management.

The Ministry of Home Affairs must take on the responsibilities of reorganising and upgrading its security forces, especially the Assam Rifles deployed in the NE so that they can deal with their basic duties. Unfortunately, the full potential of this great force has not been fully realised. They are the mainstay of our country in NE states and will deliver if purposefully utilised. This may call for a complete reorganisation of the force, enhancement of its manpower, augmentation of its weapons and equipment, and improved logistics. There may also be some increases/decreases in the span of control after force accretion and the re-deployment of its headquarters in the NE. Where then, is the need for the army to take over the situation in Manipur?

Concluding Remarks

Initially, the tribals of our northeast region, especially Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram were fighting the Indian Army, considering them to be aliens. The roots of this estrangement were embedded in a carefully orchestrated program of foreign missionaries, which came to an end in the sixties. The reorientation in the central government's policies, the well tried out welfare schemes and the 'de novo' approach to integrating the region with the rest of the country, worked well. This ensured reasonable development, removed some causes of discontent, and insulated the Chinese support in our tribal belts. In the last five decades or more, 'winning the hearts and minds of the locals' has also been attempted by the central government but the malaise (of inter-tribal rivalries) runs deeper than the failed results. In Manipur, now a full-fledged state with democratic traditions, the Christian Nagas and Kuki's

tribals still harbor fears of being swamped by the majority Hindu Meitei, who have been distrusted, from times immemorial. The misinterpretation or misunderstanding of orders from the centre has inevitably fueled riots and the total breakdown of law-and-order. Therefore, the solution to the NE problem lies within the region itself; more noticeably, on the improvement of its governance, the public servants assuming their authority and responsibilities with accountability, the optimised use of potent force like Assam Rifles and least of all, without the interference and assistance from New Delhi.

Endnotes

¹ Major Sita Ram Johri: Our Borderlands.

² MHA NE Division: Major Initiatives and Peace Process in NE Region,

³ Stats IQ, Google: Drug Abuse in India.

⁴ Major Sita Ram Johri: Dark Corner of India, The Last Word.

⁵ The Indian Express, 22 Nov 2022: Chin -Kuki-Mizo refugees pour into Mizoram.

⁶ The Hindu, 20 Apr 2023: Manipur HC directs State to consider inclusion of Meitei community in ST list.

⁷ Major Sita Ram Johri: Dark Corner of India, The Hillmen.