

Introduction

Manipur is at cross-roads of conflict and peace. In this small beautiful state on the easternmost fringes of India, while the Manipuri sportspersons like MC Mary Kom are making a mark in international boxing and Manipuri students are finding home, acceptance and employment in urban jungles of India, the state continues to be marked by contradictions. On one hand, there is a perceptible decline in violence and increased surrenders; on the other hand the ethnic divides remain sharp, extortion continues unabated and no political solution is in sight in spite of few Meitei insurgent groups joining the peace process. The Nagas of Manipur continue to look towards Nagaland for solutions and solace; the Kukis have renewed their demand for a separate state and the Meitei insurgent groups have adopted the low-cost-high-visibility option of improvised explosive device (IED) attacks to keep the insurgency simmering. This sharply contrasts with the rest of the North East India wherein even the hardcore insurgent groups like NSCN (IM) and ULFA are in negotiations. The disillusioned insurgents in Manipur are yet to be convinced about the light at the end of the tunnel. In the absence of viable alternatives, they continue their half-hearted 'struggle' and resort to status-quo of ethnic demands, imagined homelands and easy money. The futility of insurgency is clear but not the alternatives.

Highway 39

Highway 39: Journeys through a Fractured Land was a 2012 book by Sudeep Chakravarti. It documented the conflicts and ethnic divides interwoven with the lives of people on this highway from Golaghat in Assam to Imphal in Manipur. Most of this national highway was later renamed as NH 102. Recently, the NH 102 has been renamed as Asian Highway (AH) 1. The cosmetic renaming continues while the people along this highway continue to face same violence, illegal taxation and fear. In November 2012, an 8,000 km long ASEAN Car Rally from Yogyakarta in Indonesia to Guwahati took place on this highway while a 14 hours bus service between Imphal and Mandalay is scheduled to commence from October 2014 to showcase this new link in India's 'Look East' policy. At places, glossy green boards proclaiming AH 1 have been planted to signify this supposed Indian highway to the markets of Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore. Au contraire, even the inter-state trade on this road is disrupted by blockades demanding Kuki statehood to the arrest of corrupt officials or shifting of examination dates by student bodies. Violence on AH 1 is also regular. On March 11, 2014, the Meitei insurgents ambushed a security forces (SF) convoy near Laibi in Chandel district, killing two soldiers.

No More Kangleipak

The Naga and Kuki groups were the first to come to negotiation table. But for the first time since Meitei insurgency began in late 1960s, a few Meitei groups came over ground in 2013. On 04 February 2013, a total of 45 cadres of United Peoples Party of Kangleipak (UPPK) abandoned their camp in Tamu sub-division of Myanmar and crossed over. This included four women cadres, large number of sophisticated weapons and a Toyota SUV. UPPK was sharing this camp in Myanmar with Manipur Naga Revolutionary Front and Kamtapur Liberation Organisation of Assam.¹ UPPK later signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Government on 24 May 2013 which was followed by MoUs being signed with three more insurgent groups (one Meitei and two Kuki): Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP)-Nongdreinkhomba, Kuki National Liberation Front and the Kuki Revolutionary Party on 09 September 2013.

UPPK was a member of the Coordination Committee (Corcom) comprising of People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), PREPAK (Pro), KCP, Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL), United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and Revolutionary People's Front (RPF).² The homecoming of UPPK was a major blow to the unity of Corcom and first cracks have appeared in this formidable grouping of Meitei insurgent groups. However, UPPK and the other surrendered groups are not very large. The three largest and dominant insurgent groups - UNLF, People's Liberation Army (PLA) with its political wing RPF and PREPAK have not shown any inclination for peace. Official sources state that more than 30 militant groups from both the hills and the valley have entered the peace process since 2008.³ However, the much-needed impetus to peace process shall be provided when UNLF, PLA or PREPAK join the bandwagon.

A lot depends on Rajkumar Meghen, the chairman of UNLF who is in jail and has been repeatedly approached for commencing peace talks. Dubbed as 'Royal Rebel' due to his lineage from the royal family, Meghen alias RK Sanayaima had floated UNLF in 1964 to fight for a sovereign Manipur ruled by the Meiteis. He is the great grandson of Bir Tikendrajit, Manipur's ruler who was hanged by British in 1891 for rebelling against the Raj and in whose honour a street in the embassy-lined Chanakyapuri has been named.⁴ As the present Okram Ibobi Singh led Congress government is in its third consecutive term, there is hardly any political space in Manipur for the Meitei rebels who want to substitute AK-47s for political power except for Meghen who a la Pu Laldenga can hope for public life if he persuades the group to surrender.

UNLF also has financial muscle too to risk a political transition. A probe carried out by the National Investigation Agency in January 2012 had discovered that the UNLF earned around INR 1.5 billion between 2007 and 2010 through extortion. The fall of either UNLF or PLA - the two hardcore groups shall be the beginning of the end of insurgency in Manipur. PLA, named and modeled on the lines of the Chinese Army after the rebels were highly impressed with PLA during their training at Lhasa, has remained united since 1978 unlike the other groups which have seen factionalism. The PLA has also succeeded in establishing social networks that are not only spread across the community it claims to represent, the Meiteis, but also across other smaller ethnic communities in Manipur.⁵

Three States

As there are three major ethnic groups in Manipur, the insurgency is also divided into insurgent groups of Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis. While the Meitei insurgents' prime objective is to free their pre-British territorial boundary from so-called "Indian occupation", the Naga insurgents of Manipur support the demand of sovereign 'Nagalim' (Greater Nagaland) comprising of Nagaland along with the Naga majority areas of Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and

Myanmar. The Kukis on the other hand support the demand of separate Kukiland for which Kukis (specifically Chins) of Myanmar are also fighting. Manipur is dominated by the Meiteis - a distinct ethnic group of mostly Vaishnavite Hindus, concentrated in the fertile Imphal Valley spread over 790 square kms. The heavily populated Imphal Valley constitutes 58.79 per cent of the state's population (mostly Meiteis) but only occupy 10 per cent of its area, leading to accusation of the neglect of the largely Naga and Kuki inhabited hill districts of Manipur which contain 41 per cent of the population and covers 90 per cent of the area of Manipur. The Meiteis with 40 out of 60 seats in the State Assembly also dominate the political landscape, pushing the other communities to fringes of political power.

On the other hand, the Meiteis resent the Manipur Government Land Revenue Act, 1960 which granted absolute land rights of the hills to the tribals. As per the legislation, the majority Meiteis cannot buy land in the hills where land ownership rights are held by the village headmen whereas the tribals can buy land in the Imphal Valley. They also resent the reservations enjoyed by the Nagas and Kukis as scheduled tribes (ST) and have recently demanded ST for Meiteis. The rise of Naga nationalism inspired both awe and fear in the Meiteis. They initially emulated it to raise statehood demand for Manipur and then to protect its territorial integrity by posing its own movements as counter guarantee against usurping of territory by the Nagas. The neglect of the State by the Centre, influence of Naga and Kuki insurgencies and the porous borders with Myanmar gave rise to a number of Meitei insurgent groups from mid-1960s onwards who are still fighting while the Naga and Kuki groups are in ceasefire or Secession of Operations (SoO).

Nagas - Ethnicity First

The Naga tribes of Manipur - mainly Maos, Marams, Poumais, Thangkuls and Zemis have been long part of Manipur's landscape. They were also frequently in conflict with the British. Consequently, British made buffer regions between Nagaland, Manipur and Assam by forcing the Kukis to migrate and settle in areas bordering Naga regions as a 'punishment' for the Kuki revolt against British in 1917-18. The rise of Naga insurgency and the increased political consciousness among the various Naga tribes led to the Naga dominated hill districts of Ukhrul, Tamenglong, Senapati and Chandel looking towards the Nagaland for political solutions.

On 26 October 2012, the United Naga Council, the main apex body of the Nagas in Manipur asserted that a peaceful parting of the Nagas in Manipur and the Meiteis as good neighbours, was the only way to avert a catastrophic situation that would arise out of the prolonged 'forced union of the two'.⁶ The divide has been compounded by the Meiteis who have neglected the hill districts in terms of development and employment opportunities. This neglect has hardened the positions in Manipur and widened the gap between the two communities. Thomas Friedman had famously commented on Middle East that "when it came to Jews and Palestinians there were no accidents, only acts of war."⁷ Similar situation exists in Manipur where relatively minor incidents like misbehaviour with Manipuri actress Momoka at a song competition at Chandel on 18 December 2012 by Self Styled Lieutenant Colonel Livingstone of NSCN (IM) flared into a bitter ethnic dispute resulting in blockades and counter-blockades.

Demanding Kukiland

Comparing the demands of Nagas and Kukis, it is often said that Nagas have cultural diversity but enjoy political unity while Kukis have cultural unity but political diversity. The emergence of the Kuki-Chin-Mizo communities on a common political platform was gradual. The armed struggle of these Kuki-Chin tribes in Manipur is attributed to the consolidation and strengthening of Nagas. The flashpoint of the Kuki militancy has direct relationship with NSCN(IM) serving quit notice to the Kukis from the Naga dominated areas in the early 1990s. The bloody ethnic clash between the Nagas and the Kukis in 1993 resulted in formation of armed groups for the Kukis. However, apart from occasional arms snatching from demoralised Manipur Rifles personnel, the Kukis were never the formidable insurgents. They did not engage the Army and the Assam Rifles in bloody confrontations. From August 2005 onwards, they quickly signed various SoO agreements - first with the Army and then with the Government.

Today, the Kuki insurgents groups in Manipur are grouped under two umbrella organisations - Kuki National Organisation and United Peoples' Front. These organisations, along with the Kuki State Demand Committee (KSDC) support the calls for a separate Kuki nation as an autonomous State called Kukiland or Zelengam, under the Constitution of India. KSDC's proposed 'Kuki state' map covers the whole of Churachandpur and Chandel districts, Sadar Hills in Senapati and large chunks of land in Tamenglong and Ukhrul.⁸ The idea of a Kuki state comprising areas which the Nagas are claiming to be part of their Greater Nagalim, while the Meiteis as well as the Central Government are committed to protecting the territorial integrity of Manipur, is contradictory. Any division of Manipur shall push the Meiteis towards violence. United Committee Manipur, an apex body of the Meiteis, on 18 October 2012, categorically stated that it would demand 'pre-merger status' of Manipur if the ongoing political dialogue between NSCN (IM) and the Government disturbed the unity or territorial integrity of Manipur in any way.⁹

Search for Solutions

The search for solutions in Manipur is required on three fronts. Resolving ethnic differences and ensuring fair representation to the three main ethnic groups, ensuring early settlement of the Naga issue which is closely intertwined with the conflict in Manipur and ceding some political space to the Meitei insurgents who come home to peace. Unlike in Nagaland where all the NSCN factions claim to be true representatives of the Nagas, the rivalries between the Meitei insurgent groups are minor. This is due to the fact that unlike the Nagas and Kukis, the Meiteis are not divided on tribal lines. The Corcom also binds them together. While this unity makes it difficult for counter-insurgency operations; on positive side, any political settlement can be consensually arrived and implemented. Today, the state government is firmly entrenched while the insurgents are negating their influence by meaningless violence. This incentivises the State Government for status-quo.

The talks for a negotiated political settlement with the surrendered Meitei and Kuki groups are yet to begin. As secession or division of the State is not an option - the State Government has few things to offer other than New Delhi sponsored rehabilitation packages consisting of a stipend of Rs 4,000 per month, vocational training and some assistance in finding jobs. This hardly excites the rank and file of the insurgent groups who were recruited on

revolutionary slogans and great expectations. The insurgent groups are also skeptical of the public following they may hypothetically command once the weapons are no longer with them. They are reluctant to change tracks because their bases in Myanmar are intact and the extortion business is flourishing as the Centre pumps in more money for various schemes in Manipur. Further, a Meitei dominated Manipur government is not interested in moving beyond SoO with the Kuki groups – it has no political concessions to offer and hence the peace talks with the Kuki groups have not commenced. This political stalemate has resulted in these groups resorting to increased extortion. The final sufferer is the population which ends up paying more and benefiting less from developmental funds.

The peace talks with NSCN (IM) are going nowhere in spite the Naga group moderating their demands. The Nagas of Manipur as well as the Meitei insurgent groups are watching the negotiations with the Naga groups for positive indications. The NSCN (IM) is the most formidable insurgent group which had fostered other groups and is well armed – if they are not able to make headway with their key demands, the comparatively localised Meitei groups stand no chance. But the Meitei groups cannot go against the overall trend of peace talks in the North East and lose their share of any future political pie. This may ultimately prompt them in getting into ceasefire or SoO to run their extortion empires with minimal risk of military action by SF, something akin to Nagaland. This is no solution, only white-collar insurgency.

Another issue of concern is the premature demands for removal of AFSPA for diverting attention away from the real issues. In August 2004, the AFSPA was withdrawn by the Manipur Government from parts of Imphal in response to protests over the alleged killing of Thangjam Manorama Devi by SF. The State Government acted unilaterally, despite reservations expressed by the Central Government. Later, commenting on the issue, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated that, “AFSPA was enforced in Manipur by an explicit decision of the Government of Manipur and hence they have a right to modify their decision”.¹⁰ However, the removal of AFSPA from seven assembly constituencies of Imphal has converted this area into a haven for insurgents who are able to carry out unabated extortion, fabricate bombs and coordinate operations. This has prevented the SF to exercise adequate pressure on the insurgents to compel them towards the negotiation table.

Conclusion

Years of counter-insurgency effort by the Army and the Assam Rifles, agitational fatigue and the overall trend towards peace talks in the North East have together led to a fading of a deep-rooted insurgency. A search for solutions has begun but the solutions are no longer military. The ethnic fault lines in Manipur have to be bridged, economic opportunities created, surrendered insurgents meaningfully rehabilitated and the hardliner groups holding out in Myanmar are to be brought to mainstream. The people are eager for change. Imphal saw its first international flight on 21 November 2013 when Golden Myanmar Airlines flight landed at Tuliha Airport from Mandalay, carrying 189 Myanmar citizens.¹¹ The voter turnout in the April 2014 Parliamentary elections was over 71 per cent. The disenchanted insurgents are not surrendering for monthly stipends from the Government – they were earning more as gun-wielding insurgents. They want the root causes of insurgency – lack of development and dignity; and the competing ethnic demands to be addressed, besides a toehold in political space for acceptance by people. India’s ‘Look East’ policy cannot commence from New Delhi and terminate at Kolkata – it has to move further East and engage the Manipuris before it can set its eyes on the emerging markets of Myanmar. Indeed, our external affairs minister emphasised an ‘Act East Policy’ during her Vietnam visit in August 2014. A peaceful Manipur can become dream Indian gateway to ASEAN.

Endnotes

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