

## State and the Armed Ethnic Insurgencies in Manipur: an Internal Security Question

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### Abstract

Internal conflicts have been one of the greatest threats to the nation's security. At present India is facing multifarious challenges in the administration of internal security. In spite of that, laws and system dealing with the maintenance of internal security are not given adequate attention. Manipur in India's north-east has long been driven by conflicts among ethnic groups on issues of exclusivity, dominance, and integration. In spite of the Central Government's efforts, alienation of the people and perceived grievances still continue. It is found that the state of Manipur is the most conflict-ridden state among all the other states in the northeastern region, a region where democracy is freely practiced however only in the facade where the people are denied of their due rights. Such deliberate and insensible acts by the so-called democratic government defying the sensibilities of the masses lead to several conflicts, thereby making the region highly prone to political instabilities and confusions. This paper will attempt to highlight the State's responses to existing and evolving challenges of internal security that have been marked by a high measure of incoherence, structural frailties, and a growing crisis of ineffectiveness.

**KEYWORDS:** National security, Insurgency, Ethnic groups, Human rights

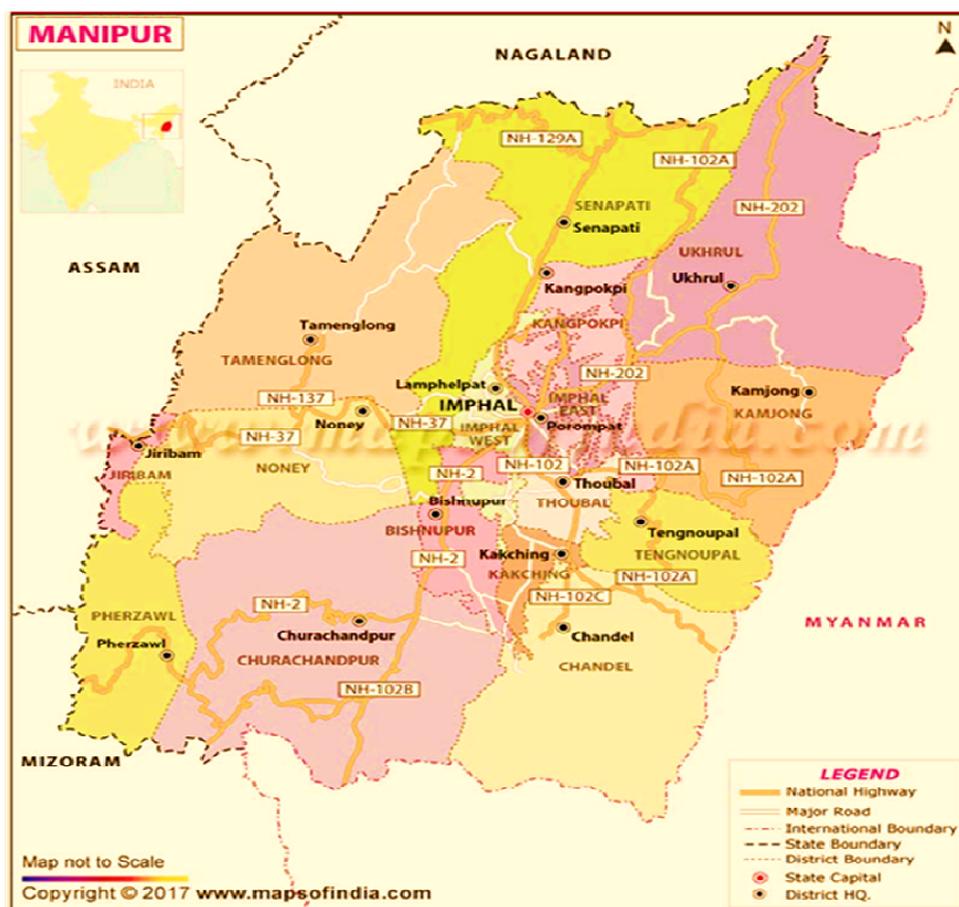
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### INTRODUCTION

In Arthashastra, Kautilya declares that a state may be at risk from four types of intimidations- internal, external, externally supported internally and internally supported externally. He argued that, among these four types, internal threats should be taken care of immediately, which are far more severe than external threats. Since independence, India is facing numerous problems of internal security. Internal security challenges in India are no more local in nature and have interstate and nationwide ramifications. Insurgency, secessionism, ethnic conflicts, and religion are the major internal security threats in India. North East India has been afflicted by insurgencies from the time of independence and still, it continues. After the implementation of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958 due to the ethnic conflict in Manipur in the 1980s, there are large scales of rights violations happened, arrest without warrant, fake encounters, forced disappearances, sexual abuses. The real problems of the state are unemployment, underdevelopment, educational backwardness, the absence of landrights, lack of infrastructure etc. Their needs and wants are differing from one to another. But the center is trying to solve all these problems in a militaristic way rather than resorting political, social or an economical solution.

## MANIPUR: STATE PROFILE

Manipur is one of the North Eastern-most states of India, bordering Myanmar in the east, and three Indian States – Nagaland, Assam and Mizoram in the north, west, and south respectively. It was an independent Kingdom and merged to Indian union in 1949. The state is endowed with rich natural resources and has a long history of geopolitical development in South East Asia and divided into two parts, inhabited broadly by two communities– Meitei (generally known as Manipuri) in the valley (concentrated in 10% of state's total land area) and tribes in the hill (spread over 90% of state's total area). A small area of the valley (10% of state's area) is surrounded by hills which consist of 90% of the state's total geographical area. The latter community is the confederation of 33 recognized and other non-recognized tribes. Unfortunately, at present, the State is passing through different social turmoil, ethnic violence, and social upheavals. It includes insurgency for secession to the movement for greater autonomy, intra to inter-ethnic clashes and fights over resources. The frequent eruption of violence and conflict that arises from the different ethnic communities in search of and to assert their identities disturb the educational environment in the State (Sinha 2013). Earlier the state is having nine administrative districts with five in the hills, namely Churachandpur, Ukhrul, Chandel, Tamenglong and Senapati and four in the valley, which includes Imphal East, Imphal West, Bishenpur and Thoubal. And now there are seven new districts carved out from existing districts of Senapati, Tamenglong, Churachandpur, Chandel, Ukhrul, Imphal East, and Thoubal. At present, there are sixteen administrative districts in the state. The newly formed districts are Jiribam, Kangpokpi, Kakching, Tengnoupal, Kamjong, Noney, Pherzawl. Agriculture is the principal source of livelihood, for a majority of the rural masses, and the state economy also depends on it. Industry in Manipur is not very well developed. Manipur is the 4th largest state in the North Eastern Region of India. The population of Manipur constitutes 6.24 % of the total population of 8 (eight) northeastern states including Sikkim where it comprises nearly 0.24 % of the total population of India. Population pressure is found to be increasing day by day reducing the man-land ratio from about 1: 7.85 hectares in 1901 to 1: 0.78 hectares in 2011. Manipur is a small state with an area of 22, 327 sq. k.m., which constitutes 0.7 % of the Indian Union according to 2011 Census. It is situated in the far-flung north-eastern border of India. In terms of area, Manipur ranked 20th among the Indian states. (Economic survey 2016-17). As per 2011 Census, the ST population constitutes 40.88% of the total state population while that of the SC is 3.41%.



Source: <https://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/manipur>

## REASONS LEADING TO THE INSURRECTION

There are many differences in policies for the people of the hills and the valley. The hill people can own land and settle in the valley after becoming educated and getting employment in the Government service while the people of the valley cannot do so in the hills even if they are working and are staying there during the employment period. The Manipur land reforms and revenue act were not applicable to the hills due to constitutional constraints so as to protect land

as this is all that the tribe's surviving on. In the hills, each village has its own village head and has their own customs and traditions. While the valley region has made reasonable progress, in comparative terms, both economically and from the point of view of education, the hill or remote areas maintain their primitiveness sans any development. These hilly regions thus provide the state with a suitable environment for the rural insurgency. The valley region is mostly inhabited by the Meitei's and Manipur Muslims locally called the Pangal's. The hilly region, in contrast, is inhabited by the tribes with the Nagas to the north and Kukis and Mizos to the south. These hill tribes are generally Baptist Protestants. The Meitei's migrated from Thailand and are Vaishnavite Hindus, whereas the tribes are traders and invaders. Different customs are practiced by almost

every tribe and each tribe confines its activities to itself at the village level. The hill tribes have been declared as scheduled tribes and enjoy the protection of property, preferential quotas in government jobs competitions and higher education.

After India's independence, Manipur remained an independent state. The first democratic election of Manipur was held in August 1948 by Manipur Constitution Act, 1947. Manipur became a part of India as a Part C state through the debatable Manipur Merger Agreement on September 21, 1949. People of Manipur felt that the annexation was forceful as the King was called for a meeting in Shillong and was secluded from others. No plebiscite or referendum took place for the annexure. This annexation resulted in armed opposition from the Manipur people and violent armed conflict erupted. The Government of India initiated a military response to control the opposition.

North East India has been afflicted by insurgencies from the time of independence and still, it continues. Most of the northeastern states witnessed armed organized violence since the 1960s and the 1970s. At present, while violence levels have come down in the other northeastern states but Manipur continues to suffer from high levels of violence orchestrated by multiple insurgent groups inhabiting the state and the counterinsurgency operations. (Sharma 2015). Naga National Council in the 1950s is the most violent amongst the armed movements.

#### MELD WITH INDIAN UNION

Manipur state is merged in the territory of India with a merger agreement act, in 1949. On June 21, 1972, some of the people in this region have disagreed with it. Separatist armed groups from Naga tribe's resisted integration with India and some other people also took similar positions. The people of different ethnic identities argued that the Government of India considered them as second-class citizens. The grievances against the merger along with the delay in conferring statehood alienated the Manipur and laid the foundation for the emergence of a separatist movement. Today the state is home to a large number of non-state armed groups and is one of the most violence-affected states in the country. This is the first and foremost reasons to sprout out for the insurgency.

The circumstances leading to the merger of Manipur with the Indian Union remain an intensely debated issue in the state. The grievances against the merger along with the delay in conferring statehood alienated the Manipuris and laid the foundation for the emergence of a separatist movement. Down the line, the state is today home to a large number of non-state armed groups and is one of the most violence-affected states in the country. Their aims and goals vary from demands for various forms of autonomy to separation from the Indian Union.

#### ETHNIC SKIRMISHES

Insurgency is one of the major social problems in the state of Manipur. The state of Manipur is witnessing insurgency for more than six decades. The prolonged armed conflict is going on since the day of the merger of Manipur against the Union of India. The ethnic conflict in Manipur is very much connected to socio-economic, religion, ethnic politics and insurgency. The insurgent groups have their own dictum in the

regions where they are concentrated, and they do not hesitate to encounter with other groups who tramp their dogmas.

As the state is inhabited by many communities, the issue of dominance over economic and political power by the dominant community and revolt against them by the weaker communities are the regular affairs. In the one hand, during the colonial period, hill communities have polarized into two broader groups – Naga and Kuki for economic and political benefits and this movement have been intensified in the post-statehood period, especially to face the dominant community Meitei. On the other hand, at the same time, the dominant community 'Meitei' living in the valley started two main movements: a) revivalist movement to preserve traditional religion (Sanamahi), Meitei script, culture, and tradition; b) revolutionary movement to revive pre-merger status of the state. In this manner, protection of their own identity, culture, the economic and political power of almost all the communities in the state has been given impetus. As a consequence of it, many insurgent groups have been formed, and often at least one fraction of the groups.

With the varying ideologies of the groups and most of them are often found to be blurred; they are acting independently for their own benefit without taking into the interest of the others. A few of them are fighting for sovereignty (e.g. a few of Meitei insurgent groups). Some are negotiating with the Government for a separate state or greater autonomy within the state (e.g. Naga and Kuki insurgent groups) and at the same time, other smaller groups are struggling for their survival. As a consequence of it, internal conflict has increased significantly.

With three major ethnic groups in Manipur, its insurgency is also primarily divided into insurgent groups of Meitei, Naga, and Kuki. While the Meitei insurgents' prime objective is to free their pre-British territorial boundary from "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 Burma (Myanmar). The Kukis, on the other hand, support the demand of separate Kuki land for which Kukis of Burma are also fighting (Laishram 2014).

#### ARMED FORCES SPECIAL POWERS ACT, 1958

Violence became the way of life in the north-eastern states of India. State administration became incapable to maintain its internal disturbance. Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Ordinance was promulgated by the President on 22nd May of 1958. In which some special powers have been given to the members of the armed forces in disturbed areas in the State of Assam and Union Territory of Manipur (Dobal 2009). Under this Act, the Armed Forces can use extraordinary powers during counter-insurgency operations. The AFSPA concedes extraordinary powers to the Armed Forces, its ignoble clauses are the power to arrest without warrant, power of a non-commissioned officer to shoot or kill on the basis of mere suspicion, to search any premises without permission, ammunition dumps, fortifications, shelters and to stop search and seize any vehicles.

This is an extremely draconian measure giving unwarranted powers to the armies and was adopted by the parliament as a temporary measure to counter the violent insurgency movement of the Nagas. In 1963, Nagaland got full statehood before it was part of Assam but that did not solve the problem. In 1972, the AFSPA was further amended due to the reorganization of the Northeastern region and was made even more stringent.

In many decades of conflict, around 20,000 people have died in Manipur and more than 1,500 extrajudicial killings have been noted in the state, besides several cases of disappearances. An Indian military law, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958), has been imposed in this region since 1958. Under this act, anyone can be arrested, imprisoned or killed on the basis of mere suspicion. Manipur is one of the most highly militarized regions in Asia. In these circumstances, the common people, generally women and children have been caught between guns of the state and the non-state actors. AFSPA has achieved in raising the level of insurgency rather than curbing it.

In Manipur, the Armed Forces Special Act (AFSPA) 1958 was imposed on 8 September 1980, which continued till now. Many people have been tortured and killed by the Armed Forces on numerous occasions. Extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances are common in this region. Provisions in the AFSPA undermine the very foundations of democracy, justice, and human rights. Basic human rights are curtailed and fundamental freedoms are denied. The Act created prolonged frustration and restlessness of the people in this region. The implementation of this Act resulted in an unprecedented civic uprising, including the 'mother's nude protest' against the Act in July 2004 on the discovery of the mutilated body of Thangjam Manorama, a young Manipuri lady, after she was picked up by the Assam Rifles and later found dead. The AFSPA is still embroiled in controversy and the people of Manipur are continuing their protest against the Act. After this protest, the then Government of Manipur withdraw AFSPA from the municipal area of the capital city Imphal.

#### MAJOR INSURGENT GROUPS IN MANIPUR

The insurgency in Manipur can be formally traced to of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) on 24 November 1964. The alleged 'forced' merger of Manipur and the delay in the conferring of full-fledged statehood to it was greatly resented by the people of Manipur. Since then several other outfits, like the People's Liberation Army (PLA), founded on September 25, 1978, People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) set up on October 9, 1977 and the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) that came into being in April, 1980 have emerged in the valley areas consisting of four districts of the State. All these insurgent groups have been demanding a separate independent Manipur.

From Nagaland, violence by the has also spilled over into Manipur, a substantial part of which is claimed by the Isak-Muivah section of National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) as part of Nagalim, the proposed unified territory of the Nagas as claimed by the Naga rebels. Several clashes between the NSCN-IM and the Khaplang division of National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-K) have been reported from the hill districts of the state.

Kuki tribes in the early 1990s initiated their own brand of insurgency against the alleged oppression by the NSCN-IM. Following ethnic clashes between the Nagas and Kukis in the early 1990s, a number of Kuki outfits were formed. Many other tribes, such as the Paite, Vaiphei, and Hmars have also established their own armed groups. Similarly, Islamist outfits like People's United Liberation Front (PULF) have also been founded to protect the interests of the 'Pangals' (Manipuri Muslims). Today, Manipur is one of the worst affected states in the Northeast where at least 12 insurgent outfits are active at present. According to Government sources, the strength of those concentrated in the valley districts, is assessed at around 1500 cadres for the Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) and its army wing, the PLA, 2500 cadres for the UNLF and its army wing Manipur People's Army (MPA), 500 cadres for the PREPAK and its army wing Red Army, while KangleiYawolKannaLup(KYKL) and its YawolLanmi army is assessed as having a strength of 600 cadres. The Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP)'s strength is assessed at 100 cadres.

The UNLF, PLA, KYKL, PREPAK and the KCP have been involved in some of the serious attacks on security forces. The insurgents have an avowed policy of not targeting the state police personnel unless circumstances demand it. The practice of directing their attack on the Army and the Central Para-military personnel is an attempt to create a divide between Manipur and India and to secure vital popular support.

However, many ethnic conflicts are still going on in Northeast India, competition over resources. Ethnicity is used as a reason to keep these conflicts alive and this facilitates the continuation of the divide and rule policy of the state vis a vis the in Northeast India. In the 2000s, the GOI faced 36 different separatist movements as well as several ethnic conflicts. Apart from the Naga-Meitei conflict, there is the Naga-Kuki conflict, the Karbi-Dimasa conflict, the Bru-Mizo conflict, the Bodo-Adivasi conflict, the Mizo-Chin conflict, the Adivasi-Muslim conflict and many others.

Conflicts can develop between different ethnic groups, or even within the same group of people and it may result in violence. In Manipur, the conflict erupted because of basic differences. The Meities, Nagas, Kuki's are dominant ethnic communities in Manipur. Meities inhabit the plains, Kuki and Nagas and others inhabit the hills. There is a boundary dispute between Manipur and Nagaland. The Meitei community is strongly against the assimilation of Naga-dominated areas of Manipur with Nagaland, which is the reason behind this dispute.

Most of the insurgent groups have refused offers of peace talks. Recently, however, the UNLF has mooted the prospects of negotiations, but its demands to open talks remain extreme. Even if progress is made in talks between the Indian government and some of the insurgent groups, however, this is very unlikely to resolve the enduring inter-tribal conflicts within the state.

#### QUESTION ON SECURITY

Ethnic clashes have arisen in almost all parts of the world where underdeveloped or developing societies are coupled with multi-ethnicity. To resolve them is a prime duty of the State and the administration. Though a lot has been done; still much more needs to be

addressed. Manipur is not only suffering from armed movements of innumerable underground organizations but also from a complex ethnic crisis. Being inhabited by different groups of people which can be classified broadly into Meitei, Naga, and Kuki, a harmonious existence of the state is being threatened as the interests of one group clash with the other. This has given rise to the assertion of group identity; intergroup competition for resources, political instability, insecurity, and underdevelopment.

These ethnic armed conflicts not only threaten the territorial integrity but internal stability, economic development, democracy and harmonious relationship among different ethnic, religious, cultural, social and economic groups but also influence, to a considerable extent, the external behavior of the state. Many of the inter-state, regional and international conflicts have their origins in the domestic conflicts of at least one of the participants. The ongoing armed conflict between the Government of India and the insurgent groups in the state is the most serious homeland crisis. Many issues came up around the conflict including human rights violation, special powers given to the Security Forces etc. The infirmity of the state's internal security apparatuses has resulted in a constant clamor for central assistance and the "paramilitary panacea" the deployment of increasing numbers of Central Paramilitary Forces (CPMF) in local disorders across the country. However, there has been no parallel enthusiasm for any alteration of the constitutional scheme to create a more balanced system of sharing control over the law-and-order apparatus.

There are two types of conflict that are being encountered by the state- they are internal conflict and the conflict between state and society. Internal conflict includes inter-community and intra-community conflicts for resource dominance, power, and identity reconciliation, and the conflict between state and society implies conflict between insurgent groups and state for greater autonomy, secession or sovereignty of Manipur. Both affect normal life in the state, directly or indirectly. A close inspection of the condition illustrates that the goals of the insurgents in Manipur are in conflict, which in long run will doom their own people if they ignore the ground reality. The scenario reflects the uncertain, anarchic and chaotic future of the state. With about the long international border and people of hostile approach, the ongoing insurgency is a not only a matter of national unity but is also relevant in the context of security concern.

The state which is inflicted with a large number of militant outfits, divided into ethnic lines, operating with demands ranging from secession to autonomy and the right to self-determination. These insurgent groups are not merely revolting against the Indian state, but are also engaged in internecine wars among themselves. The politicians had explained the cause of insurgency in the state as being a lack of employment among the educated youths and the prevailing economic backwardness. But, the origin of the turmoil in the state is due to historical issues coupled with a sense of alienation prevailing in the minds of the youths. Added to these are the tensions between various ethnic and tribal groups.

## CONCLUSION

India is insecure internally due to the armed separatist movements and domestic ethnic dissensions. The most dangerous enemy is the enemy within. The issue of ethnic

insurgency and armed conflict is a serious challenge to India's internal security concerns and territorial integrity. Over the years Indian government has been able to tide the insurgency only in some of the states of the northeastern region. However, one of the worst affected states like Manipur required more attention to internal dimensions and external linkages having a bearing on the insurgency. If the internal security issues are curbed effectively, destabilization by the external forces to that extent becomes more problematic. Inconveniently, the growth of belligerent politics based on ethnic, sectional, linguistic or other contentious criteria is predominantly responsible for the many communal and secessionist movements flourishing in India. The internal security problems should not be acted simply as law and order problems. They have to be dealt with comprehensively in all their dimensions and at all levels i.e., political, economic and social. The significance of local initiatives in dealing with internal security policy needs to be underlined because the local assistance can rapidly and more efficiently take preventive measures and can initiate confidence-building measures in troubled areas which reduce the possibility of small conflicts developing into bigger one.

Thus, there is a need for reconsideration of the Government's existing policy on paramilitary forces. Given the threat to internal security, these forces have an important role to play. But that role is required to be located in a broader internal security policy framework. Under such a framework the role, deployment and the relationship of these forces with other civil and military institutions need to be redefined. The paramilitary forces have emerged as a unique institution in India's democratic polity. And, if used judiciously they can contribute to the achievement of the larger goals of the Indian State.

This ethnic conflict is exposed to be a result of a protracted identity problem, intensified by disputes over land and ambiguous responses from the State. It is argued that the sustained land disputes and the Government's unresponsiveness to the problem prevent the different ethnic groups from getting a sustainable solution. This ethnic identity has over the years crippled the region. So the government should take care of by addressing their structural conditions like ethnic alienation, lack of governance and infrastructure, the absence of land rights etc. Also, improve local public transport and connectivity with rest of the country, empower the common people and give them due respect in political rights, respect their ethnic culture and identity, ensuring efficient law enforcement to create disincentives for armed groups to continue arming themselves. The conflicting issues like land or border disputes should be settled at the local level to make people friendly governance. And the process of dialogues and negotiations with armed militant outfits must be conducted in a professional manner by people trained in negotiation techniques. The best way to respond to armed ethnic conflicts to this nature is through the mechanisms of dialogue and negotiation to end their alienation.

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