

## **Political Imaginings, State and Territoriality in Manipur**

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**Abstract:** *Political imaginings, territoriality and conflict has become a phenomenon in the state of Manipur. Different communities constantly try to construct their own identity thereby necessitating their political imaginings. The Naga peace process and the passage of the Manipur People's Bill revealed the nature of contestations on identity and territorial politics in the state. The article delves into the issue of territoriality in the state of Manipur in the context of identity politics, and the influx of immigration.*

**Key Word:** *Political Imaginings, Territoriality, Naga Peace Process, Identity Politics.*

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### **I. Introduction**

The confrontation of state and identity politics in North East India presents a confounding discourse on identity construction. The Hegelian master-slave dialectic metaphor, of internalizing the inferior complex of the slave in the master-slave relationship produced the construction of their respective identity. The projection of the master-slave dialectic is reflected in the construction of ethnic identity and the political imaginings in the North East. For an instance, the nomenclature such as the 'Nagas' or 'Kukis' are largely a colonial construct. However, the colonial construction of such identities has also been largely self-fulfilling in the political imaginings of the tribes.

The state represents a consolidated territory, and therefore assumes the role of maintaining its border secured and protected. The influx of immigration mostly from Myanmar, Nepal, Bangladesh and migration from different parts of the country has brought about a demographic transitional phase in the state. Therefore, the state government passed the Manipur People's Bill on 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2015 for the protection of the population of the state. However, the bill became a bone of contention between the plains and hills as the bill has some implications for the tribals in the existing land related laws. The bill brought about pandemonium which exacerbated ethnic tension resulting in loss of lives and destruction of public and private property. Despite the fact that the territoriality of the state is confronted from the influx of immigration; the contestation on land related issues and political imaginings of identity politics from the different communities of the state resulted in the further divide of the ethnic populations themselves.

### **II. State, Identity and Political Imaginings**

Manipur became a full-fledged state in the year 1972. Despite the fact that the state has been territorially consolidated, the existence of multiple ethnic identities that presupposes their own separate social space and territory before the formation of nation-state became the recurring claims of identity politics in the state. The Meiteis constituted the majority in the Legislative Assembly by virtue of their larger population and continue to maintain the dominant status. Integration demands inclusive projection of the idea of state. Besides, inclusive political representation and development is a necessary condition for territorial integration. The fear of marginalization has been the concern of not only the tribals but also the concern of the majority Meiteis in the state. For an instance, the demand for the implementation of the Inner Line Permit System (ILPS), and the opposing of the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) by section of the Meiteis in the valley revealed their state of insecurity from being marginalized.

Manipur is a land of diverse cultures settled by various ethnic groups for centuries. The major ethnic groups in the state are the Meiteis, Nagas, Kukis and Pangals. There are various smaller ethnic communities within communities in case of the Nagas and Kukis. Manipur has evolved into a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and

multicultural society in the present context. However, the term ‘multicultural’ may not be applied in the strict sense of the Western term, as there is no provision of group differentiated rights. Largely, each ethnic group maintained their respective cultural and ethnic boundaries. The British colonial policy of administering the plains and hills is based on the divide and rule policy; direct rule in the plains and indirect rule in the partially excluded areas in the hills. Such policy had also widened the gap between the hills and plains. Besides, the introduction of Christianity in the hills had also widened the cultural gap between the plains and the hills communities. Despite the fact that various ethnic communities have been living together peacefully for centuries, the demand for self-determination such as the Naga movement and Kuki homeland has led to the ethnic clash which in turn accelerated the formation of various armed groups in the state. The socio-political aspirations from the Meitei organizations such as the demand for Scheduled Tribe status and the opposition to the demands of autonomy movement of the tribals in order to maintain the territorial integrity have also deepened the divide between the hills and plain communities.

The Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim-Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM) which has been demanding for the integration of Naga areas of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland into a single administrative unit has been perceived by the Meiteis as threat to the territorial integrity of Manipur. Though the Meiteis continue to protect the territorial integrity of the state, there is a constant apprehension of changing the administrative boundaries of Manipur. The Kukis has been constantly demanding Kuki homeland since its formation of their armed groups. Amarjeet Singh argued that “*such cultural and developmental aspirations, though legitimate, became problematic once they are connected with exclusive administrative boundaries for self-governance or self-determination*” (Singh 2008). The present peace talks between the (NSCN-IM) and the Government of India which is at the crucial stage is likely to have some impact on the various ethnic communities in the state. For an instance, if Sixth Scheduled or Territorial Council is granted to the Nagas, it would amount to granting of state within state as perceived by the Meiteis which is likely to further divide the various ethnic communities. The non-territorial solution which has been speculated in the present peace talks has some implications for the Nagas themselves. Nagas are still divided in their demand for integration of Naga inhabited areas as section of Nagas from the state of Nagaland are not in favour of Naga integration, while the Eastern Nagas demanded for a separate union territory. Despite the fact that the Meiteis for the most part has achieved ideological force and importance of safeguarding their interests, the Naga Peace accord is likely to re-define the ethnic relations among the various communities in the state.

The Nagas political imaginings started in 1832 when they first encounter the colonial expedition in their inhabited territory. The formation of the Naga Club in 1918 and the Naga National Council in 1946 necessitated the political imaginings, and the construction of Naga identity beyond the village republic. Their first political expression was made when the Naga Club submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929 and demanded for the exclusion of the Naga areas from the proposed reforms and pressed for self-determination should the British leave India (Yuono 1974, 126). The post-colonial states are premised in the similar contour, that the idea of nation preceded nationalism.

Cultural proximity is not a sufficient and necessary condition in defining whether a community is conjoined with the larger group such as the Nagas or Kukis. The cultural affinity and proximity of those smaller communities with the larger cultural group often incorporated them to the political imaginings of the larger ethnic groups. However, these smaller communities have their own separate social space, and wanted to maintain their distinct identity. They are of the view that an adequate share of power and politics of difference is necessary for sustaining and safeguarding their socio-cultural identities. As Biswas and Suklabaidya argued, ethnic communities assume a space of difference for the realization of their socio-cultural and political aspirations (Biswas & Suklabaidya 2008, 11). The usurpation of smaller communities to the larger communities is embedded in the political imaginings of the larger group. Therefore, post-colonial states, and politics of ethnicity mostly subscribed to the socialist principles of a strong state. The Nagas, in order to contain the Naga identity which is comprised of multiple sub-identities constructed their political imaginings which largely preceded their construction of social and cultural identity.

### **III. The Naga Peace Process**

The historic Framework Agreement was signed on 3<sup>rd</sup> August, 2015 between the NSCN-IM and Government of India after a prolonged cease fire agreement since 1<sup>st</sup> August, 1997. The agreement was envisaged to bring an amicable solution to the Naga peace process. Despite the fact that both the Government of India and the NSCN-IM made every effort for a mutually acceptable and peaceful settlement, contents of the Framework Agreement have not been disclosed. The ambiguous nature of the agreement has brought about mixed response from different civil society organizations. Some Nagas civil

society organizations anticipated that the agreement does not include the issue of integrating Naga areas under one administrative umbrella, while the United Committee Manipur is apprehensive on the possibilities of creating greater Nagalim, granting separate flag and constitution, and therefore reiterated their stand that the Naga peace process should not disturb the territorial integrity of Manipur.

The demand for integration of Naga areas into a single administrative unit has been the main contention. The Meiteis vehemently opposed the Naga integration as about eighty percent of the land in Manipur has been claimed by the Nagas as their ancestral lands. Pradeep Singh Chhonkar argued that “*the territorial aspirations of the Nagas has resulted in an anti-Meitei feeling as the resolute stance of the Meiteis for a united Manipur is often seen as one of the major obstacles to the goal of Naga unification*” (Chhonkar 2018, 49). Other neighboring states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh have also opposed to the demand for Naga integration. The Government of India has expressed the difficulty of changing state boundaries, and therefore non-territorial solution has been increasing highlighted in the peace talks. The non-territorial solution is likely to be in the form of granting cultural autonomy to the Nagas cutting across the state boundaries. However, there are strong assertions from the Meiteis in the valley that the non-territorial solution will have its own repercussion in the long run. That granting cultural autonomy to the Nagas in the form of Pan Naga Hoho will eventually lead to Naga territorial integration.

The success of the Framework Agreement will depend on the inclusiveness of the different Naga insurgent groups, civil society organizations, and political parties. The Government of India has been reiterating its stand that solution should be inclusive. However, factionalism persists among the Naga insurgent groups and civil society organizations. For an instance, the Eastern Naga Peoples’ Organization expressed their demand for separate Union Territory and do not want to be part of the present state of Nagaland. The Zeliangrong people who forms large part of the Naga populations inhabiting the contiguous areas in Manipur, Assam and Nagaland also demanded a separate state during the Zeliangrong movement in the 1980s under the leadership of Rani Gaidinliu. Though, the Zeliangrong people do not disturb the present peace process, their aspirations for separate homeland could not be ruled out. The politics of tribalism and the leadership crisis which are inherent in Naga politics has been a hurdle in the process of integration and unification. The Naga Tribes Council and Central Naga Tribal Council also play an important role in the ongoing peace process. The need for inclusiveness in the peace process has been expressed by these councils. The symbolic issues on separate Naga flag and constitution have become another hurdle for the Government of India and the NSCN-IM at the negotiating table. The Government of India rejected the demand of the NSCN-IM for separate Naga national flag and constitution in the face of the peace process coming closer to conclusion.

### **Influx of Immigration vis-à-vis Manipur People’s Bill 2015**

The agitation over the implementation of the ILPS and the passage of the Manipur People’s Bill 2015 in the state has revealed the insecurities of various communities in the North East region at the prospect of being overwhelmed by an influx of migrants into their traditional homelands, and the deep divides amongst the ethnic populations themselves (Phanjoubam 2016, 2). The influx of illegal immigration from Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar and migration from other parts of the country has created a fear psychosis among the Meiteis over employment, resources and encroachment of land in the state. Article 371 (C) prohibits the non-tribals from purchasing and settlement in the hill areas of Manipur. Despite the fact that the Meiteis constituted the majority of the populations in the state, large portion of the land are situated in the hills. The non-tribal immigrants and other migrants from other states therefore concentrated only in the valleys. This has resulted in the formulation of bills to protect the people of the valley from the influx of immigration. Besides, the demand for Scheduled Tribe status by section of the Meiteis has been opposed by the hill tribes.

The demand of the Meiteis for Scheduled Tribe status has been largely projected on social and economic grounds. That granting the Scheduled Tribe status would bring about an egalitarian society by bridging the gap between the hills and valleys, and the ILPS would be extended in the state for the protection of the people from the influx of the immigrants. However, the tribals are skeptical and apprehensive that their rights and privileges would be usurped if the Meiteis are granted the Scheduled Tribe status, and more importantly, settlement of the Meiteis in the hills would accompany resulting in the marginalization of the tribals. The creation of new seven revenue districts in 2016 is a significant development, where five districts are in the hills. The Manipur Government declared the creation of the new districts despite strong opposition from the Nagas.

Before the creation of the new seven districts, the Kukis and Meiteis had been demanding for the creation of Sadar Hill district and Jiribam district respectively. The Nagas opposed the demand for the creation of the two districts as it greatly affects their ancestral lands. However, the Government of Manipur created seven

new districts despite the strong protest from the Nagas. The Government of Manipur stated that the new districts were created not on ethnic lines but for the administrative convenience of the state. The Nagas demanded that the creation of the new seven districts should be rolled back as it was created against their consent and approval. However, the Government of Manipur declared the new seven districts as revenue districts.

### **Conclusion**

The existing state laws have binding in the tribal areas although certain constitutional safeguards are specified for their protection. Article 371 (C) protected the tribal areas in the hills by prohibiting the non-tribals from carrying out land transactions and settlement. The Kuki chieftainship system of land holding system in which the land belongs solely to the chief has been a rigorous subjugation of the Kuki people. Therefore, the creation of the new revenue districts in a way would be emancipation from the tyranny of the chieftainship system. The changing faces of the community ownership of land and property among the Nagas also reveal the changing contours of territoriality in North East India. The process of development, urbanization and commercialization of lands in the Naga areas to some extent facilitated the elites in demeaning community ownership of land. The Naga peace process, as reiterated by the Government of India that state boundaries would remain intact, implied that the territorial integrity of the North Eastern states, particularly Manipur would be safeguarded. The state institutional laws vis-à-vis the changing nature of land holding system necessitated the possibility of breaking the impasse on the claim of absolute territoriality among the different ethnic communities in Manipur.

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