

A Review of The Narrative of Ethnic Conflicts and Violence Faultlines in Manipur of Northeast India: An Economic perspectives

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Abstract

It is a review paper that examines the pertinent issue of ethnic violence and conflicts that has long been experienced in the North East region of India. It is observed to be a generic problem of the region especially in Manipur. Ethnic violence and conflicts have erupted and exploded unpredictably throwing the region or the state or the ethnic communities under immense social, economic and political pressure. The region is rich but underdeveloped and one of the significant factors contributing to this economic backwardness is the violent relationship and trust deficit between the ethnic communities. The policies formulated and implemented in the region by the constitutionally established institutions has also contributed significantly to the volatile situation. In all this fluid and volatile situation, Agriculture sector has been the most vulnerable sector of the economy.

Keywords: Faultlines, ethnic violence, ethnic conflict, bandhs, economic blockade, insurgency,

Introduction

Northeast India is a region called home by many ethnic communities who are diametrically opposed to each other and therefore it is infested with armed groups formed and operating with diversified demands. These armed groups are ethnic oriented and their demands range from complete independent sovereign nation to self-defense from annihilation. Of all the states, Manipur fares the worst in terms of the number of armed groups actively operating. There are numerous socio-economic and political benefits of insurgent groups but many times the general public has to pay the price. The various activities engaged by the armed groups, often prove to be an expensive affair for the economy.

For reasons best known to the indigenous people of the region, it is socially and politically very fluid and unstable. The people have not been fully integrated to the national mainstream which is clearly visible in the lack of knowledge of Northeast states to the population of the mainland and North east history is still yet to be part of the Indian history but only an anthropological subject of interest. Could it be that the region is of only strategic economic and political consideration? So much of armed conflicts in the midst of militarization that the people feel neglected and alienated? Much has been researched and written about the ethnic conflicts and violence, and with the constitutionally established institutions which could be

attributed to the economic backwardness and underdevelopment inspite of the prospects of tourism industry, agriculture and agro-based industry, trade connectivity to the South east nations.

Manipur is a beautiful state gifted with natural and cultural beauty and diversity. It is rightly called as the “a jewel of India’ (A. Ramanathan, D.V. Despande & Y. Hara Gopal. 2007). The rich diversity of flora and fauna along with the advantage of long international border gives the state huge potential to become an economic powerhouse in the nation. The state has rich long history and infact it became an independent princely state after the British left but became part of India in 1949.

Like any other state of the North Eastern region, Manipur even though small in size is rich in cultural diversity. Manipur is like mini-India when it comes to the social diversity. There are three major communities living in Manipur and under which there are numerous tribes and unfortunately more than often, they are in loggerheads. This diversity of communities has led to frictions between different communities in the form of insurgency and sudden eruption of ethnic violence.

The narrative of socio-economic-political alignment is clearly drawn in Manipur with the presence of many insurgent groups and numerous civil society Organizations working for the welfare of the people. The ethnic divide between the hills and the valley of Manipur is geographically and politically very vivid. Ethnic conflict and violence in Manipur are triangular in nature encompassing the three major communities; The Meiteis and Pangals, Naga, and the Kuki-Zo-Chin. The geo-political, religious, and economic divided also is well defined and observable; the Meiteis & Pangals in the valley and comparatively better off economically, politically dominant and oriented to Hinduism and Islam. The Naga and the Kuki-Zo-Chin inhabits the surrounding hills, Christians, and they are economically backward. This narrative has turned out to be the perfect recipe for conflicts and sure enough Manipur suffers from the vicious cycle of conflicts and violence, taking a huge toll on the economic conditions of the state inspite of having very rich resources and prospects.

Ethnic and insurgency issues in the North East India.

Jayanta Madhab (1999) articulates in his article “Northeast: crisis of identity security and underdevelopment” how the government have failed to understand the primary concern of the tribals. The primary concern of the tribals is loss of identity, survival, underdevelopment, land, etc. And the failure by lack of knowledge or deliberately is one of the major causes of armed insurgency and perpetual ethnic conflicts in the region.

Bethany Lacina (2009) in “The problem of political stability in Northeast India” analysed the problem of political instability in the North east India. The long history of ethnic centric violence and disputes over resources, reservations and land. This is agreed by Debasis Neogi (2010) in “disparity in socio-economic development and its implications on communal conflicts” stating that communal conflicts can be traced in the economic deprivation and disparity causing social destabilization in any region leading to dependency syndrome.

Namrata Goswami (2011) in “Armed conflicts in Northeast India and the Indian states Response; Use of force and the ‘notion’ of proportionality.” Says that the root causes of armed conflicts and the Northeast are identity, ethnicity, desire for empowerment and land. The ethnic community arm themselves against the other ethnic groups using the strategy of garnering support by playing the cards of emotions, exclusiveness and power. Ethnic conflicts and violence is a perpetual vicious cycle. Bhanwari Sharma (2012) also writes in “Homelands, Ethnic conflicts, democracy in Northeast India” how government policies have miserably failed to doused the violence in Northeast India caused by the aspiration for

economic and political powers fuelling the conflict in Northeast. There is huge trust deficit between the communities as a threat to their resources. V. Bijukumar (2013) also writes in "Social exclusion and ethnicity in Northeast India" that the violence and insurgency problem of Northeast is due to the mistrust between the diverse ethnic groups. It is a conflict over resources and identity preservation. It can also be attributed to western education that led nationalism and the frustration and mistrust due to militarization and suppression rather than negotiate with mutual respect.

In fact Bodhisattva Kar in "When was the postcolonial? A history of policing impossible line." Studied the role of the British policy in dealing with the tribal communities, the Economic and social disparities, failure of integration and development in the long-drawn violence in the region. Samir Kumar Das also considers that insurgent groups originate and exist in the region is because of injustice and so in defiance and resistance they take up arms.

M. Sajjad Hassan (2008) also agrees that the conflicts and insurgency problems in the Northeast are due to the wrong counter insurgency policies of the government like the huge resurgent of insurgency in the 1980s against the state. It is a highly militarized zone. The region has been held socially, economically, and politically at a ransom both by the constitutionally established institutions and the insurgent groups operating in the region. The serious acute problem of insurgency in the North East is the outcome of social, economic and political incorrectness.

Nishchal N. Pandey (2008) in "India's North-Eastern region: Insurgency, Economic development and linkages with southeast Asia" examines how economic backwardness and poverty are the factors responsible for the endless violence in the North east region of India. The economic prospects and potential are not realised because of the political power struggle and ethnic conflicts causing frustration, alienation, and grievances. One of the reasons for this is the convenient adoption of the British policy in Independent India.

Ethnic Conflicts and Violence in Manipur

Manipur is the classic example of the vicious cycle of ethnic conflicts and violence which have long lasting adverse impact in the realisation of the economic potential and prospects of the state. M. Sajjad Hassan (2008) writes of how Manipur has become one the most violent and fragmented state in India. The political breakdown in Manipur is due to the weak government because it is ethnic oriented and the civil societies are also formed and functions on ethnic basis. The distinct geo-political divide between the hill and the valley socially, economically, politically and in religion is making the situation very fluid and volatile.

The complexity in the ethno-demographic situation is studied in the article "Patterns of ethnic conflict in the North East: A study of Manipur" by Bhagat Oinam (2003). The Meitei in the valley occupies only 10% of the land but constitutes 65% of the state population whereas the tribals are minority in population but occupies 90% of the land area. It is observed that Land has become the bone of contention between all the communities in Manipur.

W. Nabakumar singh (2004) writes in "The Inter-Ethnic Relationship of the different communities of Manipur: A critical appraisal" of the broad ethnic groups in Manipur; the Meities-Pangals of the valley and the Nagas and the Kuki-Chin-Mizo of the hills recognized as tribes in 1951. Efforts of different tribes to unite under an umbrella have proven to fail because of lack of mutual and common ideology. The "we" and "they" narrative is a political approach to cultural identity. Thus, M. Banerjee and R.P. Attparia (2004) in article "Emergent ethnic crisis: A study of Naga Kuki conflict in Manipur" states that it is the fear of losing identity that leads to ethnic conflicts. This also leads to realignment of smaller tribes to

survive. The effort to control and rule are another factor of Ethnic conflicts. Kashung Zingran Kengoo (2009) observes in “Education and conflict: A perspective of Manipur,” that in a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious state conflict and violence is bound to happen because of the existential issues of identity and linguistic and the people are struggling for social, economic and political equity. Insurgency and violence have severely affected the lives of ordinary people

M. Amarjeet Singh (2010) in his book “Conflicts in Manipur” considers Manipur socially and politically unstable and economically underdeveloped. The issue of polarization along ethnic lines by the stakeholders has resulted in ethnic conflicts and insurgency problem. But unfortunately, the government is considering it as just law and order problem leading to militarization. The appeasement developmental funds to buy peace and development is ending up in the coffers of the militant groups thus defeating the purpose of finding peace and development but rather keeping it alive. Huge portions of the state’s budget are directly or indirectly siphoned out by the armed

Irengbam Mohendra Singh (2011) in his article “causes of ethnic conflict in Manipur & suggested remedies” states that ethnic conflicts in Manipur are attributed to Poverty, misunderstanding, resentment, cultural intolerance, and perceived injustices. There is a great mismatch between the expectation and discrimination of the minority groups and the majority community in terms of distribution of resources. The lack of trust and communication makes resolution complex and difficult. While Jiyaur Rahman & Zeba Sheereen (2012) believes that ethnic tensions in Manipur are mainly to control resources and land. Manipur was annexed to Independent India on 21st September, 1949 but was granted full statehood only in 1972. The frustrations of annexation and the delay in conferring statehood gave rise to secessionists. The diverse ethnic communities in Manipur have also resulted in ethnic based conflicts and violence to protect and preserve identity, and economic development issues.

Narendra Kumar (2012) points out in “Contours of conflict in Manipur: A Prognosis” that Manipur has been unstable due to the ethnic dynamics of social, culture, economic and religion. There is trust deficit and realignment. The Meiteis are the majority occupying small piece of land while the hill tribes occupy the major portion of land with thin population and many benefits as scheduled tribes. The number of insurgent groups in Manipur has been increasing in the state. The socio-economic and political environment in Manipur has made it an ideal state in breeding ethnic conflict and violence. What is witnessed in Manipur is a structural and cultural violence. The only solution to the chronic ethnic violence and conflicts is reducing the ethnic fault lines by making all concern groups equal.

Ng. Ngalengnam (2014) in his study observes that the multiplicity of ethnic communities in the small state as the cause of frequent ethnic violence and conflict in Manipur. Since each community is concern of its ethnic identity recognition and protection thus there is violent reaction to any action of other ethnic community is seen as threat to its identity. Th. Siamkhum (2014) in “Ethnic conflict in Manipur: Cause and prospects for resolution.” Ethnic conflict in Manipur: Cause and prospects for resolution also states that all the ethnic groups are interested in protecting their land and preserving their ethnic identity. All the conflicts in Manipur have been ethnic language oriented and it will be a herculean task to resolve it.

In “Hills-Valley Divide as a site of conflict: Emerging dialogic space in Manipur. Beyond counter – insurgency breaking the impasse in Northeast in India.” H. Khan Khan Suan candidly explains through the hill-valley prism. The geo-political and economic gap in population, land ownership is a major cause of concern when it comes to the ethnic. Thus, we find that ethnic oriented insurgent group runs a parallel and shadow government with free hand because of the policy failure of the government and the insurgent groups are able to breed on ethnic issue.

Ethnic conflicts and Violence and its impact on economy

The outcome of the vicious cycle of ethnic violence and conflicts has been devastating in the geographically small, politically fluid, and economically backward Northeast region and particularly for a state like Manipur. Bethany Lacina (2009) writes that the long history of ethnic centric violence and disputes over resources, reservations and land have been at times caused by the policies initiated as a resolution but at times have fuelled the problem because it is not conceived and implemented effectively. The investment in localized autocracy is promoting corruption and violence.

M. Amarjeet Singh (2010) in his book “Conflicts in Manipur” considers Manipur socially and politically unstable and economically underdeveloped because the government considers the ethnic problem and insurgency just a law-and-order problem leading to militarization. The appeasement developmental funds, the lack of investment on productive purposes, and state governments seen to be the most lucrative and the largest employment provider is the outcome of shortage of employment opportunities due to various frequent conflicts. As M. Sajjad Hassan (2008) The Northeast region and economy is held to a ransom by different insurgent groups through curfews, strikes, bandhs, and economic blockade. This is agreed by Debasis Neogi (2010) in “disparity in socio-economic development and its implications on communal conflicts” that the region is suffering from dependency syndrome as they are used to receiving huge developmental funds from Delhi but most of the time have failed to fulfil the purpose.

Bhanwari Sharma (2012) also writes that the threat to the ethnic identity and the desire for development have made small ethnic groups to realign or identify with larger group. The government policy of generic appeasement has opened the Pandora box of more demands and conflicts. Nishchal N. Pandey (2008) in “India’s North-Eastern region: Insurgency, Economic development and linkages with southeast Asia” examines how a region rich in Flora and Fauna and diverse in culture have become the boiling pot of political and economic struggle between different ethnic groups. The violent relationship between the ethnic groups and heavy militarisation of the region is turning the region into a backward and poor economy inspite of the huge potential.

Hawaibam Herojit Singh (2013) in his research article examines the usage of tools by all communities such as strikes, bandhs and economic blockade by different ethnic communities to pressurised and achieve their objectives. It is a measure to draw the state and center government attention to their grievances and demands. Narendra Kumar (2012) points out how armed groups have become a lucrative industry due to unemployment, drug trafficking and easy money and the withering ideology. The socio-economic and political environment in Manipur has made it an ideal state in breeding ethnic conflict and violence.

Conclusion

All insurgent groups need not be anti-India but is due to factors such as high literacy but very low employment opportunities and thus the local youth considers insurgency as an employment option. The lack of employment opportunity also leads to the problem of division between “Locals versus Non-locals”. The minority group resorts to insurgency as a means of security against the dominant majority. The ethnic groups in this part of the world are uncertain of the present and apprehensive of the future. Some of the policies of the government such as isolationist policy, linguistic state and reservation policy has fan the surge to insurgency breeding in North East India. All these factors have contributed to the vicious cycle of insurgency and lack of industries.

The protracted issue of ethnic violence and conflicts have adversely impacted the economy of the region. The most important economic sector of the economy is agriculture from time immemorial and till date.

Therefore, any social, economic and political unrest impacts the agriculture the most. Agriculture in the region and particularly in Manipur over the years of violence has been multi-facet and far reaching in the midst of lack of opportunities in industrial and service sectors in the region. This has led to mass migration of population to the mainland in search of employment opportunities thereby farmland fallowed due to shortage of labour in the agricultural sector, shying away of investment in agro-based industries because of insecurity, lack of market innovation because of unpredictable strikes, bandhs, and economic blockades, etc. Agriculture sector in the region and in Manipur in particular will continue to languish and struggle as long as the bandh and blockade syndrome, and social and political volatility and uncertainty is not contained. It will remain an economically backward region inspite of all the potential prospects of an economic powerhouse if the issues are continued to be addressed as a step-motherly law-and-order problem rather than addressing the faultlines sincerely by integrating the region to the mainstream.

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