



Manipur: The State under seize and the way forward - A study of contemporary setting and policy options

4 Oct, 2010 Jaideep Saikia (Senior Fellow, VIF) View1037 Comments 0

Manipur—which literally translates into the “bejewelled land” — is the most disturbed state in the North East, accounting for 47 per cent of the insurgency region. Perched in an isolated corner of the country, the state is caught in a cycle of insurgency, ethnic strife and inter-state dissonance. Additionally, the state has witnessed serious decay in recent years—not in the least because of economic blockades that are regularly engineered by Naga groups as well as the peace process being run by the insurgents. Although New Delhi has improved its annual outlay for the state, with even the establishment of a correct utilisation of the Manipur Reconstruction Plan, the economy has not shown signs of improvement. It is reported that only about 15-20 per cent of government expenditure goes towards development. Allegedly, the rest is siphoned away by corrupt politicians, bureaucrats and insurgents.

State redressal of the problems that ail Manipur — despite certain robust economic measures as aforesaid — have largely been confined to the institution of the Union Home Minister. However, Manipur, in the words of the Union Home Minister, P. Chidambaram, “regretfully remains resistant to CI interventions.”

An examination of the problem unravels three major reasons for the continuing impasse. The paper undertakes an analysis of these factors.

Geographical Setting

Although it may seem simplistic, the geographical setting of Manipur is one of the most important contributors. With a total area of 22,347 square kilometres, the state is divided into Hills and a Valley. The Valley accounts for only 2238 square kilometres, a mere 10.02 per cent of the total area. But it houses 58.85 per cent of the state's population, which, according to the 2001 Census is 2,388,634. The state's hill area with 20,089 square kilometres represents the rest 41.15 per cent. Of the ethnic groups, the Meiteis, who primarily inhabit the Valley, constitute the largest section of the state and are a non-tribal group. The hills are the abode of the Nagas and their 29 sub-tribes. Muslims, who are mostly immigrants from pre-partition East Bengal, the erstwhile East Pakistan and present Bangladesh, and who are the second largest group, are mostly residents of the Valley. This grouping forms around eight per cent of the state's population. The remaining non-tribal population, known as Mayangs, are scattered in different parts of the country. The manner in which the physical setting plays itself out to conflict can be seen from one instance. The Meiteis, the Vaishnavites, are debarred from special constitutional privileges granted to the Scheduled Tribes of Manipur, but are not even permitted under the state's “Land Reform Act” to settle in the hill districts. On the other hand, there are no restrictions on the Nagas and the Kukis, who are largely Christians, to settle in the Valley. This is one of the primary causes of distrust and hostility between the Meiteis and the hill tribes. Furthermore, in the absence of a homogenous social architecture the different ethnic groups maintain their respective distinct identity without a commonality of Manipuriness that could have formed the basis for harmonious existence. Indeed, this phenomenon is a pan-North East problem, with every ethnic group in the region asserting their identity and seeking separate status.

If the setting as described above provides the framework for the Hill-Valley divide, which continues to be the core of the problem, history provides the real context.

Historically, Manipur was a principality until the British annexed it in 1891. However, the colonial rulers provided it the privilege of a princely state under its case with other territorial monarchies in the sub-continent. But, the imperial rulers, despite their “policy” of superficial non-interference utilised Christianity. The Christian missionaries, who followed the Union Jack and arrived in Manipur in 1894, gradually began to convert the animistic tribes into Christians through a variety of allurements such as provision of basic medical aid and education. In the 1901 census there were only 8 per cent Christians as against 61 per cent by 1991 the number of Christians in Manipur had increased to 34.11 per cent. Indeed, if 12.81 per cent of decadal growth (1991-2001), as projected in the 2011 census, the overall state population is taken into account the Christian population of the state might have exceeded 36 per cent. As a result, the increasing Christianity widened the socio-cultural gap between the Hindu Meiteis of the Valley and the Christian tribes of the Hills. This, over time, became a permanent source of conflict.

Greater Nagalim

The spill over of the Naga insurrection into the hill districts of Manipur has significantly altered the security scenario of the state. In its quest for a Greater Nagalim, the Naga insurgent organisation is elbowing itself into parts of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. However, Manipur constitutes a special case for the Naga insurgent organisation as the hill districts of Manipur—is home to NSCN (IM) general secretary, Thuingaleng Muivah, and it is imperative that he incorporates the Naga inhabited parts of Manipur into the Greater Nagalim. To that end, large tracts of Ukhrul, Chandel, Senapati and Tamenglong districts, which are Naga inhabited, are being demanded. The cartographical sight of Muivah, who like Napoleon (a Corsican), has to do more were he to continue to retain both legitimacy and power within NSCN (IM) decision of the Manipur government to disallow a visit by Muivah to his hometown Somdal in Ukhrul has ruffled feathers and a standoff between Imphal, New Delhi has resulted in not only an economic blockade, but also a possibility of a breakdown of dialogue between NSCN (IM) and New Delhi. But to be told that the government (whose hold over the Naga-dominated hill districts is tenuous at best), it cannot allow the dismemberment of Manipur. In this context it is worth noting that the scale of protest and violence that had characterised the Valley when New Delhi accepted NSCN (IM)'s proposal to extend ceasefire to all Naga-inhabited areas, the deaths and even the Manipur Legislative Assembly was burnt down on 18 June 2001. New Delhi's decision to revoke the extension of ceasefire on 27 July 2001, well with NSCN (IM), and it has been ever since trying to enter Manipur in one way or the other. In 2009, NSCN (IM) attempted to establish a permanent ceasefire in the Chandel District. After a 15 day standoff, cadres of NSCN (IM)'s Kiusumong Battalion, which had set up base in the area, were provided safe passage by the security forces. But Siroy would not be the last of NSCN (IM)'s efforts to gain a foothold in Manipur. Indeed, according to reports, three unauthorised bases, one at Senapati, Ouklong in Tamenglong and Phungchong in Chandel District that were set up prior to the NSCN (IM)-Government of India ceasefire of 1997 are intact. The fact that NSCN-IM receives patronage from government officials functioning in the Naga populated hilly regions of Manipur.

The problem relating to NSCN (IM)'s intransigence—despite New Delhi's firmness that there would be no balkanisation of states in the North East in c (IM)'s Greater Nagalim demand—has angered the Meitei population of Manipur and this community is increasingly beginning to feel that "Hindu India" has t order to placate Christian Nagaland. It is perhaps such aspects that are not only forcing Meitei Hindus to return to their ancient Sannamahi roots and renoun but are egging them to continue with their insurgencies. In this context it must be noted that whereas 18 Kuki groups (who were under the "Suspension of C are now beginning a process of dialogue with the Government of India, the Meitei Hindu groups are not doing so. Indeed, peace has eluded Manipur primaril such People's Liberation Front (PLA), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) and United National Liberation Front (UNLF), against whom th forces are carrying out counter-insurgency operations.

Meitei Insurrection

If the physical setting of Manipur and NSCN (IM)'s agenda of Greater Nagaland, as aforementioned, provide the ground for a definitive Hill-Valley divide began under the leadership of Hijam Irabot Singh, a communist leader who opposed the merger of Manipur into the Indian Union on 15 October 1949, Meitei uprising.

Insurgency in Manipur, therefore, began with a demand for the restoration of the pre-colonial supremacy of the Meiteis. This aspect later turned into eth entered into a criss-cross of socio-political whirlpool. For instance, the Meiteis views the expansion of Nagaism and its close link with the Nagas of Manipu political supremacy in Manipur. As a result, and with an avowed view to the restoration of Manipur's pre-British status, radicals among the Meiteis—insq colonial and leftist ideology—regrouped and formed UNLF in 1964, a group that continues to engage New Delhi in a sustained war. The PLA and PREPAK differing affiliations, but with the same avowal of separation from India took UNLF's lead in the direction. However, recent trends have witnessed that the in: in Manipur has made strange bed fellows. Therefore, even as the Kukis are beginning a process of dialogue with the government after having "suspended op as PLA are courting the NSCN (IM) in order to gain a sturdier foothold in places such as Ukhrul where NSCN (IM) presence was considerable. While th contradiction in terms, the fact of the matter is that a group with an overwhelming Meitei cadre base has initiated alliance with a Naga group that is not on very ideology that sustains group affiliation. But, in the ethnic cauldron that characterises the North East such engendering are considered to be comm United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) opposes NSCN (IM)'s demand to include the N.C. Hills and Karbi Anglong districts into its Greater Nagaland, yet it wa supported the Assamese separatist group when the latter was reeling from the Royal Bhutan Army operation in December 2003. It must be understoo inimicalities bear the stamp of the inconsistency when viewed in the North Eastern context. State action in Manipur has been primarily against the separatist the Meitei ethnic community. While accomplishments by the army have not been inconsiderable, with forceful operations such as Op Somthal II (tha "liberated" zone that led from Joupi to New Somthal from UNLF control) and Op Summer Storm (conducted in Loktak lake, clearing it of PREPAK occupation) an insouciance state government has not stepped in and taken control of the areas that the army's 57 Mountain Division has been able to dominate. The role in the borders—cannot be expected to hold onto an area for an indefinite period of time. This would be not only tantamount to misusing it, but also allo variety of subterfuge that the insurgents alongside its surrogates inside and across the border engineers in order to tarnish its fair image. The unfortunate Devi has lent considerable fodder to the proponents of Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AF (SP) A) repeal. This has been done without taking into representative of the people of Manipur, the Manipur legislature that decrees that the Act is enforced in the disturbed parts of the Manipur. It would also be that Imphal city—in the opinion of a senior Manipuri journalist—has become the hunting grounds of insurgents after AF (SP) A was repealed from the capital.

But an aspect that goes unnoticed is that even the army falls under the general rubric of "security forces," which commits excesses during counter insurgent reality it is forces such as the Manipur Police that were responsible for the deaths of two innocent persons, Chungkham Sanjit Singh and Thokchom Rabina Manipur's Apunba Lup (United Front) and Irom Sharmila has made it their cause—on the basis of such cases—that the AF (SP) A should be repealed, a constituted a commission to look into the matter. But the fact of the matter is that the army cannot be expected to operate in a hostile zone with one l backs, and, as aforesaid, it is the elected representatives of the Manipuri people that passed the legislation that enforces AF (SP) A in the state. The army its primary duty in the North East, a la, Operation Falcon, which in any case needs its urgent attention. Internal security duties have dulled the edge of the process, alienated it from a populace whose support would have been important were forces such as China to adopt hot-war postures.

Another aspect that aggravates the security scenario that particularly relates to the Meitei insurrection is (a) the linkages that groups such as PLA ha: Communist Party of India (Maoist) and (b) with the People's Republic of China. While it has been corroborated that PLA has gone into an alliance with Maois video interview of PLA vice chairman, Manohar Mayum that has been appropriated from a journalist), the fact that PLA has training camps in Kachin in My fronts in Ruili/Inchong/Putao in Yunnan province of China has been more or less established. Furthermore, PLA has struck strong linkages with the anti-tal plans to undertake joint operations in the North East that may undermine New Delhi's interests in the region. On the other hand, it is believed that Meghan@Sanayaima is currently in Dhaka and is liaising with Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence Dhaka station chief, Pervez Iqbal Cheema @Honda Saa for the "land of emeralds."

Conclusions and Recommendations

The scenario in Manipur is grim to say the least. It is time New Delhi took stock of the situation and took particular note of the deindianisation process tha The shadow of NSCN (IM) over the Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur is adding to the apprehension among the Meiteis.

In conclusion, it must be appreciated that the physical setting that geography has placed Manipur in, the presence of Naga dominated areas in the state with as examined above as well as the unique history that started the process of insurrection are some of the reasons that needs careful study. Course correc embarked on only if this dedicatedly undertaken.

Certain recommendations that may alleviate the ailment are provided below for consideration.

A long-drawn-out deployment of the army in Manipur has virtually taken the sails out of the army's winds in the state. It is being variously subjected to rights violations which are alienating it from a populace whose support it would need were inimical forces to adopt hot-war postures. The best course of acti the Jeevan Reddy commission recommendations—is to phase out the army from its internal security duties in Manipur and the rest of the North East. Indee seeks, even as it wants to prepare for an eventuality with China. The AF (SP) A, which has been a subject of much debate, would fall flat in the face of such the absence of the army there would be no need for the Act. Moreover, withdrawal of the army from theatres of insurgency would endear it to the populace. in internal security management without safeguards is rendering a noble force defenceless and vulnerable.

New Delhi must institute immediate socio-economic development for Manipur. Preceding years of apathy have given rise to unemployment attracting the yo lure of easy money is also leading them indulge in gun and drug trafficking. Political leaders of Manipur are expected to rise above political affiliations and i in the interest of national security. Centrist political powers must ascertain that this is a premium for the parties in Manipur, and that they do not sabotage New Delhi with any insurgent group because of vested interests.

Accountability and proper auditing of the funds allocated by the Centre must be done. Steps must be taken to activate the Manipur Reconstruction Plan. A fac a definite mandate must be commissioned from agencies such as the NIA in order to unearth the politician-bureaucrat-insurgent nexus. The role of the NI/ Rs.10, 000 Crore scam could act as pointer.

Correct liaison must be engineered with Naypyidaw and joint Indo-Myanmarese action against Manipuri camps inside Myanmar initiated.

Extra-judicial killings and atrocities committed by the security forces should be dealt with severely. Indeed, the most important complaint of the Manipuri is the security forces are going about their task.

Employment opportunities must be created for Manipuri youths in mainland India with an eye to not only engaging them economically, but also to re-integrate gradually getting de Indianised. Special status must be provided for the Meitei community in Manipur that puts them at par with their hill counterparts.

Manipuris are good sports person and have held the tricolour aloft in international sporting events. New Delhi must provide extra incentives to the sports persons North East and fully utilise their potential without bias.

A crackdown on drug trafficking and smuggling of arms needs to be undertaken. Pressure needs to be put on Myanmar in this regard.

New Delhi must make it clear to NSCN (IM) that its demand for Greater Nagaland will not be entertained. Stern measures must also be taken to clear the Manipur. This aspect—particularly—is fraught with serious consequences as prolonged blockades would not only further alienate the Manipuri populace, but also outside India for economic and political sustenance.

Published Date : October 1, 2010

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