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# Contours of Conflict in Manipur: A Prognosis

**Narender Kumar**

Conflicts produce the worst violations of human rights and are the greatest impediment to human development, social harmony and economic empowerment. Most of the armed conflicts since the Cold War have been internal clashes over religion, national, ethnic identity, uneven distribution of economic benefits and natural resources. The northeastern region of India ironically has been afflicted with armed conflict for more than 50 years and Manipur is one the worst affected states which continues to suffer humongous losses socially and economically.

Manipur is economically and strategically an important state of India. It is a land bridge to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and gives access to India to link with the economies of the Southeast Asian nations. The Asian Highway will make the state an important hub for international trade. Manipur has the potential to be the energy corridor of India for trans-shipment of oil and gas from Myanmar. The state is land surplus, rain surplus and resource surplus but the irony is that it is grain deficient and water deficient. The state is home to the Meiteis (the majority ethnic group), Kukis, Pangals (Muslim) and Nagas. The Meiteis occupy the Imphal Valley, the Kabuis the foothills around Imphal Valley and the Chin Kukis and Nagas, the hills. The Meiteis constitute more than 50 per cent of the population but occupy only 10 percent of the geographical area.

In the recent past, there has been a dramatic fall in insurgency related fatalities, from 416 in 2009 to 59 in 2011.<sup>1</sup> After years of stagnation, the security forces have made significant gains in the counter-insurgency (CI) grid by

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inflicting heavy casualties on the multiple insurgent groups, and have reduced their areas of dominance. Though the overall situation is slowly improving, the state is still far from being stable and peaceful. Manipur continues to be an unstable plateau which can cause instability with a slight shift in the existing dynamics. As Bhagat Oinam says, this is due to the process of identity formation by more than 30 communities and tribes harping on exclusivity, integration and dominance.<sup>2</sup>

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### Genesis of Conflict

Conflicts in a society emanate from social, cultural, economic or religious insecurity. It could be perceived or in reality, and assumes different dimensions as the insecurities continue to persist. As the fault lines widen and the trust deficit increases, the contours of conflict emerge, which thereafter start taking the shape of a movement. The grievances of the masses further give a new trajectory to the cause, which later turns into a movement, and may divide the society on religious, tribal and ethnic lines. Economic conflict emerges when resources are meagre and the benefits are shared on an uneven level. Deprivation of a particular ethnic group or section of society causes realignment of the entire population on religious, political, economic and ideological lines. This is where the government failure is noticed and a lack of faith in constitutional authority becomes apparent. The erosion is fast and furious at times and the loss is irreparable. Manipur is an example of how the trust deficit has polarised the state and created a situation of no return.

Manipur is a collage of a diverse ethnic and multicultural society. Based on the 2001 Census, Meiteis and Manipuri Muslims account for approximately 14.1 lakh population (58.9 percent), whereas 9.8 lakh population (41.1 percent) belongs to different tribes such as the Naga, Kuki, Zoumi and Mizo. The hill tribes have been declared Scheduled Tribes which offers them protection of property, job reservation and higher education. Hill tribes were never part of a homogeneous single state and the village was a state in itself. Tribal loyalties were paramount and the concept of state was non-existent. The majority Meitei community feels that socially and economically, the destiny of the citizen of a state has to be homogeneous and cannot be ruled by a different yardstick. But the same is not applicable to Manipur. In the line of natural justice, origin and cultural

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background can be different but the government policies have to be consistent. Job opportunities and land ownership are governed by a different set of rules which, in turn, has created a divide between the hill tribes and the Meiteis. The demand of the Meiteis is that all the citizens of the state should be governed by the same rules whereas the hill people (tribals) demand that “different origin has different destiny”. Differing perceptions comprise the biggest challenge for reconciliation and conflict resolution in Manipur. The number of stakeholders has increased and, ironically, their idea of a state is quite contrary to the perception of other ethnic communities.

The self-determination movement in Manipur started in 1948, when the Communist leader Hijam Irawat Singh, took up the cause of the liberation of Manipur from the semi-feudal and perceived semi-colonised state. They considered a war against India as a war against an occupation force. It meant that they were compelled to launch an armed resistance in order to restore the lost sovereignty of Manipur.<sup>3</sup> In fact, some Manipuri scholars call it the third movement of self-determination. The first movement was marked by the annexation of Manipur by the Burmese (1819-26). The second was a democratic movement for self-determination.<sup>4</sup> The Meitei insurgent groups till date continue to wage insurgency in the name of self-determination and restoration of lost sovereignty; the Kukis want a state within a state under the Indian Constitution; and the Nagas are still divided between the demand for a greater Nagalim or shared sovereignty under the Indian Constitution. Over a period of time, ideology has withered away and the insurgency has become an industry.

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A fall in the violence level is a misleading statistic: insurgency-related fatalities have decreased from 416 in 2009 to 59 in 2011, giving the impression that the state is slowly limping back to normalcy.<sup>5</sup> Violence may have declined, but peace is still distant and the reason for this is the lack of capacity building for sustained peace. The security forces no doubt have made evident gains in containing the insurgency; the irony is while that the number of underground insurgents has reduced, the number of insurgent groups has increased. In all, there are close to 50 major and minor insurgent groups operating in Manipur. The policy of

the state and central governments to bring the insurgent groups to the negotiation table by offering a ceasefire, suspension of operations (SoO) and surrender is being misused by the insurgents, and some of these groups are still in a position to run their extortion industry and anti-national activities without fear of arrest or elimination. Recycling of insurgents is a grave threat to peace; the way forward is an effective rehabilitation policy which, unfortunately, exists on paper only.

The Chairman, Ceasefire Monitoring Group, Gen George says that there is a persistent risk of destabilisation if the insurgent groups are allowed to retain their weapons, trained armed cadres and organised camps. A glaring example

of the same is that in spite of a ceasefire with the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isaac Muivah) [NSCN (IM)], it still has a strength of approximately 800 cadres and holds approximately 500 weapons in Manipur.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the Kuki National Organisation (KNO), United People's Front (UPF) and some of the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) factions have signed the SoO yet they retain the dedicated cadres and arsenal, which is detrimental to the peace process. Unemployment, drug trafficking and easy money through extortion makes the business of armed struggle more lucrative. The armed cadres are being used as leverage by those who do not want the Manipur conflict to get resolved. As long as the groups are allowed to retain their armed cadres and camps, Manipur will remain a dilemma for the nation and a predicament of the northeast.

The nature of conflict has changed, given that the ideology has withered away and been replaced by the economic interests of the self-seeking leaders of these armed groups. These armed groups have established a parallel government and parallel economy, and as long as they are allowed to run their parallel economy, conflict in Manipur will remain. It suits the insurgents and their proxies, the inimical forces and, of course, the politicians. The dangerous dimension of this continued conflict is that even the armed cadres are being used as mercenaries to fuel trouble in other states of the northeast. The day is not far when these mercenaries may find their way to mainland India for a price and the disturbances in Meghalaya in 2011 comprise a case in point.

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In the opinion of the author, Manipur and the northeast are on the brink of a third cycle of insurgency. The first cycle of insurgency saw the rise of ideologically backed ethno-nationalistic insurgent groups which lasted for more than three to four decades. The second cycle was insurgency by proxy. This phase saw the emergence of groups which shunned the ideology and pursued their own agenda to run a parallel economy and control of turf by being visible in the society. Social organisations mushroomed and they became the voice of the insurgents. The main task of such organisation was to shape the opinion of the

people and act as the pressure groups to blunt and discredit the government and security forces. The third cycle of insurgency which will sweep the northeast will again be ideology based insurgency which may be more volatile than before and it will be two-dimensional insurgency i.e. left wing extremism (LWE) and Islamic *jihadi* insurgency.

- The linkage of LWE with the Manipuri insurgent groups is now a well-established and documented fact. The KCP (MC) and People's Liberation Army (PLA) have confirmed their support to the Communist Party of India (Maoists) [CPI (Maoists)] and endorsed the so-called war against the autocratic state of India. The government sources have revealed that Kobad Gandhi, the politbureau member of the CPI (Maoists) has acknowledged this fact in his interrogation. The Maoists, 'Unity' Congress of 2007 "unequivocally" supported the "right of self-determination of all oppressed nationalists; including their right to secede from the autocratic Indian state." The 'Congress' noted further: "It may be necessary to form a separate organisation to take up the 'North-Easterly' issue, and we should form such organisations in accordance with the concrete situation."<sup>7</sup> The first insurgent group, the Red Guard of Manipur, was based on the Communist ideology and the present day insurgent groups such as the People's Liberation Army (PLA), Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYEL) and United National Liberation Front (UNLF) draw their inspiration from the Red Guard. The ideological linkage is already established, and what is left now is ground level coordination between LWE and the Manipuri insurgent groups.
- The second dimension is Islamic *jihadi* insurgency. As a result of the

massacre of Muslims by Meitei insurgents in 1993, the Pangals (Muslims of Manipur) raised militant Islamic outfits such as the Northeast Minority Front (NEMF), Islamic National Front (INF), Islamic Revolutionary Front (IRF), United Islamic Liberation Army (UILA), Islamic Liberation Front (ILF) and People's United Liberation Front (PULF) to counter the challenge of Meitei insurgents. Recent inputs have revealed that Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) and the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI) are in the process of reorganisation of all existing Islamic terror and insurgent groups of the northeast under one umbrella organisation. According to an official

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source, "ISI and PLA are in touch and supplying Maoists with arms. They are supposedly using China as the alternative route." These revelations were made by two top PLA leaders, who were arrested in New Delhi on October 01, 2011. Reports indicate that the PLA was trying to forge a 'Strong United Front' (SUF) along with the CPI (Maoist) and Kashmiri militants, backed by the ISI and China.<sup>8</sup> One must not forget that it is the long cherished desire of Muslims of the erstwhile East Pakistan (Bangladesh) to merge Assam Valley and parts of the northeast to form Greater Bangladesh. Gen SK Sinha, former governor of Assam, in a letter to then President KR Narayanan had drawn attention to the fact that even a pro-India politician like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, had said then, "Because Eastern Pakistan must have sufficient land for its expansion and because Assam has abundant forests and mineral resources, Eastern Pakistan must include Assam to be financially and economically strong."<sup>9</sup> The epicentre of this third cycle of insurgency in the northeast will be Manipur and Assam.

The geographical landscape and demographic dispersion of Manipur lends itself to becoming an ideal breeding ground for ethnic conflict. The ethnic trust deficit between the Nagas, Kukis and Meiteis remains one of the root causes of turbulence in Manipur. It is a popular perception that the interests of one community are being mauled by the other community. Greater Nagalim, if

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accepted, will lead to the territorial disintegration of Manipur and will give an impetus to the demand for a Kuki state. Similarly, the Sadar Hill District demand, if accepted, will be seen by the Nagas as encroachment on their traditional land. In the last two years, Manipur has seen two of the longest economic blockades in the country, one by the Nagas and the second by the Kukis, and the objectives and demands trespass each other's

interests. The only silver lining is that the Nagas have come down from their demand of total sovereignty to a shared sovereignty but have not compromised on the demand for Greater Nagalim or an alternative arrangement under the Sixth Schedule for the Nagas of Manipur. This, indeed, is contrary to the spirit of state nationalism.

Direct violence has slowly been replaced by “structural and cultural violence”. As per Paul Farmer, “structural violence” includes any violence or suffering caused by the structures and institutions of a society. People who suffer from structural violence cannot control the conditions that have caused their suffering. That is exactly what is happening in Manipur. The masses have no control over the conflict and they are not even being kept in the loop by the parties to the conflict. Similarly, “cultural violence” is endorsing the direct and structural violence. Ethnic intolerance and sub-tribal nationalism are signs of cultural violence. This trend is more divisive, unrelenting and uncompromising. The worst impact of structural and cultural violence is that it does not allow any space for reconciliation and reconstruction of the society and state. This is being viewed as the biggest challenge for conflict resolution.

The parties to the conflict have grown manifold and the government is not sure about whom it should negotiate with, and whom it should not. There are more than 50 major and minor insurgent groups, some operating from within Manipur, some from neighbouring countries, and some operating from other states and metros. Even the masses do not know who actually represents them in an earnest manner. Almost all self-seeking underground organisations have an agenda of their own and a situation has come about where the agenda of the people has been lost sight of. An organisation may have come overground and signed the SoO but, at the same time, another shadow organisation continues with its activities under the same leadership or accomplices. The parties to the conflict are no larger sacrosanct and goal posts are shifted for personal, political and ethnic interests. The biggest

dilemma of the government comprises deciding with whom to negotiate.

### **Manipur: The Reality Check**

A resolution is hidden somewhere in the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats being faced by the state. Manipur has a rich cultural heritage, with approximately 33 diverse tribal groups, making it a collage of cultural diversity. The state is a sports and cultural powerhouse and can become a centre of excellence for the northeast as well as other South Asian nations. Abundance of natural resources, including the recent discoveries of oil, gas, limestone, chromate and coal offer a huge opportunity and an economic boost to the state. The state lies in close proximity to the Southeast Asian countries and can act as India's economic gateway to Southeast Asia. Manipur has abundant scope for wind energy,

the tourism industry and adventure sports. It is sitting on green gold and can be a horticulture, flower culture and agriculture hub of the northeast. Manipur can be the Manchester of India if an industrial revolution is brought to the state. One of the greatest gains which has emerged from the prolonged conflict is that the facade of the so-called self-determination movement has been unmasked. As per a rough estimate, approximately 5 percent of population ideologically supports the movement and 15 percent provides covert or overt support to it, while 50 percent of the population does not endorse it and sees it as a movement against the people. Some 30 percent of the people are neither concerned nor have any idea of this futile struggle.

Manipur is a landlocked state served by two fragile national highways and the rail link is yet to be established. All roads to Imphal are dominated by rival tribal communities which have been using these lines of communication as pressure points and leverage to force the government to accept their demands. This is one of the biggest stumbling blocks for the development of the state. Unemployment is rising, and it is estimated to be approximately 25 percent, which is one of the highest in the country. Manipur is power deficient, and, as

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a result, industrialisation and the information technology (IT) sector have not taken off in spite of a high education rate.

Manipur is home to the components of modern instability; it is one of the poorest states with per capita income of Rs 13,658 against the national income of Rs 19,040. In the poverty index, the state stands at 21 in the country. To make matters worse, it is suffering from poor governance, corruption, political polarisation, ethnic conflict, proliferation of black money, spread of HIV AIDS, drugs and weapons trafficking. "Ethnic separatists of the northeast are protecting the drug trade as a quick way to raise funds".<sup>10</sup> Drug and tobacco abuse is having a catastrophic impact on public health, "Manipur accounts for some of the highest burden of drug abuse and tobacco related illness in the entire country.... due to tobacco chewing, the state has some of the highest incidences of lung cancer in the entire world among women."<sup>11</sup>

## **The Way Ahead**

Manipur borders the oil and natural gas rich Myanmar which has estimated hydrocarbon reserves of 2.5 trillion cubic metres (TCM) of natural gas and 3.5 billion barrels of crude oil. It could, thus, become the energy corridor for India through which prosperity to the northeastern region and Manipur could flow. The gas find in Manipur has a huge potential, and in the years ahead, Manipur will be energy surplus. In the backdrop of the above, we need to rethink our energy strategy and route the gas pipeline from Myanmar to Manipur instead of Bangladesh.

Manipur is power deficient and it needs approximately 120 MW of additional electricity to meet its requirements. If we can tap the huge gas reserves of Myanmar and develop gas turbines for electricity generation, Manipur can become a power surplus state, and, in turn, can resolve the power crisis of the northeast. This would give an impetus to industrialisation and the IT, education and agriculture sectors. The youth will get engaged in constructive activities and the problem of unemployment will get resolved to a great extent. Agriculture too will get a boost, and from the single cropping pattern, the farmers can move to multiple cropping, promoting the potential of agro-based industries in the state. It is ironic that in spite of a high water table, the farmers are unable to exploit this resource in the absence of electricity.

Traditionally, the people of Manipur have laid a lot of emphasis on education and sports, but government run schools and colleges, especially in the hill areas are poorly managed. As a result, the state has failed to provide

quality education to the students, which is leading to a large number of school dropouts. These school dropouts are the soft targets for recruitment by the insurgent organisations. It is a well-established fact that the youths mainly do not want to join insurgent groups but since there are no avenues available for the uneducated unemployed youths, they are left with no choice but to join these groups. An immediate overhaul of the education sector is needed, as at present, it is completely out of gear. Instead of concentrating on professional colleges in the valley, each district headquarters should have at least one professional institution. Imphal should be developed as a centre of excellence for education and sports. A regional sports and education centre for the northeast and neighbouring countries should be developed at Imphal. This will give an impetus to the education and sports sector and also assist in cultural integration with neighbouring states and nations. The centre of excellence should function under a central university for better management.

Imphal is also ideally suited to be the dry dock for import and export to and from Myanmar. At the moment, it is connected with other states through National (NH) 02 and NH 53. It is expected that by 2015, Manipur will be connected by rail, making it ideal for trade. India can export consumer goods, heavy engineering machines, all types of vehicles, medicines and processed food items which are in great demand in Myanmar. Similarly, India could import pulses, vegetables and oil seeds from Myanmar apart from natural gas and crude oil. Trade and transit will open up employment avenues on both sides of the international border. Another aspect which will get a boost is tourism. The youth will get engaged and large employment generation will take place even in the agriculture sector. This will by itself dry up the availability of youths who could be recruited by militant organisations. The state will earn revenue and will be less dependent on the Centre for development and employment generation. It will also resolve two important issues of unemployment and terrorism.<sup>12</sup> The focus for speedy development of road and rail communication is paramount for peace and development in Manipur.

Manipur has the potential to develop as the agriculture, horticulture and flower culture hub of the northeast. It is rain surplus and land surplus. The agro industry, if developed, will be in a position to absorb the entire population of the state and may generate employment for labour from outside the state. RS Jassal, a noted social worker and columnist, believes that if job and employment opportunities can be created in Manipur, the divisive politics will be replaced by peace and harmony. Divisive tendencies in a society are often caused by uneven

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distribution of opportunities. Even prior to 1993, the Kukis were tilling the land of the Nagas on the barter system, and both these communities coexisted in an environment of peace and harmony. Where there is plenty for everyone, there is no reason for division in society.

Though there have been efforts towards conflict management and conflict resolution at different stages and levels, the same has been far from satisfactory and can best be described as piecemeal, incoherent and incomplete. Engaging with one group and neglecting the others has not really been accepted by all the stakeholders. The present move

of engagement with the NSCN (IM) by the Government of India is one such move where neither the NSCN (K) nor the Manipur government is on board. Therefore, even if the resolution or roadmap for resolution is worked out, it may spiral into another controversy or agitation. Such piecemeal efforts are unlikely to yield worthwhile results. Similarly, negotiations with the Meitei insurgent groups have not even been initiated. The peace committee should comprise all ethnic communities and, in turn, they should engage all stakeholders. This will give credence to the negotiations and if the people are made stakeholders, and the insurgents decline from participating in the negotiations, over a period of time, they may get marginalised. But if the negotiation is done behind closed doors by government representatives with a few groups, such initiatives are likely to hit a roadblock.

## **Conclusion**

There is an old saying that “nervous riders make the horses nervous”. Though the situation in Manipur appears to be returning to normalcy, the political leaders are nervous when it comes to conflict resolution. The dismantling of fears, prejudices and perceptions is necessary for resolution. A resolution of the conflict has to be found within Manipur and no solution can be imposed to such a complex problem. Conflict resolution in Manipur has to be found through dialogue, demilitarisation, devolution and development. The ethnic fault lines need to be bridged and all ethnic groups should be made equal stakeholders. “Insurgents do not always win, but their defeats can rarely be attributed to counterinsurgency operations”, thus, the solution cannot be a military one; rather political, social

and economic initiatives are imperative.<sup>13</sup> Outright rejection of opinions and the cause can stall the reconciliatory process. The stakeholders to the conflict must be heard, allowed to debate, and the government should have an open mind, without the baggage of history for a resolution acceptable to all the parties. But what matters most is peace through development. Even if a final resolution is not hammered out, the people, if given economic empowerment, will prevail over the warring factions to either accept the will of the people or the people themselves may make the insurgent groups irrelevant. The bottom-line is that people want peace, dignity and prosperity.

## Notes

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