
Militancy in Manipur: A Conflicting Dilemma

Shivananda H

Background

The state of Manipur, situated along the eastern frontier of the Indo-Myanmar border, has been the most disturbed state in the northeast region of India. It is afflicted with a large number of militant outfits, divided on 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.¹ 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.

Manipur remained an independent princely state for almost two years after India got independence in 1947. The state became a territory of the Indian Union on October 15, 1949, after Bodhachandra Singh, the maharaja of the then state, signed the agreement on the merger of the state with the Indian government at Government House, Shillong, on September 21, 1949, after initial resistance.² It was conferred C-State³ status which later on became a union territory and, subsequently, it attained statehood in 1972. The circumstances under which the maharaja signed the agreement and the status of C-State at that time, were controversial and remained a cause of contention for the underground outfits, revolting against the Union of India, for secession. In 1956, when it was conferred union territory status, there was a strong movement for full statehood though the

Dr **Shivananda H** is Assistant Professor, Department of Defence and National Security Studies, Punjab University, Chandigarh.

Centre had introduced a number of liberalising reforms, including the creation of a legislature and a council of ministers.⁴ Further, when the demand for statehood was delayed in comparison to the smaller states like Nagaland which was conferred statehood in 1962, the Manipuris felt neglected by the Indian Union.

Geographically, the valley constitutes merely 10 percent of the total landmass of the state, inhabited mainly by the Meiteis (Hindu Vaishnavites) comprising 50 percent of the state's population. They were deprived of the various benefits of reservations in jobs and educational institutes as compared to the hill tribes, namely, the Nagas and Kukis (occupying 90 percent of the geographical area).⁵ Besides, the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reform Act imposed in the state did not allowed the valley Meitei and Pangal groups to settle in the hills whereas the hill tribals were allowed to settle in the valley. In due course of time, this created discontentment against the government among the inhabitants of the state. As a result, insurgency erupted with the emergence of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) formed on November 24, 1964, under the leadership of Arambam Samarendra Singh.⁶

The operational base of UNLF was set up in the Sylhet area of East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) with the support of Pakistan. Its objective was to liberate Manipur from India through an armed struggle. However, when the Indo-Pak War broke out in 1971, the armed struggle got a setback. The mobilisation of the Indian Army along the borders and troops advancement in East Pakistan also deprived the insurgents of northeast India of their foreign bases. Subsequently, with the loss of their bases inside Bangladesh (East Pakistan), the insurgents turned to the Chinese for military assistance. It was in June 1975 that some insurgent youths went to Lhasa in Tibet through Nepal and got in touch with the Chinese military for training and supply of arms.⁷ On their return, after receiving training and ideology for organising a revolution, they intensified violent activities and launched an armed propaganda campaign for the secession of Manipur from the Indian Union, forming a People's Liberation Army (PLA, Eastern Region) in September 1978 under the chairmanship of N Bisheswar Singh.⁸ The end of the 1980s also witnessed the eruption of many prominent insurgent groups in the state, including the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK)⁹ led by R K Tulachandra in 1977 and the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) in 1980.¹⁰

The rise of various underground groups led to deterioration in the law and order of the state. The outfits intensified assault operations against the security forces to secure arms and ammunition and to expand their struggle when foreign contacts became difficult due to the long trekking routes to China and the change

of regime in Bangladesh. The state government, with the consent of the central government, responded by declaring the entire Imphal Valley a disturbed area and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958 was imposed in September 1980.¹¹ It was followed by the intervention of the Indian Army, establishing Tactical Headquarters Manipur Sector, popularly known as 'M- Sector' at Leimakhong (Imphal) comprising the 61 and 181 Mountain Brigades.¹² The army, along with the paramilitary, conducted various operations, in which a number of insurgents were captured and killed. As a result, PREPAK and KCP suffered severe losses and became dormant, scaling down their activities. Later, the Indian Army was recalled and the responsibility for security in the state was assigned to the Assam Rifles and other paramilitary forces and armed constabularies.

The first half of the 1980s also witnessed the spillover of the Naga insurgents, namely National Socialist Council of Nagaland Issak-Muivah (NSCN-IM), in the Ukhrul district areas of Manipur, from Nagaland, later extending to the Senapati and Tamenglong districts. After setting up camps in the Ukhrul areas in 1984, they carried out ambushes on security personnel, assassination of political leaders and civil officials, and looted banks. As a result, the army was again called out and M-Sector was revived.¹³ Large scale operations were conducted, resulting in the exclusion of various outfits. The later part of the decade also witnessed the reemergence of intense violent activities. Meanwhile, the PLA (Eastern Region) regrouped and formed a political wing known as the Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) in 1989 and set up a government in exile in Sylhet district of Bangladesh, bordering the Cachar region of lower Assam.¹⁴ They launched several campaigns against the so-called outsiders (people from mainland India), to evict them from the state.

Members of the Pangal (Manipuri Muslims) community in Manipur were also considered to be outsiders and, in 1993, a series of clashes occurred between the Meiteis and the Pangals. Hundreds of people, including women and children, were killed.¹⁵ As a result, the Pangal community formed a militant group, the People's United Liberation Front (PULF), with the aim of guarding themselves and their interests. They have been linked with the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan through Bangladesh, and are involved in illegal arms and drug trafficking in the region.¹⁶

Moreover, the NSCN has expanded its network in four districts of Manipur, namely Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong and Chandel which have large numbers of the Naga population. The activities of the NSCN in demanding a greater Nagaland (Nagalim) gained momentum in the beginning of the 1990s and they were involved in communal clashes with other groups. For instances, ethnic

conflicts erupted in 1992, between the NSCN groups and the Kuki militants for the control of drug trafficking and smuggling in Moreh, a border town in Chandel district.¹⁷ It was sparked off by the levying of “house tax” and “village tax” by the Naga insurgents and resulted in the formation of the Kuki National Front (KNF) and Kuki National Army (KNA), demanding a separate Kuki state within the Indian Union. It also led to the internal displacement of 37,000 Kukis within the state, confining their mass settlement to the Kangpokpi town areas of Senapati district.¹⁸ Like the NSCN Naga groups, the Kuki outfits, namely KNA and KNF are struggling for a separate ‘Kukiland’¹⁹ within the Indian Union.

Though a settlement was signed between the two groups, hatred and discontentment continued among their various sub-tribes. The Paites, Vaipheis and Hmars (sub-tribes) have also organised their own militant groups, adding to the fire. Consequently, during 1997-98, ethnic armed conflicts erupted between the Kukis and Paites (Naga sub-tribe) in Churachandpur district, resulting in the loss of 1,000 lives, and 4,600 houses torched to ashes, rendering many homeless and compelled to flee to other areas in the state.²⁰ Later, a ceasefire agreement was signed after the intervention of the state masses and the government. However, the scars of the hatred remain among the ethnic groups.

Enduring Conflict

The conflicting demands of diverse ethnic groups pertaining to a separate homeland have caused tension amongst the Meiteis, Meitei Pangals, Nagas and Kukis. The Nagas’ demand for Nagalim (Greater Nagaland) in the Naga majority areas, affecting four districts of Manipur, namely, Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong and Chandel, has created tensions amongst the Manipuris, primarily between the Nagas, Meiteis and Kukis. Often, the national highways connecting the state, NH-39 and NH-53, remain under an economic blockade called by the NSCN and other hill-based militants.²¹ This act of flexing their muscle has held the state to ransom and been a matter of contention between the hills and valley communities. For instance, on June 14, 2001, when the ceasefire, ongoing between the NSCN-IM and the central government since 1997, was extended to all Naga dominated areas in the northeast, without territorial limits, it was strongly objected to by the masses. As a result, on June 18, 2001, the mass violent uprising led to the killing of 18 people in the police firing and the state Assembly building being burned down.²² The Meitei, Kuki and Pangal organisations also got united under the United Committee of Manipur (UCM) to protest against the extension of the Naga ceasefire. On the other side, the Naga civil society groups,

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namely the United Naga Council (UNC) and the Naga Women's Union, Manipur (NWUM) accused the Meiteis of being insensitive to the aspirations of the Nagas. The NSCN-IM had also threatened to intensify the violent activities if the extension of the ceasefire was opposed. Later, on July 27, 2001, the central government was compelled to reconsider its decision and restore the ceasefire agreement, but confined to Nagaland only.²³

The nexus among the politicians, underground outfits (UG) and contract builders has affected the development work. Most of the construction work in the valley and hills of Manipur is undertaken by the contractors, who are mostly surrendered insurgents of various groups. These contractors are tasked by their parent organisation for raising party funds. The gunning down of civilians by unidentified groups has been a common trend.

The government employees, private companies and businessmen are compelled to donate a percentage of their income for the UG fund. No company or project work can function without a donation to the UG. Most of the engineers have had their houses bombed or bullets fired upon them to coerce them into complying with the demands of the outfits. The echo of gunshots is a daily occurrence in the valley areas.²⁴

The activities of the insurgents groups, coupled with the price rise of commodities like food and petroleum products in the region because of frequent *bandhs*, have caused unrest in among the middle class group in the region. The security forces are aware of the extortion of money by the insurgents. The inability of the state police, even though backed by the central forces, to stop this has led the common man to lose faith in them. Moreover, even some police force personnel and higher officials, including from the civil services, are suspected of having a nexus with the insurgent outfits.²⁵

Besides, the suppliers of goods in the states of Manipur and Nagaland, in collusion with the ruling political parties, are involved in black marketing. They hoard goods during the *bandhs* and sell these at higher prices on the pretext of scarcity of supply from the rear posts like Dimapur or Guwahati. Besides, most of the students' organisation like the All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU) and the

Manipur University Students' Union (MUSU) are linked with, and financed by, the valley militants groups, UNLF, PREPAK and KYKL. These student organisations have become the mouthpiece of the militant groups, controlled and staged by the militants.²⁶

Moreover, the state continues to be affected by the activities of the insurgent groups, formed on ethnic lines, with competing demands. The conflicting political demands between the valley and hills people has been the reason for the violence in their respective areas, though the Ministry of Home Affairs, in its annual reports, has held the Meitei militants groups responsible for most of the violence.²⁷ The Kuki outfits have their stronghold in the Chandel district, including the strategic border town of Moreh, bordering India and Myanmar; while the Naga sub-tribes' outfits are active in Ukhrul, Senapati and Tamenglong districts.²⁸ These two groups have often clashed in the last decades. These clashes took place between the Nagas and Kukis in Churachandpur and Chandel districts. Besides, every functionary of the administration is influenced by some group or forced to support it with money and other logistics requirements to sustain the militancy. Willing or unwillingly, major sections of the society succumb to the threat and pressure from the militants. From the tea stall owner to the senior civil service officers, everyone pays a percentage of their income to the various insurgent groups as protection tax.²⁹ The insurgents are running a parallel government in the state where the confidence of the masses in the state governance has eroded due to failure to ensure security in the state. At the village level, whether it is a case of a land dispute or marital discord, the valley-based insurgents, mainly the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and Kanglei Yaiol Kanba Lup (KYKL) are known to intervene.³⁰

Economic development in the state has come to a standstill and insecurity has intensified with the increasing violence. The state has more than 40 insurgent groups, the major ones being the People's Liberation Army (PLA), United National Liberation Front (UNLF), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), Kanglei Yaiol Kanba Lup (KYKL), Manipur People's Liberation Front (MPLF) and Revolutionary People's Front (RPF).³¹

The state has more than 40 insurgent groups, the five hill districts, including by Chandel, Churachandpur, Tamenglong, Senapati and Ukhrul, face hostilities from the Naga and Kuki outfits.

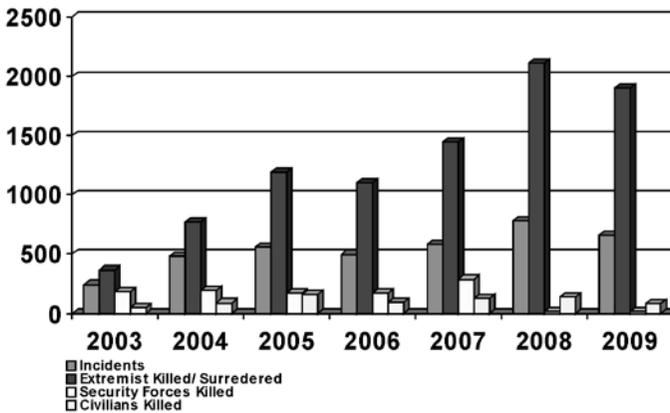
Further, out of the nine districts of Manipur, four valley districts including Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal and Bishnupur have been troubled by militancy by Meitei outfits. At the same time, the five hill districts, including by Chandel, Churachandpur, Tamenglong, Senapati and Ukhrul, face hostilities from the Naga and Kuki outfits.³²

Table 1: Security Situation in Manipur

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Incidents	243	478	554	498	584	780	659
Extremists arrested/ killed/surrendered	365	772	1,186	1,097	1,443	2,112	1,896
SFs killed	182	194	173	167	287	16	19
Civilians killed	50	88	158	96	130	137	81

[Source: Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Internal Security, Annual Reports. 2010]

Fig 1: Trends of Violence in Manipur



In the last seven years, with the rise in the number of armed outfits in the state, violent activities have gone up. The state government has intensified counter-insurgency operations in the state, but the situation is yet to be brought under control. In comparison with the other northeastern states, the

casualty rate of the outfits in Manipur is also the highest. The trend of violence as given in Fig 1, underlines the instability and threat to security in every aspect, either to the safety of the civilians or in the context of the security environment of the state. Further, Manipur is often subjected to *bandhs* and economic blockades.

Of late, the state has been facing a humanitarian crisis, with the prices of necessary commodities soaring due to the economic blockade of National Highway 39 (NH-39) connecting Imphal (Manipur) with Kohima (Nagaland) and Dimapur. Since April 12, 2010, the Naga Students' Federation (NSF) and the All Naga Students' Association Manipur (ANSAM) had launched blockades against the holding of elections in six autonomous district councils in the tribal dominated hills. The blockade was further intensified after the state government refused to allow the NSCN (IM) leaders to enter Manipur on May 3, 2010.³³ In addition, with the increase in unprovoked killings, extortion, bomb blasts, *bandh* and protests, the scenario is one of a failed state.

The central government's approach of a peaceful settlement with the militant outfits has proved counter-productive. Since, the demands of many of the outfits conflict with each other, any conventional agreement with one group becomes a cause for agitation by other groups.

Observations

A comprehensive analysis of the conflict-ridden state of Manipur reveals the following features of insecurity and uncertainty:

- The central government's approach of a peaceful settlement with the militant outfits has proved counter-productive. Since, the demands of many of the outfits conflict with each other, any conventional agreement with one group becomes a cause for agitation by other groups.
- Given that peace talks are on with the insurgents groups, there has been a tendency for the groups to continue the armed rebellion by another faction, with merely a change in nomenclature or by forming a new group. Besides, excesses by outfits organised on ethnic lines against others have led to the raising of rival armed groups on the pretext of self-protection. In the process,

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over a period of time, the number of insurgent groups in Manipur has multiplied tremendously and the situation is worsening.

- The nexus between the politicians and insurgents and criminals adds to the woes of the state. Some of the outfits operate as criminal gangsters thriving on extortion, kidnapping and contract killings. Nonetheless, miscreants take advantage of the unrest and extort funds, disguising themselves as insurgents. Besides, most of the security issues are politicised by the political parties to gain mileage for vote banks by enhancing controversies. The insurgent groups also have a

nexus with various student organisations and contractors working in civil development programmes through politicians.

- The inter-factional clashes amongst the outfits are increasing. Although the security forces had been restrained from counter-insurgency operations after the Centre entered into peace talks with the insurgents, factional encounters continue. It has also created internal displacement in the region, adding various problems to the already deteriorated security environment. The trans-movement of the Hmar and Kuki tribes along the Manipur-Mizoram border after the Naga-Kuki clashes in 1998 and the militants' atrocities on the Hmar tribe are examples of such problems. Generally, in such cases, the state government fails to address the issue, leading to another armed uprising.
- The flourishing arms smuggling in the region through the porous borders and the support from the hostile neighbouring countries are prolonging the insurgency in the northeast. With the proliferation of small arms and easy availability of weapons, any ethnic group with a grievance can resort to taking up arms against the state. It underlines the inability of the government to secure the remote corners, primarily in the border areas. The armed violence syndrome or the gun-culture is multiplying insecurity in the state which is ethnically diverse. In short, violence continues in Manipur with few chances of resolving the issues in the near future, prolonging the instability and threats to development. Consequently, the situation in Manipur remains a significant threat to national security.

The Way Ahead

To eliminate the militancy in Manipur, the state and central governments need a clear-cut, coordinated strategy on the basis of a step-by-step plan executed at various levels as follows:

- First and foremost, good governance needs to be instituted in the state through a transparent government, fair judiciary system, respect for the rule of law, and the provision of the minimum basic amenities like hospitals, schools, police stations, etc. Thus, the faith of the masses in the state government can be restored and they can be weaned away from the armed insurgents groups, who project themselves as custodians of the respective ethnic groups. This will be possible if there is political sincerity coupled with proper distribution of funds for the development of the state, both in the valley and the hills.
- Second, the nexus among the politicians, insurgents and contractors should be broken. Corruption, which is rampant in every section of the society in the state, should be rooted out or at least controlled, and communication between the government and people must be restored in an unrestricted manner.
- Third, the plan policy should be able to move ahead when the state is secured from the yoke of the insurgent outfits operating in both the urban and remote areas. Therefore, military operations against the insurgents groups operating in the valley should be intensified. After the Assam Rifles and the army had conducted operation “All Clear” in the hill areas, most of the militants’ hideouts had been neutralised, with many of them having shifted to the valley. But, Manipur being a border state, with a porous international border in a hostile jungle environment, the inflow of arms and trans-border movement of insurgent outfits who rely on external countries for training and other required logistics support are continuing. Thus, before initiating any kind of counter-insurgency policy/operations, the Indo-Myanmar international border needs proper management. The border management exercise needs to be carried out by the state and central governments.
- Fourth, the connectivity and intermingling amongst the diverse communities of Manipur with mainland India should be made more effective to encourage national integration. This should be followed by economic development through government, semi-government and private entrepreneurship participation.
- Fifth, the sincere efforts of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), women’s associations, along with games and cultural programmes could be

best utilised for restoring confidence among the valley and hill masses. Above all, a campaign for peace involving all sections of the civil society as well as the government organisations must be organised to provide a sign that the majority of the people are on the side of peace, progress and stability.

Notes

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