



UNDERSTANDING ETHNICITY AND AUTONOMY IN NORTHEAST INDIA

Dr. Ayangbam Shyamkishor, Dept. of Political Science, Mizoram University, Aizawl

Received: 06/02/2018

Edited: 14/02/2018

Accepted: 23/02/2018

Abstract: North Eastern Region (NER) of India is a plural society having different ethnic groups with distinct culture and tradition. Every community tries and wants to protect and promote their ethnic identity, culture, tradition, dialect and the land they inherited from their forefathers. Claims and counter-claims of land and natural resources by various ethnic communities are witnessed in the recent past. At the same time, different ethnic groups also have been demanding for some form of autonomy or ethnic homeland, either in the form of Autonomous District Council under Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, or Union Territory status or a new full-fledged state or integrate with the neighboring state(s). The demands for autonomy come from different ethnic based organizations and even from insurgent organizations operating in the region. In the above background, the paper focuses on the issues of ethnicity and the demand for autonomy and its consequence in Manipur.

Key words: Ethnicity, autonomy, insurgency, corruption, responsibility and accountability.

Introduction

The diverse cultural mosaic of the North Eastern Region (NER) of India makes the region another 'mini-India'. There are many culturally distinct ethnic groups of various sizes in the region. These different ethnic groups have been living together peacefully in the past. During the colonial period, ethnic consciousness emerged among the ethnic communities in the region. Leaders of these communities wanted to protect and promote their ethnic identity, culture, tradition, dialect and the land they inherited from their forefathers. In the process, conflict and competition among (and between) different ethnic groups started in the region. Claims and counter-claims of land and natural resources within and outside the state or district by various ethnic communities are also witnessed in recent past. The steep competition among ethnic groups and the claims and counter-claims of land and natural resources generated ethnic tensions and rivalry between/among different ethnic groups.

Ethnic tensions and conflicts are not uncommon in NER of India. In fact, the region is plagued by inter-ethnic conflict and violence. In other words, most of the ethnic groups in NER of

India have been experiencing (at least some form of) tension(s) and conflict(s) with other ethnic groups. Ethnic communities have started fighting against each other on various issues like a) sharing of political power, b) natural resources, c) developmental issues, d) demand for a separate 'homeland', etc. Boundary of various states or revenue districts within a state is even contested by various ethnic organizations in the region. Different ethnic groups claim a portion of the land/the whole portion of the land as their homeland and other(s) ethnic group(s) inhabiting in the area for a long time is declared as 'foreigner' or the 'other'. The so called 'other' does not belong to the same ethnic identity and therefore have no right to live and share the fruit of development, natural resources, etc. in their 'homeland'. The demand of one ethnic group affects the inter-ethnic relationship between and among various groups and often results in armed conflict against each other. The antagonistic reactions of the other groups and mutual distrust and tensions lead to overt conflict and disturbance of law and order.

Many of these ethnic tensions and conflicts are related to the ethnic based autonomy movements. Almost every ethnic group has been

demanding for some form of autonomy or ethnic homeland, either in the form of Autonomous District Council under Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, or Union Territory status or a new full-fledged state. Some of them even go to the extent of demanding complete independence from India. It is due to the belief that an adequate share of political power or complete control of political power is necessary to retain their cultural identity and also all-round development. The demands for autonomy (or secession) either come from different ethnic based insurgent organizations or from different ethnic organizations operating in the region. Most of them used ethnic identity as an ideology as well as a device to demand greater share of power, authority and resources. In the above background, the paper analyzes the issues of ethnicity and conflict vis-à-vis the demand for autonomy in Manipur, one of the states of the North Eastern Region of India. The study focuses on the issues of ethnic identity, conflict and the demand for autonomy and its consequence in Manipur.

Ethnicity and its Consequence in Manipur

Manipur is a multi-ethnic society. Different ethnic groups (like the Kuki, Meitei and Naga) are living together peacefully in the past. Manipur however, experiences communal discontent in the past few decades. The ethnic relationship between and among various ethnic groups have been changing and ethnic differences between/among them become more and more visible after 1990s. The ethnic rivalry and tensions are spear-headed by the emerging elite of different communities. The elites of the community wanted to protect and promote their ethnic identity, culture, tradition, dialect and the land they inherited from their forefathers. In the process, conflict and competition among (and between) different ethnic groups started in the state. Claims and counter-claims of land and natural resources within the state or district by various ethnic communities are witnessed in recent past. The steep competition among ethnic groups and the claims and counter-claims of land and natural resources generated ethnic tensions and

rivalry between/among different ethnic groups. Moreover, there are many ethnic based insurgent organizations who are also involving in the ethnic conflicts directly or indirectly. For example, the Naga insurgent organizations like Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isaac-Muivah (NSCN-IM) and Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K) wanted to create an Independent Nagaland by including various districts of Manipur (Kamjong, Noney, Senapati, Tengnoupal, Tamenglong, Ukhrul, etc.). These districts are mainly inhabited by the Naga however there are sizable populations of Kuki who has been also settled in these areas since centuries. The expansionist idea of the Naga is taken very seriously for the Kuki and the Meitei. Consequently, a Kuki insurgent organization known as Kuki National Front (KNF) was established in 1988 to counter the Naga agenda with an objective of forming a Kukiland and also to defend the Kuki from the atrocities and brutalities of the Naga ethnic Army. (Baite, 2014) The area for Kukiland includes some portions of Tamenglong, Ukhrul and the whole areas of Kangpokpi, Pherzawl, Chandel and Churachandpur district of Manipur. It means both the parties—the Kuki and the Naga underground organizations are claiming more or less the same space as their own.

The claims and counter-claim in the form of 'Us Vs Them' by the Naga and Kuki created hatred and tension between them. As a result, Kuki-Naga conflict occurred during 1993-1997 resulting in violence and death of many lives. In the said Kuki-Naga conflict, 905 innocent Kuki including pregnant women, children, disabled and aged were massacred, 360 Kuki villages uprooted and their lands seized and more than 100000 Kuki villagers were displaced and rendered as refugees in their own land as per the report from the Kuki Inpi Manipur (KIM). (Imphal Free Press; Dt. 14-9-2016) The issues between the two communities are yet to settle though direct confrontation is more or less over. It can be mentioned here that the Naga civil societies like the Naga Hoho, United Naga Council (UNC), etc directly or indirectly supported the cause of the so

called Naga National Movement led by the Naga Insurgent Organizations. The Naga wanted to create a state within the Indian Union by incorporating all Naga inhabited areas of various districts of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur. It is important to mention here that the Naga were the first to raise the banner of revolt against the Indian government, on August 14, 1947, under the aegis of the Naga National Council (NNC) led by Angami Zapu Phizo. The NNC is popularly known as the mother of insurgencies in the North-east India. (Sonowal, 2007) The NSCN (IM) claimed that the Indo-Naga conflict which continues over seven decades is undoubtedly the longest problem in South-East Asia. (Kashyap, 2016)

The Naga insurgency and its peace talk with the Government of India have had created communal tensions between Naga and Kuki (as mentioned above) and Naga and Meitei. On 14th June 2001, the NSCN (IM) and the Government of India extended the ceasefire agreement in Nagaland to Naga-inhabited areas in the neighbouring states of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The extension of ceasefire sparked off large-scale violence in the northeastern states particularly in Manipur. Within hours of the official announcement of the signing of agreement between Government of India and NSCN (I-M) in Bangkok, student and youth organisations of Manipur called a 66-hour bandh, which paralyzed normal life in the state. The situation took a violent turn on June 18, 2001 when thousands of people took procession and rally on the streets of Imphal. They targeted politicians and set fire to the Manipur Legislative Assembly building, 12 bungalows of legislators and former Ministers and offices of all political parties. Four MLAs and the then Speaker of the Assembly Sapam Dhananjay, who was in his residence when it was set fire, was injured. Two MLAs who were inside the Assembly building received serious burn injuries. As a consequence of the violence, 18 people lost their lives. (The Frontline, July. 07 - 20, 2001) The incident marks a new relationship; a relationship based on communal hatred and mistrust between the two

communities (Meitei and Naga). Since then the two communities have been witnessing the lowest level of ethnic relationship even though communal riot or direct confrontation between Naga and Meitei has not taken place till date. The ethnic tensions between Naga and non-Naga has however, reached at its highest peak at least on three occasions in the post-2001. The first one was in 2005, when the government of Manipur declared 18th June as 'State holiday' by marking it as a 'State Integrity Day'.¹ The All Naga Student Association, Manipur (ANSAM) had imposed economic blockade on the National Highways for 52 days in 2005 i.e. from 20th June to 11th August, as a protest against the decision of the Government of Manipur for declaring 18th June as 'State holiday'. Secondly, tension cropped up between the Naga and the other communities of Manipur during May 2010. The tension mounted up when the NSCN IM General Secretary Thuingleng Muivah decided to visit his birthplace, Somdal in Kamjong district of Manipur on May 2010.² The situation in Manipur became very tense during the time because the Naga leaders decided to give a warm welcome and was preparing for it. On the other hand, civil societies of other communities pressurized the state government not to allow Muivah to enter Manipur. The State Cabinet took a decision not to allow Th. Muivah to come to Manipur on the ground that there were possibilities of law and order disturbances threatening peaceful coexistence of the communities if the NSCN-IM leader comes to Manipur. Moreover, the ceasefire between the Government of India and the NSCN-IM does not cover Manipur. The decision of the state government was not received well by the Naga. So, Naga protested against the government decision to block Muivah's entry into the state by staging demonstration at various places of Senapati, Tamenglong, Ukhrul and Chandel districts. Tension cropped up in Manipur particularly in Mao (a town inside Manipur in Manipur-Nagaland border on the national highway) after their attempt to take out a protest rally against the State Cabinet decision to bar Muivah from visiting Manipur was foiled by security

forces. A tussle broke out between the protesters and the state police forces which killed three persons when security forces fired tear gas shells, mock bombs and live bullets to control the crowd who were vandalising and setting fire to police vehicles and other goods kept at Mao Town Hall. (Huieyen Lanpao, Dt. 5.5.2010)

The relationship between the Naga and other communities of Manipur is still tense and complex. The relationship between Naga and other is now based on the progress of peace talk between the NSCN (IM) and Government of India and its emotional issue of integration of Naga inhabited areas to Nagaland. The Naga civil organizations like the United Naga Council (UNC), Naga Hoho, etc supported the expansionist ideas and policy of NSCN (IM). On the other hand, the people from other communities are totally against the idea of 'Greater Nagaland' by including all the Naga inhabited areas of Manipur and other neighbouring states. It means until and unless the issue of Naga is settled peacefully without any bloodshed the relationship between Naga and other communities in Manipur will not improve much. In other words, the ethno-relationship between (and among) different ethnic group in Manipur will be enhanced only when the problem of insurgencies in Manipur is solved altogether. At the same, it looks like the problem of insurgency will continue for some more years. It is not because there is no solution. It is basically because there is no political will or strategies to solve the problem of insurgency among the political class across the board. No political party or leader of the state is seriously engage either with insurgent organization to negotiate or content insurgencies like the Government of Sri Lanka did. The Government of Sri Lanka decisively defeated and eliminated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from its soil after nearly three decades of civil war in 2009 and created a peace that appears lasting. (Laton, 2015) The same policy and design can be used by the government (both state and the Union), if they (both central and state government) wanted to bring peace and normalcy in Manipur they can do it.

Unfortunately, till date no government comes up with a solid plan or strategy to solve the problem or neutralize the breeding space of insurgency in Manipur. In short, Government does not take up any significant policy(ies) so far to solve the problems of insurgency and bring peace and normalcy in the state. In other words, government is running away from its responsibility to govern the society with prosperity for a better future.

It can be said that until and unless the government governs the state with a sense of accountability, responsibility and transparency, Manipur will never overcome the problems of insurgency or other socio-political crisis along with economic backwardness. The root cause of all the problems and crisis in Manipur lies in bad Governance. According to Edmund Downie, the failures of governance in Manipur have produced major levels of corruption and insurgency that generate an ugly gap between policy formulation and implementation. Further, it is estimated that the standard graft levels on road projects in Manipur reaching 66 percent of project fund allocation, with skims demanded variously by Delhi mandarins, local politicians and bureaucrats, and underground groups, among others. It can be noted here that there is a stable government in Manipur with Congress's Okram Ibobi Singh as Chief Minister of the state from 2002-2017 and the BJP's government headed by N. Biren Singh started his innings from 2017 till date. The Ex-Chief Minister however was known for its controversial decisions and corrupt practices than good work done by him. His reputation for graft earned him the nickname *10 Percent Ibobi*, for the cuts he demanded from sundry projects; a number of people in Manipur even joked that the nickname was outdated, his takes had increased. (Downie, 2015) The trend is still continues with the new government headed by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In short, there is no accountability and responsibility in Manipur.

Concluding Remarks

Manipur is a plural society having many ethnic groups like Kuki, Meitei, Naga, etc. These

different ethnic groups have been living together peacefully for many centuries however the situation has changed since the 1990s. The Manipuri society has witnessed communal tension and ethnic clashes in the last two-three decades. Moreover, the state also experience ethnic based insurgency. Almost every ethnic group is having ethnic based insurgent organization(s). For examples, The Naga has two major insurgent organizations namely NSCN-IM and NSCN-K. The Kuki has Kuki National Front (KNF), Kuki National Army (KNA), Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA), United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF), etc. These insurgent organizations are demanding either independence from India or separate state from the state of Manipur or an Autonomous District Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Their claims of areas or boundaries are overlapping in many areas. As a result, ethnic tensions and conflicts occurred in the state of Manipur. At the same time, government is not very serious to settle all the issues facing in the state including the problems of ethnic based insurgency in the state. The government of Manipur is misgoverning the society rather than governing it with responsibility and accountability.

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Footnote:

1. It was on 18th June, 2001 that the people of Manipur protest against the extension of ceasefire between the Government of India and NSCN (IM) without territorial limits. Because, the Manipuri people thought it is as a first step toward the formation of a greater Nagaland by plugging out the Naga dominated hill districts of Manipur. The protest become violent and the police fire the unarmed protestor and killed 18 individuals.
2. After more than forty years of spending his life in the jungles and elsewhere waging a war against India for Naga independence, Th. Muivah wanted to visit his village.