

Understanding the Role of Agriculture in the Nature of Insurgency in Manipur

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Abstract:

The state of Manipur in India has been in a state of turmoil and militarization since the time it lost its princely status in 1949. And over the years since then it has witnessed mushrooming of various insurgent groups among the numerous ethnic communities in the tiny state. In as much as the causes for such state of insurgent movements, the nature and dimensions of insurgency in the state is diverse. It would be of paramount importance to understand the nature of insurgency in Manipur rather than just see all groups from the prism of “Law and order” problem but perhaps the root cause of it could be related to an ancestral agriculture practice and its ownership. This will surely enable the government to have a multi-pronged approach to finding a lasting solution to the prolonged narrative of insurgency issue which is socially divisive, economically expensive and politically national integration is at stake.

Terms: ancestral settlement, indigenous people, land ownership, Insurgency, Meitei, Naga, Kuki-Chin-Mizo, ethnic diversity, trust deficit, governance

Introduction:

Manipur is a small state in Northeast India. It shares a long international border with Myanmar in the east, Nagaland state in the North, Assam in the west, and Mizoram in the south. It is small in size but rich in ethnic groups, flora and fauna. It truly reflects the spirit of diversity of India with over 33 ethnic groups and many other numerous unrecognized groups. The state is clearly divided demographically into the Non-tribals in the valley and the various tribal communities in the hills.

Manipur was a princely kingdom until it came under the British protection through the treaty of Yandbo, 1826. It was fully brought under the British Empire in 1891 as a result of the political unrest. The princely kingdom status was restored back in 1947 but was lost in 1949 with the signing of the document of accession in Shillong under mysterious circumstances. It was conferred full statehood under the constitution of India in 1972.

Indigenous people and its ancestral land: Agriculture and land ownership

The three major groups of communities occupying the state of Manipur claim certain portion specific territory as their own. They have lived, occupied and cultivated their respective territory for generations. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for all the communities in Manipur and therefore land is the most important resource.

Regardless of the affiliation of community, one common thread is significance of land in the social, economic, and political life of the tribe or community. They have lived out the produce of the land as agriculturists, they have worshiped the spirit of the land, and they have sacrificed to protect the territory

of the village or community. They have for generations lived within the territory of the village protecting every inch of it. The independent republic nature of governance by the elders of the village without the interference of outsiders has always been the benchmark of these communities. They are freedom lovers and very hospitable to strangers but are always ready to fight for every inch of the territory.

Thus, the thought of being governed by outsiders and land being encroached upon by strangers and outsiders is unimaginable. Every move to control and deny freedom will be resisted because their culture and traditions are not akin to that. So, to protect tooth and nail to any foreign rule and exploitation is considered to be a duty and right because it is considered to be endangering their identity and existence.

History of Insurgency in Manipur:

Manipur is a small state but torn to pieces by numerous groups of insurgents actively operating in the state competition or cooperation with one another. There are various causes of insurgency in the state depending on the social ethnic diversity “Insurgencies result because of the non-compatibility of the identities of the ethnic groups, with that of the larger national identity. The Indian arm atrocities in their counter-insurgency operations especially by the infamous Assam Rifles that was founded in 1834 -35 to prevent the tribal from their raids in the tea garden, the wrong policies of New Delhi and the state.

Manipur was merged with India in 1949 and was conferred statehood in 1972. It shares international border with Myanmar and internal borders with the states of Nagaland, Assam, and Mizoram. The draconian laws such as Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 and the Disturbed areas Act 195 which literally reduces a man to a mere living being without any rights of living and expression has been in full force in Manipur for decades.

Manipur seem to have become a fertile ground in breeding Insurgency. The existing insurgent activities such as extortion (tax), Security, kidnapping, the false perceived power of arms etc have greatly increased the number and complexities of insurgency in Manipur. Insurgency in Manipur has spin out of control and its activities have become the order of the day. The present situation of insurgency in Manipur can be greatly attributed to the state policies, opting for it as a lucrative employment option to earn easy money, and the fear mongering of losing their ancestral land to the neighboring communities.

Manipur has been experiencing insurgency related socio-economic and political problems since 1949. Insurgent groups in Manipur are dominated by the three major communities; Meiteis, Nagas, and the Kuki-Chin-. The intensity of insurgency related issue is equally distributed throughout the state and realignment of ethnic groups is witnessed specially with the smaller ethnic communities for want of security and protection of their ancestral indigenous territory. There are numerous factions and smaller splinter groups too operating and conduction different insurgent because ethnic assertion can be found in the identity crisis of various tribal communities who extend over the territorial boundaries drawn by the Indian nation state. Most of the ethnic assertion is due to ethnic groups’ desperate attempts to protect their identity, culture and language. And the fact that they are far away from the Centre and emotionally alienated from the discourse of nationalism and identity legitimized by the center, and therefore seek their own ways of expressing sentiments of attachment to the land in the narrative of their cultural identity.

Insurgency in the Valley

The valley of Manipur has the most number of insurgent groups operating and carrying out their subversive insurgent activities. There are many genuine as well as groups only for extortion operating in Manipur. Insurgency in the valley has been on an exponential rise since 1980s

The demand for independence in Manipur had begun even before the British left the state. Eventually independence was restored and Manipur became an independent princely state in 1947 and the Manipur constitution Act 1947. But it took a dramatic turn when Maharajah Bodhachandra Singh was summoned to Shillong and he signed the document of accession to India supposedly under duress on 21st September 1949. Manipur became part and partial of India on October 10, 1949. Manipuris have always believed and claimed that the Maharajah was forced to sign the document as he was never given the opportunity to consult the people of the state.

The first movement against annexation of the state to India began with Hijam Irabot Singh, the brother-in-law of the Maharajah. The seed of rebellion and insurgency was sown by the annexation, nurtured by placing it under “C” category of states while most of the other princely states annexed to India were placed under the “A” category of states. On March 30, 1953 Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru gifted the Kabaw Valley to the visiting Prime Minister of Burma U Nu in Kohima as a return gift for supporting the Non-Align movement as is explained by B.G. Verghese *“their grievances are that India unilaterally ratifies the colonial cession of Kubaw valley to Burma without question and forced Manipur’s merger with the Indian Union without popular consultation. Though better educated, but lacking scheduled tribe (or case) status. The meiteis are losing out to the tribal communities on account of job reservation. In the absence of non-government opportunities, unemployment has grown and accumulated discontents have led some to turn away from India.* This was considered to be an insult and betrayal. There was a huge uprising demanding full statehood when Manipur was conferred Union territory status in 1956. Salt was added to the wound when a much smaller state Nagaland in 1963 was created for the Naga tribals.

The first resistance group United National Liberation Front (UNLF) was formed on 24th November 1964 by R.K. Meghan with the objective of independence and liberating Manipur from the Colonizer “India”. In 1978 the People Liberation Army was formed under the leadership of N. Bisheswar Singh trained and indoctrinated by the Chinese Communists.

Insurgency witnesses a sharp decline in the late 1970s with the creation of a full-fledged statehood of Manipur and the birth of Bangladesh. Then it saw a sharp rise in 1980s due to the deficit in expectation and reality. The general public had expected the economic welfare of the general public to improve in terms of employment, living standard, infrastructural facilities but was greatly disappointed. The positive rise in the literacy rate, corruption, and unemployment among the educated youth caused huge frustration and a search for an alternative as a means of livelihood and solution to the problems of the civil society. Thus, insurgent groups were formed believing that they can restore the pre-merger status of Manipur for a better social – economic life.

The state of Manipur was declared a Disturbed area and the draconian laws of India; the Disturbed Areas Act (1950) and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act¹ (1958) (*Singha Komal*) that has no respect for the life and rights of the people were imposed. It was never a solution; in fact, it flared up the insurgency problems due to the atrocities and high handedness of the Army and Paramilitary forces. The policy of Militarization further aggravated and accentuated the frustration, alienation and the perception that India

¹ The draconian Indian law that gives unlimited power and protection to the army and police to arrest, torture and even eliminate a person on mere suspicion.

was not interested in integration but in expansion, subjugation, and occupation. It was easy for the insurgent groups to make people believe what they believe from what can be seen and experienced in their day-to-day life.

The people of Manipur are in the state of “Catch-22” between the insurgents and the state forces and they are always at the receiving end. The line dividing insurgents and the counter insurgent forces is so thin for the civil society that when cornered they tend to side with the ethnic insurgent group not necessarily in support of their ideologies. History has taught us that force and power does not win hearts and wars but respect does. It also reveals the level of explosive frustrations that the communities in Manipur have been building up.

The insurgent movement in the valley took a new turn in 2001 when the government of India extended the ceasefire with the Naga insurgent group, National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak – Muivah) beyond Nagaland “without territorial limit to the the demand for “Nagalim” or “Southern Nagaland”. This caused a huge movement in the valley by the civil societies supported by the insurgent groups to safeguard the territorial integrity of Manipur leading to the emergence of the ugly heads of ethnic violence and conflict between the Meiteis of the valley and the Nagas of the hills.

Insurgency in the Hills:

1. Naga Insurgency

The states of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and in Myanmar are the ancestral home to 43 indigenous Naga tribes. They are primitive, backward, highly literate, and independent loving and very protective of their territory, culture and traditions.

The revolt against the British in 1930 for the imposition of house tax, foreign religion and practices over and above the traditional beliefs and practices led by Jadonang and his follower Rani Gaidinliu planted the seed of fight for freedom from foreign suppression. Naga insurgency is called as the “Mother of all insurgencies of the region. Naga movement for independence began with the formation of the Naga club in 1918. The Naga club presented a memorandum to the Simon commission in 1929 about the unique history and culture of the Naga to be left alone.

To take the movement forward the Naga club was replaced by the Naga National Council in 1945. After signing the infamous Hydari agreement 1947, its leader Angami Zapu Phizo adopted secessionism and declared its independence on August 14, 1947. On May 16, 1951 the Naga nation went through the famous plebiscite where 99.99% voted for complete independence from India. The general election of 1952 was boycotted and on March 30, 1953 the Nagas humiliated Pandit Jawharlal Nehru by walking out of a public meeting in Kohima in the presence of the Burmese Prime Minister U Nu. On March 22, 1956 the NNC set up its own government called as the Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN) and hoisted its flag. It was in the same year that the Naga underground movement began to take shape under the military leadership of Bob Khathing.

On November 11, 1975 the Naga Federal Government and the Government of India signed an agreement known as “Shillong accord” to find a lasting solution to the Naga problem. This agreement was considered as a sell out by the group of insurgents returning from China. Thus lead by Isak Swu (Sema Naga of Nagaland), Thuingaleng Muivah (Tangkhul Naga of Manipur) and S.S. Khaplang (Hemi Naga of Burma) organized a new group called as the National socialist council of Nagaland (NSCN) on Jan. 31, 1980. Thus began another era of bloody period.

The Naga insurgent groups virtually run a parallel government in their dominated areas. The Naga nationalism is the struggle to bring the whole Naga kingdom under one administration or the Alternative Arrangement of “Nagalim”. It often enters into conflict and violence with the Kuki and Meitei due to conflicting demands and control of territory; the Nagas want “Nagalim”, the kukis want “Zalengam” and the Meiteis want “Manipur territory integrity”. Thus, the issue is always about protection and ownership land and territory because it has great cultural and economic significance.

2. Kuki Insurgency:

Kuki rebellion initially was against the British for the exploitation by Manipuri Lambus, sidelining of the village chiefs, imposition of house tax of Rs. 3 per annum, compulsory free labor, sending labor corps to France during WW-I

This rebellion of the Kuki was brought to an end with the defeat of the Kukis by the British in the 1917 – 1919 Anglo-Kuki war. Then in 1946 the Kuki National Assembly was formed to demand for a homeland “Zale-n-gam: the land of freedom” from the British before they left India but was not successful.

The Kukis and the Nagas have long been at loggerhead for supremacy and ownership of land in Manipur. In 1992, the conflicting demands and claims of territory between the Nagas and the Kukis turned into a violent bloody inter-tribal warfare. It all began in the Chandel district over the collection of house tax by the Nagas. It was the explosion of the narratives of tension between the ethnic tribes. Thus we see the origin of Kuki insurgency is not anti-India but a movement to provide security to its ethnic community and protect their territory. Today it serves dual objectives of protecting the tradition and culture of the Kuki ethnic community and to demand for Kukiland.

Nature of insurgency in Manipur:

Insurgency for secession

Insurgency in Manipur is secession in nature as many of the insurgent groups are anti-India. Insurgent groups such as NSCN, PLA, UNLF fights for complete independence from the occupation and rule of India. The Naga insurgents demand from “Nagalim” and the Meitei insurgents demand for “Kangleipak” and the restoration of Pre-British state.

Insurgency for autonomy:

Many insurgent groups operating in Manipur are not anti-India for they are not demanding for complete independence but to be given more autonomy. The demand ranges from conferring of the 6th schedule to the hill district councils, demand for upgrading a sub-division to a full-fledged district, demand for amalgamation of all areas of an ethnic groups under one administration, demand for more political representation, demand for withdrawal of various policies and militarization of the state.

Insurgents versus the state:

The insurgent conflict in Manipur is against the occupation, alienation, and militarization. The insurgents are against the state machineries and often run a parallel government. The civil society has often proven to be more loyal to the insurgent groups than the state machineries. It is a conflict of the weaker colonized communities against the high and mighty colonizer.

Insurgent versus insurgent:

It is often an insurgent against an insurgent since their demand and claims overlaps as Manipur being a small state. We observe a triangular conflict between the three major ethnic groups in the state and the state as a silent spectator. It is a conflict over supremacy, territory and resources.

Ethnic oriented Insurgency:

Manipur is a little India with rich diversity in ethnic groups. The dominant nature of the stronger tribe and the attempt of assimilation results in formation of insurgent groups to protect their unique identity. All Insurgent groups in Manipur are ethnic oriented and often than not engages in ethnic cleansing.

Insurgent against Migrant labor:

Insurgency in Manipur is not only an ethnic movement against another ethnic group in Manipur but often it is to drive out the “outsiders”, “the occupiers”. Thus we see migrant individuals being threatened, extorted, and killed.

Insurgent as a business enterprise:

Insurgency is the most flourishing industry in Manipur. It invests tax, provides employment, competes for resources, provides services and expects loyalty in return. There is a cut throat competition with rival insurgent groups and the state.

The boon of insurgency:

All is not evil of the insurgents as they play a vital role in the socio-economic-political life and reforms of the society. It is observed that they have more influence and power in the civil society than the state forces. Some of the commendable activities of the insurgents to which the state machineries have miserably failed are briefly stated below:

a. Protector of ancestral land and territory

Every insurgent groups claim to be the protector of the land, right, and freedom of the people. Even the present dispensation of conflict in Manipur since May 2023 is conflict over illegal settlement, poppy plantation, and fear of meddling with the Manipur land Reform and Land Revenue Act 1960.

b. Developmental and welfare activities:

The insurgents even though takes their share of the developmental funds allotted to the state have often been found to engage in developmental-welfare activities such as ensuring quality service and products, building of infrastructural facilities, in fact one of the reason for a small state like Manipur to receive much developmental funds is because New Delhi think-tank thinks peace and loyalty can be bought.

c. Campaign against social evils:

Insurgent groups have been actively observed to have campaigned against the social evils destroying the society and have yielded commendable positive impact in controlling acts of corruption, flesh trade, alcoholism, drug peddling and abuse, and gambling.

Insurgents have played a role in cleaning ills of the state by reprimanding and punishing corrupt officials of the state, controlling and punishing the teachers and students practicing unfair means in the board examinations, punishing the drug traffickers peddling drugs as Manipur has the highest number of HIV infected persons in India

d. Watchdog of the society:

One of the main reasons for insurgency in Manipur is to protect and preserve the ethnic identity from being annihilated by the dominant ethnic group. They are found to provide better sense of security and protection to the ethnic group.

e. Promoting local entrepreneurs and business:

Insurgents have indirectly promoted local entrepreneurs by creating an environment not suitable for the non-locals to invest and run business in the state. Bollywood movies and songs are banned since 2000 and thus Manipuri film industry is flourishing. One of the reasons for handloom industry to flourish is because of the enforcement of the traditional “Phanek” on students. There is a form of “license raj” in Manipur since every business establishment and operation, trade and commerce comes under the watchful eye of the insurgent groups.

f. Control over the natural resources:

The insurgent protects and preserves the natural resources of flora and fauna of the state by not permitting hunting and setting of wild fire. Insurgents have also restricted the export and exploitation of the mineral resources of the state.

g. Providing Justice and Security:

Unfortunately to the general public, the ethnic insurgent provides justice and security better than the state machineries. The trust and faith of the general public in the state or center government is at its lowest. It is perceived to be weak, corrupt and only interested in occupation.

h. Platform of venting general public grievances

It is observed that the general public seemed to have more faith in the ethnic insurgent group over the constitutionally established institutions. They are seen as social workers and the defender of the social cause, rights and culture. They are seen as the voice of the people and that without them the government will pay little attention and interest in the welfare of the civil society.

Conclusion:

Thus, we can conclude that not all the armed groups operating in the state is against the government of the State or India but the objective of all groups is to protect their territorial integrity and ancestral land that defines their culture. Yes, some of the groups are demanding for total independence from the Indian Union but some are demanding for more autonomy, district, recognition of the tribe, or just to protect the tribe from being annihilated by the larger stronger tribes. Understanding the insurgent issue from economic and cultural prism will help the policy formulators and implementation that a blanket anti insurgency policy or approach will not be helpful in finding a lasting solution to the problem but classifying them in terms of their objectives and demands and then approach it will be more practical.

The people of Manipur have suffered much for too long in a “catch – 22” situation because of the **one-size-fits-all policy approach** in solving the arm struggle. In fact the state has plunged into a complicated vicious spiral cycle of insurgency because of multiple causes and therefore a blanket **one-size-fits-all policy and treating it as a law and order problem by imposing draconian law** will only aggravate and complicate the issue rather than resolving it. Perhaps it will be worthwhile to view the insurgency problems of Manipur from the lens of ancestral home and agricultural land ownership.

To find a lasting solution to a problem it is paramount to go to the root cause and understand the nature. The law of nature is such that all that is uprooted, burnt, and cut need not necessarily die; in fact more branches may surface. The approach will determine if it becomes more ferocious and dangerous or a friendly and committed protector. It is important to understand the nature of the species and decide whether to try to eliminate it by force or trim and prune to create a beautiful ornamental plant to be nurtured, protected and admired. Remember, in the bygone days, every village dweller count it their duty to defend every inch of the village territory when their survival and existence was threatened and it was not mere duty but culture. Perhaps this understanding to defend territory from real or perceived

intruder or encroacher thought to be endangering the community and ensure continuity of unique cultural existence will help find a lasting solution to this vicious insurgency crisis in Manipur. Understanding land ownership and its economic-cultural significance will be paramount to resolving issue of insurgency and ethnic conflicts in Manipur keeping in mind that moving the ancestral landmark is a taboo and will go to any extent to defend every inch of the most treasured natural resource – Land.

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