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Balkanisation of Manipur: Lessons from the Yugoslavian Experience

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Abstract

Balkanisation refers to the fragmentation of a region into smaller, often hostile entities. This concept, rooted in the Balkans' historical context, vividly illustrates how diverse ethnic and political tensions can lead to division and conflict. The breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s serves as a stark example, resulting in multiple independent states following intense wars. Similarly, Manipur, with its ethnic diversity and historical grievances, faces risks of balkanisation. The majority Meitei, the tribal Naga, and Kuki-Zo communities have unique and often conflicting aspirations, driven by historical grievances, political and institutional failures, economic disparities, and militant activities. The Meitei feel insecure despite being a majority due to land discrepancies; the Naga aspire for a greater Nagalim, and the Kuki-Zo demand separate administration due to insecurity under the majority Meitei administration. Factors like the imposition of Forest Acts to grab tribal land, demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, allegation on drug and poppy plantation exacerbate these tensions. Additionally, the long historical grievance, failure of political leaders, economic and infrastructure disparities, arms proliferation, and hate speech fuel conflicts. Addressing these issues requires legal and constitutional reforms, inclusive governance, and equitable economic development. The lessons from Yugoslavia underscore the need for dialogue, mutual respect, and understanding to prevent fragmentation and foster lasting peace in Manipur.

Keywords: Balkanisation, Manipur, Ethnic Conflict, Autonomy, Peace building

INTRODUCTION

Balkanisation refers to the process of fragmentation or division of a region or state into smaller, often hostile or uncooperative, entities. The term originates from the historical and geopolitical events in the Balkans region of Southeast Europe, particularly during the late

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19th and early 20th centuries, where the Ottoman Empire's decline led to the creation of several small, often ethnically homogeneous states that were frequently in conflict with one another. For example the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s led to a series of wars and the creation of several independent countries, such as Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo (John B. Allcock 2002). The root causes of balkanisation are historical grievances of different ethnic communities, political and institutional failures, economic and infrastructure disparities and militarization and arm conflict and the misrepresentation in the media.

The majority Meitei community has at times asserted a desire for independence from India. United National Liberation Front (UNLF) was form to expedite for this demand. Initially the organisation was inclusive, with Kuki and Naga as founding members, but later sidelining tribal interests. Since the late 1990s, the Meitei's ideas of Manipur increasingly become more exclusive, focusing on the integrity of land rather than its diverse people. This community, despite making up about 53 percent of Manipur's population, occupies only around 10 percent of the land. This disparity has fuelled a sense of insecurity among the Meitei, exacerbating ethnic tensions and contributing to the conflict in Manipur.

The Naga community aspires to establish a "Greater Nagaland" or "Nagalim," with a separate constitution and flag from India. While they share a tribal identity and Christianity with the Kuki-Zo, the Nagas pursue their distinct aspirations, excluding both the Meitei and Kuki-Zo. However, they do share common interests with the Kuki-Zo, such as protecting tribal rights and enforcing the provisions of the Hill Area Committee under Article 371 (C) of the Indian Constitution etc. This alliance on certain issues reflects their shared concerns over tribal rights protection, even as their broader political goals diverge significantly.

The Kuki-Zo community seeks separate administration in the form of a Union Territory with its own legislature within the Indian Constitution. They feel insecure under the majority Meitei administration, which is predominantly Hindu and more advanced. The Kuki-Zo perceives Meiteis as a threat to them with the widening disparity in matters of development, representation, and annexation of their land.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on secondary sources with a special focus on conflict and peace, conflict resolution, and management. A specific study on the Balkanisation of Yugoslavia parallels the experiences in Manipur. To fill the research gap based on the review, the researcher employs questionnaires to the directed victims and conflict-affected individuals to obtain information on historical grievances, failure of political leaders, economic and infrastructure

disparities, militarization and arms proliferation, and the role of media and hate speech in which fuel the conflict.

BALKANISATION OF STATE: LESSON FROM YUGOSLAVIA

In analyzing potential balkanization in Manipur, we can draw parallels with the Yugoslavian experience. Few factors to consider are:

Historical grievances and ethnic tensions

The historical grievances among various ethnic groups in Yugoslavia, such as the Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, Slovenes, Macedonians, Montenegrins, and Albanians, significantly contributed to long-standing tensions. The rise of nationalist movements in different republics emphasized ethnic identities and aspirations for independence, which undermined the unity of Yugoslavia (Glenny, M. 1994).

Similarly, in Manipur, historical and ethnic tensions among various groups, including the Meiteis, Nagas, Kuki-Zo, and Pangals (Muslims), have contributed to ongoing conflict. For instance, many Meiteis view the signing of the merger agreement with the Government of India in 1949 as a grave mistake. The Shillong Times edition of 27, 1949 gave a headlines *"Manipur "Annexed" by New Delhi, Maharaja signs Agreement at Shillong"*. The report was filed by the then Imphal Correspondent RK Maipaksana. The word "Annexed" written in the headline of the report clearly indicated that the merger was not done amicably (Neken, Seram. 2013)ⁱ. Many Meitei still long for special status of the Manipur state or even sovereign state from India.

On the other hand, the tribal communities feel they were not part of the merger agreement. They believe that the outer Manipur, the present Hill districts, need special autonomy, protected under Article 371 (C) of 1971. This provision empowers the formation of a Hill Area Committee to look after the Hill areas of Manipur. The tribal communities perceive exclusion and marginalization of the hill districts, fostering a sense of historical injustice. This exclusion has driven a wedge between different ethnic communities, leading to calls for greater autonomy and recognition. Each community has its own interests, and the majoritarian viewpoint often overlooks the feelings of the minority, while the minority is reluctant to bow to the majority's will. This dynamic perpetuates tension and conflict.

Failures of Political leadership

Political and leadership failures in Yugoslavia were evident through Josip Broz Tito's authoritarian regime, which initially upheld unity but suppressed rather than resolved ethnic tensions. Tito's death in 1980 created a power vacuum that weakened central control, intensifying ethnic divisions. Leaders like Slobodan Milošević in Serbia and Franjo Tuđman

in Croatia exploited these tensions for political gain. Milošević's promotion of Serbian nationalism and Tuđman's advocacy for Croatian independence escalated ethnic rivalries, ultimately contributing to Yugoslavia's dissolution (Bennett, C. 1995).

Tony Benn said "War is the failure of diplomacy." Likewise the present conflict in Manipur failure of Biren Singh led state government. At the initially stage he have a capacity to stop further violence. Few of Biren's policy and plans which result to present conflict are:

Ethnic Cleansing under the Pretext of Immigration: The first pretext to drive out tribals from their ancestral land was the accusation that they are illegal immigrants. Without reliable data and despite the decadal censuses of the Government of India from 1901 to 2011 showing normal growth rate among the non-Kuki-Zo, NBiren Singh and a group of political class label the Kuki-Zo tribals as illegal immigrants and foreigners. Following the footsteps of Nazi Germany under Hitler during the 1930s, where the Jewish community was blamed for all the misfortunes that befell Germany, the Chief Minister and radical Meitei intellectuals started blaming the Kuki-Zo tribals for all the problems—real or imaginary—in Manipur (Vualzong, G. 2024:28).

Violation of Land Rights through Forest Acts: The state government of Manipur, bypassing regulatory process, has declared extensive hill areas as "Reserved" and "Protected" forests. According to a report on the implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, as of January 31, 2020, stated that *"there has been no substantial progress in the implementation of the act due to the fact that the tribal communities and tribal chiefs are already holding ownership of forest land as they are ancestral land. Therefore, implementation of the said Act is likely to be very minimum"*. However on April 3, 2023, a committee chaired by the Chief Secretary decided to invalidate all land ownership documents within these areas, violating the rights of the Kuki-Zo tribes, who have long inhabited these hills. A surprise eviction drive in Kangchup on December 6, 2022, led to violent clashes and injuries. Additionally, on February 20, 2023, houses in K. Songjang village were demolished under the pretext of Khoupum Protected Forest. This selective enforcement suggests discriminatory practices against non-Naga tribes by the state government (Vualzong, G. 2023:28).

Suppression under the pretext of Drug on War: According to Vualzong (2023) Biren Singh selectively tag Kuki-Zo tribes as narco-terrorist. Initially, war on drugs was openly support by Kuki-Zo Churches, various Civil Society Organisations and Kuki militant organisation KNO and UPF. However, the habitual nature of the Chief Minister targeting a particular community and geographical areas inhabited by the Kuki-Zo show that the war on drugs which he initiates is not an honest policy but comes with a sinister agenda. His image suffered a blow when police officer Thounaojam Brinda accused him and top police officials of pressuring her to release a detained drug lord. The Manipur Human Rights Commission

(MHRC) also intervened, prompted by BJP MLA Lourembam Rameshwor's allegations implicating ministers, MLAs, and police officers in supporting drug lords.

Economic and Infrastructure Disparities

Significant economic disparities between the more developed northern republics (like Slovenia and Croatia) and the less developed southern regions (like Kosovo and Macedonia) fuelled resentment in Yugoslavia (Allcock, 2002). The economic crisis of the 1980s exacerbated existing inequalities and contributed to social unrest, making the centralized federal system increasingly untenable. Likewise Manipur have Economic disparities of Hill and valley in Manipur, few of the examples are unequal distribution of infrastructure development, Educational disparity, healthcare services and employment disparities.

Development and administrative Infrastructure: Major government hospitals and private hospitals which offer training for medical courses are located in the Imphal valley. Regional Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS), Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences (JNIMS), Shija Hospitals and Research Institute, City Hospital and Research Centre are all located in Imphal city. Moreover Government administrative offices like Manipur State Secretariat, Manipur Legislative Assembly; Manipur Police Headquarters, Manipur High Court etc are located in Imphal valley. Except compulsory district office like district administration DC office and other, no state level Infrastructure are constructed in Hill areas. The Imphal city is equipped with modern facilities and enjoys better connectivity. This is the main reason why a huge population of tribals also confined in valley districts. The hill areas suffer from poor infrastructure. Roads in the hills districts are hardly motorable with exception to district headquarters, limiting access to essential services and markets.

Educational Disparities: Disparities in Educational institutions is strongly evident from primary schools to colleges and University. Six valley districts have 26 colleges, while ten hill districts have only nine. The valley district have seven University namely Manipur University (1980), Central Agriculture University (1993), Nation Sports University (2018), Manipur Technical University (2016), DM College now DM University (1946). Private Universities like Bir Tikendrajit University (2020), Manipur International University (2018) has its based in Imphal. The only University situation in hill district is Indira Gandhi National Tribal University Regional campus (2017) its head office at Amarkantak MP.

Militarization and Armed Conflicts

Widespread acts of ethnic cleansing, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, created deep-seated animosities and irreversible divisions. The formation and actions of various militant and paramilitary groups escalated violence and deepened divisions. The United National Liberation Front (UNLF) was founded on 24 November 1964 which aims at establishing a

sovereign and socialist Manipur. It was founded by different communities of Manipur like Arambam Samarendra (Meitei) as General Secretary. Kalalung Kamei (Kabui Naga) President and Thangkhopao Singait (Kuki) as Vice President (the Raisina hills, Nov. 29, 2023).

However the idea of sovereign-inclusive movement under the banner of majority Meitei was vanishing later. The exclusive idea of the movement was reflected on ambush and killing of Kuki-Zo like T. Tualkhanpau the then SP Bishnupur by Meitei militants in April 9, 1996; the attack and killing of T. Thangthuam IGP (Intelligence) on Dec. 31, 2005 by Meitei militants; the rape and physical abuse of fifteen young girls at Lungthulen, Churachandpur on the January 16, 2006 are evidences as to why sovereign movement have turned into communal militant group. Furthermore, the planting of anti-personnel landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by Meitei militant groups like UNLF and KCP in Chandel, Churachandpur in 2004 – 2006 which led to 26 deaths and 75 injured in 66 blast (Vualzong, G., 2024)ⁱⁱ are few evidence on militarization led to conflict in Manipur.

Most recently is the Arambai Tenggol which aims to re-establish the pre-Hindu, native Sanamahi religion among the Meiteis. This organisation enjoys the patronage of Manipur's titular king and parliamentarian Leishemba Sanajaoba as well as the chief minister N. Biren Singh. This organisation is involved in looting over 6000 weapons from the armouries including 303 rifles, Medium Machine Guns (MMG) and AK assault rifles, carbines, Insas Light Machine Guns (LMG), Insas Rifles, M-16 and MP5 rifles. Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun have significantly contributed to the balkanisation of Manipur. These groups, driven by ethnic nationalism and a desire for greater control over their respective territories, engage in violent activities that exacerbate existing tensions between different communities. Their presence and operations create a climate of fear and insecurity, further deepening the divide between ethnic groups and undermining efforts toward peaceful coexistence.

Media and Propaganda

State-controlled media disseminated misinformation and nationalist rhetoric, further polarizing communities and deepening ethnic divisions. This manipulation of information played a crucial role in the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Likewise in Manipur the state-controlled media misinformed the massed and spread propaganda, including hate speech and incitement to violence against different ethnic groups. This significantly escalated tensions and contributed to the conflict.

Spread of fake news and its deadly consequences: The Print (July, 12, 2023) contradicted the claim that photo of a young woman's body wrapped in a plastic bag to be a Meitei woman raped and killed by Kuki men. The photo with the false claim was released just days after clashes broke out in Manipur on 3rd May. The woman in the photo was

later confirmed as Aayushi Chaudhary from Delhi who had been murdered by her parents in November 2022 – she was not a Manipur nursing student. But by then, the fake news had unleashed a new, deadly cycle of reprisal violence allegedly by Meitei mobs against Kuki tribal women. Inebriated men, some as young as 15 years old, dragged a Kuki woman in her 40s and a teenager to a paddy field in Kangpokpi district on 4 May and raped them. As their ordeal was on, the men screamed, “We will do to you what your men did to our women.” For them, this was retribution. “It was all because of a fake news. The men were saying ‘This is revenge for the Churachandpur case’,” said the woman to The Print,

Tagging Kuki-Zo as Narco-Terrorists: Regularly tagging of Kuki-Zo as narco-terrorist by different Meitei owned print media, digital media and other social networking sites violates journalist ethics. In fact, Kuki-Zo churches, Civil Society Organisation including Kuki Inpi and Kuki Students Organisation and Kuki-Zo militants like KNO and UPF openly support war on drugs and they are against the poppy cultivation and drug trafficking.

Despite poppy cultivation being reported in various districts including those dominated by Nagas, N.Biren Singh's focus on Kuki-Zo areas led to widespread support from Kuki-Zo tribal bodies and churches against illegal poppy planting. Reports from the Netherlands-based Transnational Institute highlighted Saikul, Ukhrul, and Chandel as hotspots (KSO, 2024). However, Manipur police data showed diverse involvement in drug cases, with arrests predominantly from Kuki-Zo tribes, Muslims, and Meiteis. This selective crackdown, coupled with hostile rhetoric, created a stigma associating Kuki-Zo tribals with drug cultivation, while broader drug syndicates often involving individuals from other communities received less scrutiny

Targeting Kuki-Zo as Refugees and Immigrants: The regular portrayal of Kuki-Zo community as refugees and immigrants is a form of misinformation that fuels hatred towards the group. This narrative is based on historical reports, such as RB Pemberton's 1835 report on the Eastern Frontier of India, which mentions the migration of Kukis in Manipur at the start of the 19th century, and a 1968 District Commissioner's letter referring to Kuki refugees from Burma. However, the Kuki-Zo community strongly asserts their indigeneity with substantial evidence. Following 51 years of Burma being a province of India, the Government of Burma Act 1935 led to the separation of India and Burma, resulting in the relocation of many ethnic communities Kukis across the two borders. One must also understand the nitty-gritty of displacements which have taken place before Manipur as a state was even born. The Khadawmi operation in Myanmar 1968 has displaced Kukis, Nagas and Meities equally. However, the blanket description of a community to have been immigrants from Myanmar holds little ground.

CONCLUSION

In the midst of conflict, there are no true victors, only enduring lessons from history that must guide our future. Peace, a precious commodity, cannot be forged amidst the chaos of

battle but must be painstakingly crafted at the negotiating table, where understanding and compromise can pave the way forward. It is crucial to recognize that in times of war, it is often the marginalized and vulnerable that bears the brunt of suffering and sacrifice while the powerful discuss strategies from a safe distance. The echoes of conflict extend beyond the immediate parties involved, affecting innocent onlookers and even the natural world around us.

Therefore, in addressing the Balkanisation of Manipur or any conflict, it is imperative to heed these lessons. We must strive for inclusive dialogue and mutual respect, recognizing the diverse aspirations and grievances of all communities. Legal and constitutional reforms, inclusive governance practices, and equitable economic development are not mere aspirations but essential steps towards lasting peace and prosperity. Ultimately, sustainable peace requires a collective commitment to learn from the past, embrace diversity, and build a future where the scars of conflict are healed through understanding, compassion, and justice for all. The solution lies to reasons together what is the problem not who are the problems.

Thus, the nature of conflict needs legal and constitutional solution from the Government. Implementing constitutional reforms that grant greater autonomy to ethnic communities can address their aspirations for self-governance. Ensuring adequate representation of all ethnic groups in legislative bodies can help in the fair distribution of resources and political power. Strengthening legal frameworks to protect the rights of minority communities, including land rights and cultural preservation, can build trust and reduce grievances.

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