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### Introduction

Manipur, one of the North-Eastern states in India, is a state of diversities. The state has a total area of 22,327 sq. km. with a population of 23,93,896. Geographically speaking, the state has two distinct regions – the valley at the heart of the state and the hills surrounding the valley. The entire area of the state is divided into nine districts. Of these four are in the valley. They are Imphal West, Imphal East, Thoubal and Bishnupur Districts. The remaining five are in the hills. They are Ukhrul, Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong and Churachandpur Districts. The valley is inhabited by the Meiteis who constitute an overwhelming majority of the people there, along with the Pangals or Manipuri Muslims, who constitute the single largest minority community in the state.

The valley also has a number of localities where different tribes reside.

The hills of the state, on the other hand, are more or less exclusively inhabited by 33 officially recognized tribes. Of these, Aimol, Anal, Angami, Chiru, Chothe, Kabui, Kacha Naga, Koirao, Koirang, Kom, Lamkang, Maring, Maram, Mao, Monsang, Moyon, Sema, Tangkhul, Poumai, Purum, Tarao, and Kharam are Naga tribes. Regarding the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group or the Kukis, they are Gangte, Hmar, Lushai, Paite, Ralte, Simte, Sahte, Thadou, Vaiphei, Zou and Any Kuki Tribes. Regarding the geographical dispersal of the different tribes in the hills of the state, Ukhrul and Tamenglong Districts are overwhelmingly dominated by the Nagas whereas Churachandpur District is overwhelmingly dominated by the Kukis. In the other two remaining districts, Chandel and Senapati, both Nagas and Kukis constitute two more or less equally effective communities there. Speaking in terms of their representation in the state legislative assembly, the six Assembly Constituencies (ACs) in Ukhrul and Tamenglong Districts (three each) always return Naga

MLAs whereas the six ACs of Churachandpur district always return Kuki MLAs. In case of Senapati District, out of a total of six ACs, both groups have won three each, and the two ACs in Chandel District are also divided into one each between the Nagas and the Kukis. At present the two groups have ten MLAs each in the state legislative assembly having 60 members.

It is important, however, to note that none of the five hill districts are exclusively inhabited by one particular tribe or group of tribes. In fact, there are many Kuki villages in Ukhrul and Tamenglong district, more so in case of the latter. There are also many Naga villages, particularly of those Nagas belonging to the Zeliangrong group of the Naga people (a group within the Naga community) in Churachandpur District. In case of Chandel and Senapati Districts, as already mentioned, both constitute two more or less equally effective communities there. Indeed, there was one Kuki candidate each in as many as five Naga dominated ACs (all the three ACs of Tamenglong District, Ukhrul AC of Ukhrul District and Karong AC of Senapati District).

### The Kuki-Naga Clashes of the 1990s

The Kuki-Naga clashes which started around the middle of 1992 continued till the middle of the 1990s. Though it was popularly described as the Kuki-Naga clashes, it was mainly between the Nagas and the Thadou speaking Kukis of the state. Nonetheless, many other tribes of the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group were also affected during the clashes. In fact, the Kuki-Paite clash in Churachandpur District during 1997-98 was also a ramification of the Kuki-Naga clashes.<sup>1</sup> Various factors, both historical and contemporary, have contributed to the outbreak of the clashes. Elements of rivalry were there in the traditional relationship between the two. Raids and reprisals often took place among the villages of different ethnic communities. The usual practice of divide and rule was also fully operative in course of the consolidation of the British rule over the different ethnic groups of Manipur. Among the contempo-

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rary factors, the most important one was that of the claim for exclusive ownership rights over land. While the Nagas demand for unification of the Naga inhabited areas into a single political unit, sovereign or otherwise, irrevocably assumes their absolute ownership of all the hill districts of the state except Churachandpur, the Kukis insist that they have been living in the state for centuries, that they live in the territory of the Indian Union as free citizens, that there is nothing like Kukis usurping Naga areas or vice-versa and that the villages of both communities have their own respective well defined and long established boundaries. The existence of numerous militant ethnic outfits as protagonists of such claims and counterclaims; extortion of homeland taxes; quit notices served by one group to another; fight for control over resources; disagreements on sharing of the development opportunities; inefficient administration; lack of effective policing; poor governance; etc. also have contributed to the outbreak of the clashes.

Once started, the clashes spread like wild fire and within no time the entire state was in the grip of unprecedented ethnic violence. It affected all the five hill districts of the state. Of these five, Chandel was the most troubled and affected district<sup>2</sup> while Ukhrul and Senapati Districts were the less affected districts.<sup>3</sup> Tamenglong was also very much affected. Churachandpur District was a different case in the sense that the clash in the district was not so much of a Kuki-Naga clash but a case of Kuki-Paite clashes, two tribes belonging to the same Kuki-Chin-Mizo group of tribes. While the clashes in Ukhrul and Senapati Districts were mainly between the Tangkhul Nagas and the Thadou Kukis, the clashes in Tamenglong District were mainly between the Zeliangrong Nagas and the Thadou Kukis. In case of Chandel District, though it was mainly between the Naga tribes and the Thadou Kukis, a number of other intermediate tribes were also drawn into the whirlpool of the clashes in the district. It may also be noted

here that while the Kuki Naga clashes showed a steady decline during the second half of the 1990s, fresh and intense ethnic clashes took place in Churachandpur during the period from 1997-98. Overall, the violent clashes have claimed about 2000 lives and many more were injured. Many were also maimed for the rest of their lives. More than 500 villages were attacked and about 7,000 houses were burnt down to ashes. It also led to the displacement of about 15,000 families and more than one lakh people.

Impact of the clashes on the inter-community relations among the people in the hills:

The ethnic clashes were a grim reminder of the threats posed by the contest over land, demand for exclusive ethnic homelands and erosion of ideals of peaceful coexistence to the unity and integrity of the people inside a plural society. It has adversely affected the sense of unity and integrity among the various communities in the hills thereby seriously disturbing the inter-community relationship among the various ethnons inside the state. First of all it inflicted deep wounds in the relationship between the Nagas and the Thadou speaking Kukis. The relationship between the Nagas and other tribes of the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group of people

also got seriously strained as various other tribes belonging to the later group of people were also sucked into the whirlpool of the clashes. Besides, the relationship between the Thadou speaking Kukis and other non-Thadou speaking Kukis also got strained as anyone who was not on one's side became a potential enemy or collaborator with the enemy, and was viewed with suspicion. The most tragic manifestation of this was that of the Kuki-Paite clashes during the late 1990s.

While the clashes have not affected the ethnic affiliations of the major tribes inside the state, the same cannot be said about the small and vulnerable tribes. As violent clashes spread, the efforts of the latter to keep themselves away from the clashes went in vain. The dominant groups



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tried to drag these tribes within their fold in their efforts to strengthen themselves and expand their group identity vis-à-vis the position of their opponents. In the process, many of them found themselves helpless even though they wanted to maintain their unaffiliated position. Many of the small tribes were also either surrounded by or in proximity with different dominant groups and in the quest for the all-important security during the clashes many of these villages had to identify themselves with different dominant groups. As a result, villages of the same tribe were found claiming themselves as belonging to either the Naga or the Kuki group in accordance with the dominant community surrounding them or with whom they had proximity. This, in fact, became an important factor afterwards in these tribes' moving closer to either of the two major groups involved in the clashes.

There also has emerged a tendency among many tribes within the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group to assert themselves by their individual tribes. This may be because of the fact that it was mainly the Thadou speaking Kukis who were initially involved in the clashes. The Thadou is also the most prominent tribe among the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group of tribes. There were already resentments among the other tribes within this group about the dominance of the Thadous and after the harrowing experiences of the clashes they started distancing themselves all the more from the Thadous. However, this has not happened among the Naga group of tribes.

The demands for more or less ethnically exclusive homelands have also created a fear on the part of the smaller tribes of being swamped by bigger tribes. One may cite the plight of the KOMREM people of the state here. The word Komrem is the united banner of six small tribes of Manipur viz. Aimol, Chiru, Kharam, Koireng, Kom and Purum. At present, the Komrem people in the state are reported to be about 32,000.<sup>4</sup> They aspire to preserve their own distinct identity as different from other groups. Yet

pressure from other more powerful groups to come within their respective folds is there. Their situation is rendered all the more vulnerable due to their not living in a compact area.

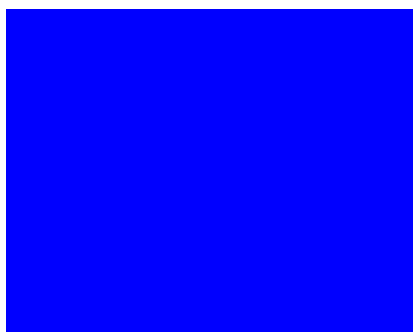
The clashes also have resulted in increased polarization among the groups. Prior to the clashes the people used to exercise their franchise without any consideration of ethnic groups to which a candidate may belong. Now after the clashes they tend to cast their vote on ethnic lines. With the people giving more and more emphasis on their respective ethnic affiliations, people are divided on ethnic lines all the more. Earlier, the Kukis voted and campaigned for Naga candidates but the clashes have changed it all. Now casting their votes, both in state and Lok Sabha elections, on ethnic lines is the norm. In other words polarization on ethnic lines has taken place to a very great extent.

It is true that in most of the affected villages, nowadays there is no longer restriction on entering and free movement of different communities inside the villages. But in many villages, inter-marriage got less frequent though inter-dining still continues. Besides, even after the clashes have subsided, there are places where inter-village as well as inter-tribal relationship continue to be strained on account of finding ones former village being occupied by another after they returned from their places of displacement and their being refused the return of their villages to them. For example, the Aimols of Aimol Louchilbung Village, Churachandpur District have found their land occupied by the Kabuis after they returned to their original site. Often the villages where clashes took place remained deserted for long times and many were abandoned permanently. Many also decided not to return even though majority their fellow villagers have decided to return. Many have also established new villages.

The last significant gesture for reconciliation was made on 14<sup>th</sup> November 2003 when Baptist Church leaders of the

state, along with Dr. Dentan Lotz and Mr. Zac Patnaik, General Secretary and Vice President of Baptist World Alliance (New York), made a Peace Declaration and planted a sapling (called peace tree by many) in the presence of some Kuki and Naga church leaders. The Declaration was a firm pledge to send out beams of bonhomie to fetch ways and means to do all the good one can do to all the people instead of “driving a wedge between Christian groups with the sole motive to have an edge over some” in the interest of leaving a legacy of “physical safety, spiritual security and social harmony” for the people.<sup>5</sup> Yet the grim reality of the clashes between ethnic outfits persists. In fact there was a serious clash on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2007 between the NSCN (IM) and the Kuki Liberation Army (KLA) which led to the killing ten KLA cadres.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as the Declaration itself says, the state of things remains as one of “potentially reversible amity”.<sup>7</sup>

lacked the political will, strength of resolution, persistent efforts and sensitivity to intervene in time. It was rather a case of the clashes subsiding by themselves simply because they cannot continue forever. For the police and security personnel also, it was most of the time a story of rushing to the site after the clashes have already taken place. It is so tragic to note that though there were vigils from the security personnel to the villages from time to time they were never on hand when the attacks took place. At most they will come only after the damage has already been inflicted in the form of houses burnt, properties destroyed



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and people killed. Many of the administrative officials were also not free from criminal negligence. They failed to realize the magnitude of the sufferings of the victims. Complaints of the security forces taking sides and supporting one group against the other were also too many for comfort. It is true that the security personnel have to flush out militants from villages whenever they are there. But while doing so they should not make use of innocent villagers. Otherwise, this will invite the wrath of the militants on the villagers and make them soft targets of their retaliation.

One also cannot overlook the effect which the ongoing peace talks between the Government of India and the NSCN (IM) will have in securing peace and communal harmony among the various sections of the people inside the state. Coming on the heels of the prolonged ethnic clashes of the 1990s, Kukis have many misgivings about the ongoing GOI-NSCN (IM) peace talks. They are naturally sensitive to any possible impact it could have on them. The claim for a sovereign Nagaland covered various areas presently inhabited by them. It was also obvious to them that the underground Naga outfits had a hand in the clashes and in addition to that they have received quit notices from the Nagas on more than one occasion already. Undisputed and exclusive claim over land was the single most basic reason for the clashes. So they insist: “The present ongoing talks

**Concluding Observations**

A number of things have to be taken into account if one is to find a lasting solution to the whole problem. For one, there is no denying the fact that the clashes were the handiwork of the militants. They were responsible not only for the outbreak of the clashes but also with the continuation of the clashes. This was evident from the fact that whenever there was an attack on a village there were militants welding sophisticated weapons like AK-47 and others. The entire episode also shows how militant outfits can perpetrate violence and seriously damage communal harmony. Dealing with these underground outfits has proven to be an uphill task. Village chiefs and church leaders tried their best to bring a peaceful life. Yet, they have failed more often than not to convince various militant groups.

Lack of timely intervention also has led to the loss many precious lives. Had it been made, much of the problems of the people would have been avoided. The state government

between the GOI and NSCN (IM) poise intense doubt and total mystery to the good citizens of India’s North East in general and the Kukis in particular.”<sup>8</sup> It cautioned the peace negotiations between the two saying that the Government’s peace initiative with the NSCN (IM) alone may endanger the prospects of peace in the region and would blow the lid off the Pandora’s Box.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, they insist that the Prime Minister must take the Kukis into account before an amicable solution is tabulated by him with the NSCN (IM).<sup>10</sup> The Kuki Students’ Organization (KSO) also insists that the GOI should take Kukis into confidence before making any deal with the Nagas. It says that the Government of India “has no right to negotiate Nagas without participation of the Kukis” and that their slogan is “Do not give away our lands to bargain the Nagas”.<sup>11</sup>

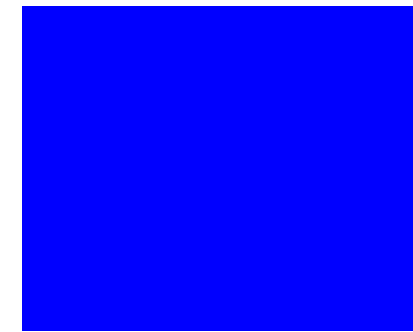
There is one more thing which has to be always kept in sight while dealing with the entire problem of the ethnic clashes. At the core of the problem there are the claims and counter claims of exclusive ethnic territories which are in one way or the other bound to have adverse effects on the territorial integrity of the state. For the Meiteis in the valley, the hills and plains of Manipur constitute one organic whole never to be severed from one another. Indeed the threat which the problem poses to the

territorial integrity of the state was time and again raised by the politicians and public leaders. However, so far political parties inside the state and the state legislative assembly have been unanimous about their stand to protect the territorial integrity of the state. Overlooking this fact is bound to seriously endanger the already disturbed inter-community relations inside the state.

The following suggestions may be made in order to better promote the interests of communal harmony among the various groups inside the state:

1. To develop administrative efficiency and security preparedness.

2. To station neutral/non-communal officers so that equal justice could be dispensed to all.
3. To assure equal treatment to all the different ethnic groups by the government.
4. To create avenues for mutual interaction on common platforms so that both may come together and indulge in healthy socio-cultural exchanges and exercises together.
5. To encourage inter-community prayers.
6. To find ways and means to encourage the people to cherish and nurture the pluralistic identity of the



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society and develop a greater spirit of accommodation among them.

7. Government should be non-partisan while dealing with militants of different ethnic groups.
8. Development is necessary. It is true that absence of peace stands in the way to development. However, it is also true that neglect of development leads to discontent and it leads to disturbance of peace. The government must also work towards development in an even manner.
9. The grievances of the displaced people should be justly redressed. So far this has not been done. The people have been demanding this all the while. However their demands have fallen to deaf ears so far.
10. Both the central and state governments must take up all the necessary

steps to find a meaningful, just and lasting solution to the problem of ethnic conflict among the different tribes of the state. Half hearted measures won’t solve the problem. The interests and identity of the smaller tribes must also be justly protected. Otherwise there is fear on the part of the smaller tribes of being swamped by the bigger tribes and in the simmering conflict, the arming of the groups can lead to various configurations and conflict situations with different political objectives.

11. It is also high time that the Government of India answers the questions of the Kukis that are they not

- Indians and are they not living inside the Indian Territory or are they living in the land of the Nagas.
12. Peace cannot be there as long as long as insurgent ethnic armies who champion exclusive ethnic homelands continue to be there. Both the state and the central government should justify their own existence by securing good governance to the people.
13. Demands for ethnically exclusive homelands should be given up in the interest of all. [\[13\]](#)

### Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup> Manipur Cultural Integration Conference and Ethnic Community in Manipur (A Report of the MCIC visiting team), 1996, p. 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Memorandum submitted by the CRN to the Chief Minister, Manipur, seeking intervention to cause equitable division of share of project property: EGE-9402071660-944041 CRN-VVD Relief/Rehabilitation program 1994-95, p. 2.
- <sup>4</sup> 50 Years of KRBCA (Komrem Baptist Church Association) and Ahead issued and published by Mission Department, KRBCA, 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> Manipur Peace Initiative Declaration, dated 14<sup>th</sup> November 2003, Kangpokpi Mission Compound.
- <sup>6</sup> Poknapham, a local vernacular daily, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2007, p. 1.
- <sup>7</sup> Manipur Peace Initiative Declaration, op. cit.
- <sup>8</sup> An open letter to the PM of India from the Kuki International Forum, USA, Tulsa, OK-74136, dated January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2003.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
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*The views expressed in the write-up are personal and do not reflect the official policy or position of the organization.)*