

ETHNIC RELATIONS AMONG THE PEOPLE OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

Editor

N. JOYKUMAR SINGH

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**CENTRE FOR MANIPUR STUDIES
&
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Among the People of North-East India



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Preface

Situated between two cultural realms, that of India in the West and the Southeast Asian countries in the east, the Northeast has been experiencing contested identity formations and dynamic ethnic relations for centuries. Ethnic relations in the region is thus associated with its social, cultural, economical, political and historical experiences. They have their ramifications in identity formations, ethnic conflicts and territorial assertions. These ramifications are promoted or even contested on the basis of "unique" histories, cultures and affinities of the people in the region. Such bases are not always free from prejudice and political motivations. This results in contested views on identities of the ethnic groups, their territorial assertions and the conflict situations.

It was in this context that the need to address the different aspects of the ethnic relations in the region was felt. And the Centre for Manipur Studies, Manipur University thus envisaged a seminar on the theme, "Ethnic Relations among the People of the Northeast India with Special Reference to Manipur" to generate a wide spectrum of views on the issue from different cross-sections of the intelligentsia including historians, political scientists, economists, geographers, sociologists, social workers and others. The seminar was held on 10th to 11th November, 2004 at Manipur University. The present volume is a product of the collection of the proceeding papers.

Prof. Gangmumei Kamei's key not address highlights the issue in the context of the geographical, historical and cultural situations of the region. He introduces the historical, economic and religious aspects of ethnic relations, and ethnic tension in Manipur. Prof. Amar Yumnam's paper, "Ethnic Relationship in Manipur: Good, Bad, Good" gives a critical analysis of the economic basis of ethnic relationship in Manipur in different historical epochs. He also examines the implications of such ethnic relations. Konjengbam Meghachandra Singh, in his paper "Ethnic Relations in Manipur: An Urban Experience" explores the relations of the ethnic groups who developed their territorial spaces within the capital city of Manipur. Aheibam Koireng Singh's paper "Dynamics of Kuki-Naga Inter-Group Relations in Manipur: 1992-2000" addresses the genesis, ramifications of the Kuki-Naga conflict in Manipur. Dr. M. Ranjana, in his paper "Socio-Political Relation between the Moirangs and the Ningthoujas during Historical Period" explains the relationship between the two principalities in terms of the social values and practices from the earliest historical times. Dr. M.C. Arun's paper "Ethnicity and Ethnic Fragmentation: The Question of Bishnupriya" gives a critical examination of the process of ethnic amalgamation by which Bishnupriyas became a part of the Manipur society and the fragmentation of the society, that resulted in the 'Bishnupriya-Meitei conflict'. Dr. S. Mangi's paper "The Kuki-Paite Clash (1997-98) in Manipur: A study" is a critical evaluation of the genesis and extent of the Kuki-Paite clash and the various reconciliation processes to resolve it. Dr. Suresh, in his paper "A Comparative Study on Ahom Tai and Meitei Dead Rituals", explores the death rituals of the Tai and Meiteis and the affinities in cultural practices of the two people. Dr. Amal Sanasam's paper "Social Integration in Early Manipur : Some Aspects" analysis the historical circumstances of social integration in ancient Manipur and process of integration among the different communities and clans in both the Hills and the Valleys.

The Centre for Manipur Studies is greatly indebted to Prof. N. Bijoy Singh, Former Vice-Chancellor, Manipur University for his kind and generous initiative in organizing the seminar. The Centre also extends its gratitude to Prof. C. Amuba Singh, Vice-Chancellor of the Manipur University for his generous initiatives in the publication of the proceeding papers. The seminar was made successful by the valuable papers of the contributors. Many research scholars, faculty members and staff of the Centre and the University made painful contributions in the organization of the seminar. The Centre extends its thanks and gratitude to the contributors and all those persons who have contributed in the organization of the seminar. Last, but not the least, the Centre to expresses its indebtedness to Shri M.P. Misra Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi for taking all the initiatives in the publication of the present volume.

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Devi, M Ranjana is a Lecturer in Standard Collage, Imphal. Her area of specialization is ancient history of India. She has contributed in a number of research journals and presented a number of seminar papers on various aspects of the ancient history of Manipur.

Kamei, Gangmumei is former professor of the Department of History, Manipur University, Manipur. He is a distinguished academician and historian of the Northeast. He has authored a number of books on historiography, regional history and identity questions, besides his numerous articles in professional journals. He is also a great social worker.

Sanasam, Amal is a Research Associate in the Centre for Manipur Studies, Manipur University, Manipur. As a sociologist, he is specialized in traditional values, practices and statecraft. He is credited with a number of publications in these aspects. His numerous articles reflect the traditional practices, social problems of the scheduled

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Singh, Konjengbam Meghachandra is a research scholar of the Department of History, Manipur, University, Manipur. He has a geographical background and his area of specialization is urban and regional studies. He has been associated in projects sponsored by national bodies such as the Planning Commission of India and the National Commission for Women.

Singh, Aheibam Koireng is a research scholar of the Department of Political Science, Manipur, University Manipur. His area of specialization is identity questions and conflict resolution. He has been associated in a project on Kuki-Naga conflict and the internally displaced people in Manipur, sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi.

Singh, S. Mangi is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, Manipur University. He is specialized in socio-political problems. Besides his contribution in a number of professional journals, and seminar proceedings, he has also been engaged in a number of projects sponsored by national bodies such as ICSSR and CSDS, New Delhi.

Suresh, L. is a medical practitioner by profession. He has a special knowledge of Tai-Studies with his expertise in the language, culture and environment of the Tais. Being a social worker, he has also contributed in the study of cultural affinities and identity questions.

Yumnam, Amar is a professor of Economic, Manipur University. He is distinguished economist of the region. Besides his contributions in professional journals and other publications he has also been actively engaged in planning and policy-making at the international and national levels. He has been associated with international bodies such as World Bank, UNDP, Asian Development Bank, etc. in various projects.

Ethnic Relation among the People of the North-East with Special Reference to Manipur

— Gangmumei Kamei

A Unique and Strategic Situation

The Northeast is a unique and strategic geographic situation, which is the meeting place of different races and ethnic groups surrounded by China, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. India meets Southeast Asia and Central Asia in Northeast India. This is reflected in her ethnic and cultural pluralism.

Ethnic Diversity

The Northeast presents an ethnic diversity which is a part of India's plural society. Diversity is a special feature of the ethnic composition of the racial movements into and across the eastern Himalayas, the Brahmaputra valley and the surrounding great mountain mass during different periods of history from the ancient times to the modern times. The main segments of the population are the Tibeto-Burmans who are also known as the Indo-Mongoloids; the Australoid and Indo-Aryan. The ethnic groups migrated from the southwest China, crossing Tibet, the eastern Himalayas and northern Myanmar. The Indo-Aryans came from the great plains of mainland India.

Ethnic relation among the people is essentially between these three racial groups. But within their broad relation, there are various sub-groups who form the distinct ethnic entities on the basis of language, ethnicity, religion and culture. The greatest ethnic groups are the Bodo-kacharis with about a dozen tribes such as the Garos, Tripuris, Dimasa, Rabha, Mech, Bodo-proper etc. Then came the ancient Austroloids, the Khasi and Jaintias, also the Meities, Nagas, Karbis, Kukis-chins, Mizos, the Ahom, the Indo-Aryan speaking Assamese and various Indian migrant communities like the Bengali, Bihari, Marawari, the Santals and other tea garden tribes who came to northeast India during the British colonial period onwards.

Emergence of the Ethnic State

The ancient states were Pragjyotish and Kamarupa which were established by the Bodo people but later on controlled by the Aryan colonizers from the northern India imposing their rule over the Bodo-speaking tribes. The ancient Meiteis established their Kingdom of Kangleipak (renamed Manipur in the 18th century). The Kacharis established their Kingdom in upper Assam with Dimapur as the capital from the 10th to the 16th century. The Bodo state of Tripura was established in the early middle ages. After decline of the Hindu kingdom of Kamarupa, the Mau-Shans known as Tai-Ahoms migrated to upper Assam from upper Burma and established their kingdom in AD1228. They ruled in Assam from the 13th to the early 19th century. In the 13th century, the Muslims invaded Assam from the west, starting from Bhakhtiyar Khalji's inroads to the large scale Mughal invasion and maintained the sovereignty of Assam under them. In the modern times, with the rise of the Burmese imperialism and the British colonial policy of opening up of the north eastern frontier led to the Anglo-Burmese war (1824-26) which resulted in the conquest of Assam and other principalities. In the 19th century the British conquered all the states and

ethnic groups. All the former states were reduced to the states of districts and the tribes were constituted into administrative units, districts and sub-divisions. Only Manipur, Tripura and the Khasi States could maintain their distinct political entities under the British paramountcy. In the post independence periods, Assam was balkanized into four states Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram. Manipur and Tripura were upgraded to statehood; so also Arunachal Pradesh

Manipur: A Land of Homogeneity and Heterogeneity.

Manipur stands out as a unique state in the whole region. Manipur is a multi ethnic state. Her population consists of the Meiteis, the Nagas, the Kuki-Chins, and the Muslim. These are also migrant communities from mainland India like the Bengalis, Biharis, Sikhs, Marwaris, Nepali, recently the Tamils. Manipur is a meeting place of different racial groups. The movements of people into the State from the prehistorical times down to the present is a great historical phenomenon. The hill state with a beautiful oval valley in the middle attracted various people for trade, wealth and glory. Manipur was never an isolated country. She is the gateway between India and south East Asia.

Underneath the outward ethnic diversity, these are elements of affinity. The indigenous Meiteis, the Nagas and Kuki Chin are all Tibeto Burman racially and linguistically. They speak different linguistic sub-group of the Tibeto Burman family. Linguists and Anthropologist have found and established the root of the Tibeto Burman family. However, the Meitei(Manipuri) has a highly developed literature and is recognized as the Modern Language in Indian universities and a regional language included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. There are affinities in the roots of the Meitei, Naga and Kuki-Chin languages. Because of the common origin of Tibeto Burman family who migrated from Southwest China Upper Myanmar of the state, there is also ethnic affinity among these communities of

Manipur. In the course of their long history there grew up close cultural relationship among the ethnic groups of Manipur particularly between the Meitei and Nagas; and later on the Kukis. The folklore prevalent in the hills and valley relates the close contact between the Naga tribes and the Meiteis and also with the kings. The ethnic and cultural relation between the Meitei clans and the Tangkhuls are well known. The relation between the Moirang principality with the Rongmei Moyon-Monsang and Anals are all recorded facts. The intermarriage between the Meitei culture heroes who were deified into gods-preserved in the tradition of marriage between Soraren of Koubru and a girl of Harok Konthou tribe (now identified as Konthoujam Lairema), Wangbren, a Meitei God of Sugnu with an Anal girl of Anal Khullen is indicative of the strong link. The Tangkhul-Meitei tradition of origin from Khangkhui cave and the migration of the younger brother Meitei in the valley is a popular tradition. The tradition of Kabui Salang Maiba (Ram ngampou) of Ningthi village in the Khamba-Thoibi epic is supported by History. The marriage of Meitei kings with Naga girls (for example Maràm Naga) is history. The Nongpok-Ningthou-Panthoibi tradition in the LaiHaraoba festival (Tangkhul Saba) is the living proof of the ancient connection between the Meitei and Tangkhuls.

Over and above the close ethnic and cultural links the various ethnic groups are bound by economic interdependence. There were barter trades in the traditional economy. And this barter trade produced a close social linkage. In the nineteenth century, there were a large number of tribal converted into Hinduism and absorbed into Meitei social fold. In the post-independence period with the development modern education and relation facilitated by of government service and trade, there are now a lot of intermarriages between the Meiteis and tribes. Most of the major families of the Meitei have tribal daughter-in-laws.

Economic Relation

North East India and Manipur are on the international trade route. In ancient times there were brisk trade between North East India and China on the one hand and the Roman world on the other. The Roman and Greek writers, especially Claudius Ptolemy in his *Geographika* and Periplus of the Erytherian sea by an unnamed author refer to the tribal communities in eastern India like Kirhadia (Kirates), Nangalogae (Nagas), Besatau etc. And the brisk trade with the Roman Empire in the second century AD through South India has been referred to. The excavations at Ambari in modern Guwahati confirm the Roman trade. The region also served as trade route between China and Central Asia. Within the region, there were trade between hill men of the eastern Himalayas with the people living in the north bank of the Brahmaputra. The Garos, Khasis and Jaintias were great traders with the Bengali traders in the Surma valley. The Nagas, particularly the Angamis, the Lhotas and the Aos are great trading tribes. There were regular trade flow between the Brahmaputra valley and upper Burma across the Patkai mountain; that preceded the Ahom migration and conquest of Assam. Manipur was on the trade route between India and Burma. The international caravan trade between Manipur and Burma continued throughout history with their hostile relations. The Mizos are great traders who have connections with the Bengalis of the Bengal-plains, the Chins hills of Burma, Assam and Manipur.

Since the colonial period with development of road and communication, especially railways, the economic relations among the people of Northeast have greatly increased .

Religious Aspect of the Ethnic Relation

The indigenous people of the region have their own religious belief and practices. But the religious groups in mainland India have brought Vedic Hinduism, and Buddhism to region. But from within the region was developed Tantrik

Hinduism with the Temple of Kamakhya as the centre. Then Vajrayana or Tantrik Buddhism grew up. In the medieval times, Islam was brought by the Muslim invaders who came along with Muslim immigrants to Assam. After the British conquest in the nineteenth century, Christianity was introduced and the hill people had accepted this foreign faith. While Hinduism and Islam were confined to the Brahmaputra and Manipur valley, Buddhism was brought in from Tibet and upper Myanmar.

In the medieval period there was a strong Vaisnavite reform movement, popularly known as Bhakti movement under the leadership of Shri Shankardeva. Under his inspiring leadership Vaisnavism was spread to many tribal communities of Assam like, Bodo, Kachari, Chutya, Baraha etc. Even many Nagas accepted vaisnavism. Some tribes of Arunachal Pradesh still follow Vaisnavism. Shakta Hinduism was accepted by the Ahom rulers and there was conflict between the Shakta Hindus and the Vaisnavites. Manipur valley, Tripura and Cachar accepted Vaisnavism. Amidst these well-established religion, there are the indigenous religious traditions flourishing. Mention may be made of the Sanamahi religious cult of the Meiteis who are found in Manipur and Assam; the Seng Khasi of Meghalaya, the Donyi Polo of Arunachal and the Ting Kao Ragwang Chapriak among the Zeliangrong people of Manipur Assam and Nagaland and the Brahma Dharma among the Bodos of Assam. Except the belligerent Christian proselytism, there was a harmonious religious relation among the people of the region.

Ethnic Tension

However during the post independence period, there was tension between various ethnic groups in the region. The first occasion was the official language issue. Assamese as the official language and Bengalis as the District level official language of Barak valley. There are conflicts between the

Bengalis and Tripuris in Tripura, the Kuki-Naga conflict in Manipur is quite well known. There was anti Santal riot in the Bodo-land, the conflict between the Kukis , Hmars and Dimasa in North cachar hills. These ethnic conflicts have posed a great danger to the ethnic relationship in the region. The basic cause of these conflicts is the question of possession of lands. While the earlier indigenous settlers are jealously guarding their rights to land, the new comers have to struggle for livelihood. While the Kuki-Naga conflict has been resolved, the Tripuri-Bengali tension remains. The Dimasa are still struggling for the protection of their homeland; the clash of interest between the Garo and the Khasi reflects the simmering ethnic situation in the region.

Ethnic Relationships in Manipur: Good, Bad, Good

— Amar Yumnam

Introduction

The issue of inter-ethnic relationships now inhabit almost every academic discourse in the social sciences in Manipur. This is to be welcomed given the fact that, despite being small in geographical space, the State is characterised by plurality of ethnic groups. But, unfortunately for all of us, the discourse has arisen in the context of heightened inter-ethnic tensions in the State. Nevertheless, the fact that it has taken the form of an involved dialogue provides the silver lining to the emerging scenario. I shall attempt in this paper to articulate the economic reasons for the present not so calm relationships among the various ethnic groups in the State. Before I proceed I should explain my understanding of a good or bad relationship. My understanding of this is necessarily contextual. I would call an ethnic relationship a good one if all the diverse groups function as usual, and do not articulate and express any reservations, either orally or physically, on the dealings with the other group. Not only would the various groups express the relationships as good, but also seem to be good. Any untoward incident involving persons of two different ethnic groups would not lead to any

inert-ethnic misunderstanding, and there would be endogenous processes in place with which each community would address such issues without involving the other group; even if an individual starts articulating issues against the other community in terms of ethnicity, it would never reach the organisational level. On the other hand, an inter-ethnic relationship would be a bad one if each group develops suspicion of the other, and articulates and expresses, either orally or physically, reservations against the other group for any social, political or economic outcome. Any untoward incident involving persons of two different ethnic groups would have a tendency to turn into an inter-ethnic tension, and the endogenous forces for addressing such issues within a group would be weak.¹ In such an atmosphere even if an individual does not articulate and try to convert an incident into an inter-ethnic one, there would be ready organisations for doing so.

The conventional understanding of modernisation and development is that ethnicity would disappear gradually and classes would emerge instead. There would be no sharpening of ethnic identity and ethnic based articulations. Recent social capital literature establishes that maintaining an individualised specific identity would be a very costly affair.² Ethnicity can serve, in appropriate circumstances, as a social capital for promoting modernisation. Ethnicity can, on the other hand, be even mobilised for political ends, violence included.

The Good Past

That the ethnic relationships were good in the past is not disputed by any party. In fact, the most dominant nostalgias are the sharing of ancestral origins and the direct person to person interaction till the recent past. Though many imperfections of these historical relationships, particularly the one between the valley-dwelling larger numbered Meeteis and the various ethnic groups settling mostly in the hills,

have been pointed out recently, yet the commonality of ancestral origins and mutual festivities in the historical past are not questioned. The royal chronicles and the oral history traditions are full of anecdotes and stories of such mutuality of existence, survival, cooperation, and commonality of ancestral origins.³

The Bad Present

My concern in this paper, however, is not with the *good past*, but with the *bad present*. I shall attempt, as mentioned earlier, to give an economic explanation why the *bad present* has emerged out of the *good past*. There are two aspects in this. First, the *good past* had, on hindsight, elements of its own backlash. Secondly, the various interactions in the recent present have not served the purpose of an integrated development of a multi-ethnic economy. There is no tight demarcation in the time line of these two aspects. In fact, elements for the backlash had continued till recent past as well.

The backlash: The backlash causes are fundamentally sociological if we look at it historically and even the articulations are fundamentally sociological. Historically, the Meeties have inhabited the location-friendly valley area and have been the ruling as well as the more advanced of the different ethnic groups in the State. On hindsight, the attitude and treatment of the other ethnic groups inhabiting the hills by the Meeties had not been one of equality and inclusion. This naturally had created a certain kind of alienation and feeling for vengeance. This atmosphere would not have lasted if we could evolve an interactive economy whereby a common future and a common growth were built-in. But unfortunately this had not happened. This takes us to the second aspect of the *bad present*. I shall now turn to this.

Multi-ethnic economy: The foundations of the traditional strength of the Meeteis are:

- a. The economically more friendly spatial structure of the valley where they inhabit;
- b. The more rather than less homogeneity of their population as compared to the widely heterogeneous ethnic groups in the hills; and
- c. The second feature of homogeneity was reinforced by the factor of larger population, whose sustenance was made easy by the fertile valley soil.

The manifestation of these features in the general conduct of the Meetei populace (particularly of the Meetei Brahmins and the staunch Vaishnavaites after the adoption of Hinduism), coupled with the non-inclusive nature of development in the historical past, must have imbibed to the smaller ethnic groups in the hills a desire for homogeneity and population multiplication in order to extract a larger share of the pie as well as assert a sense of pride and dignity. What is unfortunate for all is that these tendencies have too long been allowed to continue along ethnically divisive lines with accentuated political, ethnical and sociological articulations. Even after full five and a half decades of planning efforts, there has been no attempt to give an economic turn and an economic articulation of these issues. These have hampered the emergence of an economic momentum for growth which could take all upward. This is what I turn to now.

The economy of Manipur can be viewed as a loose conglomerate of very small, both in terms of population and economic, open economies. The macro-economy of Manipur is such that it cannot fully co-opt and incorporate the numerous small economies prevailing at pockets of ethnicity and space. In other words, Manipur's macroeconomy consists of various local economies in the sense that, despite the potential and real free mobility of labour and other factors, the level of interaction is such that the overall interdependence within the region/sub-region spaces and

population do not decide the overall economic fate of the internally homogeneous and externally heterogeneous population groups and spaces.

It is in such an atmosphere that Manipur has experienced growth slowdown, if not collapse, right from the 1970s to till today, despite the short growth spurt in the early 1970s. This period also corresponds to the period during which the credibility of the state as an institution has suffered a sharp decline.⁴ Due to the enforcement of rule of state law rather than rule of law, each ethnic group was force-mobilised to be always on alert to protect itself and reduce the damages from the brutalities of the enforcement of rule of state law. Now we had before us the following realities:

- a. The sociological reality of non-inclusive society;
- b. The economic reality of non-inclusive growth and growth slowdown; and
- c. The political reality of lack of credibility of the state.

As a result of the interplay of the above factors the various groups did not visualise any economic benefit from identifying with and working for the larger macro-economy of Manipur. Now these are necessary and sufficient conditions for the ethnic-based articulations and mobilisations to surface as well as gain momentum in a multi-ethnic society like Manipur's. The primordial identity now becomes the only identity for rallying around for political and economic reasons as well.⁵ In other words, the primordial identity has become the instrumental variable for all articulations – political, sociological and economic. Unfortunately for Manipur, the use of this identity has been made even more convenient and forceful by the districting process in the State. The districting of the State has made it possible for the primordial identities to develop a concept of homeland as distinct from Manipur as well. The unfortunate fall-out of these processes

is the fast decline in democratic values, norms and practices by mugging debate and dissent within and dialogue with outside.⁶

The Good Future

Having attempted to explain how I view the recent developments as bad and why these have become bad, it is now incumbent on my part how the good future is being visualised by me. *If it is pitch dark in the night, the morning cannot be far away.* There are various reasons for my visualising a good future. First, the dominant majority group now seems to have realised, if not openly admit, her historical follies. So there are now many moves both by individuals and organisations to undo the historical damage through positive action. Secondly, there seems now emerging a certain kind of backlash to the decline of democratic norms within ethnic groups, and slowly but surely a certain culture of tolerance for positive criticism is evolving. Thirdly, the till-now-silent minority of those vouching for good ethnic relationships is now subtly making its voice heard. Fourthly, the macroeconomy of Manipur has of late started acquiring a character of endogenous performance. Well just as there were elements for the bad phase to come, these are conditions for the good relationship to emerge and prevail. Prevail definitely it will be for we have learnt at our own cost that nobody gains from a bad inter-ethnic relationship. Diversity is good for economic performance, witness Mumbai and New York.

NOTES

1. I would not say non-existent because, at any point of time and in any social context, there would always be persons who would unequivocally articulate, vouch and work for good inter-ethnic relationships.
2. For a discussion on the economics of identity, see Bodenhorn, Howard and Christopher S. Ruebeck, (2003), *The Economics of Identity and the Endogeneity of Race NBER. Working Paper 1962.*

3. References on this are galore. Kindly see *Cheitharol Kumpaba* and the various works on *Lai Haraoba*. The other papers on this volume also contain many references on this aspect.
4. On the relationship between state credibility and development, see Borner, Silvio, Aymo Brunetti and Beatrice Weder, (1995), *Political Credibility and Economic Development*, St. Martin's Press.
5. In this context, it would be rewarding to read, Green, Elliott D., (2005), What is an Ethnic Group? Political Economy, Constructivism and the Common Language Approach to Ethnicity, *Development Studies Institute Working Paper Series No. 05-57*, London School of Economics.
6. For a general discussion on such issues, see Hirschman, A.O., (1970), *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States*, Harvard University Press, Mass.