



**EXPANDING BOUNDARIES:  
HUMAN RIGHTS AND  
BEYOND SOUTHEAST ASIA**

# MILITARISM AND THE ISSUE OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY IN NORTHEAST INDIA

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Armed conflicts certainly have detrimental effects on the lives of people. Militarism and violence perpetrated by conflicting parties lead to violation of human rights, loss of lives and destruction of livelihoods. Drawing on the experience of the Northeast India, this paper identifies the genesis and nature of the armed conflict in the region, and the trend in which violence has also been accepted by the larger society both as a practice of resistance as well as a method of settling dispute or any issue. It argues that these trends lead to the acceptance of aberration of principles and practices of democracy. Further, the paper discusses the juxtaposition of the Indian State (with a civilizational narrative) with other erstwhile independent nations such as Manipur finds mismatches. Timely intervention is required to address the issue. This analysis enables one to better understand the distinct nature of armed conflict in Manipur in particular and Northeast India in general. At the same time, it will also enable to precisely show how a cycle of violence is in operation in the region; human rights are violated and put at stake democracy both in its condition as well as principle.

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\* I thank Bhagat Oinam, Associate Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, Hanjabam Shukhdeba Sharma, Assistant Professor, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University-Regional Campus Manipur and Bobo Khurajam, Independent Film Maker and Columnist, for their valuable comments and suggestions.

## 1. Introduction

In a memorial lecture delivered on June 30, 2013 at Imphal, scholar and creator of alternative theatre, “theatre of the earth,” Padma Shri, Shri. Heisnam Kanhailal observed:

Simmering discontent that started from around 1960 finally erupted into a war of independence against India in the 70s. Manipur became a contested land for both the Indian army and the liberation army. Even today, the Manipuri society exists amidst confusion and mayhem. Government’s imposition of various types of laws to subjugate the people has become the burning issues and resulted into existential crisis. It has been nearly 50 years since people have been living in this manner. ... Brutal oppression continues (Kanhailal, 2013:2).

Further he remarked:

On a daily basis there are *bandhs* and ceaseless economic blockades for more than 100 days. All this happens in the midst of armed-conflict between the State armed-forces and armed opposition groups. All of us are living, leading the lives of victims... Violence has become a characteristic feature, embraced and practiced, for any activity. Whenever there is a bandh or a strike, instead of seeking solidarity from the public, *bandh* supporters warn the people to follow their *diktat*, if not, they have to face the consequences on their own.... Are these verdicts non-violence or violence? There is no respect for human life any more. There are no qualms in taking away a life. Where can one find a more decadent society than ours? (Kanhailal, 2013:5 & 12).

Heisnam Kanhailal clearly captures the popular angst as well as the existential reality of the Northeast region of India (hereafter NER) in general and the state of Manipur in particular. It would not be an exaggeration to add that in contemporary Manipur, violence influences not only the high politics but also the everyday life of the common people. In fact, the prolonged and continued armed conflict in NER has impacted onto the social, economic, political and everyday life shaping into a practice. This is reflected in three visible trends. On one hand, State enjoys impunity to violence under the cloak of the Armed Forces Special (Powers) Act, 1958 (hereafter AFSPA). The Act, which was imposed initially in the hill areas of Manipur in 1958 and all over the state in 1980, provides immunity to the state actors and they cannot be tried in civilian court of justice.<sup>1</sup> And on the other hand, armed opposition groups continue to rely on violence either to achieve the goal of independence or to enforce their mandate upon the people. Moreover, we witness seeming acceptance of violence by the people both as a means of resistance against the excesses of the armed groups (state and non-state actors) as well as a method of settling disputes amongst themselves, and thus caught in the grips of the cycle of violence.

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1 In 2004, after a state-wide protest against the rape and murder of Th. Manorama Devi by the Assam Rifles, AFSPA was partially lifted from the Imphal Municipality areas.

My argument is that these trends have led to the acceptance of aberration of principles and practices of democracy. And human rights violations are considered to be collateral damages. In order to put the issues into perspective and understand the prevailing malaise of militarism as well as the democratic condition in the state, the paper focuses on the genesis of the armed conflict in Manipur. Further the paper proposes that the juxtaposition of the Indian State (with a civilizational narrative) with other erstwhile independent nations such as Manipur, which was once a sovereign kingdom in the Southeast Asia, finds mismatches. In this midst, what has become an alarming trend is the practice of violence, which has captured popular imagination and used in dealing with any issue.

## **2. Contesting Narratives & the Armed Conflict**

The genesis of armed conflict in Manipur may be traced back to the last days of British imperialism. The Asiatic kingdom became a colony of the British after its defeat in the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891. End of British colonialism in the Indian Sub-continent in 1947 the provided the historical context for the emergence of conflict situation in the state. In fact, the conflict in Manipur is rooted in the contested merger of Manipur with India Union in 1949. A pertinent demand of the armed opposition groups in Manipur has been the restoration of the pre-1949 sovereign status of Manipur. Since then, the narrative of “nation” and “sub-nation” becomes a major point of contention among different political and cultural positionalities, which has rendered the erstwhile kingdom in a cauldron of violence.

### **2.1 The Nation Narrative, Nation Building & the Enemy Within**

The modern idea of nation state was introduced in India through colonial intervention. The post-Enlightenment ideals of value-neutrality, objectivity, impersonal and bureaucratic structures of governance and representative rule, developed in western countries as a part of reform movements and protests, had a basis in popular thought. In India, such ideals, which became the basis of nationalism, were a gift from the modernity package brought by colonialism.

In rejecting the colonial rule, Indian nationalism had to assert its distinctive identity by differentiating itself from the identity of the colonial masters, while simultaneously internalizing the Enlightenment rationality of western thought for its own formation. But as Bikhu Parekh (1997) notes, the cultural limitation of liberal democracy imposes certain constraints upon those imitating the same both in terms of skills as well as the craft. Out of such emplacement emerged the Indian dilemma: a contradictory and conflicting nation-self in which the nation state had to be at once itself and the other than itself. This dilemma leads the Indian State appropriating the colonial character, questioned and rejected during the freedom struggle, thus resulting into a situation of state-linked “internal colonialism” (Nandy, 1983:12). The state uses legitimizing core concepts like

national security, development, modern science and technology as justificatory ideologies for domination. Violence is used to sustain these ideologies. Legitimacy to this violence is drawn from the accepted dominant theory of state so as to monopolise absolute violence.

At the policy level, what was followed by the political elites, following the withdrawal of the colonial state, was the tendency to take an excessively constitutional or constructivist view of the political dynamics. It was widely believed, in the Indian nationalist circles as elsewhere, that the making of a successful nation state was basically a matter of legal and political construction. In spite of differences on principles for the creation of a new society, the constructivist premise went unquestioned among the political elites. Legacies of administration, political order, rule and defiance surviving from earlier political formations – empires, royalties, rituals of exaltation and subordination, *etc.* – thus, have not completely vanished but remain in something like a substructure of the political world (Doornbos and Kaviraj, 1997:12). Administrative convenience once decried against the British colonial rule was continued and legal homogenization of the political world entirely structured by the institutions and initiatives of the ruling elites, who went all out to serve their own interests. The materiality of having a physical nation (territoriality) whose resources could be exploited for the elites' benefits, under the garb of social equity and redistributive justice could only be envisioned by the educated elites at the expense of illiterate masses.

Over the years, what has occurred in India is the resurgence of historical legacies often as memories, which do not have any definable locus in institutions but pervade the political world, subtly altering the meanings and results of political actions (Doornbos and Kaviraj, 1997:12). For example, the recent period in India has witnessed an increasingly lucid appreciation of the subtle ways in which historical past remain active through their effects. The patterns of traditional politics operate as deeper, subterranean influences on the formal architectures of modern parliamentary politics. Caste and religious politics have in recent times developed forms which are impossible to describe in terms of the dichotomy between the “traditional” and the “modern.” In the case of the Northeast, ethnicity have emerged as historical units vying for space both in the mainstream politics as well as serve as canons for self-determination. Whether ethnic groups in the Northeast are historical entities or these are modern political constructs shall be deliberated in the subsequent sections. It is worth noting that the politics of identity revolves around these structures, which are responsible for most of the violence in the region.

The story of the political integration of India as a nation state was through the logic of citizenship and economics. The ideas were mainly borrowed from the (western) modern paradigm of nation state theory. In this enterprise, what was inculcated is the principle of individuating the individuals whose locomotion in life is propelled by self-interest and profit. While this is true for most part of India, the Northeast and some parts of India had a different story to tell. The logic of “strategic importance” was given paramount significance over those two processes. For example, Manipur was “taken over” through a militaristic manoeuvre. The enforcement of Merger Agreement on October 15, 1949 led

to the dissolution of a democratically constituted Legislative Assembly. In Manipur, after the departure of the British in 1947, elections based on universal adult franchise was held in June 1948 and the Maharaja inaugurated the first Assembly Session on October 18, 1948.

The state, as a social and political practice and as a system of inclusion and exclusion *par excellence*, has tried to solve the problem of conflicting identity claims by producing precise distinctions and differences between citizens and aliens, by domesticating particular identities and by creating a coherent sovereign identity. As Bauman describes the modern state:

National states promote “nativism” and construe its subjects as “natives.” They laud and enforce the ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural *homogeneity*. They are engaged in incessant propaganda of *shared* attitudes. They construct *joint* historical memories and do their best to discredit or suppress such stubborn memories that cannot be squeezed into a shared tradition - now redefined in the state-appropriate quasi-legal terms, as “our common heritage.” They preach the sense of *common* mission, *common* fate, and *common* destiny. They breed, or at least legitimize and give tacit support to, animosity towards everyone standing outside the holy union (Bauman, 1991:64; emphasis by Bauman).

This state has become more and more a contested space. As Appadurai notes, the “nation state” is a battle of imagination with “state and nation seeking to cannibalise each other” (Appadurai, 1990:304). Groups with ideas about nationhood seek to capture or co-opt state power, and states simultaneously seek to capture and monopolise ideas about nationhood. Thus, a platform is set for separatism and micro-identities to become political projects within the nation states. Ideas of nationhood appear to be steadily increasing in scale and regularly crossing existing state boundaries.

At the same time, logic of citizenship, although the constitution provides the parameters, remains questionable when seen in the context of the state’s relation with its minorities. The application of a western worldview of state formation in the developing countries with ideals of singularity – single identity, single source of sovereignty, single legal system, a single system of rights and obligations, a unitary conception of citizenship, and a single mode of relating to the state – presupposes that members of the state are all agreed in defining themselves primarily as individual citizens rather than as members of specific ethnic, religious or other communities. The presupposition is that members of the state form a single and homogenous people, and qua people they are sovereign. Since, they form a homogenous unit, the majority is entitled to speak and act in the name of them all (Parekh, 1997:192). Any attempt to develop or sustain loyalties to their pre-modern identities, other than given by the state, or go against the majority principle, are viewed with suspicion and hostility. For the state, these minorities are the “Others” - the enemies within or the “objective enemies.” Take for instance, when movements are initiated demanding autonomy in the form of recognition of language, culture, or in more radical terms, self-determination, they are viewed as anti-national. Catalytic explosions of such demands are

not viewed as failure of the state to provide a framework for order and justice. Thus, the very idea of turning the Northeast into an “alien space” where martial law like AFSPA operates suggests that people of the region is closer to Hannah Arendt’s “objective enemies”<sup>2</sup> whose definition is created by virtue of their existence in a particular position at a historical moment in time, and that they do not fall within the self-definition of a state. The idea of “national security” which the Indian State emphatically nurtures may in the long run create incurable conflicts where the state starts subscribing to totalitarian ideology of creating “Others” within the country. From the perspective of the “nation state,” an ethnic group claiming a right to produce difference and make distinctions which transcend the official state ideology is treated as an “enemy within.” The state enacts several suppressive methods to deal with these “enemy within.” In India, AFSPA seems to be a pointer towards this method. The hardening character of the state emerges in reinforcing greater violence at the moment of slightest opposition. Ethnic communities in India’s Northeast have been targets of such violence, not only officially at the hands of powerful state machinery, but also at the hands of all those who take their legitimation from state ideology.

Economic logic of integration is also used as another tool for nation building. This was successfully achieved through the development of capitalism across nations. In the developing countries, too, economic integration formed a compulsory component of the nation building process. In India, the idea of economic integration was associated with the concept of “planning.” However, official justification of “planning” was projected as a means to achieve social justice. There seems to be inconsistency in what the Indian State intends and what it projects. While the intention of the Indian State is to achieve economic integration, it projects a different picture of targeting social justice as its goal. The result is quite imminent. Each stage of planned economy produced elites which sought to benefit the most from the state. They developed the idea of India as a nation state based on “materiality.” Instances are that of the neo-rich peasants in the Green Revolution belt, and emerging new elites in other regions of the country at recent times.

What is being achieved in this entire process of legal, political and economic integration is a strong Indian State, whose military play a substantive role in safeguarding the “national interest,” which only endorses the unitary spirit of a nation state.

## 2.2 Counter Narrative: The Manipuri Discourse

Assertions and demands for self-determination mainly by the Manipuris harp back to the historical legacies – of an autonomous kingdom with a civilizational foundation or having been the constant defenders of the territory against the marauding Burmese, or most recently of the story of defiance against the British colonial rule – which they believe was undone through merger with the Indian Union (Oinam and Thangjam, 2006:123).

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2 “Objective enemies” or “enemies of the people” refer to classes of people who are liquidated simply because of their group membership.

Although ascribing to different political ideologies and method of armed struggle, a common narrative shared by the valley based armed opposition groups<sup>3</sup> is that Manipur was a sovereign kingdom where different ethnic communities existed harmoniously and was never a part of the British India that ruled over India for more than 400 years. Such an articulation has produced a nationalist discourse that fits into an imagination of nation and territoriality. First claim is that Manipur has a 2000 years old political history and one of the most ancient kingdoms in the Southeast Asia (Akoijam, 2002). When British Paramountcy lapsed, the first political act committed by the people of Manipur was the promulgation of the Manipur State Constitution Act, 1947 and adoption of a partially democratic government by holding an election based on universal adult franchise in 1948. Thus, Manipur had the distinction of possessing a constitution based on free will with the king as its constitutional head. However, the democratic sovereign status ended with five initiatives taken up by the Indian Dominion.

First, Manipur was made to send its representative to the Constituent Assembly of India by entering into a secret agreement with the Manipur State Durbar on July 1, 1947 (Singh, 2009:61–62). Second, the Standstill Agreement and the Instrument of Accession were signed on July 11, 1947 (Singh, 1988:70). Third, Government of the Indian Dominion had stationed an extra-constitutional entity known as Dewan in Manipur on April 10, 1949 (Singh, 1988:95). Fourth, the controversial Manipur Merger Agreement, 1949 was signed on September 21, 1949 and subsequently integrated Manipur into the Indian Union on October 15, 1949 (Singh, 1988:93). Fifth, the democratically adopted Manipur State Constitution Act, 1947, and the Manipur State Assembly were dissolved by promulgating two orders, namely, the Manipur (Administration) Order 1949 and the State's Merger (Chief Commissioner's Provinces) Order, 1950 (Singh, 1988:125 & 127).

The dissolution of the Manipur State Constitution and its democratic Government eventually has led to one of the most protracted armed conflict in Manipur. As a matter of fact, the armed opposition groups or insurgent groups of Manipur have been resisting the presence of Indian State in Manipur. They are fighting against the Indian military forces to restore the pre-1949 political status of Manipur with the ultimate aim to reconsolidate the democracy that had existed then. The armed opposition groups pick up October 15, 1949 as a specific historical moment when the independent political existence of Manipur came to an end. As such, the day is observed every year as “National Black Day.” They are demanding the revocation of the Merger Agreement. It may be recalled that the Manipur Merger Agreement which was signed on September 21, 1949 became operative on October 15, 1949.

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3 By valley based armed oppositions groups I am referring to those which are largely derived from the Meetei ethnic stock. However, this is not to deny the presence of membership from other communities. Major valley based armed opposition groups include the United National Liberation Front, Revolutionary Peoples Front, People's Revolutionary Army of Kangleipak-Pro, Kangleipak Communist Party, Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup, *etc.* which at present forms the CORCOM (Coordination Committee) to wage a unified war against India.



Resistance to the Indian State is articulated as a national liberation struggle by claiming that it is not even a demand for independence. It is instead, as the Chairman of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), RK Sanayaima, who is currently in prison, asserts, “A question of regaining the lost sovereign independence of Manipur by driving out the Indian Occupation Forces from the soil of Manipur” (Annual Statement of the Central Committee, United National Liberation Front on its 41<sup>st</sup> Foundation Day, 2005 in *The Sangai Express*, Imphal, November 24, 2005).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Revolutionary People’s Front (RPF) and its military wing People’s Liberation Army (PLA) also claims that the existing issue is not an internal matter of India as the Government of India (hereafter GOI) understands, but purely a conflict between two nations. The conflict, according to RPF, is between Manipur and India and this is due to the annexation of Manipur by India in 1949. It, therefore, considered it irrational to hold unemployment and underdevelopment as factors responsible for launching the liberation movement. RPF also holds the view that their struggle is not a separatist or secessionist movement on account of the fact that they are not asking or demanding even an inch of the Indian Territory that existed as in 1947. Claiming that Manipur was never a part of India, the armed opposition group insists that their resistance is a movement for national liberation which is aimed at restoring the independence of Manipur.

### 2.3 Counter Narrative: Multiple Ethno-discourses<sup>5</sup>

Manipur is a multi-ethnic state. Major ethnic groups are the Meeteis, Nagas and the Kukis and officially thirty-three tribes are recognised as the scheduled tribes. The Manipuri discourse is regarded to be nationalist and representing only the Meetei ethnic group by other ethnic groups such as the Nagas and the Kukis. At the same time, they also reject the idea of India. What we witness in Manipur, at the micro level, is an ongoing process of identity constructions and reconstructions resulting into clashes, both physical and otherwise. It is in a way, the invigoration of Appadurai’s (1990) nation-state as the battle of imagination or platform for separatism and micro-identities to become political projects within the nation states. In other words, undercurrent of ethno-nationalism marks demands for separatism and such political projects operate within the discourse of the nation-state.

Though ethnic consolidation began during the colonial period, emergence of ethno-nationalism is a post-colonial development. The democratic and representational form of government that was adopted in the newly independent countries has substantially influenced the process. In the case of Manipur, it was only in the 1990s that ethnic and religious strife of various shades became prominent with the heightening of ethno-nationalist assertions. Unification and formation of ethnic identities, today, have balanced the control of political space, which Meeteis as an ethnic community has been enjoying

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4 UNLF made its visible presence as an armed opposition group only in 1991 after nearly three decades of establishment.

5 This section is largely developed from the subtheme titled “problem of the periphery” of an earlier published work co-authored by the author (see for details Oinam and Thangjam, 2006: 60–66).

for long. In spite of the recent consolidations, population are known by their tribe identity. In fact, the number of scheduled tribes in the state has increased to thirty-three not out of migration but out of division into sub-tribes. This is not to suggest that there is no migration at recent times. While tribes split into sub-tribes largely for administrative benefits, they also consolidate into larger ethnic identity in the political domain. These ethnic conglomerations, which are very recent, have not only brought new equation of power, but also added newer dimension to the concept of the “other.”

Both the terms Naga and Kuki as functional categories came into use with records of the British military officers and administrators (Mackenzie, 1884, reprint 2001). Though the names may be in use earlier, self-appropriation of identities with these names came much later. Take for instance, the name Naga, which is more of a British creation in the 1880s, though the term existed before the British came to the Northeast (Thangjam, 2008). The name was identified with a large number of tribes for better administrative purposes – to club different tribes under one administrative umbrella. It was much later that the first self-appropriation came into being with the creation of the Naga Club. This name as a political identity became clearer in 1947 when the British left its Southeast Asian colonies. Phizo, as the champion of Naga self-determination, called for a separate Naga state outside the Indian Dominion. Thus the term got projected by the Naga national workers that Nagas achieved independence one day before India did. Creation of Naga political identity is still in process, latest being the inclusion of tribes like Anal, Moyon, Monsang, Maring, *etc.* in 1990s into a common Naga identity. This is a major achievement of the NSCN (IM). In spite of inter-tribal rivalry (Singh and Singh, 1989) the appropriation of Naga as a political identity shaping on a common political platform has enabled to seek for “equal” participation of the constituting tribes.

Identities are continuously negotiated in encounters, which are political and involve power.<sup>6</sup> Arendt (1970:52) also notes that power “springs up whenever people get together and act in concert.” Furthermore, ethnicity is employed in order to draw boundaries as to who belongs to the group and who does not. An ethnic group is about boundary maintenance; ethnicity is a way to structure interaction, which allows the persistence of differences. Ethnic communality is, therefore, always an artefact of boundary-drawing activity: always contentious and contested, glossing over some differentiations and representing some other differences as powerful and separating factors (Barth, F. (ed.), 1969; Bauman, 1992).

The problems with the Kukis are, however, different. Though the term Kuki is also a creation of the British, the tribes constituting this category has close cultural affinity - linguistically as well as by custom. Of course, it would be an exaggeration if one projects these tribes under one cultural head. Unlike the Nagas, Kuki as a political identity has not yet been fully appropriated. It remained more as a convenient name coined by the British administrators. Though attempts were made for unification of all the tribes under Kuki, it

6 On the political nature of human encounters, see Hannah Arendt, 1958.

was short-lived. Controversies over the nomenclature to identify the various tribes under a single name have been the major problem inhibiting the consolidation of these tribes. Failure to integrate the Kuki tribes, either through equal participation or dominance of one over others, also shows the thin fabric, which fails to tie them as a cultural unit or block. It further shows the difficulty of seeing Kuki as a cultural identity before being a political one. Recent attempt by some scholars to float the concept of “Zale’n-gam” (Haokip, 1998) by including all these tribes into Kuki is yet another attempt to create Kuki both as a political and a cultural identity. Success or failure is yet to be seen.

These new identities-in-formation uses the discourse of western liberal democracy and its ideological constructs though it is hard to presume if those values have really been internalised. Political consciousness in its collective form becomes not only exclusive in approach, but also takes violent turns – ethnic conflicts being its outcome. “A factor which, perhaps, contributes towards a violent expression of aspirations for political independence is the absence of a language native to a community in terms of which to generate a complex, nuanced, authentic and imaginative articulation of the idea of freedom. In the absence of such a language, the articulation takes place in the language of ideologies fashioned elsewhere and not internalised to any appreciable degrees” (Miri, 1999:14). Rise of violence in its varied forms emerges mainly because of non-internalization of the borrowed discourse. This doubt on internalization remains even after conceding the arguments by many in the “South” that borrowed categories from the West no more remains the same while in operation in the developing countries. That concept like “secularism” in the Indian context has to be understood differently for the discourse has totally changed from the place of its origin. This line of argument has already been conceded while studying the idea of nation as used in the political discourses in the region. However, the success or failure of these identity formations in terms of achieving the spirit of democratic values is yet to be accounted.

The ideas of nation, self-determination and human rights that all the major tribes and communities in the state used in their respective discourses are within the firmament of strong tribal kinship and bond. The idea of a Naga nation or a Kuki (and for that matter, pan-Manipuri) draws legitimacy from the same discourse, that of the western liberal democracy. Interestingly, each of these identities emerges with consciousness, which is opposed to the idea of India as a nation state, though both the Indian State as well as these ethnic nations borrow their legitimacy, again, from the same discursive context (Akoijam, 2002). The very complexity of these identities lies where Naga “nation” and Kuki “nation” operating within the territory of Manipur are, in addition to their opposition to the Indian nation state and the Manipuri “nation,” mutually opposed and antagonistic. This is indeed alarming that instead of being accommodative these identities have turned exclusive and hostile. At present, the wider “world view” remains more in symbolism than in content (Bhagat and Thangjam, 2006: 66). Yet, this should be seen, particularly of the Nagas and the Kukis, as a struggle to come out of tribal moorings, failure being only a pathway.

### 3. Militarism and Counter Insurgency Operations

Violence has become the *ultima ratio* of (late) modern politics, because “subjectivation” has liberated political understanding and framed the world in a “technological” and instrumental manner. The basic political subject is violent by virtue of its very composition (Campbell and Dillon, 1993). According to them, security is the foundational value around which the political subject revolves. Security is not merely the main goal of the political subject of violence; it is, rather, the very principle of formation of that political subject. The political subject of violence, invoking constantly security, comes in a variety of forms: God, rational subject, nation, state, people, class, race, *etc.* (Campbell and Dillon, 1993). The Indian State justifies use of violence to maintain security of the “Indian nation state” and adopt militarism as a means. Militarism here is understood as a behaviour or condition in which states resort quickly to the use of their armed forces in response to international or domestic threats or go to great lengths to mobilize people and resources for war. Militarism is also the belief that military responses are usually the best ones, and that the military is the most important institution in the state (Vagts, 1959).<sup>7</sup> Or in other words, “It is the extension of military thinking over civilian institutions and civilian planning and over civilian authority” (Regehr, 1980:129–30).

The fragility of the foundation on which the Indian State rests necessitates the invocation of a sense of “supreme national interests” in its citizen vis-à-vis other interests and its corollary obsession with security. This is the outcome of a “deeply wounded” memory of partition and subsequently, wars with its neighbours after Independence.<sup>8</sup> One of the unfortunate fallout of these events is the collective psyche that treats the minorities with eyes of suspicion. What follows is the denial of alternate voices and interests. The homogenising trend (dealt above), in interest and value, of the Indian nation state, has increased all the more ignoring competing and contradictory interests that exist in societies. Such homogenizing tendencies justify the adoption of militarism and use of violence while dealing with ideologies or movements interpreted to be inimical to national sovereignty. That in recent times there is a constitutive relationship between politics and violence has become more glaring if one takes into account the unfolding events in NER.

Pervasiveness of militarism with regard to NER can elucidated from the very framing of the region itself. In the 1950s, GOI evolved and adopted an approach towards NER, which was founded on two edifices. First is the Nehruvian model of non-interference into the traditional socio-economic structure of the region and second is the national security perspective. Given the low level of understanding and appreciation of the region among the policy makers in Delhi, the surest shortcut to policy was one based on security by virtue of the region sharing international boundary with Myanmar, China, Bangladesh and Nepal. So security emerged as the guiding principle for all policy interventions, development or otherwise, in the region. But the question is – security for whom?

7 In feminist analyses, intellectual and cultural histories, or “bottom-up” historical accounts, militarism is a factor of inequality or an aspect of cultural hegemony (See, for example, Enloe, 1983).

8 In 1905 partition of Bengal took place. Again in 1947 British India was further fragmented into India and Pakistan, and part of Bengal went to present day Bangladesh.

The security principle, or rather the insecurity of GOI, drove it to adopt AFSPA (Assam and Manipur) way back in 1958 when there was hardly any insurgency in the region. According to Amar Yumnam, “The Government of India could never get rid of its insecurity and abandon the security principle even when it belatedly realized that the Northeast Region needed a development agency for transformation” (Yumnam, 2005:201). As a result, when the North Eastern Council (which should have been there in 1958 instead of AFSPA) was established in the early 1970s, it was placed under the Home Ministry. But the Home Ministry, Yumnam adds, could never evolve a development strategy for the region as it is neither competent nor oriented for such a task. This “politicization of economic issues” has reached its height recently with the requirement of certificates from the Home Ministry for the provincial government to get funds sanctioned from the Ministry of Finance (Yumnam, 2005:201).

The battle of imagination envisioned by Appadurai (1990) where groups with ideas about nationhood seek to capture or co-opt state power, and states simultaneously seek to capture and monopolise ideas about nationhood is clearly manifested in the form of armed conflict. Precisely on this account, armed liberation movements in India by different insurgent groups and ethno-nationalism that has emerged and shaped the course of these movements found a strong response from the Indian nation state. The Indian State comes ever more strongly with its military might. Equally, the logic of military employment rests on the notion of security. As far as Manipur is concerned, the government had granted full-fledged statehood to Manipur in 1972 as a response to subversive activities undertaken by the Revolutionary Government of Manipur in the late 1960s and early part of the 1970s. It was also a pre-emptive strategy of the Government to prevent further escalation of subversive activities in the state. But from the 1980s when armed opposition escalated, militarism marks the government’s efforts to contain the liberation movement. Since then the Indian State has been routinely propagating national/internal “insecurities” to allow the Indian State to exercise its monopoly over violence. Imposition of AFSPA in the region is to ensure India’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

### **3.1 Counter insurgency operations**

As against the intermittent commitment in conventional wars, the Indian Army has been fighting insurgency almost continuously since independence. As early as 1955, Jawaharlal Nehru ordered “the Indian Army to conduct a counter insurgency campaign against the rebel Naga tribesmen in Northeast India, a campaign that has since haunted the region” (Cohen and Dasgupta, 2010:4). And since then it has been involved in counter-insurgency operations in almost all of Northeast in an ever escalating area of operations. In fact, counter-insurgency operations have provided the staple operational fare for the Indian Army more than any other, except, perhaps, the Israeli Army (Sinha, 2006).

Different types of counter insurgency operations undertaken in NER are discussed briefly in the following sections:

- a) **Isolating the Populace from Armed opposition groups (Grouping of Villages):** Drawing on the British experience in Malaya in the 60s, Indian Army tried the concept of grouping of villages as a means to isolate the rebels from the populace. It was tried out both in Nagaland and Mizoram. In Nagaland it was given up in the face of fierce opposition from the moderate Nagas. In Mizoram the experiment produced mixed results. S.P Sinha opines, “A study of the existing literature on the Indian experience leads one to conclude that such measures may have been acceptable means by colonial powers to quell insurgencies, but the fallout of adoption of such measures against own people is extremely contentious and repugnant” (Sinha 2006:3).
- b) **Employment of Air Power:** Air strafing was resorted to in Nagaland at Purr and in Mizoram at Aizwal and Lungleigh Districts to save the Assam Rifles posts from being run over by armed opposition groups. Since the 60s, helicopters have been used extensively for movement of troops, casualty evacuation and reconnaissance as integral part of counter-insurgency operations. In Operation Stinger conducted in October 2005 and Summer Storm in April 2009, drones were used to locate hideouts of rebels in Loktak Lake in Manipur.
- c) **Political and Diplomatic Initiatives:** Counter-insurgency operations are politico-military in nature. In the context of Northeast insurgencies, political initiatives have been taken at two levels, internal and external. At the internal level, peace talks are underway with National Socialist Council of Nagalim-Isaac and Muivah and United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). In the case of Manipur, there has not been peace talk or political initiative to end the armed conflict. However, Suspension of Operation (SoU) prevails. Under this model, peace talks do not occur but surrendered militants are given shelter by the government. At the external level, political and diplomatic steps have been taken to deny safe sanctuaries to the armed opposition groups in neighbouring countries such as with Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh.
- d) **Re-organising of Infantry Battalions for Counter-Insurgency Operations:** One of the earliest attempts to reorganise the infantry battalions for counter-insurgency tasks was the creation of I-Battalions in the 1960s by converting some of the existing battalions drawn from some selected regiments. These units were to be permanently deployed in the Naga Hills and Tuensang Area with their personnel being periodically turned over from within their respective regiments. In the early 90s when the requirement of forces for internal security duties increased, it was envisaged to raise “a paramilitary force with Army’s ethos” under the Ministry of Defence, designated as Rashtriya Rifles (Roychowdhury, 2002:219). It has been deployed exclusively in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), except for a very brief period in the Northeast. Today, there are Indian Reserve Battalion and Village Defence Force, exclusively created to combat insurgency in the Northeast.

- e) **Composition of the Assam Rifles:** Assam Rifles was raised primarily for deployment in Northeast and comprised men from these areas. In 2004, Gen. V.P. Malik, former Chief of the Army, recommended that the force should comprise 60–70 per cent of its personnel from the Northeast.
- f) **Military Civic Action Programme:** In the expanding American empire after 1898, civic action went hand in hand with military measures in the Philippines, which included a variety of public works projects to improve communication and health (Beckett, 2001:36-37). It was practised in Malaya in counter-insurgency operations against the communist guerrillas in the sixties by the British forces. Over the years the Indian Army has expanded the scope of civic action. In official parlance it is known as “Winning the Hearts and Minds” of the local population. It has moved beyond initiatives by local commanders to deploy resources for creating the basic infrastructure like provision of potable water, primary health centres, primary schools and improving village roads. Operation Good Samaritan in Manipur and Sadbhavna in the Kargil sector of J&K are examples. This method is perceived by the people as an attempt on the part of the Indian Army and para-military forces to prevent the armed opposition groups from penetrating the local population and procure intelligence.
- g) **Unified Command:** One of the cardinal principles of counter insurgency operations is the unity of command. At the operational level it means integrated civil-military operations under one military commander appointed by the civil government. The concept of unified command in counter insurgency-operations was first experimented in Kashmir. In Assam a three-tier system was evolved. At the top was the Strategic Planning Group (under the Chief Secretary) to lay down the policy. The second tier, the operation group, was headed by General Officer Commanding (GOC) 4 Corps, the senior military commander in Assam. The third tier was headed by the District Collector, supported by the battalion commander and the superintendent of police of the area. The strategic group at the top had GOC 4 Corps, State Director General of Police (DGP) and Inspector General of Police of Border Security Force and Central Reserved Police Force as members. GOC 4 Corps attended the meeting whenever the chief minister chaired it (Roychowdhury, 2002:121). In Manipur, the Chief Minister insisted that the DGP of the state head the unified headquarters, which resulted in the Army keeping out of it. In Tripura the situation was different; there were no army formations in Tripura. The Deputy Inspector General of Assam Rifles, who, if he was a serving brigadier, had army battalions serving under him. Tripura, too, adopted a unified headquarters model headed by the Chief Secretary.

What has emerged in the militaristic approach is that the agents of the State (the army, para-military forces and police), rather than approaching the affected people as citizens, treats them as “subjects.” Thus, military and paramilitary forces are “deployed” for the maintenance of “law and order” in the region. An unofficial report puts that there are more than 60,000 security personnel deployed in Manipur (Rupachandra, 2012). According to Namrata Goswami, a defence analyst, “The overt presence of the armed wing of a democratic state like India, i.e. its army, has fostered the idea of a militarised India amongst the population” (Goswami, 2010:11).

Deployment of the state security personnel such as the army, para-military forces and state police, as a part counter insurgency operation can be read as “interventionist policy” in an alien space. While not questioning the merit of such approaches, rather the very premise of treating the people of the region as aliens is itself questionable. Incursion of the military into the civil spheres and violence meted out through counter insurgency strategies, despite the motto of use of minimal force, tells a lot about the nature of the Indian State. The terms of engagement formulated in the past, that is use of minimal force, is deemed to be no longer valid and needs to be redefined. General Shankar Roy Chowdhury, a former Army Chief, defines it as “adequate minimum force, the adequacy of weapons and firepower for each situation to be determined by the field commander. This included heavier weapons like mortars or artillery whenever required” (Roy Chowdhury, 2002:98).

#### **4. Practice of violence**

As much as the State discourse is built on violence, its counterpart, the non-state armed groups are also built on the same logic. The “non-state” if understood as “State in becoming” highlights interesting trend that is near equivalent to the State discourse – of monopolising violence. But more alarming trend is the “non-state” discourse that no more seems to confine to its “classic” opposition to the State, but more so towards the contending groups and the people. Propaganda warfare, intimidation, extortion, *etc.* have become the hallmark of their operation over the latter. Militarism is largely reflected through these operations. In the militarized situation, ordinary people are caught in the crossfire, lives remain dear, and human rights continue to be violated. Table 1 shows the number of people killed in Manipur from 2001 to 2011.



Years	Civilians	Security Forces	Militants	Total
2001	70	25	161	256
2002	36	53	101	190
2003	27	23	148	198
2004	40	41	127	208
2005	138	50	143	331
2006	107	37	141	285
2007	150	40	218	408
2008	131	13	341	485
2009	77	18	321	416
2010	26	8	104	138
2011 (till December 4)	22	10	27	59

Table 1: Insurgency related Fatalities in Manipur: 2001-2011

Source: South Asia Terrorist Portal, 2011. <http://www.satp.org> (accessed on Saturday, August 3, 2012, 2:30:16 PM).

From the Table, we can see that a total of 2,974 persons were killed in the stated period of time. More than 60 percent were militants and civilian casualties constituted nearly 30 percent. We witness escalation of fatalities from 2007 to 2009. A disturbing feature of the armed conflict is the kind of impact it has on the demographic profile of the indigenous population. More than 90 percent of the victims were from the indigenous stock.

One of the major problems associated with tabulation of casualties related with insurgency is that very often, civilians killed in fake encounters or extrajudicial encounters are grouped in the category of militants. Such instances are high in compilations (insurgency related statistics) done by Government officials or organizations sponsored by the Government. Take for instance, *The Sangai Express* reported that altogether 1,528 people including 31 women and 98 children were killed in fake encounters by the security forces in Manipur between 1979 and May 2012. Of these, 419 were killed by the Assam Rifles, while 481 were killed by the combined teams of Manipur Police and Central Security Forces (*The Sangai Express*, Imphal, 19 June 2012). In October 2012, a Public Interest Litigation was filed by NGOs – Extra-judicial Execution Victims' Families Association of Manipur and Human Rights Alert – to the Supreme Court of India against extra judicial executions carried out by the police and the security forces in Manipur. The petition gave details of each of the 1,528 people killed in fake encounter since 1979. The Court randomly

selected six cases out of the 1,528, and found the security forces to be guilty. In order to address such issues, as recommended by the international community, India needs to ratify the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment as well as the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

At another level, the apprehension expressed by Campbell and Dillon (1993) that the political subject of violence constantly invokes security, amongst others, holds true in the case of Manipur. What has aggravated the situation in the region (largely in the state of Manipur) is the prolonged and continued armed conflict. Violence has impacted onto the social, political and everyday life shaping into a practice. Take for instance, civil society bodies very often resort to non-violent methods such as *bandhs* and economic blockades to voice their grievances or resist against excesses committed by the State actors or non-state armed opposition groups but ultimately take recourse to violence. Heisnam Kanhailal (2013) correctly captures the popular angst and predicament. “Groups of *bandh* supporters move around in vehicles and raze down commuters’ vehicles, innocent people are beaten up with sticks for defying their verdict” (Kanhailal, 2013:12). This elucidates the fact that impact of militarism in the functioning of civil societies has become highly pronounced.

At the societal level, violence is also constantly used to settle dispute or any issue. Take for instance, houses of suspects in any crime is dismantled and razed to the ground. The family members of the suspects or accused are expelled from the locality by Kangaroo Courts. There are incidences in which self-styled moral cops raid restaurants and parade young girls and boys before the public for allegedly indulging in “immoral activities.” In the more extreme cases, suspects behind the killing of any person are publicly lynched. These are the classic cases of mobocracy hijacking the rule of law and the role of police, judge and executioner, *etc.* Editorial of the *Huyen Lanpao* (April 03, 2011) affirms that the conflict situation which has besieged our society has given rise to the concept of street justice. It states that this is no longer a law and order problem. It is a problem of a society where ethical and social values are being spurned and mocked at. In the year 2012, when unabated crimes continued in Manipur, editorial of the *Sangai Express*, Imphal (21 August 2012) expressed that the definition of an “anarchic state fits Manipur to the T.” The editorial was written on the occasion of lynching of a suspect in the murder of girl child.

## 5. Conclusion: Issues of Human Rights & Democracy

The foundations of democracy in the Northeast are based not so much on values and principles but on political expediency (Goswami 2010:12). When violence has been embraced and accepted as a practice in contemporary Manipur, the notion of rule of law, ethos of tolerance, dignity of life and human security have become utopian ideals. Although a civilian government is in place, elected through periodic elections, militarism continues to be the guiding principle. As a result, human rights continue to be violated and lives extinguished. Such losses are regarded to be collateral damages by the state actors.

At the same time, these are considered to be “objective” casualties to achieve the political goal of self-determination on the part of the armed opposition groups. Finally, to the common people who have embraced violence as a practice, even if dreadful, and become vigilantes, such dealings are about “justice” as law keepers are unreliable, corrupted and too engaged in fighting the armed opposition groups. The prolonged and continued armed conflict in NER sees no immediate end. The Indian State as arbiter of conflict continues to refrain from bringing about a peaceful political solution, other than employing a militaristic approach. Militarism and use of violence has been to neutralize the fighting power of the armed opposition groups as witnessed in its counter insurgency operations. In fact, it has not abandoned its homogenising tendencies both at the ideological level as well as practice. On the part of the non-state actors, too, they are unwilling to come to the table for negotiations. State impunity to violence and seeming acceptance of people to embrace violence has led to the acceptance of aberration of principles and practices of democracy.

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