Spurn Thy Neighbour: The Politics of Indigeneity in Manipur

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Abstract

This article examines the recurrent ‘politics of indigeneity’ in Manipur with the emerging notions of space and territoriality, and the increasing demand for ‘political space’ by marginal groups. The perpetual xenophobic anxiety and perceived threat of ‘homogenization’, which aroused the drive for ‘ethnic revivalism’ in recent years, have been dominating the state’s day-to-day ethno-political life. Treating ‘tribes as indigenous people’ and the synonymous usage of ‘indigenous people as original inhabitant’, the ethno-politics of territory translates into the ‘politics of indigeneity’. The emergent ‘indigenous tribe’ politics is a strategy not only to claim further rights and entitlements from the state but also to question the ‘indigeneity’ of certain marginal ‘others’ in the state and their rights.

Keywords

Manipur, indigeneity, ethnic politics, territoriality

When the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) released its ‘Vision Document’, a variant of election manifesto, for Delhi Assembly election on 3 February 2015, an epithet attached to northeasterners residing in Delhi sparked a horde of protests. In attempting to address the grievances of people hailing from the northeastern states who have been the target of racial attacks in Delhi, and other cities of India, the BJP had referred to them as ‘immigrants’ in the heading ‘North Eastern Immigrants to be Protected’. While the BJP may refer it to migration within India, from the northeast to Delhi, and later clarified it as a ‘clerical mistake’, the vociferous protests apparently demonstrate the sensitivity of the northeastern people on ‘belongingness’ and the question of being indigenous to a particular place.

Moving back further to about 2 years, the International Meeteis Forum (IMF), founded in 2012, declared on 10 March 2013 its intention to, in the words of the forum, ‘launch a signature campaign against the Kuki tribe claiming to be one of the indigenous communities settled in Manipur’ (The Sangai...
Another new group, which was also formed in the latter part of 2012 under the banner Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur Valley demands Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for the Meiteis. The underlying theme of these two advocacy groups is the assertion of Meitei indigeneity to Manipur. Such events are only indicative of ethnic revivalism and a discourse on indigeneity that attempts to re-recognize and reconstruct the past in order to reshape the future. As Xaxa (1999, p. 3589) pointed out, the term indigenous people ‘is identified with all the prejudices and conjectures to the masses. It was precisely to mark out the differences from the dominant community.’ Interestingly, why is this progressively forward moving dominant Meitei community in the state of Manipur, of late, attempting to move backward and assert its ‘indigenous’ status through ethnic revivalism? This protagonism in Manipur once again opens up the heated discourse on indigeneity. As Srikanth (2014, p. 41) observed: ‘Indigeneity is now above all a political question, closely bound with claims to territory, status, identity, and political power.’

In India, there is a continuous debate as to who is indigenous and who is not. In this, every group claims that they are indigenous to India. As Sanders (1993, p. 126) writes about the people of South Asia that ‘the majority populations have lived in the area for millennia’, it is difficult to establish a clear line dividing between the indigenous people and others. In the absence of official recognition in India, where ‘indigenous’ has become synonymous to the status of the Adivasis, it is generally used to refer to groups classified under the Indian Constitution as ‘Scheduled Tribes’, and people who assign to themselves with the claim as the first inhabitants of India (Baviskar, 2005; Fernandes, 2013, p. 381). Yet Dalits, Dravidians and Aryans, all claim that they are indigenous to India as much as the tribes. Thus, as Karlsson (2003, p. 407) aptly pointed out: ‘[t]he term “indigenous peoples” is therefore claimed to be inapt on the Indian subcontinent; sometimes with the conclusion that there are no IPs (indigenous peoples) in India or, alternatively, that all Indians are indigenous’.

**Indigeneity in India’s Northeast**

In northeast India to assert oneself as ‘indigenous’ or a ‘tribal’ ‘is to situate oneself within...a space. Being “indigenous” is thus a new way of placing oneself in the world, and as such of pursuing a new type of politics’ (Karlsson, 2003, p. 404). Thus, the notion of ‘indigeneity’ exists together with ‘territoriality’ and these notions are largely determined by the colonial spatial knowledge. The colonial empires mapped the occupied territories to find out who was who and who lived where to make the task of administration easier. In order to bring about legitimacy of their rule, the colonial power created identities and an elite among such groups. It also established compact with such elites so that the legitimacy of colonial rule was not challenged. Administrative units were created around such identities and a host of other minority groups were also grouped within such units. Thus, colonial rule had consolidated itself through identification and reidentification of populations, the production of historical and cultural knowledge of such identities or social groups and the creation of administrative units based on such knowledge of identities by drawing boundaries.

How the British colonizers saw native lands, particularly who populated them, and how they documented and defined space in northeast India become important in understanding the divisive ethnic politics prevalent in the region today. Whatever the colonial administrators of the time reported became

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3 *Adivasi* literally means ‘original inhabitants’ or ‘indigenous people’.

4 For further delineation, see Mamdani (2009, pp. 145–146).
the first written record of these people. Such ethnographic and administrative records were thought to be the gospel truth. ‘Thus’, in contemporary northeast India, as Baruah (2008, p. 16) observed, ‘the politics of territorially and indigeneity often becomes an exercise in defending the fences and walls that colonial rulers had erected. The continuing hold of colonial knowledge is reflected in both official policy discourse, and the political imagination of local activists.’

Due to the emerging notion of territorially in contested spaces, discourse on indigeneity is often politicized, and indigenousness often tends to be used in the sense of ‘first settler’ in ethno-nationalist politics while keeping the other key determining factors, such as dispossession and marginality, at bay. While the question of being ‘indigenous’ in terms of ‘first/original settler’ is regarded as less significant in other parts of India, in the northeastern region it is perceived to be central to the people there. Hence, ‘indigeneity’ in India’s northeast is deployed to assert a group of people or community as the ‘original inhabitant’ or ‘first settler’ of a particular territory so as to imply others as ‘settlers’ or ‘migrants’. On the other hand, ST is mainly used in the economic and cultural senses to primarily indicate the backwardness and the endangered nature of such cultural groups. The often conflicting narratives on indigeneity and the contestation thereupon led anthropologists in India to suggest that the idea of indigeneity in the sense of ‘indigenous people’ or ‘original settler’ is irrelevant in the ‘strange alchemy’ of India’s historical melting pot. In this sense, they suggest that nobody is ‘indigenous’ in India (Singh, 1995, p. 30). In this context, all the people of northeast India also invariably fall within this category. As in other parts of India, all the communities of northeast India also traced that they came from ‘somewhere else’ to their present habitats. While some claimed to have migrated from the north, from Tibet through the Himalayas, larger number of them claimed to have migrated from the east, northeast Tibet and southwestern China via Burma. As migration went on, the earlier settlers have been further pushed forward so that a particular land which a certain community inhabits today had been a site of settlements for a series of moving communities in the past. This undisputable historical fact has never constituted the site of discourse on the question of indigeneity in northeast India while the idea of the ‘first/original settler’ discourse has been mindlessly employed to stigmatize certain marginal or minority communities within certain states purely to exacerbate the hate campaign looming at large at the altar of new ‘nationalism’.

While ‘homogenization’ is prevalent in different parts of the post-colonial world in response to national integration and lately the globalization process, the world also experiences ethnic revivalism due to perceived threat of homogenization. Nath (2014, p. 55) delineates: ‘Some of the ethnic communities have demanded separate statehood while some others have demanded the status of scheduled tribe. In such a situation many believe that reviving and evoking long-dead and obsolete rites and institutions have become the new rhetoric of protest.’ The discourse on indigeneity in India’s northeastern state of Manipur has generated intense debate among different ethnic groups of the state lately. Thus, the state has been embroiled on the indigenous–migrant binary for quite some time. In the vein of Bengt Karlsson (2003, p. 406), this article explores what is ‘left out or silenced by the predominantly legalistic, rights-based language of indigenous activism’ in the state of Manipur.

**Manipur: Ethno-demography**

Located in the extreme northeastern borderlands of South Asia, the largely ethnified people in Manipur are mainly divided into three main groups—Meitei, Kuki and Naga. The Meiteis, including Pangals and others, occupy the centrally located valley, which is only about 10 per cent of the total geographical area of the state but constitutes about 64.6 per cent of the total population of the state. Apart from them, there
are few populations of migrants who are collectively referred to as *Mayang* by the Meiteis. They migrated from different parts of mainland India in the last century, and are primarily engaged in business and other allied activities. The valley is surrounded by the hills, which are administratively divided into five districts and six autonomous district councils, and are sparsely inhabited by 34 recognized tribes who are broadly classified into Kukis and Nagas. The Kukis largely occupy the southern hills, while the Nagas mainly settle in the northern hills. These hills constitute about 90 per cent of the total geographical area of the state but only 35.4 per cent of the state’s population as per Census of India, 2011.

In spite of the rapidly increasing population in the Imphal valley, the Meiteis are restricted to acquire immovable properties and settle in the hill areas as per the ‘tribal policy’ of India. By dint of their domination of the state assembly, certain legislations were enacted so as to remove such restrictions, and attempts were made to bring about uniformity in the application of laws. However, these moves have been opposed tooth and nail by the hill people developing an antipathy towards the state government, leading to an intractable hills–valley divide.

India is seemingly one geographical entity yet it was the British rule that ‘brought about an enduring political consolidation’. This geopolitical entity is bedevilled with the contentious leftovers of the colonial rule till today. In the northeast, in particular, boundaries came to be drawn around certain identities by the colonizer to bring about governance among the so-called ‘wild races’. These boundaries were inherited by the new administration when the colonizer left. These colonially injected arbitrary boundaries left the region a fractured frontier sandwiched between South and Southeast Asia. When India built itself as a federal nation-state, and in an attempt to accommodate the aspirations of its people, reorganization of states was mainly done along linguistic and ethnic lines as seen in the creation of few states in northeast India. The States Reorganisation Commission, constituted in 1953, perhaps had reorganized states in good faith to strengthen Indian democracy by espousing, as well as embracing, diversity and pluralism. However, it has also had the unintended outcome of exclusivist identity politics in many parts of the country. The ‘imagination’ and ‘re-imagination’ of identity led to the construction and reconstruction of certain disparate group of tribes into a generic umbrella term and their ‘imagined homeland’. Those outside the imagined community were confronted with insecurity of land, property and even life. Thus, identity politics and territoriality continue to perpetuate conflicts with ever-growing demands for redrawing of boundaries.

In Manipur, the three communities—Meitei, Kuki and Naga—have been living together for centuries. This time-tested coexistence is under constant threat with the emergence of new nationalism, which came into existence with the advent of English education, and of the middle class and their self-consciousness of their identity during the British colonial rule. The colonial policy to ‘divide and rule’ its subjects and the practice of using one against another were responsible for the emergence of divisive and exclusivist politics. These are furthermore aggravated by the practice, among ethnic elites, of romanticization of one’s history and culture on the basis of certain colonial knowledge. This often forms the basis of certain ethno-politics and has often led to the glorification of one’s history, heroes and

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1 There are five hill districts in Manipur—Churachandpur, Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong and Ukhrul—with six autonomous district councils which are associated with each of these districts along with Sadar Hills Autonomous District Council. Sadar Hills, which is within the administrative jurisdiction of Senapati district, has been long due to be upgraded as a full-fledged district. For this issue, see Haokip (2012a).

2 There are hosts of legislations in this regard: The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act, 1960; The Manipur (Hill Areas) District Councils Act, 1971; The Manipur (Village Authority in Hill Areas) Act, 1956, etc.

3 For details about political integration in India, see Haokip (2011, 2012b).

4 For instance, until today in Ukhrul district two villages—Thawai Kuki and Thawai Tangkhul—live in close proximity, and in Litan town the two ethnic groups, Kukis and Nagas, live together despite ethnic conflict in the 1990s.
symbols at the expense of others, which consequently aggravated and continues to fan conflicts till today. Likewise, in various contemporary discourses the land relations between such groups have always been regarded as competing in nature despite the prevalence of cooperation and sharing lands in the past.

The classic case of constructivist identity and colonial spatial order can be observed in Naga identity and the way Isak-Muivah faction of National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN-IM) defines Naga territory. On its official website, the NSCN-IM describes ‘land’ of the Naga people, wherein John Henry Hutton’s description in ‘Introduction’ to J.P. Mills’ ethnographic account of the Lotha Nagas, which was published in 1922, is twistedly quoted. It reads:

The area inhabited by the Naga tribes is bounded by the Hukawng Valley in the northeast, the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley in the northwest, Cachar in the southwest and the Chindwin River in the east. In the south, the Manipur Valley roughly marks the point of contact between the Naga tribes and the very much more closely interrelated group of Kuki tribes. (SCN-IM, 24 September 2014)

Hutton introduces the Naga people and their territories as an ‘arbitrary’ term saying that they lived ‘in certain parts of the Assam hills’ (Hutton, 1922, pp. xv–xvi). About 20 years prior to the publication of Hutton’s book, G.A. Grierson (1904) described the length and breadth of the ‘Kuki country’ which extends from the Naga Hills in the north down into the Sandoway District of Burma in the south; from Myittha River in the east, almost to the Bay of Bengal in the west…This vast mountainous region, from the Jaintia and Naga Hills in the north, is the home of the Kuki tribes. We find them, besides, in the valley of Manipur, and, in small settlements, in the Cachar Plains and Sylhet.

This colonial definition of space and the territorialization of both the Kukis and Nagas are overlapping in many places. For instance, the sketch map in John Shakespear’s ethnographic work *The Lushei Kuki Clans* (1912) showing the regions inhabited by different clans of the Kukis includes the southern regions of Tamenglong, Senapati and Ukhrul districts. This basically means that in a number of pockets they inhabit the same territory and the population is largely mixed. However, to the Naga nationalists others living in the colonially defined territory of the Nagas become non-indigenous or migrants. They labelled the Kukis, without question, as ‘land grabbers and outsiders’ (Hazarika, 1994, p. 243). The Kukis contested how space is defined, particularly in Manipur, and claimed that they were further marginalized and disadvantaged by the British after fighting them for three consecutive years from 1917 to 1919 in what the British termed it as a ‘rebellion’, while the Kukis regarded it as a ‘war of independence’. After this uprising, centres of administration (subdivisional/district headquarters) were gradually shifted to the Naga strongholds. Regarding this, P. Gangte (2013, p. 146) views that ‘[a]fter 1919 the Kukis were generally referred to as *Dushman* (by the British) and the name of Laijang headquarter [was] changed into Tamenglong’. To lay claim on the mixed settlements as ‘Naga territory’ by virtue of having started an armed struggle much earlier, those who were not identified as ‘Naga’ were subsequently served quit notices since 1960, followed by cleansing of Kuki villages thereafter. According to Ahanthem (2015, pp. 189–190), the editor of English daily *Imphal Free Press*, ‘The intention to drive out Kukis from these four hill districts, in fact, led to an intense and prolonged *ethnic cleansing* by the NSCN-IM.’ While meeting and submitting a memorandum to the visiting union minister and minister of state for home affairs of India, Rajnath Singh and Kiren Rijiju, respectively, in Imphal on 13 February 2015, Kuki leaders brought to the notice of the two ministers a ‘very important case of genocide and crimes of NSCN-IM’ in which ‘the NSCN-IM murdered 905 innocent Kukis including women (some pregnant), children, aged and invalid while uprooting 360 villages and seizing their land besides rendering 100,000 peoples refugees in their own land’ (*The Sangai Express*, 2015, p. 3).
The politics of territoriality and ethnic cleansing is supplemented by the practice of nationalists and other ethnic activists who engage in the expansion of the Naga identity. The Naga nation, as argued by Sajal Nag (2012, p. 177), is not ‘given’; instead it is continually being constructed and the politics of Naga identity construction ‘need to acknowledge the presence of multiple, contingent, continuously constructed identities in any conceptualisation of the process of identity-formation. This is particularly glaring as we historicise the forging of Naga nationality.’ This is achieved by the NSCN-IM through a method, as Nag (2012, p. 190) pointed out again, of ‘coercion, carried out by threats: tribes were to surrender individual identities and officially merge with the Naga identity, or alternatively, face the violence of mass murder, burning of villages and eviction’. The expansion of Naga identity through the ‘Naga-isation’ process (Kabui, 1993, p. 1) coincided with what Gangte (2013, p. 146) calls the ‘politics of disunity and eventual fragmentation of the Kukis’, resulting in the ‘politics of identifying with and distancing from Kuki identity in Manipur’ (Arora & Kipgen, 2012). Gangte (2011, p. 63) delineates:

Such a socio-political faux pas allowed the Naga nationalism to buttress right through the very heart of the Kukis when large segment of small tribes belonging to the Old Kukis such as Anal, Aimol, Khoibu, Lamkang, Maring, (to name a few) decided to follow their leaders who had their self-interest in joining the ever increasing and enlarging edifice of the Nagas in view of some disdainful behaviour of the Kuki leaders and thus helped in chipping away of the Kuki edifice that was the over-riding scene in Manipur.

Among the ‘New Kuki’ groups too, as Sajal Nag (2012, p. 191) further denotes, ‘Some like the Gangte, Vaiphei, Zou Simte, Hmar and Paite declared themselves to be a part of the Zo group, so as to avoid being identified as Kukis and targeted by the Naga armed groups.’ Thus, the group which was generally identified as ‘Kuki’ came to be the target in conflicts.

Despite living together for centuries, the issue of indigeneity has become quite central in the pan-Naga movement and later imbied by the Manipur integrity movement. In this, both the parties fashioned themselves to be the ‘indigenous people’ of Manipur and the Kukis have been thoughtlessly projected to be the ‘late settlers’, ‘migrants’ and ‘foreigners’ despite the fact that they have been migrating to Manipur with the Nagas and Meiteis roughly during the same time. To the two parties, some recorded migration of the Kukis who sought the protection of Manipur Maharajah during early colonial period when there was conflict among the Kuki chiefs in the hills was enough case to stigmatize the whole Kuki community as ‘migrants’. In fact, these small refugees were not allowed to settle within Manipur state (Imphal valley); they were provided with guns and asked to remain in the foothills to protect Manipur territory from the attack of Kuki Rajahs. It was by circumstances of the British colonial paramount frontier politics that these people have become the ‘subjects’ of Maharajah when the whole hills were included within the expanded territory of Manipur. This unwarranted politics of indigeneity has become quite profound in public, especially during different ethnic conflicts in the state.

Even in scholarly discourses, few stray comments in colonial ethnographic studies are mindlessly deployed as a reference point to question the indigeneity of the Kukis in Manipur. The oft-quoted words are primarily derived from the writings of British Colonel Thomas Callan Hodson who mainly studied Kukus’ immediate neighbours.9 While writing about *The Native Tribes of Manipur*, Hodson (1901, p. 308) remarked that ‘The Kukis are migratory, from the force of circumstances, and possess a strong fissiparous instinct. Indeed the Kuki is to be found almost everywhere in the State except in the territory

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9 Indeed, T.C. Hodson had written *Thado Grammar* (1905) but did not devote himself to understand their culture. Some of his ethnographic works are *The Meitheis* (1908), *The Naga Tribes of Manipur* (1911) and *India Census Ethnography 1901–1931* (1937).
occupied by the Mao confederacy.’ This platitude definitely shows how ethnographic history was written only from the colonial point of view. It is indeed discernable that Hodson had limited understanding of the Kukis’ lifeworld while devoting himself mainly to the ethnography of Naga tribes and Meiteis. Hodson (1911, p. 2) also wrote how a Kuki man once told him: ‘We are like the birds of the air. We make our nests here this year and who knows where we shall build next year’. In fact, these statements reflected how a fraction of the Kuki population led their life.

Hangsing (2013, pp. 11, 23) pointed out that the British understanding of the then Kuki society was limited to colonial interest. He argues that as the expansion of the Kuki territory took place through creation of new villages beyond the bound of the old ones, it was misread as mindless migration. For instance, the present Churachandpur town and adjoining areas were basically the lands of Songpi chief who had settled at the hilltop to evade heat and mosquitoes. In 1935/1936, Bungmual was given to a group of people who migrated from the Indo-Myanmar border region by the Songpi chief with Rs. 20 and a pot of local wine. Likewise, Teiseng (1942), Pearson (1946), Tuibuong (1946), Molnom (1946), Salbung (1964), Sielmat, etc. were all given by the Songpi chief, while Thingkangphai chief gave Kawnpuii, Ngathal, Lanva, Pangjial, Gangpimual, Tangmual, Tangnuam, etc.

The Kukis in the then Naga Hills District represented as one of the indigenous tribes to meet Simon Commission in January 1929 and also as one of the 10 indigenous tribes on the discussion that led to the ‘The Naga-Akbar Hydari Accord’ signed on 28 June 1947 when the other Naga tribes were still largely not involved in the politics of the hill areas of the northeastern region. During the early years of the Naga nationalist movement, tens of Kuki villages were eliminated in the northern hills of Manipur since the early 1960s to lay claim that territories belong exclusively to them and to put a stronger case to their demand. The quit notice served to the Kukis by United Naga Council (UNC), Manipur, in their meeting on 22 October 1992 once again brought up the dormant debate on territoriality and ‘politicized indigeneity’ after three decades, which was subsequently responsible for Kuki–Naga conflict of the 1990s. The meeting adopted a resolution setting 1 July 1972 as the base year for the purpose of determining land ownership for the Kukis in the hill districts of Manipur—Ukhrul, Senapati and Tamenglong—and those settling after 1972 were directed to vacate the land and their settlement by December 1992. It also put another condition that the Kukis may reside in a particular village by giving an undertaking to the supposed original Naga village authorities that ‘they will peacefully and loyally live with the next immediate Naga village by recognising the sole ownership and sovereignty to the Nagas over the land and that they will not invite or allow any new settler in their village’. The Kuki Inpi, Manipur (KIM) in its memorandum to the then Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao blamed the UNC’s quit notice served to the Kukis as the ‘root cause’ of Kuki–Naga conflict and ‘an undisclosed objective of the Nagas of Manipur…the dispossession of Kukis of their land by force and fraud’. The relentless public debate on territoriality and indigeneity continued during the 90-day blockade imposed along the

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10 For further understanding of ‘non-state peoples’, see Scott (2009).
11 Data derived from a conversation with the chief of Songpi Village Mr Thenkholet Haokip, 68 years, 8 October 2014, 7:40 am, at Phailen, Churachandpur district.
12 The 10 tribes that represented the tribes of the then Naga Hills District for a discussion with Akbar Hydari, the Governor of Assam, on 26–28 June 1947, were Western Angamis, Eastern Angamis, Kukis, Kacha Nagas, Rengmas, Semas, Lothas, Aos, Sangtams and Changs.
13 By ‘politicized indigeneity’, I refer to the notion of indigeneity defined in terms of ‘first settler’ and the bickering thereafter.
14 Resolutions passed in the emergency meeting of the Executive Committee of UNC, Manipur on 22 October 1992 with R.K. Thekho as president and Francis Ngajokpa as secretary.
15 Memorandum submitted to Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao by KIM on 10 February 1996.
National Highways (NH)-2 and -37 by Sadar Hills Districthood Demand Committee (SHDDC) in the latter part of 2011 and the Kuki State Demand Committee (KSDC) movement in 2012–2013.

The extension of ceasefire between the Government of India and the NSCN-IM to Naga-dominated areas outside Nagaland invited stiff opposition from various Meitei civil society groups in Imphal valley leading to a review of the agreement after 43 days. Public debates during the protest movement had reflected the extent of seriousness on territoriality in the state. In the debates, both the Meitei and Naga civil society organizations and insurgent groups claimed themselves as having cognizance of the past. It is manifested in the words of NSCN-IM communiqué which stated that the ‘Manipur Territorial Integrity’ campaign of the valley-based clubs, human rights activists and politicians reflects ‘their ignorance of their own history and political reality of contemporary period’ (Imphal Free Press, 2001). Manipur history and politics are interpreted to suit the sectional interests of each group which are mostly conflicting in nature.

Among scholars too, selecting literatures that suit one’s intention and disregarding the others that would have led to different observations is also common. The Cheitirthon Kumpapa, the court chronicle of the kings of Manipur, and Puyas, the traditional records of the Meitei people, also have accounts of the Kukis since 33 AD. However, such records can again be contested as it is claimed that the Puya Meithaba (burning of ancient Manipuri scriptures) in 1729, during the reign of Meidingu Pamheiba (1709–1748), totally devastated the ancient Manipuri scriptures and cultural history and the present literatures are merely reconstructions.16 This shows how romanticization of one’s history is a desperate exercise yet so common in lived experience in India’s northeast.

**The New Millennium Conundrum**

The conflict in Bodoland Area Territorial Districts of Assam in the latter part of 2012 between Muslim population and the Bodo tribals not only had serious repercussions in Assam and other northeastern states but also led to large exodus of northeast people from various parts of south Indian cities. The general notion about this conflict is associated with people who are alleged immigrants increasingly occupying vast indigenous lands and threatening the very existence of indigenous people. This conflict was translated into xenophobia among many, leading to the adoption of several measures by advocacy groups and state governments of the region to combat this perceived menace.

In Manipur, the issue of territoriality along with the perceived menace of immigration has generated a sense of insecurity among the dominant Meitei community of the state. It resulted in the sporadic formation of collective advocacy groups and the vociferous pursuit of their demands. Taking a cue from the Bodoland conflict, these newly formed pressure groups embroiled the state for quite some time linking the genesis of this heated discourse on ‘indigeneity’ to the issue of immigration from different parts of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar into Manipur.

The IMF under the leadership of R.K. Rajendra, a former member of the Manipur State Human Rights Commission, while seeking ‘unification of Meiteis residing around the world’, aims to stop influx of foreigners. The official IMF Facebook page posted on 1 November 2013 surmised its objectives:

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16 A certain Hindu preacher from Sylhet Shantidas Adhikari, popularly known as Shantidas Gosai, converted King Pamheiba of Manipur to Hinduism in 1717 AD. Under the behest of the Hindu preacher, Pamheiba ordered his men to burn all the Meitei scriptures. A ‘Puya Meithaba Commemoration Day’ was observed on 4 February 2013, jointly organized by International Observation Committee on Puya Mei Thaba (ICOP) and other Meitei civil society organizations at Palace Compound, Imphal. ‘Puya burning observed solemnly’, The Sangai Express (5 February 2013a).
To press the people and the government to stop the continuous influx of Kukis from Myanmar and Muslims, particularly Rohingyas from Bangladesh, resulting in dangerous demographic change, which will (reduce)…Meetei (to a) minority and (render them) homeless within few decades.

To organise any Meetei particularly from outside Manipur who always love and have more sense of belongingness for Manipur to settle in all border areas to save Territory of Manipur and save Meetei nation.

The IMF’s politics in Manipur clearly typify the politics of hurt communal sentiments, where minority becomes an emotional subject and the expansion of their occupied territory beyond Imphal valley becomes their primary objective.

To demonstrate that the Meitei community is culturally endangered and ensure the removal of restrictions on settlements in the hill areas, the demand for ST status gained momentum under the Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur (STDCM). In course of this demand, reviving and evoking the dying rite Sanamahi and the long-dead institutions have become the new rhetoric. As Shneiderman and Turin (2006) observed:

The struggle for recognition as a distinct tribal entity, a classification that can entitle a community to educational and economic benefits from the state on the basis of their unique cultural history and language, is one of the most critical political issues in this region today.

While studying the ethno-politics of seeking ST status in Darjeeling and Sikkim, they also ask

In fact, it is precisely their distance from centres of state learning and ‘civilisation’, and their concomitant reliance on oral cultural transmission, which historically has marked these communities as ‘tribes’. Why, then, are the upwardly mobile ethnic organisations of Darjeeling and Sikkim so eager to rediscover their ‘lost’ scripts?

This question is also perfectly suited to an upwardly mobile Meitei society settling at the heart of civilization with a written history for about a millennium seeks this status recently. Elsewhere, I have shown the futility of the arguments made by the STDCM. Such arguments are merely ‘a ploy to attenuate the fervent political demands of the Kukis and Nagas, as well as a tacit strategy of the dominant valley dwellers to make inroads into the hill areas of the state’ (Haokip, 2015, pp. 87–88).

Manipur also saw the emergence of Inner Line Permit Demand Committee (ILPDC) which demands implementation of Inner Line Permit System (ILPS) in the state. The formation of such pressure groups is inextricably linked to one another in their pursuit of ‘securing the insecurity’. As Schleiter and Maaker (2010, p. 16) remark:

To be ‘tribal’ plays an important part in identity (indigenous) claims advanced by many of the 84 million people who the Indian state has categorised as such…the ‘tribal’ communities are in many respects considered as even more vulnerable than other minorities and thus in need of state protection.

The demand for ST status and subsequently making the Meiteis a ‘vulnerable community’ is made to be the basis of further demand for the implementation of the colonial law—the ILP system, in the state of Manipur.

The assertion that Meiteis are indigenous to Manipur, in terms of original inhabitant, is no doubt an undisputed fact. However, the demand for an ST status, as a marginalized indigenous group, under the Indian Constitution after being in the general category for the past 65 years becomes not only problematic to an astute observer but also mischievous in the eyes of the tribal people in the hills. This is especially
so when the assertion is made by pitting oneself against another community by questioning the latter’s indigeneity. Looking into the demands of IMF, STDCM and ILPDC, there seems to be a clear sense of insecurity and ‘perceived threat’ on the part of the dominant Meitei community because this exercise, in a nutshell, typifies the earnestness for restructuring the self-image of Meitei ‘indigeneity’, as the ‘original settler’ of Manipur (hills) as well as a ‘marginalized’ and ‘backward’ community in relation to other mainland Indians. At the same time, if they succeed in their assertion for ‘indigeneity’ over the hills, it means a lot for them because it follows that the hills of Manipur also belonged to them in the past. In this sense, the Meiteis’ assertion for ‘indigeneity’ is but an exercise of domination over the hills of Manipur (and its inhabitants?).

The ‘perceived threat’ to Meitei community came in the wake of the ongoing ‘peace talks’ between the Government of India and the Kukis and Nagas. Instead of lobbying for inclusive politics, the Meiteis have chosen for exclusion. This not only is disturbing in the eyes of the hill people who now found that their ancestral lands in the hills were threatened much stronger than ever before but also now gives them more tooth, a much stronger case, to clamour for the disintegration of Manipur than they usually have. According to Nath (2014, p. 55), the assertion of indigeneity ‘is to situate oneself within a space from which one can apparently counter the threats of cultural imperialism’. Thus, Meitei indigeneity is a strategy to contain the menace of ‘cultural imperialism’ and immigration coming from outside the sub-national state, as well as the ‘perceived threat’ arising within the state, particularly from the hills. The ILPS demand found overwhelming support from, if not initiated, the Meitei insurgent groups, in which many of them were engaged in attacks on non-local immigrant workers from different parts of mainland India.

On the question of migration which has become central in the public debate noted above, one can only say that the question charged by the new zeal of nationalism having no real ground at the base for migration is as dynamic as it was before. Just as we have a continuous internal migration within the state, there was also migration of people into the state from outside. This also applies to the migration of people of Manipur to other states in India and overseas. Take the case of Meiteis who have migrated to Cachar valley in Assam during the ‘seven years devastation’ (1819–1826) who later migrated back to Manipur, the process of which is still going on. The case of migration of Bishnupriya Meiteis and Meitei Tripuris into Manipur in recent times is a clear case in point. They were compelled to do so by the circumstances of their position there and the great hope they expected in Manipur (Bimol, 2013). Likewise, there were many Nagas who migrated to Nagaland from Manipur in recent times but by circumstances of their new-found land, they immigrated back to Manipur. The case of Tangkhul immigration from Dimapur in recent times is a clear case. Likewise, internal migration from one district to another and from rural to urban areas and vice versa is as vibrant as before. The statistical data from different government organizations, including the decadal census, have clearly shown this dynamic situation.

Therefore, the pertinent question is where are we going to put the standard timeline to measure who is a ‘migrant’ in Manipur state? If the question of indigeneity is so serious a matter to be reckoned with, there should be a proper standard to measure who the ‘migrants’ are in Manipur and who are not? Without setting any proper standard measurement, it is pointless to tag someone who lived in their present habitat for centuries as ‘foreigners’ and someone who came few decades before as ‘indigenous’. But the more serious point is any such instrument of standard measurement would seriously question the status of more than half of the population of the state, especially of the valley people who have deserted the valley en masse during the ‘seven years devastation’. People migrated from one place to another by virtue of their circumstances and expectation for a better livelihood; one must have great sympathy to
these circumstances and hope. Any effort to create a standard will simply shut down the system to the ground because there cannot be any standard in strict sense of the term.

One thing that is crystal clear to an astute observer is that there are no ‘indigenous people’ in Manipur and there are ‘no migrants’ in Manipur because the question does not simply arise as everyone is ‘indigenous’ to the land they inhabit now. This is the natural truth and any effort to overwhelm this natural truth, especially through the emotive instrument of nationalism, is going to bring down everything including peace and governance. The attempt by Manipur Legislative Assembly to set 1951 as the standard year to measure who are indigenous people of Manipur by introducing the Protection of Manipur Peoples’ Bill on 28 August 2015, along with two other contentious bills, has thrown the state out of gear due to protests by various tribal groups in the hills.

The politics of indigeneity, which centres on the question of ‘original inhabitant’ or ‘first settler’ of a particular territory by certain group(s) in order to categorize some others as ‘settler’ or ‘migrant’, is a practice so common in post-colonial northeast India that it results in the existential dilemmas of many minorities. The idea of ‘indigeneity’ is essentially the creation of a ‘self-image’ of a community so as to distinguish itself from ‘settler communities’, and thereby through this ‘self-image’ each ethnic group considers the other as ‘settler’ and claims the settled areas as its own heritage. The resulting contestations, in Dev’s (2006) words, ‘breed tense, mistrustful, anxiety-haunted society/ies where even cultural spaces often become occupied territory’. In fact, this type of new nationalism has become a problem in the past decades causing enmity between communities and engulfing them with conflicts.

**Concluding Remarks**

With the emerging notion of nationalism or sub-nationalism and its spread, particularly to the north-eastern region, the divisive politics among desperate communities and the assertion of their identities become profound. The new assertion even led smaller groups within the three broader communities to claim for separate identities. With this new assertion, the politics of indigeneity has also become prominent. Indigeneity has become a convenient tool not only to create a self-image of the community but also to create the image of the ‘others’. This leads them to claim that they are the ‘original settlers’ and the others are ‘foreigners’ who occupy their ‘ancestral lands’. This normally breeds resentment leading to rebuttal from the ‘others’ and further antagonism among the ethnic groups. It also gives valid reasons for ‘others’ to vigorously clamour for some forms of political autonomy within the Indian state to secure their interests. Thus, the question of indigeneity in India’s northeast, and Manipur in particular, is about creating and securing a political space for self-determination.

The discourse on indigeneity, of late, emerges out of the ‘perceived threat’ within a section of the dominant group in the wake of the ongoing ‘peace talks’ between the central government and the minority ‘others’ in the state. However, the tacit attempts by the Naga nationalists for an exclusive ethnic homeland from shared spaces by driving out ‘others’ since the early decades of Indian independence were responsible for the emergence of the ‘politics of indigeneity’ in the state. In this discourse, each group engages in representing themselves as ‘indigenous’ with the clear intention of either to clean sweep the remnants of other minorities, in the case of the Nagas, or to preserve the territorial integrity of the state, in the case of the Meiteis.

Time and again, different forces have brought various groups in the state to spurn against each other. As pointed in other studies, ‘political mobilization based on indigenousness is most likely to prove disastrous or result in undesirable consequences. Such politics might lead to ethnic conflict, or pit
different marginalized groups against one another’ (Karlsson, 2003, p. 405). The need of the hour is to engage civil societies from all groups for a joint initiative to search for a solution through negotiations on the vexed issues. Contrary to its homogenizing tendencies, the liberal-democratic state should instead promote ‘civic engagements’ and intervene in protecting the diverse culture and ways of life. In the absence of serious attempts by the state government to resolve issues, the onus lies on civil society organizations to find solutions which would not be bound by assertions of historical claims to ‘ancestral land’ and other zeal of sub-nationalism, including the question on indigeneity, but based on citizenship. In order to bring about enduring peace in this troubled periphery, Baruah (2003, p. 321) strongly argues that it would involve ‘confronting the constructionism of modern identities by the political actors themselves’. This basically means that narrowly defined identities are always dangerous and actors constructing their own identities should rather confront the constructions of their own identities. For a resolution to work out, identities need to be reconstructed.

References
Haokip


