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Winter 2012

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/haokip/23/

Man and Society
Vol. IX, Winter 2012: 92-112.

District Status for Sadar Hills in Manipur

Thongkholal Haokip

This paper examines the longstanding issue that the Kukis and other communities in Sadar Hills area of Manipur have been waging struggle with respect to their demand to upgrade the Sadar Hills area of Senapati district as a full fledged district. The paper takes the position that full fledged status for Sadar Hills is indeed the rights of Sadar Hills people considering the many decades of administrative inconveniences, developmental bottlenecks and backwardness faced by them and keeping in mind the Government of India's legal enactment, Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act, 1971, granting six Autonomous District Councils, including Sadar Hills, in the hill areas of Manipur which were to be subsequently upgraded as districts. The paper starts with a brief historical background of Sadar Hills and the movement for district status, followed by attempts to examine the various arguments revolving around the issue of district status for Sadar Hills. It also argues that reorganisation of districts based on ethnic lines will have more stability among the ethnically competing groups with a liberal, inclusive and tolerant state government.

Within 2011 there were numerous plans by several Indian states to create new districts by bifurcating bigger districts. Indeed, two new districts were created in Punjab, nine new districts in Chhattisgarh and two new districts in Uttar Pradesh. While announcing the creation of nine new districts the Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh, Raman Singh expressed his optimism that new districts will bring administration closer

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to the people.[1] The formation of new districts did not provoke any resentment in any of these states in mainland India but were rather welcomed. Even the formation new states like Chhattisgarh, Uttaranchal and Jharkhand by the turn of the twenty-first century did not face stiff opposition.

However, in Northeast India administrative units are tied up with identity and land (Fernandes, 2004) and therefore face political and ethnic confrontations when it comes to readjustments of such units. This "ethnicisation of districts" has become an issue in such case as the renaming of North Cachar Hills district of Assam into Dima Hasao district on 1 April 2010, which faced stiff opposition from minority communities in the district, i.e. Kukis, Nagas and Hmars. While holding a news conference about the indefinite economic blockade on the two national highways of Manipur by the Sadar Hills Districthood Demand Committee (SHDDC) and a counter blockade by the United Naga Council (UNC), the Union Home Minister of India P Chidambaram rightly remarked that "Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh have formed new districts and no one objected… But in the Northeast, even creation of districts is a sensitive issue" (The Times of India 2011). The longstanding issue of Sadar Hills district demand continues to linger in the politics of Manipur. This paper is an examination and deconstruction of arguments revolving around the district status for Sadar Hills in Manipur.

Inscribing Sadar Hills

Covering an area about 2238 Sq. Km. Sadar Hills is primarily the hills surrounding the Imphal valley which is inhabited by the Kukis, some Naga tribes and Nepalese. These hill areas were a buffer zone between the valley and hill people and were selected for administrative region during the British rule. The most important factor for this selection was the strategic plan to protect the centrally located administrative capital - Imphal. In fact, this was done to secure the administrative headquarters from war like tribes settling in the highlands surrounding Imphal valley. Let us briefly discuss the etymology of Sadar Hills before we go deeper into the issues.

There are two contesting views regarding the origin of the word "Sadar". According to R K Rajender Singh the word "Sadar" is an

acronym of "Selected Area Development Administrative Region" given by John Maxwell, the then British political agent of Manipur and Superintendent of the State Administration, who made Manipur into two divisions, the valley and hills. Claiming that the abbreviation of "Sadar" is found in the land records of Manipur R K Rajender Singh conceives that the British established Sadar Hills with the same pattern, aim and object of other "Sadars" in several states of North India (Singh, 2011a). R S Jassal contest the view of R K Rajender Singh and argues that no evidence is traceable to support Rajender Singh's claim after examining the historical settlements of peoples in Sadar Hills, historical documents, articles and assessments from ground realties (Jassal, 2011). According to R S Jassal, Sadar Hills is derived from the Persian word "Sadar" meaning "middle", which also means closer to headquarters or close to the analogy of Sadar Bazars in army cantonments in large cities of India fostered by the then British administration. To him, the term Sadar Hills came up of its own, not as a product of any agitation, coaxing, Joint Action Committee-bandh or petitioned to authorities but rather out of administrative expediency (Jassal, 2008).

Historical Background of Sadar Hills

Till the first two decades of the twentieth century the Kuki Hills of Manipur and Somra Tract were largely unadministered territories as they were, so far, friendly to the British government (Reid 1942: 79). In the beginning of 1917 the government of British India intended to recruit second Labour Corps for France from various Kuki tribes of Manipur, who were described by the then Deputy Inspector General of Assam L W Shakespear as "a people who had never left their hills and knew but little of us and our ways" (Shakespear 1929: 210). The meeting in March 1917 among the various Kuki chiefs decided to wage war against the British Raj than supply labourers. Known as *Thadou Gal*, *Zou Gal* or *Haka Gal* in various local parlances, the arm resistance of the Kukis stretches three years and spread out to the then Naga Hills of Assam and Kabaw valley, Somra Tract and Chin Hills in Burma. An Indian linguist M S Thirumalai (2004) made an observation that "The 1917 Thadou Rebellion or the Kuki Rebellion against the Britishers is a special and significant event in the history of the Indian freedom movement." The

official colonial version regarded the uprising as "The most serious incident in the history of Manipur and its relations with its Hill subjects… it cost 28 lakhs of rupees to quell, and in the course of it many lives were lost" (Reid, op. cit.). L W Shakespear (1929: 235) also commented that the Kuki Rebellion was "the largest series of military operations conducted on this side (North-eastern region) of India."

After the uprising the British rulers felt the necessity of administrative control and thus "the hill people were for the first time brought under intensified political and administrative control of an imperial power" (Dena 1991: 134). As such, Manipur was divided into four subdivisions, one with headquarters at Imphal and three in the hills under a Sub Divisional Officer (SDO) each, viz., for the Southwest, inhabited by Kukis with headquarters at Churachandpur under B C Gasper; for the Northwest area, inhabited by Kukis, Kabui Nagas and Kacha Nagas with headquarters at Tamenglong under William Shaw; and Northeast area, inhabited by Tangkhul Nagas and Kukis with headquarters at Ukhrul under L L Peter (Reid 1942: 85). These three subdivisions were abolished on 1 January 1930 and the whole hill areas was placed under the President of Manipur Durbar from Imphal, who was assisted by two SDOs, one being in charge of the South and one of the North (Ibid 86). On 1 May 1933 a new arrangement was made whereby the hill areas were divided into three subdivisions: Sadar, Tamenglong and Ukhrul. The President of Manipur State Durbar was in charge of Sadar subdivision.

With the signing of "Merger Agreement" with India on 21 September 1949 by Maharajah of Manipur Bodhachandra Singh, the state became "Part-C State" of the Indian Union. In 1969 Manipur was divided into five districts: Central (Imphal), North (Karong), South (Churachandpur), East (Ukhrul) and West (Tamenglong). The reorganisation of districts placed Sadar Hills as a subdivision of the North District (Karong). To fulfill the aspirations of the hill people the Government of India enacted the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act, 1971. With the attainment of statehood by Manipur in 1972, the state government adopted this Central Act by issuing the Manipur (Adaptation of Laws) Order, 1972[2] and in exercise of the power vested in him under Section 3 of the Act, the then Governor of Manipur vide notification dated 14 February 1972 initially constituted six Autonomous Districts for the purpose of

constitution of Autonomous District Councils (ADC) under the aforesaid Act of 1971, viz.:

(i) Sadar Hills ADC,
(ii) Manipur North ADC, now Senapati ADC,
(iii) Manipur East ADC, now Ukhrul ADC
(iv) Tengnoupal ADC, now Chandel ADC
(v) Manipur South ADC, now Churachandpur ADC, and
(vi) Manipur West ADC, now Tamenglong ADC.

However, unlike their counterparts in other states of the Northeast created under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act, 1971 merely provides limited administrative powers to the ADCs under the control of the state government. The councils have no legislative powers, but can only make recommendations to the government about legislations on appointment and succession of chiefs, inheritance of property, marriage and divorce and social custom (Chaube 1973: 230).[3]

As per the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act of 1971, Ukhrul, Tamenglong, Churachandpur and Senapati ADC territorial areas had been upgraded to a district and there was no opposition as it was the implementation of the legal enactment of the central government. Chandel, Tengnoupal and Chakpikarong continued to remain as hill subdivisions under the Central District. In the following years the four ADCs, Senapati, Tamenglong, Ukhrul and Churachandpur, were upgraded to a full fledged district. On 13 May 1974 three Subdivisions, Chakpikarong, Chandel, and Tengnoupal Hills, were merged and put under a separate hill district with its headquarters at Tengnoupal, which was later shifted to Chandel.[4]

The Manipur North District came into existence on 14 November 1969 with its headquarters at Karong. Later the district headquarters was shifted to Senapati on 13 December 1976 and the district came to be known as Senapati District on 15 July 1983.[5] Sadar Hills continues to be under Senapati District waiting to be declared as a full fledged district even though it has a fully functional ADC since 1973.

It has also recalled that the Sadar Hills Autonomous District Council is created under the provision of Manipur (Hill Areas) Autonomous District Council Act 1971, (Parliament Act No. 76 of 1971, 26 December 1971). The said Act is implemented by Government of Manipur by constituting 6 (six) Autonomous Districts in the Hill Areas

of Manipur vide Government of Manipur's Notification dated February 14, 1972, issued by the then Governor of Manipur through Secretariat, Planning & Development Department.

The 'Tribal Areas/Tribal Block' and 'Hill Areas' status were already granted to present Sadar Hills areas as per the order of the Chief Commissioner, Manipur Administration, Revenue Branch, on November 10, 1958, signed by S.C. Bardhan, Secretary (Law & Home) Manipur Administration so as to give protection to tribal people of Sadar Hills as per provision of Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886 as extended to the territory of Manipur, further recalled the SHDDC in the representation.

Sadar Hills Movement and Manipur Governments

The demand for the creation of Sadar Hills district first came from the Kuki Chiefs' Zonal Council in its meeting held on 3 September 1970. The leaders of Kuki Chiefs' Zonal Council met the then Home Minister K C Pant in July 1971 and placed their demand for a separate Sadar Hills district. The delegates of Kuki Chiefs' Zonal Council again held a meeting with Security Commissioner on 6 October 1971 at Kholjang village (Haokip 2005: 147-148). The Nayal Commission in 1974, not only recommended for the creation of Sadar Hills district, but also suggested for the inclusion of some adjoining areas of Senapati and Ukhrul for administrative convenience. However, all these demands, talks and recommendations failed to produce any result.

Under the auspicious of the Kuki National Assembly SHDDC was formed in 1974 to demand a full-fledged district status for Sadar Hills. Ever since Manipur attained statehood in 1972 several state governments made attempts to declare Sadar Hills as a full fledged district. The first attempt was made by the Rishang Keishing's Congress government in 1982. The cabinet decision approved the creation of three new districts: Bishnupur and Thoubal by trifurcating Imphal district, and Sadar Hills, by upgrading the two subdivisions Saikul (East Sadar Hills) and Kangpokpi (West Sadar Hills). The former two districts came into existence. With regard to Sadar Hills an ordinance was put up by the cabinet to the Governor to declare it as a district. The Governor dully signed the ordinance but it was withdrawn due to opposition from the then Manipur Naga Council, "even though

the invitation cards had been printed to the effect" (Prakash 2007: 1404).[6]

The 1990s was trying times in the politics of Manipur, marked by instability of state government ministries, the Kuki-Naga ethnic conflict and attempts by various coalition governments to inaugurate Sadar Hills as a district. R K Ranbir Singh's United Front ministry endeavoured to upgrade Sadar Hills to a district status in 1990-91. But the political instability and downfall of the United Front ministry at the centre prematurely ended the life of the state government, and so were their efforts. The succeeding Congress ministry of R K Dorendro Singh also put efforts during their regime without success. After heading the Manipur State Congress Party government in December 1997, W Nipamacha Singh's ministry gathered courage and even fixed a date in October 1997 to inaugurate Sadar Hills as a district but the final declaration was not made.

In the course of its untiring demand for Sadar Hills district several demonstrations and bandhs were called, which sometimes filled with gory incidents incited by the state machinery apart from many untold miseries. In the past, two youths lost their lives. In 1981, Seikeng Haokip, who was part of a long silent procession from Sapormeina to Kangpokpi demanding Sadar Hill district, was shot dead by state police personnels in an attempt to disperse the crowd. In 2008, a grade VIII student, Lalminlien Sitlhou, was run down by a vehicle of security forces in Keithelmanbi while he was obstructing the highway in support of the demand for Sadar Hill district.

The election of new SHDDC leaders in June 2011 marked the revival for the demand of Sadar Hills district. The Sadar Hills District Demand Committee has been renamed as Sadar Hills Districthood Demand Committee to signify the readiness on the ground in terms of infrastructure and various processes needed, as the state government spelt out such requirement before and promised for the upgradation as and when done.

The committee requested the state government to declare Sadar Hills as full fledged district before 31 July 2011 failing which seven days economic blockade on the two national highways, NH-2 and NH-37,[7] will be called and an indefinite economic blockade thereafter if there is no response from the state government. On 26 July 2011 representatives of various Kuki civil bodies, Members of District Council and SHDDC staged a sit-in-

protest demonstration at the office complex of the Additional Deputy Commissioner, Kangpokpi, against the forty years denial of district status to Sadar Hills Autonomous District Council. A memorandum addressing the Chief Minister of Manipur was submitted by the leaders of various civil bodies gathered there. The non-response from state government forced the SHDDC leaders to impose economic blockade to the two lifelines of Manipur on 1 August 2011. On the second day the state government bullied the protest by imposing CrPC 144 in Sadar Hills area and due to the death of three girls SHDDC leaders declare indefinite bandh on the evening of the second day. The non-announcement of official dictum by Manipur government makes SHDDC to seek more intensive methods to pressure their demand.

Present Status of Sadar Hills

The historical marginalisation of the Kukis, and the people of Sadar Hills in particular, is mainly attributed to the measures adopted by the British Raj followed by the successive Manipur and Central governments. Lamenting on the marginalisation of the Kukis a former Manipur police officer Paocha Gangte blames the British in setting up administrative posts at Tamenglong and Ukhrul to displace the original Kuki bases of Laijang and Chassad (Gangte, 2011). The newly created District Councils were upgraded to full-fledged districts in no time when Manipur attained statehood in 1972. However, Sadar Hills was left out due to opposition from Manipur Nagas. While the creation of districts such as Ukhrul and Tamenglong were not opposed by the Kukis living in these districts as it was central enactment based on administrative convenience, putting the demand of district status for Sadar Hills based on communal lines eroded the whole fabric of collective Manipur life, incontestably.

Even though Sadar Hills has an Autonomous District Council it is supervised by Senapati district administration in all matters concerning executive, legislative, judicial and financial matters. Due to the requirement of adequate infrastructure as a *sine qua non* for upgrading Sadar Hills to a district status by previous state governments' ministries adequate buildings such as mini-Secretariat, Sports Complex, etc. were constructed and all functional departments were upgraded. A new Assembly Constituency,

Saitu-Gamphazol, was created in 1998 since all hill districts were having a minimum of three Assembly Constituencies each. The ADC now has all the paraphernalia of a district on ground and all offices functioning with an added prefix such as the Additional Deputy Commissioner, Additional Superintendent of Police, etc.

The SHDDC leaders pointed out the abysmal socio-economic conditions in their memorandum submitted to the Chief Minister of Manipur on 26 July 2011. They estimated that an amount of Rupees 38,000 crore have been lost during the period of about forty years due to delay in upgrading Sadar Hills to a district and lamented that such big amount of money could have been spent on socio-economic developments. The general secretary of SHDDC, Tonghen Kipgen, stated that "we have lost our faith in the government due to their blatant lie of making promises after promises to grant Sadar Hills as a full fledged district" (Imphal Free Press 2011). The people of Sadar Hills wanted the benefits and privileges of a full-fledged district and be self-supervised under a separate Deputy Commissioner, a District Magistrate, and a Superintendent of Police with its headquarters at Kangpokpi town (Singh, 2011b).

After 92 days of economic blockade[8] on the two lifelines of the state, NH – 2 and NH – 37, representatives of SHDDC and the state government on the evening of 31 October 2011 had marathon meeting which a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed by the two groups and the economic blockade was called off. According to the MoU, the government of Manipur has agreed to upgrade Sadar Hills as full-fledged District at the earliest after Committee on Reorganisation of Administrative and Police Boundary submit its report. It also agreed for the creation of three more subdivisions by bifurcating the existing three subdivisions and the new subdivisions to be inaugurated within November 2011.[9] The next day UNC and All Naga Students Association, Manipur (ANSAM) made a counter press statement against this MoU and imposed 78 hours bandh in Naga areas of Manipur. And the drama continues.

Examining Arguments Revolving around District Status

The necessity to form six separate administrative units for the hill areas of Manipur was felt by the central government which was pronounced

as the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act, 1971. Through this legislation the government of India seeks to ameliorate administrative and developmental needs and also protect the culture of the tribals. However, the subsequent upgradation of these ADC areas to a district status was left to the state government.

An important question to thus ask is: If Sadar Hills have been deemed as deserving of district status, why then has it been denied to them all these years while the other ADCs were granted district status more than three decades back?

Since the inception of Sadar Hills demand Nagas oppose it based on their claims of being "indigenous people" and the Kukis, and to some extent the Nepalese, as "late settlers" who had occupied their traditional land. It is important to examine and deconstruct this argument. A renowned anthropologist K S Singh of the Anthropological Survey of India suggests that the idea of indigeneity in the sense of "indigenous people" or "original settler" is irrelevant in the "strange alchemy" of India's histori-cal melting pot, and claims that nobody is indigenous (Singh 1995: 30). Most ethnic communities in Northeast India migrated to their present settlements at some historical periods, mostly after the first century AD. The Nagas claimed Tamenglong, Senapati and Ukhrul as their ancestral land based on folktales, oral traditions and British colonial gazetteers, reports and surveys. Such claims need to be examined pragmatically, whether they are merely malevolence, before a reasoned conclusion can be arrived at. Neither the Nagas nor the Kukis have written historical records as they don't have script of their own. In the absence of written history the claims based on such myths are more of a speculation and rather false or misleading information. Colonial records are often used to substantiate their claims. In this regard, the British records often have prejudice and biased against the Kukis since the Kukis opposed colonialism as an uprising from 1917-1919 and also in both the World Wars. While analysing the ethnic dimensions of Northeast turmoil Sreeradha Datta finds ethnic history as "a product of political memories, myths and emotions and many of the inter-ethnic conflicts in the Northeast are rooted in such conflicting portrayals" (Datta 2004: 21).

Another common argument by the Nagas against granting district status to Sadar Hills is to point at migratory history, i.e. British planted

the Kukis into the present Sadar Hills areas. The argument is that they are technically not indigenous peoples but from areas other than the hills of Manipur. This argument is hugely problematic to make because it could then easily be extended to numerous, indeed all, other communities in India. Harka Bahadur Chhetri points that there is no proof of inception of human beings in India, and that all the population groups, since pre-historic Stone Age migrated in different times from different regions (Chhetri, 2005). It should also be noted that most of the ethnic communities in Northeast India trace their migratory histories to East and Southeast Asia, and thus it would be imprudent to somehow point to the migratory histories of Kukis as an argument against the granting of district status to Sadar Hills. J H Hutton speaks about the migration of different tribes in Northeast India and Myanmar in preface to Henry Balfour's book *The Sema Nagas*. He writes:

> This area has been subjected to emigration from at least three directions-from the north-east, whence came the Tai races; from the north-west, whence came the Singphos, Kacharis, and Garos, among others, and from the south, as the Angami Nagas at any rate came to their present country from that direction, while a migration from the south northwards on the part of the Thado Kukis and Lusheis has barely ceased even now" (Hutton 1921: vii).

Rajesh Dev (2006), while analysing the existential dilemmas of the "settler Bengali" communities in Meghalaya, observes:

> The strongest foci of all these experiences, therefore, (have) been the idea of "indigenity" through which ethnic groups have structured a self-image of a community that is often contradistinguished with "settler communities". This self-image is a cascading phenomenon where each ethnic group considers the other as "settler" and as such claims the settled areas as its own heritage. The resulting contestations breed "tense, mistrustful, anxiety-haunted society/ies" where even cultural spaces often "become occupied territory".

In fact this type of arrogance itself has become a problem which is one of the root causes of enmity between communities in Northeast India.

In contrast to migratory claims by the Nagas, Majumdar and Bhattasali refer to the Kukis as the earliest people known to have lived in prehistoric India, preceding the "Dravidians" (Majumdar and Bhattasali 1930: 6-7).

Even *Cheitharol Kumpapa*, the court chronicle of the kings of Manipur, and the *Pooyas*, the traditional records of the Meitei people, has some accounts of Kuki people and a king which dates back to 33 AD.

It must be strenuously added that the granting of ADC to Sadar Hills by Indian government is primarily the recognition of the area's historical contribution to the state and the need felt for a separate administration, rather than recognition of a particular community. Thus, it is around the issue of historical developments and administrative needs that the argument should revolve around and not problematic arguments of indigenousness of a particular community.

The Ethnic Dimension

Land and territory, the lived and the perceived spaces, constitute a primeval experience in the imagination of ethnic groups. It has been a perpetual site of contestation as well as negotiation. They are now considered as cultural symbols which are essential for the survival of one's collective identity. In post-colonial era these lived spaces are often subjected to the "politics of name changes" which have been justified on anti-*colonialist* grounds. In the past two decades several Indian cities had been renamed to "merely sweeping clean the last corners of colonialism who have wrapped India's identity in its anglicized names."[10] This is sometimes more divisive than uniting people (Easwaran, 2001). Unlike the much opposed renaming of North Cachar Hills district in Assam as Dima Hasao, which is an ethnicised name of the district after Dimasa tribe, the abbreviation of "Sadar" Hills points the non-ethnicised name of a selected area for special development. The demand of constitutional rights for Sadar Hills district status is, as spelled out by SHDDC, meant for all the ethnic communities settling in Sadar Hills; yet it has spiralled on ethnic lines.

While assessing the ethnic dimensions of turmoils in Northeast India Sreeradha Datta perceives ethnic differences and conflicts as neither new nor unusual in the region and were not central to the regional dynamics until the imminent withdrawal of the British from India and when independent India sought to integrate the region with the rest of the country. She finds almost all political developments in the Northeast, from reorganisation to protracted violence, as intrinsically linked to the

question of ethnicity (Datta op. cit.). The sharp division of the communities of Manipur into a group preserving integrity of the state (Meiteis) and the other vying to break it so as to integrate with the neighbouring state (Nagaland), or exist within the state under an "alternative arrangement"[11] (Nagas), has degenerated the state into a zone of political battle where Sadar Hills demand continues to be placed between Naga politics and the elusive Manipur government.

The Naga tribes in Manipur perceive any state-induced changes as an objective to facilitate alienation of their land to the Meiteis (Maring 2008: 118-120). The attempt to create Sadar Hills as a district is regarded as an attempt to break Naga traditional land. The UNC, while reaffirming their stand on Sadar Hills which oppose the creation of Sadar Hills district by carving out of Senapati district, stated that it "will not accept bifurcation of Naga areas without the wishes and consent of the Nagas. The Nagas have been resisting arbitrary encroachment and creation of artificial boundaries of their land since the colonial period and hence any attempt on the part of the government of Manipur to create Sadar Hills district without consulting the Nagas will be strongly opposed" (Hueiyen Lanpao 2011). To the Nagas, land and identity are concomitant to each other and cannot be parted but are integral and indispensable. They regard parting of any parts of their land will tantamount to loss of their cultural heritage. The Naga Youth Front also regarded the demand and creation of Sadar Hills district as constitutional rights but forfeiting and annexing other's land is not justifiable and gross violation of universal rights (The Sangai Express 2011a). The UNC often reminded the state government about the four MoUs signed between them, wherein the MoU of 1998 stated that the resolution to the conflict on the issue of Sadar Hills has to be brought about through a consensus of the peoples concerned in the interest of bringing about lasting peace and harmony between the Nagas and the Kukis.

The four decades of debacle on Sadar Hills may also be attributed to the Manipur government trivializing the Sadar Hills demand and regarding the issues related to the Kukis as the "others". While discussing the virulence of insensitivity to the existence of several ethnic minorities and their interests within their own boundaries in Northeast India, Jangkhomang Guite espouse that the "State cannot continue to ignore the presence of the minority 'others' who constantly insist on identifying

with it" (Guite 2011: 63). Even though the demand to upgrade Sadar Hills to a district predates the idea of another bifurcation of Imphal district, it was taken up together and was promised to be done together. While Imphal was bifurcated on 18 June 1997 into East and West districts, Sadar Hills was left. When the agitation in Sadar Hills arises again, the Chief Minister stated that Sadar Hills will be discussed together with the plan to create Jiribam district and the newly emerging demands to bifurcate Ukhrul and Churachandpur into two districts each (The Sangai Express 2011b). The delay in granting district status to Sadar Hills has not only cost precious lives and unnecessary economic hardship during the agitations. The deep emotional anger and frustration of the people of Sadar Hills continues to widen the gaps between the already fragile ethnic relations, and thereby even inciting communal feeling between the ethnic groups.

I. District wise land holding of Nagas and Kukis in the Hills of Manipur

Name of District	Land holding (%) - Naga	Land holding (%) - Kuki
Churachandpur	Nil	100 %
Chandel	25 %	75 %
Senapati (excluding Sadar Hills)	75 %	25 %
Sadar Hills	10 %	90%
Tamenglong	65 %	35 %
Ukhrul	70 %	30 %

II. Manipur population as per census 2001

Ethnicity	Population
Kukis	4,23,227
Meitei Hindus	13,61,521
Meitei Muslims	1,67,201
Nagas	2,94,585
Others	1,46,096
Total Manipur population	23,88,631

(Source: Kuki Inpi, Manipur memorandum to Indian Home Minister on June 10, 2010)

Reorganisation of Districts

A month after intense Sadar Hills agitation spearheaded by SHDDC since 1 August 2011 the indecisive cabinet of the Secular Progressive Front (SPF) government of Manipur instituted a committee, named as Committee on Reorganisation of Administrative and Police Boundary (CRA&PB), to recommend on reorganisation of district boundaries in the state with special emphasis on finding ways to solve the Sadar Hills issue. The committee headed by Chief Secretary of Manipur, D S Poonia, was given three months time to submit its report. It is not the first time that the government of Manipur constituted district reorganisation committee to solve the Sadar Hills stalemate. Decades back Rishang Keishing's Congress ministry instituted a committee headed by L Chandramani as chairman but failed to finalise the report (The Sangai Express 2011c). During the course of its hearing by CRA&PB from various civil society organisations of the state it is found that each ethnic community wants to be under a district dominated by their own community.[12] Here comes the issue of reconciliation between administrative convenience and ethnic attachment to a particular administrative unit. Even though administrative expediency is being emphasised for reorganisation of administrative and police boundary, at the bottom ethnic attachment seems to counterweight administrative convenience (Haokip, 2011).

In the past two decades the world has witnessed the rise of ethnic consciousness, and ethnic conflicts and tensions have become a common experience in many parts of the world. Many have partly attributed the collapses of USSR, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia to ethnofederalism, but it is frequently recommended for countries torn by ethnic conflict. Many researchers argue that ethnofederalism can help preserve ethnically divided India by meeting the demands for autonomy and promoting unifying identities (Brass 1993, 300-301; Kohli 1997). After studying cases of ethnofederal states Henry E. Hale finds that properly designed ethnofederal system "appears to be a viable political option for societies where ethnic identifications are already conflict-hardened and where there is a premium on continued state unity" (Hale 2004: 193). Such ethnofederal adjustments can be seen in Africa's most diverse multiethnic country, Nigeria to accommodate the aspirations of several ethnic and territorial identities through periodic territorial reorganisation and thus

bring "government closer to the people". The Willink Commission of 1957 and the Panel on Creation of States of 1976, under whose guidelines the series of state reorganisations was carried out, contends that in a multiethnic state like Nigeria administrative convenience should take into account the history and wishes of the people (Alapiki 2005: 49-65).

The diversity within India's Northeastern states makes many to consider them as a "mini India". In multiethnic, conflict ridden and deeply divided state like Manipur ethnofederal structure can be instituted in the form of districts. This means that reorganisation of districts has to be done on ethnic lines. While exploring "how deep differences can be accommodated" in India, H Kham Khan Suan opines that "the future of social justice will depend on the extent to which the state and society could mitigate past wrongs and injustices by acknowledging and giving institutional recognition to the unequal circumstances in which different communities are placed in" (Suan, 2007). Rather than being largely illiberal in its intent and orientations, narrow, parochial and exclusivist in its social and political projects; state can be liberal, inclusive and tolerant towards diverse ethnic groups. This framework can build a new form of relations by promoting dialogic space and thereby reduce ethnic, religious and cultural differences.

Conclusion

The demand to upgrade Sadar Hills to a full fledged district status is one of the longstanding district demands in the whole of India, which continues to linger in the politics of Manipur for the past four decades. It continues to remain as a site of contestation between the Kukis and Nagas of Manipur. While the Kukis term this delay in granting district status as "justice denied" and felt ignored by the state for long; the Nagas see it as an attempt to encroach their traditional land. Thus, this is the minuscule of the larger claims for territorial supremacy by both Kuki and Naga insurgent groups of the hill districts of Manipur as part of their homeland. The rise of ethnic nationalism in postcolonial Northeast India or within Manipur, which is often parallel and competing, can be attributed to this persisting impasse.

Even though the issue of Sadar Hills district status is primarily

between the Kukis and Nagas, this perplexed problem has been often placed in the larger context, the relation between the Nagas and the elusive Manipur government. The Meitei dominated Manipur government, in its best effort to preserve the territorial integrity of the state, is in a dilemma. The granting of district status will aggravate their relation with the Nagas, which will ultimately lead to staunch pronouncement of the integration movement and the demand for alternative arrangement by the Nagas. As such, understanding the intricacies of the ethnic aspirations Manipur government has been delaying on any decisive move on Sadar Hills. On the other hand it also cannot continue to deprive the people of Sadar Hills of their aspirations for a separate district for administrative expediency and developmental needs. There will be no end to this impasse unless the state government takes bold decision and act accordingly.

In this complex relation between ethnic groups and the state government, issues like relative deprivation and ethnic nationalism, which exacerbates a sense of antagonism and mistrust among the various communities, need to be addressed with ingenuity. Given the deep tribal, geographical and historical divisions in the state, Manipur government should also not forget its role in shaping the intricate ethnic relations in a multiethnic, multicultural and multinational society. It must provide "dialogic space" for civil societies to highlight their concerns and interests and thereby formulate strategies to tackle differences.

Notes

[1] "Raman announces 9 new districts in Chhattisgarh on Independence Day", http://www.newkerala.com/news/2011/worldnews-48593.html (accessed 28 October 2011)

[2] The Manipur (Adaptation of Laws) Order, 1972 was published in the Manipur Gazette on 21 January 1972.

[3] The ADCs are practically not empowered to generate its own revenue but made it dependent on grant-in-aid from the state government.

[4] For details about Chandel district see the official website of Chandel district: www.chandel.nic.in

[5] Detail of information about Senapati District can also be obtained from the district's official website: http://senapati.nic.in/index.htm

[6] The Manipur Naga Council was renamed as United Naga Council. This is partly due to the opposition by the Nagas to recognise Manipur government

and its machineries, and their being part of Manipur. It is the larger movement to show solidarity to the integration movement of NSCN(IM).

[7] As per Ministry of Road Transport and Highways order in June 2011 NH-39 was assigned NH-2 and NH-53 as NH-37 respectively.

[8] The 92 days economic blockade by SHDDC becomes the longest blockade in the history of Manipur with the intention of pressurising the state government to meet their demands. The previous record of 67 days blockade was set in 2010 by the UNC and ANSAM demanding the implementation of Sixth Schedule in the hill areas of Manipur and conducting elections of ADCs under this Act.

[9] The MoU between SHDDC and the state government was signed by President and General Secretary of SHDDC, Ngamkhohao Haokip and Tonghen Kipgen, while the state government was represented by D S Poonia, Chief Secretary, Government of Manipur and Sumant Singh, Secretary to Chief Minister, Manipur. Apart from the creation of three more subdivisions in Sadar Hills by bifurcating the existing three subdivisions and upgrade Sadar Hills as full-fledged District at the earliest after submission of report by District Reorganisation Committee, it was also agreed in principle for creation of Lhungtin SDC Circle within Saikul Subdivision and to withdraw all the legal cases against SHDDC leaders and volunteers and other legal involvement over the agitation.

[10] For details about renaming od cities in India see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renaming_of_cities_in_India (accessed 3 November 2011)

[11] The demand for "alternative arrangement" for the Nagas of Manipur is a response to the Naga People's Organisation call to sever ties with Manipur government in a meeting held on July 1, 2010 at Senapati. The Nagas of Manipur view that their voices are least represented and their rights least bothered by the state government. They, therefore, affirm that alternative arrangement is the only way out to find amicable solution where they will have the sovereign right over their resources and land. The Senapati meeting was held after Manipur government did not allow general secretary of NSCN(IM) Th. Muivah to enter the Naga areas of Manipur, which resulted in the "Mao-Gate incident" where two Naga boys were shot to death by Manipur security forces in the agitation.

[12] The Committee on Reorganisation of Administrative and Police Boundary had hearing from various civil society organisations of each district including some district demand committees in October and Novenber 2011. From these hearings it is revealed that a Naga in Sadar Hills and Churachandpur would like their village be part of a district dominated by the Nagas i.e., Ukhrul,

Senapati and Tamenglong. Likewise, the Kukis in Ukhrul and Tamenglong choose to be under Sadar Hills or Churachandpur district.

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