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Research Article

Understanding the Causes of Ethnic Clashes in Manipur Through Ethno-Centric Politics

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Abstract

Ethnic clashes in Manipur are frequently seen over a period of time. They are shaped by history, interactions and competition between groups over a variety of goals. This paper discusses the ethnic clashes with the idea of ethnocentric politics in what way people become conscious about identity, collective memories what extent everyday experiences affect different groups related to each other. The paper uses a qualitative method on the basis of existing literature and historical records. To understand this better, the study begins with the Zeliangrong movement and examines the extent did its people in reforming traditional and social practices change slowly into a political demand.

The study revealed that identity is not something that remains the same. It is a living process and changes slowly through history, memories and lived experiences. As people become emotionally connected to their identity, the imaginary line that separates between groups also become more visible which frequently leads to put into a category. Ethnocentric politics plays an important role in creating spaces and opportunities for people to come together within their own and also at the same time, it can make antagonism against others. This article suggests that if we understand identity in a more flexible and inclusive way, naturally it may reduce tensions between communities and cultivate a sense of belonging that touches every individual's heart to open the door wide for diversity to flourish.

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INTRODUCTION

In Manipur, ethnic clashes are seen repeatedly as simple fights between communities. Most of the clashes either in underdeveloped or developing countries occurs on the basis of ethnicity. Meanwhile, ethnic clashes bear a physical resemblance to disputes between groups with differing ethnic identities. But deep down these clashes are usually connected to an issues like land, political power, access to resources and a long-standing tensions that have been built up in day to day lives of the people knowingly or unintentionally. This is where ethnocentric politics appeared.

Manipur is located in the Northeast part of India and covers an area of 22,327 sq.kms. It is bordering with Nagaland to the north, Mizoram to the south, Assam to the west and shares international border with Myanmar. It is a multi-ethnic society and a home to many communities like Meitei, Naga, Kuki and Meitei Pangals along with others like Nepalis, Bengalis, Tamils and Marwaris live in. The state is divided into valley and its surrounding hills. Besides, the state has sixteen districts including Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal, Bishnupur, Kakching, Churhandpur, Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong, Jiribam, Kamjong, Ka-gpokpi, Noney, Pherzwal, Tengnoupal and Chandel.

The Meitei mainly settle in the valley with 10% of land including other communities whereas Naga and Kuki live in the hills with 90% of the total state land area. The land laws in Manipur operate differently in the valley and the hills. The Manipur (Village Authorities in Hill Areas) Act, 1956 remain in force in the hills district of Manipur (Government of Manipur, 1956). Many promises particularly about the interest of protecting hills were ignored. So, in these concerns, Article 371C inserted by the 27th Amendment created a Hill Areas Committee (HAC) give a voice to hill communities in decision making. Besides this, the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms (MLR &LR) Act, 1960, is extended to the whole valley (Naorem Mohen, 2025: Government of Manipur, 1972). These differences create an imaginary line between communities and make people more protective of their own interests (Haokip, 2015; Singh, 2014) [4].

Historically, Manipur was once an independent kingdom. After merge with India in 21 September 1949, people didn't understand or experiences changes in the same way. There were widespread discontent, insurgency as well as ethnic tensions between communities. Different communities carried different memories and meanings of the past. And these still shape how they think today (Kamei, 2015; Sanajaoba, 2005) [3, 8].

Some see Manipur as one unified history while others focus more on their own separate histories and identities. Because people grow up with different stories about their past, land and they react differently when issues like land or rights come up. This is where ethnocentric politics begins and over the time it builds tension and can lead to clashes (Ningthouja, 2014; Baruah, 2005) [6, 1].

So, to really understand these clashes, we need to look beyond what we see on the surface and try to understand how people think, what they believe and how those beliefs have slowly

taken shape over the time (Brubaker, 2004; Halbwachs, 1992) [15].

This articles shows that ethnic clashes are not just about differences between groups. They happen because people understand those differences in their own way and use them in politics, especially through ethnocentric politics.

Understanding the study through existing work

When we look at existing literature on Manipur and the Northeast, most of the scholars viewed that ethnic clashes are not appeared suddenly and it is slowly influenced by history, identity, land, politics and people's sense of belongingness.

Sanjib Baruah, in his books "In the Name of the Nation" (2020) and "Durable Disorder" (2005), helps us to understand about Manipur clearly as the region is located near the border and it has created a space where different groups is seen visible in competing a belief in the superiority between themselves. Further, he pointed out that many ethnic tensions in the northeast region also emerge from the gap between government policies and local expectations. Gangmumei Kamei, in "History of Manipur" (2015), explains that in course of time identities of Manipur is formed by different communities through history, migration, settlement, kingdoms, war colonial rule and cultural interaction. However, each community understand issues like land, memory, belonging and political rights on their own terms. In this situation ethnocentric politics strengthen boundaries which resulted into frequent ethnic clashes. Thongkhohal Haokip, in his articles "The Kuki- Naga Conflict in the Light of Recent Publications" (2013) and "The Politics of Scheduled Tribes Status in Manipur" (2015), highlights about the competing memories over land, recognition and status slowly leading to clashes. Malem Ningthouja, in his book "Diametrical Nationalism" (2014) [6], points out that existence of multiple ideas of competing national imagination is closely related to land, belonging as well as political right. N. Lokendra Singh, in his "Politics of Insurgency in Manipur" (2013), explains that in what way do common issues like weak governance, unequal development and political instability slowly created the conditions of unequal of ethnic conflict. He further emphasised that when people sense ignored or sometimes left out for too long, emotionally they began to learn more on their identity. In course of time it become more intense increasing tension and divisions. In addition to this, Naorem Sanajaoba, in his book "Manipur: Past and Present" (2005), pointed out to what extent does identity, land laws and political system has influenced in resulting the hill and the valley divide in Manipur. He also explains that the division is not just only a social issue but also linked to the governance. Udayon Mishra, in his book "The Periphery Strikes Back" (2000), highlights the emotional notion of neglect and marginalisation in the Northeast eventually become identity as a political force.

When we look closely to the existing literature, it will help us to understand that issues like history, land, as well as struggles over identity and recognition are not fully explain. Further it also pointed out to what extent can it be argued that identity is shaped and used in everyday politics. This study further pointed out that ethnic clashes are expressed in many forms. The fear

and anxiety of losing such as rights, unequal distribution of power and resources can create psychological stress among different ethnic groups. So, ethnocentric politics not only shaped conflict but it also affects people psychologically.

Understanding Ethnocentric Politics

The idea of ethnocentrism was first used in social science by William Graham Sumner in his seminal book "Folkways" (1906) [10]. He explains that ethnocentrism is way of thinking one own group as the centre of importance by judging other groups as inferior. Later scholars like Theodore W. Adorno and his colleagues also pointed out that ethnocentrism is not about thinking at all but also about emotions. Further, he established a broader understanding ethnocentrism into an in- group and out-group. An ethnic or cultural groups that provides a positive attitude toward others is called in- group and a negative towards others is called an out-group (Adorno *et al.*, 1950).

Ethnocentric politics is something people which have been constantly carry out even without noticing it. It essentially refers to incorrect assumption about others behaviour in accordance with one own norms, values and beliefs. When this set of beliefs enters into politics, then a group of individuals may see another community as wrong in regard to language, behaviour, customs and religion. In course of time, this creates an emotional feeling of distorting complex problems by dividing into us and them in everyday issues like land, jobs or political representation. These can quickly turn out to be sensitive ethnic tensions between communities.

The Zeliangrong or Haomei Movement and Identity Mobilisation

During pre-colonial and colonial periods, we see people began to form identity slowly. Zeliangrong movement (1930-1932) is an early example to understand the development of identity into political mobilisation. The movement was led by Haipou Jadonang and later carried by Rani Gaidinliu. In the beginning, the movement have paid more attention in reviving traditional beliefs and also focused in bringing Zemei, Liangamei and Rongmei tribes together under one Identity (Khangchain, 2019). For the first time, Zemei, Liangamei and Rongmei come together to form a single group. In course of time, it has change into a political movement because of experiences like experiences like forced labour, taxation and the failure of colonial authorities to protect the people during the Kuki Rebellion (1917-18) (Khangchain, 2019). These have created frustration and enable them to form a cooperative and collective mobilisation strengthening group identity.

In relevant, this movement reflects an early stage of ethnocentric political thinking. Reuben pointed out that during critical scenario of ethnic conflict people frequently judge one group own values, beliefs as right and other group as wrong which led to increase divisions and pushes into more extreme actions (Reuben, 2009, p.63).

Contemporary ethnic clashes in Manipur through ethnocentric politics.

We can see the same pattern continuing in present day Meitei-Kuki conflict started on 3rd May 2023. According to IWGIA News (2023) and Newsclick Report (05 May 2023), the All-Tribal Student Union Manipur (ATSUM) called a solidarity march in various parts of hill district of Manipur. However, the violence erupted suddenly in Kuki dominated areas pf Churachandpur district (IWGIA News, 2023; Newsclick, 2023). The marched took place after the court issued an order directing the Manipur government to submit recommendation in reply to the letter dated 29 May 2013 from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India in relation for the inclusion of Meitei in the Scheduled Tribes (ST) list (IWGIA News, 2023). The tribal communities is in fear about losing land and job opportunities if the Meitei are allowed to acquired land in hills. The issue became politically sensitive. It is shaped by long historical processes, social exclusion, forced deprivations and group comparisons.

A first, identity is simply about belonging but it slowly become more protective and even defensive. Each group feel suspicious of each other and start challenging over land, rights and recognition As a result, issues like land, resources, migration and political rights become more sensitive because they are closely tied to identity (Baruah, 2005; Thongkholal Haokip). We have known that many areas of Manipur are agriculturally backward and there have been a huge minerals and resources. This add another layer to the conflict. So big companies like Reliance Industries, Adani group have interest in in Manipur resources. Prakash Ambedkar, president of Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) had also stated earlier that the Manipur violence is made stronger by BJP with granting a platinum mining contract to a leading industrialist (ETV Bharat; 2023). This interpretation absorbs into fear, suspicious and each group begins to look through ethnocentric lens.

According to the Sangai Express News (2025), the reports suggest that Union Minister Amit Shah discussion with Ex CM Biren Singh at the national level led to separate arrangement of administrative responsibility over the valley by the state government and hill areas to be handled by the Home Ministry. This was followed by creating a buffer zone restricting the movement telling both Meitei and Kuki not to cross the designated zones. Such arrangements are closely aligned in strengthening identity divisions.

CONCLUSION

Understanding all these factors like economic issues, political decisions and security measures help us connected that conflict is not driven by single cause as many factors overlapping each other in course of time. It is seen as part of a bigger struggle over land, identity and control. In this way ethnocentric politics links everything together and makes small problems grow into conflict.

This study shows that identity itself is not the problem and should be understood in a more open and flexible way. Understanding ethnic clashes through ethnocentric politics help us to explain why the conflict had happened and difficult to resolve. Such conflict requires inclusive policy and dialogue.

There is also scope for further research to examine the role of social media, political communication and grassroots experience in sustaining ethnocentric politics in the region.

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