

## **Nation building through print media: An exploration of nationalism in Manipur's local press**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Print media in Manipur, a state in India's Northeast, has emerged as a platform for disseminating the idea of the nation and articulating the emotional and intellectual dimensions of Manipuri nationalism. Although the press in Manipur seeks to engage with the region's subcultures, it exhibits differential treatment toward the cultural sentiments of the Naga and Kuki communities, whose identity-related questions and political demands are often subordinated to the dominant Manipuri identity. Furthermore, the idea of India as expressed in newspapers does not carry the same prominence in Manipuri local newspapers as it does in those of mainland India. This paper examines print media in Manipur as a site of contestation between two competing ideas of the nation—Meitei nationalism and Indian nationalism. It further focuses on two key areas of contention in Manipur's print media: the press's evaluation of governments and the national question.

**KEY WORDS:** Nationalism, print media, identity, Manipur, insurgency.

### **1. Introduction**

The concept— a product of industrialisation and modernisation - was replicated by the rest of the world (Anderson, 2006). Anderson's definition of nation as an imagined community and Gellner's argument that it is a definite political boundary where the fulfilment or violation of national sentiments can cause satisfaction or anger of its members has some usefulness to examine the evolution of Manipur as a nation. Manipur is a 2000 years old nation which is defined by the monarchical form of government. The political boundary of Manipur with an identifiable map; began with the Col. Henry Yule's Manipur map drawn around 1500 AD and James Johnstone's Manipur Map in the 19th Century. Such political and territorial boundary as presented by the map has provided the state government and its population, a reason for a strong hold on the protection of territorial integrity of Manipur. The absolute monarchy was replaced by constitutional monarchy in 1947 which continued for two years until Manipur was merged with India. The

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long history has implanted on the Manipuri imagination of a community with a national identity and political boundary.

Manipuri nationalism has a mainstream and variants. The Meitei nationalism, Naga nationalism and the Kuki nationalism are the sub-divisions of Manipuri nationalism. Both the Naga and the Kuki nationalism are asserting themselves against the dominant Meitei nationalism while they are also contesting among themselves as well. Manipuri nationalism lacked homogeneity and the attempts to bring about it culminated in the dominance of Meiteis which intern led to ethnic assertion in the form of sub-nationalism (Shimray, 2001). Manipuri nationalism, despite the claims to represent the entire Manipuri community, on a closer look, the dominance of one particular group and the internal heterogeneity become discernible.

Another perspective to look at Manipuri nationalism is from the viewpoint of moderates and extremists, both characterized by assessment of validity of the merger issue and consequently the agreement or disagreement in becoming a part of the Indian nation. The former accepts the Indian constitution while the latter are the radicals and armed who don't accept the idea of India, reject the merger agreement and demand the restoration of the pre-merger independent status of Manipur. They are anti-India and anti-establishment. The dissent of the moderates is primarily the negligence of the state by the central government in general. Like Khilnani argued, the idea of India could not offer a single or clear definition of India thereby resulting in many possible ideas of India (Khilnani, 1997).

For the purpose of the study, the editorials of Huiyen Lanpao, a vernacular Manipuri newspaper, during the year 1989 to 1998, are collected based on systematic random sampling. They are reviewed qualitatively and two main issues; the Evaluation of governments by the press and the National Question as the Core Areas of Contention in print media of Manipur have been identified. The decade is significant for its peak period of insurgency in Manipur.

## **2. Evaluation of Governments through Editorial Analysis.**

An analysis of editorials in Manipuri print media reveals a critical engagement with both the state and central governments, particularly in issues related to media freedom, governance, and insurgency. Editorials consistently critique the state government's restrictions on media autonomy, especially concerning reportage on insurgent organisations. These restrictions are interpreted in the editorials as instruments aimed at containing separatist tendencies and reinforcing Indian nationalism; however, the press frames such measures as violations of democratic norms and freedom of expression (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1990). This critical stance underscores the press's role as a watchdog and its resistance to state control over public



discourse. Editorials also reflect discontent with the state government's failure to effectively implement welfare policies and development schemes. The press constructs this failure as symptomatic of broader governance deficits, linking underdevelopment and public dissatisfaction not merely to insurgency but to administrative inefficiency and political neglect (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1989). In addressing insurgency-related challenges, the editorials emphasize the limitations of the state's security-centric approach and advocate dialogue, repeatedly urging political leaders to pursue peace talks as a more sustainable solution (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1990).

With regard to the central government, editorial commentary critically examines the imposition of President's Rule in Manipur, framing it as a coercive response to political instability, ethnic violence, and insurgent activity rather than as a constructive intervention (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1993). The editorials contest the Centre's narrative that insurgency is the primary cause of unemployment and underdevelopment, arguing instead that structural neglect and policy failures are equally, if not more, responsible (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1993). Editorial scepticism is also evident in discussions of proposed peace initiatives led by central leaders such as former Prime Minister H. D. Deve Gowda and Rajesh Pilot, with the press questioning the sincerity and political commitment behind these efforts (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1997).

A recurring theme in the editorials is strong opposition to the Centre's reliance on military solutions to address insurgency in Manipur. The press consistently frames insurgency and liberation movements as fundamentally political in nature, thereby asserting that excessive militarisation exacerbates conflict rather than resolves it. Editorials thus interpret the Centre's heavy militarisation of the state as a strategic and moral failure, reinforcing alienation rather than fostering integration.

Finally, editorial discourse highlights perceptions of unequal citizenship by critiquing the Centre's differential treatment of Manipur's population. The apparent indifference of then Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao towards victims of ethnic violence between Nagas and Kukis—especially when contrasted with his responsiveness to similar crises in Assam and Gujarat—is interpreted in the editorials as evidence of Manipur's marginalisation within the Indian polity (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1993). Through such critiques, the editorials position Manipuris as second-class citizens, thereby reinforcing a sense of political exclusion and regional grievance.

### **3. National Question: The Core Areas of Contention**

The issues concerning nationalism in Manipur are identified and classified on the basis of the argument of Anderson that Map, language, census and historical monuments are the factors that shape national identity.



They include territorial integrity of present Manipur state and pertaining issues about the legitimacy of the merger of Manipur in Indian union; the preservation of Manipuri language and its inclusion in the 8th schedule; communal disharmony among different sections of Manipur and the demand for the implementation of Inner Line Permit (ILP); the competitive and contentious claim by different sections of Manipur about their status as the real inheritor of Manipuri culture and the demand for the protection of places and materials of historical importance.

The Manipur Map and the political boundary of Manipur include within its boundary, the ethnic communities of the state. Therefore, the idea of Manipur nation including the Nagas, Kukis and the Meiteis has been imagined. But some sections of Nagas and the Kukis showed their disapproval to be identified with Manipur identity and demanded their separate homeland out of Manipur. There is also an overlapping in the territory demanded by them, resulting in the ethnic clash in 1992. The demand for separate homeland, in turn threatens the territorial integrity of Manipur. The press is strictly against any compromise on the territorial integrity of Manipur (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1994). The disapproval by the press can be understood from the point of view of preserving the entity called Manipuri nation as defined by the map and its political boundary. This is evident when the press supported unity among the communities in the hill and valley of Manipur at the wake of ethnic clash (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1995). Following the ethnic clash among the tribals, press reflected that the Meiteis should take the responsibility to promote harmony among these communities (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1997).

Census also becomes significant in defining the nationality question. It classifies different nationalities in physical terms such as population. It includes the indigenous population of the nationality and excludes those who don't belong to the nationality. The mainland Indian and the Nagas of neighbouring state Nagaland are regarded outsiders. The press argued that that the non-Manipuris have migrated and settled down in Manipur should be excluded from the census data (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1990). The press also expressed its disagreement with the extension of Indo-Naga ceasefire beyond the territory of Nagaland (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1997). The demand for the re-implementation of Inner Line Permit (ILP) to stop the influx of outsiders can also be understood as the view of nationalism of Manipur expressed in terms of census.

The controversial Merger Agreement, 1949 is still an issue that trigger nationalist sentiments in Manipur. The agreement received criticisms in the press in terms of the subjugation of a sovereign Manipur nation by India (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1989). The press reminded the people of the independence which was lost twice by the Manipur, one in the year 1891 and the other in the year 1949. The press criticized the political leaders for not recalling the loss of sovereignty to Manipur after merger in Indian union (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1990).



The immediate result of the merger gave a Part C status to Manipur and a Union Territory until it attained statehood in 1972 which was viewed as an insult to the distinct identity of the Manipuris. The press showed its dissent towards the indifference of the state and the centre in addressing some unresolved issues of merger. Addressing the public, the press raised doubts whether Manipur took the right decision to join the Indian Union because it did not bring about any progress in the state (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1992). The merger agreement has always remained relevant in terms of explaining the insurgency movement in Manipur. The press expressed that the merger agreement signed between government of India and Manipur brought the political subjugation of the independent Manipur (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1989). Press didn't explicitly support the liberation movement of the insurgents and their activities, but it suggests a peaceful solution to the rising problems of insurgency (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1996).

Historical monuments like the Kangla fort also shape Manipuri national identity. The British had kept Kangla Fort under their control until they left Manipur in 1947. The ownership then was transferred to the Defence Ministry of India. Later, the place was allotted to the Assam Rifles. The occupation of Fort by Indian army remained a major source of discontent among the people of Manipur. The Kangla has a great historical significance to the Manipuris. Hence, its occupation was treated by the press as a humiliation for Manipuris. The press strongly supported the movement demanding the restoration of the Kangla fort (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1996).

Vernacular language plays a significant role in the national identity question. So, the Manipuris want to preserve and protect the Manipuri language. The recognition of the vernacular Manipuri language in the 8th schedule is an issue that concern the Manipuri national identity and is supported by the press (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1992). The press expressed concern that the history of Manipur should also be based on *Puya*, a holy literature of the Meiteis instead of Aryan tradition (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1992). The press reflected the presence of various culture and beliefs in Manipur and it has expressed its disapproval towards the representation of Manipur culture by the dance form of Ras Lila. The representation of Manipuri culture and identity by the Ras Lila which has an Aryan element is considered by the press as against the sentiments of people of Manipur and as an instance of distortion of history (*Huiyen Lanpao*, 1998).

#### **4. Print Media and Manipur National Identity**

According to Anderson, creation of imagined communities became possible because of print capitalism. Capitalists printed their books and media in the vernacular which is intelligible for most and helped in promoting the vernacular imagined community (Anderson, 2006). Robin Jeffrey argued that print media creates political and the national identity in India. He also argues that print media in north east India promote



the secessionist movements that challenge the Indian state (Jeffrey, 2010). Hence the idea of India through the newspapers was not reflected in the Manipuri vernacular newspapers in the same gravity that it makes in the newspapers of mainland India. The decade 1920-30 saw the beginning of the modern Manipuri literature and the field of journalism. Though the activities were limited to the literate middle class, journalism began to create political and cultural awareness to the public to fight against the injustice of feudalism and colonialism (Parratt, 2005). Post-merger, the print media tried to infuse into the minds of Manipuris the uniqueness of two millennia old history, literature and culture etc. of the community and the need to preserve it. Print media automatically creates the core idea of nationalism.

The print media in Manipur face pressure from both the state and the extremists. Since they are following different versions of nationalism the press is caught between the various ideas of nationalism i.e. the Kuki nationalism, the Naga nationalism and the Meitei nationalism on one side, and the mainstream Indian nationalism on the other. The government impose censorship of media on news and views regarding the activities of the militant outfits and to protect the idea of India. Print media withstood the pressures from both sides and chose to maintain no affiliation with any of them. At the same time, the press has some disagreement with the idea of India and its state forms which failed to give recognition to the national question of Manipur and to offer a democratic political solution to their demands.

Even though the print media in Manipur attempts to address the sub-cultures of Manipur, it has a differential treatment towards the cultural sentiments of certain sections of Manipuris such as Nagas and the Kukis. Their identity questions and demands are subordinated to the mainstream Manipuri national identity. The print media's approach to sub-national questions of the Nagas and Kukis is largely confined to the propagation of unity and harmony among them and not approving any demand that pose a threat to the unity and integrity of Manipur. A hierarchy in the variants of nationalism is seen in Manipur in which the Indian nationalism stands at the apex with state support, followed by the Manipuri nationalism at the middle and the sub-nationalism of Manipuri Nagas and the Kukis at the bottom. The study by reviewing the editorials finds that the press most often takes the moderate Manipuri nationalism as the legitimate representative of Manipuri nationalism. It also takes the same as reference point to evaluate political issues and sociocultural sentiments of Manipuris as well as to encounter the idea of India propagated by the Indian state.

Within the Meitei nationalism it lends less support to the extremists. Such idea of the print media is also a reflection of the moderate form of Manipuri nationalism. The print media strives to maintain a distinct national identity of Manipur within Indian union. More importantly the press points out that the merger is



invalid mainly because the Indian government did not accomplish its own promises related to the economic development of Manipur. While writing editorials on certain issues such as territorial question, implementation of Inner Line Permit (ILP), question of inclusion of Manipuri language in the 8th schedule, and protection of Manipuri language and culture from the influence of other cultures, protection and preservation of historical Kangla fort etc. the print media maintains distance from both the extremists of Meitei nationalism and the nationalism of Indian state. The press reflects the moderate nationalist sentiments of Meiteis regarding the map, census, language and historical monuments that in turn shape the image of nation for a majority of Manipuris.

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