

The Evolution of Identity Politics in Manipur and Northeast India: From Assertion to Polarisation

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ABSTRACT

Identity politics in Northeast India initially emerged as a form of resistance to colonial authority and as a demand for recognition within the postcolonial Indian state. Over time, however, these ethnic-based identity politics has increasingly become a source of inter-tribal and inter-community conflict. The nationalist movements of different communities, which initially articulated demands for autonomy, sovereignty or complete secession vis-à-vis the Indian state now appear to have narrowed down into forms of ethnic-based identity politics and mobilization.

KEYWORDS: Identity politics, Ethnic mobilisation, Manipuri identity, Naga nationalism, Kuki nationalism.

Introduction

The Northeastern states of India have historically experienced prolonged neglect from the central government, owing largely to their small populations, far flung geography, and the manner in which they were integrated into the Indian Union following the British withdrawal from the subcontinent. Meaningful strategic attention to the region emerged only in recent decades, driven by shifts in India's foreign policy particularly its engagement with Southeast Asia under the Look East/Act East policy and by the imperative to counter growing Chinese influence in the broader ASEAN landscape.

Ensuring stability in the Northeast has consequently become essential for safeguarding major transnational infrastructure initiatives such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway. However, persistent insurgencies especially those rooted in Nagaland and Manipur pose significant challenges to the successful implementation of such projects. Against this backdrop, India's approach to "Northeast-building" warrants closer examination, because many of the region's enduring identity-related problems can be traced, directly or indirectly, to the militarized policies and security-centric orientation adopted by central authorities in New Delhi. The Naga

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Kuki conflict of the 1990s and the Kuki–Meitei tensions which has continued since May 3rd, 2023 stand as illustrative examples of the consequences and limitations of this approach.

Identity Politics in Northeast India

Identity politics typically arises when a particular group feels excluded or marginalised in mainstream politics, inadequately represented by existing institutions, adversely affected by historical or structural inequalities, and unified by a shared experience of discrimination. Identity politics, in Northeast India, has been a defining feature of the region’s political dynamics, shaped by historical legacies, ethnic pluralism, processes of state formation, and contestation over land, resources and uneven development. Scholarly work consistently notes that the region comprises an “exceptional mosaic of ethnic communities” (Misra, 2014, p. 3), many of whom engage in political mobilisation through identity-centered claims rooted in real or perceived marginalization.

Many scholars agree that the origins of identity politics in Northeast India can be traced partly to colonial administrative legacies. The British policy of separating hill areas from general administration contributed to the emergence of a lasting hill plain divide, which later became a key foundation for ethnic identity politics in the region. Baruah (2005) observes that colonial rule created “islands of administration” in the hills and “zones of extraction” in the plains (p. 27), thereby reinforcing structural divisions between indigenous hill populations and valley communities. These colonial-era distinctions continued to influence postcolonial institutions. Consequently, identity politics in the region should be understood not merely as cultural expression, but as a response to enduring institutional marginalization and asymmetrical distributions of political power.

Another manifestation of identity politics in Northeast India has taken the form of armed movements. While many ethnic mobilizations were initially non-violent, several gradually evolved into sustained militant struggles. The seven states of the region host more than thirty insurgent groups engaged in prolonged armed conflict (Das, 2009). Prominent among these are the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN–IM and NSCN–K), the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), and the Revolutionary People’s Front (RPF) along with its armed wing, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The objectives of these groups have ranged from demands for greater autonomy to calls for complete secession. In Manipur, additional insurgent organizations have operated primarily in the hill areas, including the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL), People’s Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), Kuki National Organisation (KNO), and the Kuki National Army (KNA), among others.



A recurring theme in the scholarly literature is the central importance of territorial claims in identity-based mobilization. Territoriality functions as a crucial political resource, as it shapes administrative authority, access to resources, and the protection of cultural identities. Numerous studies emphasize that in movements such as those for Gorkhaland, Dimasas, Karbi, Bodo, and Naga autonomy, claims to identity are intrinsically linked to demands over land. Hausing (2022) argues that although the recognition and accommodation of self-determination or self-rule claims of the Naga, Bodo, and tribal groups in Manipur are essential for fostering peace and stability, these measures alone are inadequate for achieving lasting peace unless accompanied by strong identity-preserving authority over land and resources. Additionally, he stresses the need for power-sharing not only across India's multi-level federal structure encompassing the Centre, state, and sub-state levels but also within and between tribal and non-tribal communities. Consequently, territoriality has emerged as a core axis of identity politics in Northeast India. Similarly, Amarjeet Singh (2008) observes that despite the formation of several new states and territorially based autonomous councils, various tribal groups in the region continue to press for further statehood and autonomous arrangements. As a result, disputes over land and territorial boundaries persist, contributing to the region's continuing instability and conflict.

Another prominent theme in the literature concerns migration-induced identity conflicts, particularly in Assam, Tripura, and Meghalaya. Scholars widely acknowledge that these states have experienced sustained anxieties over demographic shifts and their implications for indigenous political dominance. Haolai (2022) notes that fears of being numerically and politically displaced by outsiders have consistently fuelled large-scale mobilization in Assam. Such concerns extend beyond inter-state migration, as cross-border movement especially from Bangladesh has generated some of the most intense identity-based movements in the country. The anti-foreigner agitations in Assam, which culminated in the Assam Accord of 1985 and were later revived through debates surrounding the National Register of Citizens (NRC), have been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis. Baruah (2019) characterizes these movements as the largest and most enduring "sons-of-the-soil" agitations in India.

Thus, it is evident that identity politics in Northeast India constitutes a complex, historically grounded, and continually evolving phenomenon. Rather than operating as a singular process, identity-based politics in the region manifests as a set of interconnected dynamics, including territorial assertions, responses to migration, armed mobilization, and ongoing institutional negotiations with the state. While identity politics in India initially emerged as a means of seeking recognition and resisting colonial domination and postcolonial state structures, it has over time also become a basis for exclusion, generating multiple forms of tension and conflict. These conflicts are frequently articulated through binary terms such as majority



versus minority, tribal versus non-tribal, local versus outsider, valley versus hills, sons of the soil versus immigrants, as well as inter-tribal and intra-tribal divisions.

Ethnic identity formation in Manipur

Among the Northeastern states, Manipur stands out as a region marked by multiple and persistent identity-related conflicts. The state is home to a diverse range of ethnic communities, with the Nagas, Kukis, Meiteis, and Meitei Pangals constituting some of the major groups. Each community possesses a distinct history, cultural practices, linguistic traditions, and religious affiliations. Although these groups are loosely bound through a broader “Manipuri identity” or the “idea of Manipur,” they tend to construct and assert identities rooted in ethnicity, which may coexist, overlap, or come into conflict with one another.

Examining identity politics in Manipur is particularly significant within the wider context of Northeast India, as the state encapsulates within its borders many of the historical, political, and structural forces that have shaped identity-based mobilization across the region. Manipur’s coerced and incomplete incorporation into the Indian Union, its pronounced hill–valley divide, long-standing developmental marginalization, and prolonged militarization under a security-oriented governance regime reflect broader shortcomings in the nation-building process in the Northeast. The coexistence of several politically mobilized ethnic groups Meitei, Meitei Pangal, Naga, Kuki, among others advancing competing claims over territory and recognition illustrates how ethnic identity becomes the dominant idiom of politics in contexts marked by weak inclusive citizenship, limited decentralization, and uneven development. Consequently, studying Manipur offers critical insights into how state practices, rather than cultural diversity alone, generate and consolidate identity politics in the region, making it a key case for understanding ethnic conflict, governance challenges, and the limitations of India’s strategies for managing diversity in its frontier areas.

Idea of Manipur or Manipuri Identity

According to Akoijam (2001), the identity of the Manipuris as a ‘nation’ evolved against the backdrop of the history of the Meiteis and its kingdom which dates back to the first century of the Christian era. He notes that what began as a small principality gradually expanded by incorporating other principalities and populations from both the valley and the surrounding hills. By the fifteenth century, the Meitei kingdom had consolidated its position as a dominant regional power, with territorial boundaries extending well beyond those of present-day Manipur. As the kingdom expanded, a collective consciousness of being a distinct “people” also developed. This sense of collective identity was shaped not only by shared political



authority under a common ruler but also by broader historical experiences, including earlier conflicts with the Burmese and later encounters with British colonial forces in the nineteenth century. Notably, the kingdom's military forces were composed not only of Meiteis but also of members from various tribes and communities in the region. It was within this historical context that a composite identity of Manipur and a broader Manipuri identity took shape.

He further argues that Manipuri identity acquired its modern character through collective struggles against British colonial rule and the autocratic authority of the Maharaja, including movements for democracy before and after independence, demands for representative government, and the quest for statehood. One of the most significant moments in which this composite identity was most clearly expressed occurred during the 1940s, particularly in the period between independence and Manipur's merger with India (1947–1949). Following the British withdrawal in 1947, Manipur briefly functioned as a modern polity, adopting a constitution and establishing a representative government under a constitutional monarchy. Notably, the constitution-drafting committee included representatives from both the hill and valley regions, and elections were conducted on the basis of universal adult franchise, enabling participation from communities across Manipur. The resulting government also included ministers drawn from both the hills and the valley, reflecting an inclusive political arrangement.

Although the composite identity of Manipur has come under increasing strain in recent times due to the rise of sectarian forms of politics, people from both hill and valley communities have continued to play an important role in sustaining the "idea of Manipur." For instance, despite the Meiteis constituting the demographic majority in the state, the first Chief Minister of Manipur, after it had attained a full statehood within the Indian Union in 1972, was a Muslim. Additionally, the state has had two Chief Ministers from its hill districts. Notably, Rishang Keishing, a Tangkhul leader from Ukhrul district, remains the longest-serving Chief Minister in Manipur's history. These instances illustrate that, notwithstanding repeated challenges posed by sectarian ideologies and politics, political leadership and participation from both the hills and the valley have contributed to the maintenance of Manipur's composite identity into the present.

Identity of the Nagas as a nation

As compared to the idea of Manipur as a nation, the idea of the Nagas as a nation is of a relatively recent origin (Akoijam, 2001). This notion of Naga nationhood emerged from the growing political self-awareness of elite groups among the hill communities in the present-day state of Nagaland. By the time of British withdrawal from the Indian subcontinent, the Naga National Council (NNC) had rejected the idea of Naga's



incorporation into India and instead asserted the demand for an independent political entity. The Indian state's refusal to accommodate this claim sowed seeds for the emergence of Naga insurgency.

In its initial phase, the Naga nationalist movement had limited impact on Manipur, as it was largely initiated by the people of the present-day Nagaland and it was confined to the same only. However, by the 1960s, Naga mobilization increasingly began to influence the hill populations of Manipur, particularly in the northern hills of the state. Following the split within the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the rise of the NSCN-IM faction, led by General Secretary T. Muivah (hailing from Ukhrul district in Manipur), a significant section of Manipur's hill tribes became involved in the Naga underground movement. As a result, the articulation of Naga nationhood increasingly came into tension with the broader Manipuri identity.

Identity of the Kukis as a nation

The Kukis constitute a heterogeneous assemblage of ethnic groups characterized by diverse dialects and cultural practices (Meetei, 2014). The term "Kuki" functions as an umbrella category encompassing several related Tibeto-Burman-speaking tribes, including the Chin, Mizo, Hmar, Thadou, Paite among others, who inhabit parts of Northeast India as well as regions of Bangladesh and Myanmar. Similar to the Naga case, the articulation of a Kuki nationhood and the demand for a distinct Kuki homeland are relatively recent developments. The movement advocating an exclusive Kuki territorial entity gained momentum only in the aftermath of the Kuki-Naga clashes of the 1990s.

It has been alleged that ethnically related groups from Myanmar have migrated illegally into Kuki-inhabited hill districts of Manipur and have subsequently been assimilated as Kukis, contributing to a rapid increase in the Kuki population in the state. These allegations have become a major source of contention, generating tensions between the Kukis and other tribes and communities in Manipur. One of the most serious consequences of such disputes is the ongoing conflict between the Kukis and the Meiteis, which has persisted since 3 May 2023.

In contrast, comparable forms of ethnic mobilization are not evident among the Meitei Pangals (Manipuri Muslims), who reside primarily in the valley alongside the Meiteis. As Meetei (2014) notes, the Meitei Pangals assert a distinct identity not only vis-à-vis the three communities discussed above but also in relation to other Muslim communities elsewhere. They view themselves as "naturalized" inhabitants of Manipur—adherents of Islam who nonetheless possess a distinct historical experience that has shaped a unique trajectory of ethnic formation.



Nationalist assertion to ethnic polarisation

Identity politics in Northeast India in general and in Manipur in particular, initially emerged as a form of resistance to colonial authority and as a demand for recognition within the postcolonial Indian state. In the immediate post-independence period, the region witnessed the rise of numerous ethnic movements, articulated through both democratic mobilization and armed struggle, with demands ranging from greater autonomy to complete secession from the Indian Union. Movements such as Naga nationalism and the Mizo movement, for example, sought autonomy or sovereignty but were later integrated into the Indian constitutional framework through the attainment of statehood (Nagaland in 1963, Mizoram in 1987).

Over time, however, these identity-based mobilizations became sources of inter-community tension and conflict, particularly over issues of land, resources, development, and political power among groups that had long coexisted in the region. This shift in identity politics can be attributed to multiple factors, including the colonial “divide and rule” legacy and its continuation in postcolonial governance, uneven development and disparities in political influence among communities, prolonged neglect and indifference by the Indian central leadership toward the Northeast, and what Haolai (2022, p. 4367) describes as the interplay of “greed and grievance,” or the strategic manipulation of ethnic identities by political elites for political advantage.

Across the Northeastern states, ethnic-based identity politics has increasingly become a source of inter-tribal and inter-community tensions and conflict. In Manipur in particular, such forms of ethnic mobilization, often described as “ethnic polarization,” have posed a serious challenge to the state’s composite identity or the broader “idea of Manipur.” The infamous Kuki–Naga clashes of the 1990s represented one of the earliest and most significant threats to this composite and non-communal political tradition of Manipur. A further challenge has emerged from the Naga nationalist movement, grounded in the conception of the “Naga as a nation” and the aspiration for “Greater Nagalim,” which seeks to incorporate all Naga-inhabited areas into a single territorial entity an aspiration that conflicts with the territorial and political integrity associated with the idea of Manipur. More recently, the Kuki–Meitei tensions that began on 3 May 2023 have intensified these challenges.

Taken together, these developments suggest that nationalist movements of different communities of Northeast India which initially articulated demands for autonomy, sovereignty or complete secession vis-à-vis the Indian state now appear to have narrowed down into forms of ethnic-based identity politics and mobilization. This shift has contributed to deepening polarization among Nagas, Kukis, and Meiteis, whose competing identity claims increasingly appear mutually incompatible.



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