

Manipur's silent suffering and the broken promises of 'peace'

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In a land where trust has been shattered and lives hang in the balance, the call for peace rings hollow.

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Armed Meitei community members rush towards a hillock where a firing incident was reported in Kangchup, near Imphal, on June 22. | Photo Credit: Altaf Qadri/AP

*First came the scream of the dying
in a bad dream, then the radio report,
and a newspaper: six shot dead, twenty-five
houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied
behind their backs inside a church.
As the day crumbled, and the victors
and their victims grew in number,
I hardened inside my thickening hide,
until I lost my tenuous humanity.*

— **Robin S. Ngangom from *My Invented Land***

Dead bodies piled up waiting to be buried. They say this is not the time to mourn but wage war. I am bitter and tired of writing about death and destruction. But we need a language to speak the truth.

There is a pitched battle between the State police, backed by ultranationalist Meitei groups, and the Kuki-Zo militia, which is allegedly backed by Central paramilitary forces. A mosque caught in the crossfire was turned into a bunker, forcing the Pangals (Muslim Meiteis) to take sides. The Meitei separatist groups have not been visible, nor have we heard or seen the Thangkul (read NSCN-IM or the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak Muivah) heavyweights yet. This may just be the overture to a protracted and bloody ethnic conflict.

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To say “the lines have been drawn” may be too simple and inadequate to explain Manipur at any point in history. The spectacle of violence in Manipur has complicated our reality. The new realities of Manipur, dogged by a troubled past, do not fit in with conventional policies and resolutions such as those offered by a counterinsurgency operation or even a truth commission. Violence has always been a part of the Manipuri experience for at least half a century now because of contested histories and the misadventures of the Indian state. The idea of a Manipuri identity is being subsumed, as each community tries to assert its political hegemony. Each community has banned guerilla outfits “protecting” their clan/tribe, which have been legitimised by elected

governments and civil society over years. The dirty war has been playing out in the State for decades. So, what went so horribly wrong this time that women and children were raped and burnt alive? How did the State fall into the abyss of hate so swiftly?

‘Peace process’

India’s Prime Minister finally spoke in Parliament on August 10, promising that the “sun of peace will rise again in Manipur”, his second public utterance on the situation there in the three months of death and destruction. But is there a vocabulary for ‘peace’?

India’s north-eastern region has been trapped for years in images of violence and the language of armies and generals. The favourite phrases in use have been “peace process” and “peace accord”. Journalist Robert Fisk has the pithiest definition of a “peace process”—it is “rarely about peace and never a process”.

“...And you see, even the phrase peace process is a lie, because a process is something that proceeds, and the peace process has never proceeded anywhere. But... the words become part of the language, the grammar of television reports... And you can see what happens in this process, we’ve got a new cliché... ‘put back on track’.”

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In the ‘North East section’ of the Ministry of Home Affairs website, the various peace accords and those under “process” are listed (*see box*), and there are at least a dozen of them.

Peace moves in the NE region

Peace accords

(i) NLFT (SD) Agreement (2019): A Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was signed with National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT/SD) on 10.08.2019, and 88 cadres surrendered with 44 arms.

(ii) Bru Agreement (2020): An Agreement was signed with representatives of Bru migrants on 16.01.2020 for permanent settlement of Bru(Reang) families in Tripura.

(iii) Bodo Accord (2020): MoS was signed on 27.1.2020 with Bodo Groups of Assam, following which 1615 cadres of NDFB groups surrendered on 30.1.2020 and disbanded on 9th-10th March, 2020.

(iv) Karbi Accord (2021): MoS was signed on 04.09.2021 with representatives of Karbi Groups, following which over 1000 armed cadres abjured violence and joined mainstream society.

(v) Adivasi Peace Accord (2022): MoS was signed on 15.09.2022 with representatives of 8 Adivasi Groups, following which 1182 cadres of Adivasi groups laid down arms and joined the mainstream.

Impunity

Peace is a tricky word in conflict and the majority of these processes have gone rogue. The drill is familiar: the Union government comes to an agreement with an insurgent group to cease hostilities, paving the way for the guerillas to “lay down arms” and surrender. Everyone knows that not all arms will be given up. The legal cases against the members of these groups are dropped, the leaders are taken good care of while the cadres languish in “ceasefire camps”. Often, groups with more heft receive better “deals”. Then the “process” commences, and the government appoints interlocutors who negotiate with the leaders. These are usually post-retirement gigs for bureaucrats and intelligence officers. The political dispensation now allegedly begins to use them whenever required, while the groups engage in fratricide to retain control over extortion turfs. Their subversive activity against the state turns into legitimitised intimidation and coercion against the people.



An NSCN (IM) cadre with a Naga boy holding the outfit’s flag, at Hebron camp in Dimapur, Nagaland. A 2016 photograph. | Photo Credit: RITU RAJ KONWAR

As a case in point, the Indian government has been in a ceasefire accord with the NSCN(IM) since 1997; and it signed a “framework agreement” in 2015. There have been over 80 rounds of “talks”. The group has since abducted, killed, ambushed, and expanded its footprint across the region and across the international border in various underground trade activities ranging from narcotics to arms running. Only in 2020 were they held responsible for 44 per cent of all insurgency-related incidents in Nagaland. One of the worst attacks in the region on October 30, 2008, in Assam was triggered by a surrendered Bodo separatist outfit reportedly operating from ceasefire camps.

A day after the incident, when I visited the camp, the cadres were missing and the armoury was empty. It is well known how the surrendered ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) or SULFA men unleashed a reign of terror called “secret killings” contracted by the State’s police force in exchange for legal and illegal trade permits. Despite judicial commissions on the killings, the then government officials and police

officers involved have got away. Signing “peace” deals has allowed armed groups to rule over satraps licensed by the governments of the day violating all “ceasefire ground rules” with impunity.

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Is there a possibility that the current situation in Manipur is an implosion of the government’s “peace process” with Kuki-Zo armed groups? Reports suggest that the trouble broke out on the day these groups were to have talks with representatives of the Central government and five days before the proposed “agreement”. The interlocutor was reportedly a witness to the mob frenzy. Some of the Kuki-Zo groups, which have been in a “suspension of operations” or SoO initiated by P. Chidambaram when he was the Home Minister, started a “dialogue” with the Narendra Modi government via an interlocutor in 2016.



In this picture taken on July 24, 2023, a Kuki volunteer demonstrates the working of a weapon at a camp in Churachandpur district. | Photo Credit: ARUN SANKAR/AFP

According to the Central government, there are 2,200 cadres in 14 designated camps who are trained in the use of sophisticated arms. The modalities of the accord would have been similar to the one with the Bodo Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. If this is true, then Chief Minister Biren Singh’s political career would have been threatened. He was already battling inner-party rebellion while paying obeisance to his masters. Did Biren then use this moment to turn against his own political masters by emerging as the messiah of the Meiteis and the defender of Manipur’s famed “territorial integrity”? Given the scale of violence and the extraordinary looting of

government arms, was this a well-thought-out exercise? Joining the dots is gradually becoming easier. De-notify hill areas, allow extractive industries to enter, expand the Meitei revivalist plans while appeasing armed groups in the hills, extend ceasefire and perpetrate a culture of impunity. The script is familiar: knitting together a nexus between government agencies, militia, and contractors with the lucre of drugs, arms, and land.

Highlights

- India's north-eastern region has been trapped for years in images of violence and the language of armies. The familiar cycle involves the Union government striking agreements with insurgent groups for ceasefires.
- Ceasefire agreements with insurgent groups rarely result in lasting peace, with many groups retaining arms and engaging in illegal activities, exploiting the lack of accountability and genuine resolution.
- The conflict is rooted in struggles for territorial integrity and autonomy. Meitei groups aim to protect their historical territory, while hill tribes demand greater representation and autonomy.

Triggers for violence

The immediate trigger for this round of violence may have been the problematic High Court ruling about the Meiteis' Scheduled Tribe status, which threatened control over land. But the alarm bells were ringing loud in April when churches in Imphal were being demolished. Subsequently, 249 churches are said to have been destroyed in the State. Meitei groups maintain that this is not a religious conflict, but the others are not convinced. The trouble, however, has been brewing for long. Meitei civil society organisations have been opposed to the demand of the Kuki-Zo tribes for autonomous territorial councils under the Sixth Schedule. Currently, the district autonomous councils are weak and lack financial and administrative autonomy.

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In 2015, the residents of Churachandpur refused for 632 days to bury nine of their community, including a 11-year-old, who were killed in police firing. They were protesting against three Bills—the Protection of Manipur People Bill; the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms (7th Amendment) Bill; and the Manipur Shops and Establishments (2nd Amendment) Bill—which were seen as denying the rights of hill tribes. The valley and the Meiteis wanted a greater share and say over land, given that they were numerically more and live on only 10 per cent of the State. Land is at the heart of this conflict.

On August 17, the SoO groups Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and United Peoples Front (UPF) were invited for talks to New Delhi. Predictably, the meeting merely determined the date for the next round of talks on August 31. The groups have been asked to submit their new demands by then. KNO and UPF are umbrella names under which more than 25 groups operate. The bureaucracy of "peace processes" is well

known by all the groups and they will not give up until their demands are met. The Centre talking to them might ignite the valley further. Unless Biren Singh's continuation, assured by Home Minister Amit Shah unequivocally in the Lok Sabha, is the trade-off.

Peace moves in the NE Region

Other peace processes

(i) United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) (pro talks) is under Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement with the government of India for an indefinite period.

(ii) A Framework Agreement with NSCN(IM) was signed on 03.08.2015.

(iii) Ceasefire agreements with NSCN(NK) and NSCN(R) of Nagaland have been extended for a further period of one year from 28.04.2022 up to 27.04.2023. Ceasefire agreement with NSCN(K-Khango) of Nagaland has been extended for one year from 18.04.2022 to 17.04.2023.

(iv) A Ceasefire Agreement with National Socialist Council of Nagaland(K)Niki group was signed on 08.09.2021 for a period of one year and more than 200 cadres of this group along with 83 weapons joined the peace process. Ceasefire agreement with NSCN(K)Niki group has been extended for one year from 08.09.2022 to 07.09.2023.

(v) Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreements with United Peoples' Front [UPF] and Kuki National Organization [KNO] of Manipur have been extended for a further period of one year from 01.03.2023 to 29.02.2024.

(vi) A Cessation of Operation (CoO) Agreement with Zeliangrong United Front (ZUF) group of Manipur was signed on 27.12.2022 and ZUF agreed to abjure violence and join the peaceful democratic process as established by law of the land.

“They want to delay the process. They want us to keep us engaging with the government so that the issue gets diluted and diverted. Ultimately, we may get something but not what we have been demanding... they will make us surrender in a ceremony and give us a trophy depending on what they decide. But we will not give up arms till we are satisfied with what we want,” said Kiamlou Guite, secretary, Ministry of Information & Public Relations, Zomi Revolutionary Organisation (a constituent member of the UPF).

Territorial integrity: these two words in Manipur are a tinderbox; the Meitei-dominated political dispensation has always found tremendous popular appeal in this phrase. It harks back to their glorious sovereign kingdom of Kangleipak and they take the lead in preserving the territory they claim belonged to the erstwhile kingdom. Many groups have never been able to reconcile themselves to the loss of sovereignty and what they call an “unjust” merger with India.

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But the hill tribes claim that the Kangleipak kingdom never ruled over them even though the majority Meiteis now decide their fate administratively. The hills now want a greater say in State affairs. This positioning, however, has hardened since the May violence to “complete separation” from Manipur. The new demand is for a Union Territory.

Each side has its own version of history. But the war cry for a unified Meitei front has been used to defend the State’s territory. In 2001, the Central government proposed to extend the ceasefire with the NSCN(IM) to all “Naga”-inhabited areas in the region. This was perceived as the government giving in to the demand for Nagalim or an extended Naga homeland, changing its contours as a “peace deal” with the NSCN(IM). Manipur went up in flames and the intensity of the agitation forced the then National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government to retract, promising the Meiteis that the “unified” territory would never be touched.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh, NSCN (IM) general secretary Thuingaleng Muivah, and others during the signing of a peace accord with the NSCN, in New Delhi on August 3, 2015. | Photo Credit: PTI

In 2010, when the Central government allowed NSCN(IM) chief Thuingaleng Muivah to visit his home in Somdel, Ukhrul, in Manipur, the State government was battle-ready to make sure he would not step into Manipur. This bravado may have saved Ibobi Singh's Congress government that was under fire then for a daylight "fake encounter" in the heart of Imphal city that was caught on camera. Each time the Manipur government faces a crisis, "territorial integrity" comes as a saviour. This time around, the civil war is being waged precisely for the same reason. Will India have the conscience to resolve this vicious entanglement that it has nurtured, or will it let loose "mere anarchy" upon the people of Manipur?

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If those in charge are serious about solutions, they could begin with some transparency. Abandon the charade of "peace processes" and get real. Today, no side trusts the other. And nobody trusts the government's processes and representatives. If the Centre does not dissolve the government or replace the Chief Minister, autonomous Meitei, Naga and Kuki-Zo units may become a reality. And that could be the beginning of a prolonged feud in this sensitive and troubled north-eastern belt.

India can now afford to admit mistakes that contributed to this impasse. Decades of buying peace has bled the region. Open, speedy, and fair trials for all perpetrators and instigators will bring back some trust. Manipur has the dubious record of having one of the lowest conviction rates in the country. This must be set right. The security forces must be held accountable for every life lost and for the millions displaced.

The human tragedy in Manipur is immense. The Prime Minister has an obligation to pay attention to it.

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Robin S. Ngangom is a Manipuri poet who lives in Shillong. The lines have been excerpted with his permission.