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## Politics and question of national identity in Post Merger Manipur

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### Abstract

In this article, an attempt has been made to look the contemporary concerns of the people in Manipur about their identity and its associated politics for nationalist struggle or the demand for separate states. In Manipur the urge for separate nationalities primarily had sprung from distinct historical and structural setting. The conflicts or contests over the nationality question in Manipur are being experienced at two levels. One at the level of the Indian-state vs. the Manipuri nationalism which claimed to have their own 'homeland' and at the other level the Manipuri nationalism vs. the ethnic groups nationality potentialities. In this scenario of identity assertions and subsequent national movement shall be explored in details. However the paper shall focus mainly on the issues and reasons for the origin and persistence of territorial agenda for Manipuri nationalism.

**Keywords:** Identity politics, territorial consciousness, nationalism, etc.

### Introduction

#### The Idea of Territoriality

The idea of territoriality (with clearly marked out political boundary often controlled by standing army) and that of a 'sovereign' are creation of modern nation-states especially in Europe. In contemporary times these two traits seem to have been perceived as the sine qua non of nationhood among aspirant nations. Manipur, too, reflects the same traits or, rather, an obsession with them. Consequently, there has been a visible shift among many of these nationalities in understanding their relationship with 'land'. Whereas the traditional relationship between people is based on identification of land as an extended part of the community's organic self, the modern take on land as a resource to be exploited, both economically and politically has made the relationship quite complex and often confusing. Nationalism involves a struggle for control and management over land not only for economic resource but also providing a platform for 'nation building project'. Since eighteenth century modern nation-state <sup>[1]</sup> were essentially connected to 'territoriality' and possession of territory or a homeland, a national space of one's own, <sup>[2]</sup> a recognition for nationhood is an essential aim of nationalism as practical business of nation-building can be carried on. A sense of 'territory' or possession of 'territory' had been a crucial marker for a modern nation-state <sup>[3]</sup>. Therefore, state was an essentially territorial entity <sup>[4]</sup>. Being nation-state a territorial entity, the nationalist movement always attempted for reserving a certain geographical territory as 'our national territory' to establish the 'imagined' or 'real' nation on it. Claims had been made through establishing an uninterrupted connection between the people and their territory through associating with history, culture, etc. And encouraged integration or consolidation of the people, (to be called citizen) within a project 'our territory' under a national banner, simultaneously, on the other hand separated citizens from the aliens (not our national citizens). For the fulfillment of their design and interest in the nation-building project, adaptations or constructions of various images of the nation that connects citizen, nation,

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<sup>1</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780, programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1997, p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, New York, Basil Blackwell, 1986, p.163.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism*, London, Gerald Duckworth, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1983, p.xiii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.135.

territory, culture, history, etc took place what could be termed as 'invention of traditions' <sup>[5]</sup>. Therefore nationalism became the major ideology through which a national identity was to be maintained, nurtured and sustained.

'Territorial integrity' of Manipur should not be disturbed in any case which is one of the most important demands of political movement in Manipur <sup>[6]</sup> shows 'territorial consciousness' or 'love for motherland' what could be

<sup>5</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p.1.

<sup>6</sup> Manipur State Durbar demanded against the Butler Committee for the amalgamation of hills and valley administration in 1928 and again demanded in 1939. The NMM and MPM condemned Sir Coupland's plan for the proposed formation of Nefa in 1946. In 1946 people protested against the proposed formation of Purbanchal and held several public meetings in which people clashed with the police killing one person and injuring to many others. In 1965 AMSU protested against the threat to the 'integrity of Manipur'. On 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1968 MTCC demanded for the protection of the 'territorial integrity of Manipur'. In 1987 the MPP submitted memorandum for the 'territorial integrity of Manipur'. The MSLA passed resolutions unanimously to defend the 'territorial integrity of Manipur' on 24<sup>th</sup> March 1995, on 14<sup>th</sup> March 1997, on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1998, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2001 and on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2002. On 4<sup>th</sup> August 1947, AMUCO organized a rally to defend 'unity and integrity of Manipur'. On 28<sup>th</sup> September 2000, AMKIL and NIPCO organized a rally and reiterated to protect the 'integrity of Manipur'. On 15<sup>th</sup> June 2001, 72 hrs general strike was called by AMUCO and AMSU in protest against the extension of ceasefire between GOI and NSCN (IM) without the consent of the people of Manipur which was followed by protest by attacking and burning several government buildings including the MSLA building, Assembly Secretariat, CM's bungalow and hoisted seven colour traditional flag in many places. People defied the curfew imposed by the government and led to the killing of 18 people which is popularly known as 'The Great Uprising Day'. Many sports persons including Kunjarani and Dinko returned their Arjun Awards. Theatre personality, Ratan Thiyam and M.K. Binodini, eminent writer, returned their Padmashree Awards. Many voluntary organizations such as KIM, KUC, KP, KWS, MOA, NESCOMI, KUM, LKPC, DYC, HKC, KKYC, OLWCDS, MKYC, VNO, KMHR, etc and many student organizations such as MSAD, AMSU, MSF and DESAM also condemned the ceasefire extension and protested. On 17<sup>th</sup> June 2001 the AMSU, AMKIL, AMUCO, IPSA, NIPCO and UPF called 24<sup>th</sup> hrs Manipur band and passed a historic resolution called the 'People's Declaration' to defend the 'territorial integrity of Manipur' on 26<sup>th</sup> June 2001. A booklet titled 'Manipur Fact File 2001' was published and called the people to fight for the protection of the 'territorial integrity of Manipur'. The IPPU organized a three days seminar on impact of administration on mutual relationship of Manipuri on 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> September 2001 with a motto to establish peace, harmony and unity. The AMUCO organized public dialogue on unity, development and peace in Manipur in September 2001 and strongly condemned the Indian state's capitalist path of development as responsible for the 'integrity problems' in Manipur and called the people to 'unite and defeat every bit of India's attempt to disintegrate Manipur'. The UCM organized three days seminar in November 2002 and drafted a 'draft policy to protect and uphold the unique historical features, existing historical boundary and also for bringing emotional integration of the people to achieve faster economic development in the state' which was submitted to the PM of India, President of India, Home Minister of India and was widely circulated. On 16<sup>th</sup> January 2003 many civil society organizations and women *Meira Paibee* organizations held a rally and resolved to seek a 'separate existence from India' in the event of disintegration of Manipur.

termed as 'territorial nationalism' <sup>[7]</sup> which meant recognizing a demarcated geographical land as 'our land' which transcended community and linguistic boundaries. Such 'territorial consciousness' was based on one specific point that Manipur is historically evolved and politically independent territory before British rule. Thus, 'territory' is part of Manipuri identity formation and identity politics of nationalism.

Land remains the single most important physical possession and land resource – the extent thereof – would apparently measure one's social status and temporal power. On the other hand, cultural, socio-political and economic considerations have prompted the group(s) to attach land with primordial significance. Nation building in such context necessarily involves integration of co-existing communities under a common platform within a 'national territory' with a shared culture <sup>[8]</sup>. Since territorial consciousness at the popular level was not a given, but was largely due to the organized efforts which might be in the form of 'restorative campaign' for Kabaw Valley or 'integrative movements'. As restorative campaign, it took up the issue for the restoration of what they claimed as 'lost' territory <sup>[9]</sup> such as Kabaw Valley and territorial consciousness could also be 'integrative' in the sense that there have been conscious efforts to prevent the territory from divided up into community or into small political units according to each ethnic group's aspiration for autonomous segments. And consciousness of integrative development through a harmonious co-existence of all communities had also been fully emphasized and circulated amongst the Manipuris.

The terms or symbolic representations such as *ema-leipak* (motherland), *irei-pak* (blood land), *poknapham lamdam* (birth place) and so on concretized 'territory' as an organic property that a nation possessed, visible or measurable. Linking psychological feeling to the concrete organic thing i.e. personification of territory, a crucial marker of 'nation-state' suggests to defend and protect the honour and prestige of the mother nation which is the supreme duty of her children. 'Territory' or 'occupied space' measures one's social status and temporal power in historical time. 'Space' in this context was the claimed, possessed, controlled and defended in historical times. Territorial space was synchronous with the temporal power which was subjected to historical circumstances that occurred in a particular historical time i.e. more space meant more power or vice-versa. Thus attempted to show the territorial space of Manipuri imagined nation by referring or reproducing various accounts including colonial maps which have most appealing visual representation and legitimized their claims. Contemporary politics push territorial considerations into the foreground gradually compelling identification between 'imagined nation' and its 'territory' i.e. Manipur and India as two different nations with their different and distinct 'territory'.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism*, London, Gerald Duckworth, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1983, p.218.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, New York, Basil Blackwell, 1986, p.136.

<sup>9</sup> Gangmumei Kabui terms cession of Kabaw Valley as 'lost territory of Manipur' in Sanajaoba (ed.), *Manipur Past and Present Vol.1*, p. 23.

By highlighting the primordial relationship between land and people, reconstructed history of Manipur's territorial space with the first settlement of people to the hill areas<sup>[10]</sup> and latter on with establishment of politically 'sovereign' authority at *Kangla* in the beginning of the Christian era. Thus *Kangla* became the symbol of political power which represented the conquests and expansion of territories through which hill people were deeply integrated into the political economy as argued by Sumit Guha.<sup>[11]</sup> R.B. Pemberton observed, 'the territories of Muncpeor (Manipur) have fluctuated at various time with the fortunes of their princess, frequently extending for three or four days journey east beyond Ningthi or Khyendwen River (Chindwin) and west to the plain of Cachar'<sup>[12]</sup>. In this regards, we may also aptly quote the remarks of Sir James Johnstone, 'the territories of Manipur varied according to the mettle of its rulers. Sometimes they held a considerable territory east of the Chindwin in subjection, at other times only the Kubo Valley, a strip of territory inhabited not by Burmese, but by Shans'<sup>[13]</sup>. In the first half of the nineteenth century Manipur's territorial influence had been expanded up to the limits of Dhansiri River which flows at Dimapur in Nagaland state of India. During King Gambhir Singh (Chinglen Nongdren Khomba), Manipur comprised of southern portion of China in the north, the Brahmaputra Valley, the river Chindwin in the east and the south and Chandrapore (Cachar) in the west. Thus areas comprising the three sub-divisions of upper Chindwin district of present day Burma i.e. Thangdut, Khambat and the Kale were integral parts of Manipur and river Chindwin formed the international boundary between Manipur and Burma till 1834. In the west, parts of the plains of southern Cachar were included in Manipur and in the north the forest between Doyang and Dhumsiri was the international boundary between Manipur and Assam<sup>[14]</sup>. The territory/space that was claimed by the Manipur State Durbar to Butler Committee in 1928 was much bigger in size than that of present Manipur<sup>[15]</sup>. During king Bodhachandra, Manipur comprised of southern portion of China, in the north the gold mines in the Sibsagar valley, the Chindwin River in the east and the south and Chandrapore

(Cachar) in the west<sup>[16]</sup>. The united committee of Manipur (UCM), quoted the public proceeding of the Home Department (British India) volume 1763 pp.1330-31 to show that Manipur's boundary extended up to the Brahmaputra valley and included the peripheral limits of Burma and China, while the south sea remained as the southern boundary and Hiramba's kingdom (Dimapur) as the northern boundary<sup>[17]</sup>. Thus argued for Manipur's long march in her process of nation building from a small clan principality at *Kangla* in Imphal to a powerful kingdom comprising the surrounding hills and territories in Chindwin basin that reflected the extensive territory of Manipur in 'past'.

Such territorial space of Manipur which was claimed, defended and controlled in historical time was also recognized and legitimized by the other contemporary powers which could be established from the facts that Manipur as sovereign political power entered different historical international treaties, instruments and agreements such as *Kiyamba-Khekhomba* agreement of 1470 between the Manipur and the Pong/Shan kingdoms, the Anglo-Manipuri Mutual Defence Treaty 1762, Anglo-Manipuri Treaty 1833, Treaty of Yandaboo 1826, Kabaw valley Agreement of 1834, Instrument of Accession of 1947, Manipur Constitution Act 1947, etc. And again for the recognition and corroboration of the territorial space of Manipur which visualized the sovereign power at *Kangla* could be gathered from the accounts like Henry Yule's map of Manipur and Munster's map of Asia in 16<sup>th</sup> century and other maps of Manipur from 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century, Johnstone's map in 19<sup>th</sup> century, etc. Thus these treaties, agreements, maps, etc were reproduced and popularized among the Manipuri national citizen not only reminding the extensive size or territorial space of Manipur but also to have momentum for the construction of distinct and different Manipuri identity.

### Fixing boundaries and Question of Restricted Sovereignty

The British officials were informed by what Peter Robb describes as 'fixing boundaries'<sup>[18]</sup> with 'increasing restricted sovereignty'<sup>[19]</sup>, definitely, the present 'so called' territory or territorial space of modern princely state of Manipur could be considered largely a colonial creation which was created out of territorial demarcations by the British colonial power through the treaties and agreements signed by the British officials as commissioners with the various contending powers such as Burma, Cachar, etc. These treaties were in accordance to company's special logic that view sovereignty as territorially circumscribable

<sup>10</sup> 'The *Koubru* Hill was controlled by *Moirang Anouba* Clan, the *Loijing Pamangkhu* was controlled by *Luwang* clan and the *Loijing Phounoi Ching* was controlled by the *Mangang* Clan, *Lamangdong* was controlled by the *Luwang* Clan, the *Thangjing* Hill was controlled by the *Moirang Ariba* Clan, the *Nongmai* Hill was controlled by the *Angom* Clan and the *Sugnu* Hill was controlled by *Wangbren* Clan', in Khelchandra Singh, 'The territory of Manipur and the relationship between the hill and plain people' in R.K. Mani (ed.), *For Our Tomorrow Vol.1*, Imphal, Silya, 2001, pp.1-12.

<sup>11</sup> Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India 1200-1991*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p.121.

<sup>12</sup> R.B. Pemberton, *The Eastern Frontier of India*, Delhi, Mittal Publications, reprinted, 2000, p.20.

<sup>13</sup> Sir James Johnstone, *My experience in Manipur and Naga Hills*, Delhi, Manas Publications, reprinted, 1990, p.81.

<sup>14</sup> 'Political Proceeding 19<sup>th</sup> December 1833, No.85-93 and Political Proceeding 11<sup>th</sup> February 1835, No. 90', in Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier of India*, Delhi, Mittal Publications, reprinted, 2000, pp.65-66 and pp.101-102.

<sup>15</sup> Kh. Ibochou Singh, 'Responsible Government under Manipur State Constitution Act 1947', in *Annexation of Manipur 1949*, PDM, Imphal, 1965, p.165.

<sup>16</sup> 'Proclamation of His Highness Maharaja Bodhachandra on 18<sup>th</sup> 1948 on the occasion of the inauguration ceremony of the first Manipur State Assembly', (here after Proclamation of Maharaja Bodhachandra), document reproduced in Sanajaoba (ed.), *Manipur past and present vol.1*, Delhi, Mittal Publications, 1988, p. 361.

<sup>17</sup> 'The UCM organized a three days seminar in November 2002 and drafted a 'drafted policy to protect and uphold the unique historical features, existing historical boundary and also for bringing emotional integration of the people to achieve faster economic development of the state', (hereafter UCM's draft), submitted to PM and widely circulated.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Robb, *Liberalism, Modernity and the Nation Empire, Identity and India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 130.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.130.

or territorially bounded sovereignty<sup>[20]</sup> as informed by Mridu Rai. What was at issue was sovereignty itself as it more reflected the authority over the populations that were inscribed within the boundaries. And for such, its significance, the boundaries of the princely state of Manipur became frozen at varying stages in state formation. But it could be historically incorrect to assume territoriality of Manipur as totally colonial construct or colonial gift to the people of Manipur as it had fairly established as a sovereign power before the advent of the British colonial power. In an agreement signed on January 9, 1834, Kabaw Valley was handed over to the Burmese. The British commissioners transferred to Burma, the towns of Tummao, Khumbah, Surjail and all other villages in the Kabaw valley, the Ungoching hills and the strip of valley running between the eastern foot and the western bank of the Ningtha Khyenden (Chindwin River). Such a controversial agreement had been described as appeasement policy of the British and infringement on the sovereignty of Manipur as Manipur was not party to the agreement and betrayal of the king Gambhir who died due to heart attack on the same day the Kabaw Valley was transferred to Burma<sup>[21]</sup>. Although British continued to recognize Manipuri's right over the 'territorial space' as it agreed, 'to pay a monthly compensation of 500 sicca rupees to Manipur from the date of transfer' and provision in the treaty for cancellation of the compensation, '.....any circumstances hereafter arise by which the portion of territories lately made over to Ava again reverts to Munnipore, the allowance now granted by the British Government will cease from the date such reversion'<sup>[22]</sup>. Such agreement had been described as 'lost of honour' as Manipuri's territorial space could not be protected or defended.

The Kabaw Valley is still a question which touches the sentiment of the people of Manipur and movements for restoration of it were launched at various times. During the reign of Sir Churachand Singh (1891-1941) in 1932, the Manipur state government took up the matter with the government of India and submitted a memorandum that states, 'the matter has however never been absent from the minds of the Maharaja and the durbar and they have always contemplated raising it at a favorable moment'<sup>[23]</sup>. There were further attempts to reopen the matter but the partition of India and Burma in 1937, death of the king in 1941, invasion of Manipur by Japanese during the Second World War, etc have diverted the attention of the Government of Manipur. In such prevailing situation, after Manipur became a part of the Indian union, the Government of India's decision for the complete secession of the Kabaw Valley to

<sup>20</sup> Mridu Rai, *Hindu Rulers, Muslim Subject, Islam, Rights and the History of Kashmir*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2004, pp. 27-28.

<sup>21</sup> 'The British signed an agreement with the Burmese regarding the 'Kubo' (Kabaw) valley, then within the territory of Manipur which clearly infringes on the sovereignty of the Manipur nation and provisions of existing treaty obligations with an ally'. Report submitted by Centre for Organization and Research Education Manipur to the Sub-Commission on the prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, Commission on Human Rights UN, March 1999 (hereafter COREM report).

<sup>22</sup> 'Agreement regarding compensation for the Kubo valley 1834' document reproduced in Sanajaoba (ed.), *Manipur past and present vol. I*, Delhi, Mittal Publications, 1988, p.468.

<sup>23</sup> A Representation of the Manipur State Durbar to the State Enquiry Committee submitted by the Manipur State Durbar, 1931, Imphal.

Burma on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1953 had been described as an attack on the territorial space of Manipur and a process of subjugating Manipur national<sup>[24]</sup>.

The argument advanced for the 'present' which represents reduced Manipur power began somewhere with the inability of Manipur to withstand external aggression from 19<sup>th</sup> century i.e. period of seven year desertion (1819-26) by Burmese force popularly called as *chahi taret khuntakpa*, forced transfer of Kabaw valley from Manipur to Burma in 1834, British colonial period (1891-1947), the Indian state's occupation since 1949, etc. The 'present' has been shown as characterized by the inferiority of the Manipuris as its territory was perceived as fragmented and parceled out to different powers. It had been described as national subjugation and oppression. Contemporary Manipuri political movement condemned the indifferent attitude of the Indian government towards territory of Manipur and for the attempt of disintegrating or Balkanizing the territory of Manipur on ethnic lines<sup>[25]</sup>. Arguments had been advanced that 'the boundary of Manipur could not be altered by any country without the consent of the entire people of Manipur as the pre independence territorial integrity of Manipur had been sustained in 1947 and became part of Indian with a 'territorial space' of its own<sup>[26]</sup>. Thus the 'present' represented as 'reduced territorial space' which had been described 'weak' Manipur or 'enfeebled' Manipur and called for defending the territory of Manipur which was an essential part of Manipur identity formation and also aroused nostalgia for past identity that represented more Manipur power and highlighted the experience of deep traditions of polity governance and maintenance of community equilibrium in their erstwhile history and also made aware of the challenges due to the contemporary developments. The ceasefire agreement between Government of India and National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isac Muivah) since 1960's had been described as unfortunate, betrayal of the people and direct blow to the honour of Manipur as 'integrated space' considered as fairly established by 15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>[27]</sup>.

## Conclusion

The idea of territoriality and sovereignty are creation of modern nation-states especially in Europe. In contemporary times there has been a visible shift among many of these nationalities in understanding their relationship with 'land'. Nationalism involves a struggle for control and management over land not only for economic resource but also providing a platform for 'nation building project'. Since eighteenth century modern nation-state were essentially connected to 'territoriality' and possession of territory or a homeland, a national space of one's own, a recognition for nationhood is an essential aim of nationalism as practical business of nation-building can be carried on. A sense of 'territory' or possession of 'territory' had been a crucial marker for a modern nation-state. Therefore, state was an essentially territorial entity. Being nation-state a territorial entity, the nationalist movement always attempted for reserving a

<sup>24</sup> COREM report.

<sup>25</sup> 'Balkanisation of Manipur or alteration of her ancient historical boundary had been raised since 1949' in Sanajaoba, 'why India cannot disturb Manipur Boundary of 1947? *UTI Possidetis Juris*,' reproduced in Manipur Fact File 2001, pp.109-111.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.108-109.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

certain geographical territory as 'our national territory' to establish the 'imagined' or 'real' nation on it. Claims had been made through establishing an uninterrupted connection between the people and their territory through associating with history, culture, etc. For the fulfillment of their design and interest in the nation-building project, adaptations or constructions of various images of the nation that connects citizen, nation, territory, culture, history, etc took place. Therefore nationalism became the major ideology through which a national identity was to be maintained, nurtured and sustained. This is what we witness in contemporary identity politics in Manipur.

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