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A REPORT OF
The Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS)
Jindal School of International Affairs
Panel Discussion
on
Contested Identity and Competing Claims
Along India-Myanmar Border Region

12 October 2019



India-Myanmar border region has been a conflict-ridden area since India's independence. The region has the highest number of insurgent groups in the country, of which some demand independence from the Indian Union. The Kuki, Naga and Meitei are some of the ethnic groups which settle along the border region in the two countries - India and Myanmar. These communities have been grappling with contested identity and competing or overlapping territorial claims. In order to contribute to the pool of a growing discourse on the subject, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), by bringing together scholars from three different communities - Kuki, Naga and Meitei - to talk about their own communities' movement in an academic setting, organized a panel discussion on 'Contested Identity and Competing Claims Along India-Myanmar Border Region' at Jindal Global Educational and Professional Academy, Qutab Institutional Area, New Delhi on October 12, 2019. The panel comprised of Dr. Bhagat Oinam, Professor of Philosophy, Jawaharlal Nehru University; Dr. M Amarjeet Singh, Professor at the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia University; Dr. Thongkholal Haokip, Assistant Professor at the Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University; Mr. K Kokho, Assistant Professor at the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia University. The discussion was chaired by Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen, Associate Professor, Assistant Dean (International Collaboration) and Executive Director of CSEAS, Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University.



Dr. Oinam, who gave a talk on 'Contested Identity Along India-Myanmar Border Region', articulated his presentation on the basis of two narratives - colonial and ethnicity. Under the colonial narrative, the year 1826 is significant because it was the first Anglo-Burmese war in which the Treaty of Yandabo was signed. The year was also the starting point for boundary demarcation between the British India and the Burmese territory. The Britishers were initially not very keen to enter the region. They were stationed in Calcutta but gradually moved to the region. Their interest in the region began with the opening up of trade route. The Yandabo treaty ceded a large chunk of Manipur, i.e. the Kabaw valley to Myanmar. Part of the treaty was that the Burmese government will pay compensation to Manipuri king every year which continued till 1949, when Manipur was merged with India and the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru permanently gave away the entire Kabaw valley to Myanmar. Territorial boundaries were drawn and redrawn to the convenience of the powerful states. In the colonial narrative, the place of the ethnic communities who have been residing in the region for long before the British advent is left unaddressed.

Only those communities or kingdoms who were dependent and useful to the British empire find some mention in the colonial historiography. The way political boundaries were marked to demarcate the British empire with few of these kingdoms run over the small ethnic communities simply making these communities and their place of habitation non-existent. Ethnic narrative emerges as a response to colonial historiography. Under this narrative, the small communities who were living in the frontier region of these empires and kingdoms, and did not find place in the grand narratives of the British or the Burmese historiographies, assert their own narratives. The counter narrative that these communities have been residing in their place of habitation for centuries is strongly asserted. They challenge the narrative and political legitimacy drawn from the colonial boundary as frame of reference. Identity politics is one such component through which the ethnic communities try to draw legitimacy and assert their political claim. The claim is not one, but many, and several ethnic communities in the region asserted their right to self-determination after India's independence, thus seeking sovereignty. The trend complicates with the emergence of several ethnic communities, each claiming their 'right' to self-determination and often contradict one another. Identity politics marked by claims and counter claims of community/ethnic identities is a result of colonial historiography.



Dr. Singh, who spoke on 'The Meitei Lebensraum and Insurgency movement', said the Indian side of the border is relatively better compared to the Myanmar side. In the borderland areas, there are many similar problems, such as under development and socio-economic disparity. The Northeast insurgency problems are there on both sides of the border. The state of Manipur, in particular, has seen a lot of issues related to ethnic identity movement. Identity movement always transforms into a movement for a separate or independent statehood movement. According to state reorganization report of 1954, there was only Assam and the states of Manipur and Tripura. More states were later carved out of Assam. Manipur is a difficult state in the sense that there is insecurity for all ethnic groups. The main demand of Meitei insurgent groups is cessation of Manipur from the Indian Union. At the same time, the non-Meitei groups - Kuki and Naga - demand either separation or self-determination from the state of Manipur. The competing demands in Manipur is a problem since it is a small state. The plain area is just about one tenth of the total area of Manipur but 60 to 65 percent of its people live there. This is the main reason why people in the plain area (predominantly the Meiteis) oppose the demands of the hill people - Kukis and Nagas. One possible solution to insurgency problems in Manipur is to re-organize the existing electoral constituencies. Currently, 40 out of 60 Member of Legislative Assemblies are in the plain area and 20 in the hill area. There needs to be an adjustment to the distribution of seats in a way that more seats are allocated to the hill area. In other words, re-alignment of power is necessary, and for this to happen a compromise is essential.



Dr. Haokip, who spoke on 'Statehood or Territorial Council: A Boon or Bane for Kuki?', discussed the history of granting statehood to Manipur and the demand for applying the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution to Manipur. In the pre-colonial period, people in the frontiers governed themselves through village councils in the hills and external authority controlled the medieval kingdoms. Post-colonial times have changed the situation with 90 percent of the state's resources coming from the central government and only 10 percent being generated by the state on its own. The princely state of Manipur was not given direct statehood after independence. This delay led to the formation of insurgency groups in the state. In 1968, Manipur Congress demanded statehood status. By then her neighbor, Nagaland state, had gotten statehood which tempted many near the border to migrate to Nagaland for better and freer life. The Kukis of Manipur formed the Kuki National Assembly (KNA) in 1946. The KNA demanded autonomy from the government and warned that they would be forced to take up arms if their demand was not met. The Kuki armed movement officially started in the late 1980s. Under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution, tribal states have the right to govern themselves. Therefore, the Kukis have the right to govern themselves. In 1978, it was discussed that the Sixth Schedule will be introduced in Manipur, but until today the situation has not changed much. There have been protests in Manipur on this issue and one major incident was the 'Three Bills Movement' where the Manipur government passed three bills without consulting the Hill Area Committee. There have been growing insurgencies in the state on this matter. In 2008, the two Kuki umbrella armed organizations - Kuki National Organization and the United People's Front - signed a tripartite agreement with the government of India and the Manipur state government for suspension of operation. And since 2016, the government has engaged the Kuki armed groups in political dialogue for a durable and peaceful solution.



Mr. Kokho, speaking on 'The Question of Naga integration: Opportunities and Challenges', said that the non-state armed groups of Northeast India are fragmented just like other non-state armed groups around the world. Everyone has an opportunistic attitude, and no group wants to work towards a common goal. Manipur has the highest number of non-state armed groups followed by Assam, Nagaland and Meghalaya. In Manipur, the non-state armed groups are more than the languages spoken in the state. The Indian government's actions are sort of an intervention in the region as the Northeast, as a region, is barely part of the narrative of the Indian state or Indian nationalism until recently. Therefore, it is necessary to revisit the approaches and strategies adopted by the Indian state to understand the situation in the region. The brutal military approach of the Indian state was based on the experiences of the leaders at the center. For example in 1953, when former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's speech was boycotted and humiliated in Kohima town, it led to the implementation of the Armed Forces Special Power Act in 1958 and the Nagaland Security Act. These actions have created a sense of fear towards the military personnel in the region. In terms of problems with economic and infrastructural development, non-consultation of the different stakeholders caused rift between the government of India and people of the Northeast region.

The government adopted a policy of divide and rule. The arbitrary nature of drawing borders has also attributed to the intractable conflict in the region. With the exception of the state of Assam, other states of Northeast India were not part of India's freedom movement, and, therefore, they were unable to identify themselves with independent India and took up arms against it. Consolidation of the Naga consciousness started with the formation of the Naga Club in 1918. There are differences within the Naga groups but around 70 percent of them share roots which made it easier to mobilize for the pioneers of Naga nationalist movement. To understand the Naga nationalism, one needs to see it from ethno-symbolism perspective. One major challenge to the Naga integration is the awakening of their neighbors to the Nagas' demands. The other problem is lack of political will from the Indian state to the Nagas' demands. Much more than the military solution, the Indian state needs to focus on the civil administration of the Naga people. What the people of Northeast India, including the Nagas, have to live with is the lack of basic facilities such as reliable roads and other infrastructural needs. Above all, the most significant challenge to the Naga integration is the never-ending peace talks.

Finally, **Ambassador Gautam Mukhopadhya** made a few intriguing observations by noting the necessity of a civilized discourse on the politically sensitive/charged topic of identity. Identity issues could often distract from the equally important issue of economic viability and well-being of the people of the region. He referred to the States Reorganization Act of 1954, and the question of financial viability of states in a naturally productive region and how already poor capacities of Northeastern states have been eroded by well-meant and often good central schemes that have accentuated dependence of the center. This has also become the fundamental source of corruption in the Northeast region contributing to a culture of graft from top to bottom, including insurgent groups. He emphasized that the Indian government should focus not only on connectivity but also on the productivity of people who live off the land, water, livestock and forests, and the environment on which their productivity depends in a way that respects livelihoods, societies and economic advancement.

This report, with feedback from the panelists, is jointly prepared by CSEAS staff members - Megha Gupta, Sanjana Dhar, Shivangi Dikshit, Mohanasakthivel, Ankit Malhotra and Vanshika Ramkrishna Singh, and edited by CSEAS Executive Director Professor (Dr.) Nehginpao Kipgen.