Chapter Five:

Dams and Ethnic Relations in Manipur
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V: I: Ethnic Identity and Natural Resources: An Outline of the Contemporary Debate

It is a known fact that construction of large dams has tremendous adverse impact on the people living in the project sites. It is more serious in the case of those projects which come up in areas where different communities with contested claims over the natural resources have been settled for ages. The nature of an environmental setting in any society has a significant influence on the process of identity formation. A community with a distinct ecosystem shows distinct characteristics that differentiate it from other communities. And, every community emerges with some kind of claims that define uniqueness from others as well as commonness within. These claims are formulated through a gradual process in order to provide security of livelihood among members of the group.

The link between livelihood and the ecosystem can hardly be exaggerated as every form of economy is established within the existing ecosystem in which richness of natural resources is the key to the well being of people living in the system. Richness of natural resources is different from one ecosystem to other, so is the economy too. Thus, exploitation of natural resources to bring about an equitable economy becomes a threat to the people living a better life through greater access to its natural resources. Therefore, sharing of an economy by various communities with different economic status has been an issue in the process of developmental planning all over the world. This issue has led to redefining the notion of ethnicity as to how ethnic groups emerge as distinct identities to claim certain resources as their own. Contestations arise precisely over these claims. In order to bring clarity to the politics of these contested claims among different groups of people, it is important to examine the definitions and notions of ethnicity before exploring the issues arising out of the intricate linkages with the processes of natural resource exploitation.
The ethnic phenomenon whether defined in terms of common ancestry, culture, experience or even region, gives rise to *spirit de corps* among the members of a group which lends it a distinct identity. These identities are expressed and maintained by a name, shared beliefs and symbols and projection of a distinctive style of life.\(^{292}\) The term ethnicity is often used to refer to communities based on a kinship imagined to exist by virtue of shared cultural bonds of different kinds—language, religion, race, tribe, caste, sect, etc. This is a broader use of the term than that adopted by some scholars, who distinguish ethnic groups from religious and racial ones.

An ethnic group has specific ways of behaviour or interaction with other groups, in terms of its subjective feeling of being a self-conscious group. Cultural differences give them self-consciousness. It consists of a group of people having a common descent, name, language, norms, values, beliefs, practices, manners, customs, rules and regulations, unity and integrity, homogeneity and endogamy. The distinct physio-cultural feature of an ethnic group makes it unique, and distinguishes it from other groups. Ethnic groups may live in a specific geographical area. Therefore, an ethnic group can be defined as a historically formed aggregate of people, having a real or imaginary association with a specific territory, a shared cluster of beliefs and values, connoting its distinctiveness in relation to similar groups and recognized as such by others.\(^{293}\)

This definition thus has five components:

i. subjective belief in real or assumed historical antecedents,

ii. a symbolic or real geographical centre,

iii. shared cultural emblems such as race, language, religion, dress and diet, or a combination of some of them which though variegated and flexible, provide the overt basis of ethnic identity.


iv. self-ascribed awareness of distinctiveness, belonging to the group; and
v. recognition by others of the group identification.

Ethnic groups use ethnicity in the form of inter-group politics to make demands for their economic well-being, and join the political field for their status alteration, their civic rights and educational opportunities. It is determined by a complex interaction of social forces.

The subjective belief that ethnic groups entertain may also be because of memories of colonization and migration. Conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists. In any case, as Blumer says, an ethnic group is a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past and cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements which define the groups' identity such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance. The significant point here is that any ethnic group exists within a larger society in which it is in constant interaction with other such groups. Herein arise the questions of recognition by others as well as the contestations over natural resources. Therefore, available natural resources in an environment are closely related to the nature of identity formation of a group. In brief, it is on the basis of an economy based on these resources that a group emerges as a distinct identity.

The uniformity of the group is ensured by the selection of a limited number of features both as being typical of the individuals forming the group and as being more important than other features in terms of the definition of their identity. Ethnic identity is a psychology of a sense of belonging. It creates a separate and unique place in the society. Generally, the highly important factors for the emergence of ethnic identity are a primordial sentiment and a psychology

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296 Ibid.
of a sense of belonging or identity based on kin-blood, speech and customs, existence of a hierarchical cultural division of labour, colonialism, etc. It may also be characterized by an awareness of backwardness, a common economic interest, refusal of similar claims by others, etc. Ethnic identity is a requisite base for interaction through identification, differentiation of individuals or groups outside its purview. The identity of an ethnic group or its members is not just a case of self-identity but an identity which others concede vis-à-vis their own. In fact people in all societies raise the questions of ‘who am I?’ and ‘who can I interact with?’ in the process of identifying themselves with other groups. All of humankind has a desire to belong.

Ethnic identity shows both likeness and uniqueness among the members of a group. It differentiates what members of a group share in common from the other. It not only separates a group from others but also provides sameness and oneness to members of a group for identification. Ethnic identity manifests itself through cultural markers which they stress on the self as well as on group related feeling of identity, distinctiveness and its recognition by others. Ethnic identity is the root from where ethnicity arises, which manifests in both intra and inter ethnic interactions.

Most importantly, ethnic identity gives a sense of community and solidarity. Thus, ethnic identity is a significant unit of operation in educational, economic and political fields, which helps the social mobility of a community. Social mobility is the movement of an individual or group, from one social position to another. It is a change in social object or value, beliefs that have been created or modified by human activity. It is also a change in one’s education, occupation, income, economic conditions, prestige, status, power and wealth. It

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297 Anjali Kurane, Ethnic Identity and Social Mobility. New Delhi and Jaipur, Rawat Publications, 1999, p. 34.


changes a person’s overall social position. Moreover, ethnic identity is often affected by conversion, migration, modernization, westernisation, territorial partitions and the politics of dominant groups.

Therefore, ethnic identity has socio-cultural and political dimensions. It plays a crucial role in bringing about social mobility of a community and common norms through which interaction takes place. Ethnic communities which are locally segregated develop their own ethnic associations and ethnic organizations, which provide for upward mobility. In the process, ethnic associations play a pivotal role in the preservation of ethnic identity by simulating their culture and social mobility by promoting and accelerating educational and cooperative activities.

In a sense, the urge to assert the identity of groups can be partly explained by the special interests of communities and groups who took upon religion or culture as a means to achieve other ends and to manipulate the people. Ethnicisation, understood in the broadest sense of a process of estrangement and distantiation between traditions, cultures and communities with previously shared beliefs, values and historical memories and a common past, has been a common experience of societies that went through colonial domination. Far from representing an unchanging set of ways of acting and thinking or a finite body of knowledge, beliefs and values, traditions or rules, a religious tradition and culture is a living thing, a process involving communication and cross-fertilisation. It is because of this constant reshaping of a tradition or culture by history that a cultural or religious group is never a uniform entity but breaks down instead into different cultural sub-units that are themselves continually undergoing change.

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2. Ibid., p. 167.
3. Ibid.
Ethnicity is generally a primordial feeling of ethnic identity. In other words, it is a kind of consciousness about the status and problems of an ethnic group.\textsuperscript{304} It is the character, quality of conditions of ethnic group membership, based on an identity with and/or a consciousness of group belonging that is differentiated from others by attributes and traits symbolic markers and is rooted in bonds of a shared past and perceived ethnic interest.\textsuperscript{305} So it plays an important role in the mechanism of boundary maintenance. It classifies the social system into ‘we’ and ‘they’. This categorization is different from society to society and culture to culture in respect to size and composition. All these categories have a sense of homogeneity. Ethnicity maintains the rule of endogamy and exogamy by establishing the criteria for inclusion into, and exclusion from, the group, and by classifying the society into marriageable and non-marriageable groups, and showing the superior and inferior status of the groups. Paul Brass is of the view that ethnicity or ethnic identity also involves, in addition to subjective self consciousness, a claim to status and recognition, either as a superior group or a group at least equal to other groups. Ethnicity is to ethnic category what class consciousness is to class.\textsuperscript{306}

Thus, the notion of ethnicity is the compression and persistence of the ethnic group and is closely related to the structural dimensions of identity formation. Consequently, it provides quality and character to the group and is the summation of impulse and motivation for power and recognition. In most of the occasions, ethnicity is used for group mobilization through selecting the ethnic symbols for socio-cultural and politico-economic purposes.

Ethnicity may also be used by the advantaged groups in order to pressurize the power structure for the fulfillment of their rising aspirations and expectations. It is thus a purposive mobilization of a group of people.\textsuperscript{307} Ethnicity is the sense of ethnic identity. It is an accurate appreciation of ethnic identity. Ethnicity

\textsuperscript{306} Paul Brass, \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{307} Urmila Phadnis, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 20.
appears to have tremendous scope for perseverance for group mobilization without necessarily passing through historical phases. Some claim that shared-cultural feature do not constitute ethnicity unless they are the basis on which the community is imagined, and ethnic boundaries shift with the way they are imagined.

The history of ethnicity is largely a record of the movements and conflict and revolutions and renewed conflicts of ethnic and related identities. These conflicts which arise everywhere in the world can be of at least three different kinds:

i. conflicts between individuals or groups claiming the same right but with different interests,
ii. conflicts between different but equally legitimate rights,
iii. conflicts on the state or national rule between the rights of individuals on groups and the interests of the state to guarantee security and public order.

It is often suggested that in the process of transforming cultural forms, values and practices into political symbols, elites in competition with each other for control over the allegiance or territory of the ethnic group in question strive to enhance or break the solidarity of the group. Elites seeking to mobilize the ethnic group against its rivals or against the state strive to promote a congruence of a multiplicity of the groups' symbols, to argue that members of the group are different not in one respect only but in many and all its cultural elements are reinforcing.

Therefore, ethnic groups make their claims by virtue of being a 'community of culture' in which members are united with each other by a shared

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309 Narendra Subramanian, Ethnicity and Populist Mobilisation: Political Parties, Citizens and Democracy in South India, New Delhi, Oxford University Publication, 1999, p. 3.
311 Ibid, pp. 15-16.
312 Paul Brass, op. cit, p. 15.
culture and differentiated from others by the possession of that culture.\textsuperscript{313} While there are conflicting relationships between different social groups, the ethnic groups too feel threatened by the homogenizing tendencies of the national elite in evolving a national culture which is perceived as a majoritarian culture and therefore hostile to existence of ethnic groups.\textsuperscript{314}

In the early stage of ethnic formation, economic development and education may also create ethnic consciousness among the people who share some objective ethnic characteristics. For example, the gap in the economic or educational level between any two people may further strengthen the ‘we’ and ‘they’ attitude. The same may be reinforced with the growth of urbanization and the spread of communication. Natural forces like dependence of agriculture on climate and weather may sometimes affect the intensity, awareness and behaviour of the ethnic group. When any or all of these and other factors are present, ethnic awareness starts germinating. Such consciousness may even finally lead to nationalist aspirations and claims by the people, a process which reconfirms the ethnic origin theory of nations.

A study of the history of the nation-state formation, whether Western civic model or non-Western ethnic model, would clearly indicate that ethnic nation states were normally formed in the first place around a dominant community or \textit{ethnie} which annexed or attracted other \textit{ethnies} or ethnic fragments into the state to which it gave a name. In other words, it is the ethnic core or the dominant group that often shapes the character and boundaries of the nation; for it is very often on the basis of such a core that states coalesce to form nations.\textsuperscript{315}

Every culture has values of its own, and among these, elements of democratic rule can be found. Out of these elements, therefore, democratic structures of government can be developed everywhere, but they have to be developed within the particular culture and not transferred from one part of the

\textsuperscript{313} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 189.
\textsuperscript{314} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 198.
world to another. Similarly, it should not be regarded as impossible to establish human rights in every culture, leaving apart different approaches, different emphases and different formulations.\textsuperscript{316}

V: II: Ethnic Belonging and Conflicts in the Northeast

The movements of the various communities to assert and protect their ‘ethnic’ identity are the most significant aspects of the contemporary socio-political reality of India’s Northeast. Many smaller groups with somewhat blurred cultural markers are also now seeking to assert their identities. Some of these ethnic movements are making separatist demands and others are articulating issues that are apparently cultural, but politically ticklish. This articulation emerges as a result of either perceived or real socio-economic and political threats from the larger ethnic groups.

In the context of Northeast India, any attempt to understand the dynamics of ethnicity calls for prior understanding of the concept of tribes. The term ‘ethnic’ is not commonly used in self descriptions by the people, and even when there are such usages, the significance of tribes is not lost out as constitutive units of many ethnic groups. A tribe is a group of people descended from a common ancestor to form an extended family. Thus, the tribe represented an early stage in the lineal evolution of human societies coming later than small bonds but definitely preceding the development of peasant and modern societies; and coming before the growth of the nation.\textsuperscript{317} A tribe, according the Evans-Pritchard, is the largest group of people, ‘who, besides recognizing themselves as distinct local community; affirm their obligations to continue in warfare against outsiders and acknowledge the right of their members to compensation for injuries.\textsuperscript{318} As constitutive elements of ethnic groups, tribes exert considerable influence on the dynamics of ethnic groups in interactions both within and

without. On the other hand, ethnic groups may also have a regulative effect on the tribes that are within a particular group.

In the Northeast, articulation of grievances and mobilization of peoples on ethnic lines have acquired such proportion that ethno-nationalism has become an ideology. A look at the history of nationality formation in this part of the world convinces one of the point made by Paul Brass, that this process involves passing through three stages: the first stage is of ethnicity, implying an existence of cultural markers recognized easily but their political significance unnoticed; the second is of community awareness of cultural identity and the urge to employ it for furthering community interest; and the third is of nationality formation involving community interest.319

As compared to tribal identity, an ethnic community is more politicized, ideologically structured with a mature form of communication network. For example, the emergence of the Nagas as an ethnic identity can be seen as a recent development. Naga is not a tribe but an ethnic community. Ethnic community is certainly a later formation than tribes. It is politicization of a tribe with certain ideological construct as goal that gives birth to an ethnic community. Thus, the formation of an ethnic community became primarily political.

The rise of ethnic politics in the region has been attributed to various factors from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Chandan Kr. Sharma points out three explanations behind the volatility of phenomenon of ethnic upsurge in the region with different perspectives:320 the first explanation subscribes to the geo-political and culture-historical differences of the region with the rest of the country; the second explanation identifies the lack of socio-economic development of the region as the primary cause behind the spurt of ethnic movements in the region; and the third explanation exclusively holds the role of

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external hand responsible for the phenomenon of ethnic assertion in Northeast India.

Chandan’s explanation leaves out the aspect of ethnicity that arises as a result of inter-ethnic interactions within the region itself as he refers only to the dynamics of the region vis-à-vis the rest of India and even goes to point out foreign countries. Within the region itself, community-based majoritarian politics has generated fear and suspicion in the minds of the members of smaller communities about their influence in the various layers of socio-economic and political domain of the region. The vulnerability generated by this fear and suspicion may be taken into account as responsible for many inter-ethnic conflicts in the region. Susmita Sen Gupta observes that ‘in a system of ethnic stratification in which one ethnic group is dominant over the other, some members from one ethnic group may attempt to move into the economic niches occupied by the rival ethnic groups and if they fail to do so, they are likely to protest against the system of ethnic stratification as whole and attempt to mobilize the ethnic group.’

It may be pointed out that emergence of a dominant ethnic group is closely linked with the nature of socio-economic and political conditions among various communities in the region. In such cases, assertion of ethnic identity is a tool to assert one’s place in the existing power structure in the society.

There is yet another point of view which tries to explain the ethnic conflicts in the region to certain expansionist aspirations or tendencies among some ethnic groups. Such a line of thinking became popular particularly after the demands for a "Greater Nagalim" came to occupy much of the public debate and politics of the region. However, explaining all ethnic conflicts of the region in terms of ‘expansionism’ is to ignore the fact that ethnic assertions manifest themselves only when social forces requiring such manifestations emerge or

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dominant sections come to require values which are conducive to such assertions.\textsuperscript{322}

On the other hand, the elitist theory of ethnicity cannot yet be dismissed in analyzing the ethnic politics of the region. The absence of powerful feudal or bourgeois classes has led to the educated elites of the various communities occupying hegemonic position in their respective communities and they have started competing with the relatively advanced sections of their nearest rival communities for material gains. Since hegemony makes access to these opportunities easy, the elites of various communities compete for hegemony too. This competition acquires additional edge from the natural concern of the educated elite for protection and development of cultural identity. And therefore competition for hegemony with emotive slogans has become a source of ethnic conflicts in the region.

It is important to note that these competing elites aspire to exercise hegemony in their own areas but accept the reality of the Indian state. This has led A.K. Baruah to call the ethnic-based insurgencies of the region \emph{bargaining insurgencies} because of their tendency to arrive at negotiated settlements\textsuperscript{323} which may finally minimize their pre-negotiated demands to some point. It may be worth pointing out here that the history of ethnic assertions in this region has been closely connected with the history of political evolution, administrative structuring and re-structuring, and of course the emergence of new social forces.

With its highly politicized organizations mainly based on ethnic or communal lines, the region is now infamous for the inter-community conflicts, leading to violence seriously affecting everyday life. Ethnic cleansing, the worst demonstration of the phenomenon of ethnic conflict is no more a distant phrase for the people of the region. But the role of the state tackling this menace has

\textsuperscript{322} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 21-22.
generated a lot of questions. Ethnic conflict may arise when ethnic group compete for valued resources and opportunities in societies undergoing social mobilization, industrialization and bureaucratization. If two communities raise the demand for self-determination over the same tract of land and their defined ‘homelands’ crisscross, none of them seems willing to enter into a dialogue with the other and to review its demand. Violence and coercion become the only means left for the resolution of these conflicts. Much of the fratricidal conflicts that take place amongst communities struggling for their rights of self-determination can be attributed to their staunch refusal to compromise on their defined ‘homelands’ and most importantly, to come to terms with each other. 324 Thus, the question of territoriality became the limelight of ethnic assertion in the region.

Collective consciousness has emerged in the tribes (Naga, Kuki, Paite, etc.) through the formation of separate political identities. In addition to their earlier existing identities, both as cultural and political units, a new form of assertion attempting internalization of new political ethos is in the process. The tribes in the state are not only trying to redefine themselves through this new consciousness, but many larger tribes are moving out of tribal identity to that of ethnic community. 325 This is due to emerging differences in the socio-economic status among the tribes of ethnic community that a notion of separate identity is asserted to gain their share in socio-economic and political life of the region.

However, the emergence of political consciousness cannot be seen as the only factor determining the process of identity formation and subsequently, conflict. Because, the increasing awareness of land as the only long-term reliable capital for all development purposes in the state that has slowly been realized by the tribes/ communities now turns out to be major issue in the region. It is this

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realization, of course, under the above conditions that trigger an atmosphere of conflict in almost every state of the Northeast India.

At the same time, the extra-ordinary ethn-geo-graphic and bio-geo-graphic diversity of the region precludes uniform solutions as different communities are at varying stages of growth. Hence, inter community hatred, conflicts and violence in the region could be understood only when we understand the forces that generate such conflicts, the interests such forces pursue and also the social values they propagate. The articulation of such interests has generated a lot of tension because the interests of various communities often conflict with each other.

V: III: Ethnic Composition and Ethnic Groups in Manipur

Manipur, an ancient Kingdom with a long history of both glory and sorrow, is a cradle of human civilization and creativity which has come under the influence of many cultures of many ethnic groups who came at various times and contributed to the growth of the civilization in this hilly state.

Ethnologically, though there have been distinct Caucasoid and Austroid strains in the population, the main ethnic stream belongs to the larger Mongoloid stock and their legends of ethnic migration link them to the North and East. The name Manipur literally means the 'city or the land of gems' and was first officially introduced in the early eighteenth century during the reign of Hinduised King Garibaniwaza (1709-48).

In the legendary or proto-historical period, the principality with its centre at Kangla, the capital of the later Meitei Kingdom was known by several names


which are referred to in both historical and literary works. Some of indigenous names are Kangleipak, Poireipak and Meitrabak. This Kingdom and her people were known by different names to her neighbours. The Shans or Pongs of Upper Burma with whom she had political and cultural contacts called her Cassey, the Burmese, another eastern neighbour and rival power called her Kathe, the Assamese named her Meklee.

Manipur is one of the routes between South Asia and South East Asia and Central Asia. The long history of its contact with neighbouring countries has also been responsible for fluctuation in the size of its territory and population. R. B. Pamberton wrote: Manipur’s size extended or contracted according to the fluctuating fortunes and power of her monarch. The present boundary of Manipur with an area of 22,32,227 square kilometer more or less remained fixed since the controversial transfer of Kabaw valley to Burma in 1826.

Various ethnic groups belonging to southern, Mongloid group, the Tibeto-Burman, the Indo Aryan and a sizeable section of Tai (Shans) came to Manipur from pre-historic times down to the present day. The present major ethnic groups of Manipur, viz., the Meitei, the Naga tribes, the Kuki-Chin tribes and other Indian communities are the descendents of those migrating peoples.

Historical reasons greatly influenced the independent growth of these social groups with varying degrees of cultural development and civilization, of whom the Meiteis are the most dominant and advanced nationality. Hence, in the historical context of migrations and uninterrupted contacts with different neighbours, the ethnic intensity, awareness, and behaviour of the various

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131 Kabaw valley is a fertile valley with rich stock of timber on the border of Manipur and Myanmar. It was once a part of Manipur but and the transfer of Kabaw Valley to then Burma at the time of Indian Independence by Indian Union was a resentment among the Manipuris today.
of the Meitei or Meetei is shrouded in mystery. The ethnic name Meitei, according to B.H. Hadgson in the mid-Nineteenth Century thought, was a ‘combined appellate of Siamese Tai and Kachin Chinese Moy (Moy Tai= Moytai=Moitai=Meitei) and that the Meiteis belong to the Moi section of the great Tai race. This suggestion of the origin of the Meiteis was rejected by T.C. Hudson on the ground of the Meitei being a Tibeto-Burman language and the Tai being of the Siamese-Chinese linguistic family. Thus, he suggested that it was derived from the blending of two words, Mee means man or people and Tei meaning separate: Meetei = separate people.

Another indigenous explanation is of that Meitei being derived from the creation of man by God in His image: Mi = image; Tei = modeled after God’s image = Meitei. Connecting the origins of Meiteis with the major hill tribes, McCulloch observes:

From most credible traditions, the valley appears to have been occupied by some tribes, the principal ones of which were named Koomal (Khuman), Looang (Luwang), Moirang and Meitei (Nlngthouja), all of whom came from different directions. For a time, the Koomal appears to have been the most powerful and after its declension the Moirang tribe. But by degrees, the Meiteis subdued the whole, and the name Meitei has become applicable to all...I...Think there is...ground to conclude hem to be descendents of surrounding hill tribes.

Taking the similar language spoken by these tribes into account, he concluded that the Moirang tribes were traditionally from the south, the direction of the Kookis, the Koomal from the east, the direction of the Murrings, and the Meitei and Luwang from the north -west, the direction of the Koupooes (Kabui). All these tribes, according to him, also have traditions amongst themselves and the Muniporees are their off-shoots.

132 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
136 Mc Culloch, op.cit. p.18.
The view of tribal origin of the Meitei was also endorsed by R. Brown with a speculation that 'should it be a correct view that the valley of Manipur was at no very distant period almost covered entirely by water, the origin of the Manipuris (Meitei) from the surrounding hills is the proper and only conclusion to be arrived'. T.C. Hudson, writing in the beginning of the twentieth century, was of the view that 'Two hundred years ago, in their internal organization in village, in habits and manners, the Meiteis were as the hill people now are. The successive courses of foreign invasions, Shans, Burmese, English and Hindu, each left permanent marks on the civilization of the people so that they have passed finally away from the stage of relatively primitive culture with one of comparative civilization but their ultimate homogeneity with the Nagas and Kukis of hills is undoubted'.

However, the tribal origin of the Meitei clans was refuted by many writers in the 19th and 20th Centuries. For instance, Ch. Manihar maintains that 'there is no legend or tradition among the Meiteis about their common origin with the tribes. But chronicles refer to the migration of individual Meitei heroes or families to the hills and conversion into the society of the Kabuis, Tangkhul and other unspecified tribes'. Gangumei Kamei observes that there was a process of entry of the tribes into the Meitei social fold. Thus, one can not deny the Naga and Kuki-Chin elements in the evolution of the Meitei as an ethnie.

With all these obscurities, Chongtham Budhi Singh is of the opinion that the place and the time and the process of ethnic formation of the compound people are yet to be historically ascertained. However, it is a well known fact that historically, the term Meitei was used during the period of the establishment of the Ningthouja Dynasty by Pakhangba, to mean this clan or dynasty and the

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ethnic and social group which were politically and socially integrated within the suzerainty of the Ningthouja.\textsuperscript{341}

Thus, the ethnonym Meitei was historically found to have been applied to the Ningthouja clan dynasty founded by Nongda Laien Pakhangba and other groups absorbed by this dynasty politically and integrated into the social structure.\textsuperscript{342} These tribes, clans or social groups are Mangang, Angoms, Luwangs, Khabas, Nganbas, Khumans, Moirang, Sarang, Leisangthem, Heirem Khunjam, Lera Khongnang, Thanga, Kombong, Ulok Ushai, Haokha Lokha, Ningol Laton, Phanteck Khuyon, Chakpa, Haorok Konthou, etc.\textsuperscript{343} All these tribes and groups were socially organized into seven clans which exist even in the present times.

The origin of these pro-Meitei tribes is still obscure and complicated due to the absence of information with regard to their migration before they arrived at Manipur valley. But, the general agreement indicates that these tribes in their pre-Meitei social formation moved into the valley from different directions and routes. Therefore, Gangumei Kamei concludes that the Meiteis as a distinct ethnic, linguistic, cultural and social entity was formed in Manipur valley which was a melting pot of culture. And immediately before they settled down in the valley, they must have lived in different places in the surrounding hills and gradually moved down to the foothills and then into the heart of the valley as indicated by the clan chronicles.\textsuperscript{344} In fact, the fertility and favourable topography of the valley were the main reasons that attracted people from different parts of the surrounding hills.

The existing structure of political boundaries inevitably across ethnic, religious or linguistic boundaries, have added another problem in the form of a minority syndrome. Border adjustments of Assam with Bengal, Manipur and

\textsuperscript{341} Gangumei Kabui, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{343} Chongtham Budhi Singh, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{344} Gangumei Kabui, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 21.
Tripura in the Nineteenth century not only created problems for the Assamese but split numerous tribal groups in the region. The separation of Burma in 1937 and the partition of the British India gave international significance to their borders and it has restricted the mobility of the tribal people living on shifting cultivation and doing trade with neighbouring countries. Finally, the establishment of district boundaries affected most of the tribal groups as it introduced multi-ethnic districts. With the transformation of administrative districts into political entities, inter-district borders have again created political problems. 345

Regarding the origin of the Nagas, it is not yet very clear as to how the name was derived as several theories compete for authenticity. The meaning and derivation of the word, according to Verrier Elwin, has long been disputed. 346 In the Second Century, Ptolemy in his Geography refers to a group of people called Nangaloe living in the hills of eastern India with which the present day Nagas are sometimes identified by writers like Mc Crindle, Gerini and others. (Nangaloe= Nanga log means in Sanskrit naked people, i.e. Nanga means naked and logoe or log means people.)

In the middle ages, the chronicles of the Ahoms of Assam referred to the Nagas who fought against them, and the first reference to the Naga in Ahom Chronicle called Bhuranji dates back to the ninth century at a time when Ahoms or Shans were living in upper Burma and had not crossed over to the Brahmaputra valley.

Many Europeans commonly accept that the word was derived from Assamese or Sanskrit Nanga. William Robinson says that the origin of the Naga is unknown; but it has been supposed to have been derived from the Sanskrit word ‘Nanga’ and applied in derision to the people, from the paucity of their clothing. However, he further says that there seems to be little foundation for the

346 Verrier Elwin, op. cit. p. 5.
etymological derivation, as the form has never been known to be applied whether by the Bengalees to either the Khasis or the Garos with whom they were far better acquainted than with the Nagas. According to him, the Garos specially were habitually accustomed to a greater degree of nudity than the Naga tribes with whom the British were acquainted.347

Another theory in the end of the nineteenth century propounded that it originated from the word, Nok meaning man in some of the Tibeto-Burmese languages like that of the Aos, Noctes, Garos, etc.348 as the tribes call themselves mostly man or people indicative of the absence of any class or distinction in social order. Some tried to connect it with Sanskrit Nag meaning mountain as the Nagas live in the highlands. However, it is certain that this name was given by the outsiders to mean this group of people who are divided into more than two dozen tribes. It was the British military and political officers who gave the generic name to the present Nagas of Nagaland, Assam and Manipur and, by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Naga had become quite a popular name.

In Manipur, the people were known by their tribes’ names throughout the Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries. But the British for administrative convenience applied it to mean a group of tribes who, according to their anthropological classification, were Nagas.

The Kuki tribes of Manipur are a branch of the great Kuki-Chin family of people. They are linguistically close to the Meiteis. Kuki is a generic term covering a large number of tribes across northeast India and some parts of Burma. Kuki is probably a Bengali word meaning ‘hillman’. Some Kuki tribes migrated to Manipur hills in pre-historic times along with or after the advent of Meiteis in Manipur Valley. However, greater migration occurred in the Eighteenth century

347 William Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam, Gauhati, 1841, p. 380.
onwards due to the great Kuki Exodus which affected the demographic landscape of the hills of Manipur and adjoining areas.

Interestingly, ethnic groups in Manipur, settled in compartmentalized blocks, sparsely isolated from each other due to economic backwardness are vulnerable to ethnic conflicts in case of any communal conspiracy. Zeliarong (Zemi, Liangmei, Rongmei, Puimei) dominated the Western hills of Manipur in Tamenglong district; Mao, Paomei, Maram and Thangal dominate Northern Manipur i.e. Senapati district; Tangkhul, a dominant tribe occupies the Ukhrul district in Northern hills; the Marings, Moyon, Monsang, Lamkang, Anal, Tarao, Chothe are found in Chandel district in Southern hills; the Kuki-Chin- Mizo groups occupy the Churachanpur district in the South-Western hills. Besides Pangals (Manipuri Muslims), the Meiteis dominate Bishnupur and Thoubal district, whereas Imphal district is the melting pot of all the communities including mainland Indian immigrants. Any one-way free movement and settlement right entitled to a particular ethnic group is regarded by many as a colonial policy of divide and rule. Imphal has been the only centre for contact among the people. Since the mode of contact is based on market relations, there is limited space and time for assimilation though the inhabitants share a lot in historical development, cultural upbringing, language, racial appearance and other habits.

The question of identity formation has always been a complex one. To what extent the primordialities retain their grip over the process of identity formation has been the litmus test of ontological maturation of the societies. What is critical about ethnic groups in South Asia in general and in India in particular, is not the specific set of symbolic objects which distinguishes them but the social and political uses of these objects. In the South Asian context, given the nature of the historical evolution of its societies, ethnicity would be defined by

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social collectivities based on religion, region, culture, language and so on. When this confluence affects the political thinking and action, ethnicity assumes a political relevance. It is this political relevance that moves ethnic groups from social to political space affecting the state formation and state response to the ethnic demands.\textsuperscript{350}

It may also be observed in the context of multi-ethnic societies like Manipur that as political and economic structures become competitive, various groups and communities begin to mobilize in order to seek power and resources. Those groups which remain underprivileged in terms of seeking political rights and share in social goods and services begin to assert in order to attain these goals on the basis of their ethnic identity. In the process, these ethnic identities come into conflict with the state as state is the main actor in social and political affairs.\textsuperscript{351}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Name of Ethnic Group/ Tribes</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Meitei*</td>
<td>10,59,470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Pangal (Manipuri Muslim)*</td>
<td>1,33,535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Aimol</td>
<td>2,643</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Anal</td>
<td>13,853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Angami</td>
<td>650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Chiru</td>
<td>5,487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Chothe</td>
<td>2,675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Gangte</td>
<td>15,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Hmar</td>
<td>42,690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Kabui</td>
<td>62,216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Kacha Naga</td>
<td>20,328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Koirao</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Koireng</td>
<td>1,056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Kom</td>
<td>15,467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Lamkang</td>
<td>4,524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Mao</td>
<td>80,568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Maram</td>
<td>10,510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Maring</td>
<td>17,361</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{350} Ibid. p. 5.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tribe</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Any Mizo (Lushai Tribe)</td>
<td>10,520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Monsang</td>
<td>1,635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Moyon</td>
<td>1,710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Paite</td>
<td>44,861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Purum</td>
<td>503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Ralte</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Sema</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Simte</td>
<td>7,150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Sukte</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Tangkhul</td>
<td>112,944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Thadou</td>
<td>115,045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Vaiphei</td>
<td>27,791</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Zou</td>
<td>19,112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>Poumei</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>Tarao</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>Kharam</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>Any Kuki Tribe</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India 2001, (Provisional), Manipur.
* Inhabitants of the Valley Districts. **Unavailable in the Census.

As the above Figure: V: I: shows, large sections of population belonging to the Meitei and Manipuri Muslim are concentrated in the valley districts while various ethnic groups or tribal population comprising 41 percent are found in the hill districts. Out of this tribal population, the recognized Naga groups are Anal, Chiru, Chothe, Kabui, Kacha Nagas, Koieng, Kairao, Lamkang, Mao, Maram, Maring, Monsang, Moyon, Serna and Tangkhul, while the Kuki-Chin-Zomi includes Zou, Vaiphei, Simte, Paite, Aimol, Gangte, Thadou, Ralte, and the others are Kom, Hmar, etc. The other tribes like Thangal, Poumei, Liangmei, and Tarao are of unclassified tribes which are yet to be listed as scheduled tribes as applicable to other hill tribes. However, according to the classification of the earlier British ethnographers, the Aimol, Anal, Chiru, Chothe, Gangte, Hmar, Koirao, Maring, Koieng, Kom, Lamkang, Monshang, Moyon, Mizo (Lushai),

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352 Unclassified tribes here mean those tribes who are not categorically recognized as 'scheduled tribe' as per the provision of Indian Constitution.

Paite, Purum, Ralte, Sukte, Simte, Thadou, Vaiphei, and Zou are Kukis. 354 Thus, due to the overlap between different classifications in a politically charged situation, the issue of how some of the earlier Kuki tribes have now come to be regarded as Naga has led to a certain amount of tension in the multiethnic state.

British anthropologists applied the term tribe to the isolated communities of India, because they felt these groups belonged to 'a society with a particular frame of mind' 355 which was different from other organised communities. This characterisation of tribe implicitly assumes that all the tribal communities had something in common which made them different from the non-tribals. However, the issue of identity, besides being discussed only from the perspective of the 'other', should also be approached from another angle: the viewpoint of the community itself regarding their own identity.

In Manipur, the word, tribe is a term applied to certain groups specified in a list of 'Scheduled Tribes' which entitles them to certain benefits. Not all of those falling into this category necessarily live in the hills, nor are they all at a low level of technology, illiterate or leading isolated lives. This is evident from the number of high level government officers, doctors and lawyers who are legally still 'Scheduled Tribes' living in the capital city, Imphal. Contacts between the tribes and the peoples from the plains continue to grow in intensity and scale.

V: IV: Ethnic Conflicts in Manipur: Its Internecine and Fragmentary Character

Many interesting features add elements of distinction to the northeastern cluster of states, societies and cultures. 356 Numerous cultural groups with their own histories, conflicting claims, and different stages of development constitute the

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355 S. Fuchs, The Aboriginal Tribes of India, Delhi, Macmillan, 1982, p. 25.
socio-economic and political matrix of the region. These states are inhabited, besides a dominant ethnic group, by numerous minority ethnic communities with differing social histories and stages of political growth. An important factor for consideration at this juncture is that this claim was sometimes made by a conglomerate of ethnic identities which made claims in conjunction with one another. This was done sometimes by utilizing the identity markers that were external to the collectivities. Sometimes many groups form ‘tribal’ fronts for achieving the claimed autonomy. This choice of identity markers reflects the strategic importance of a form of identity and brings into focus the situational exigencies that determine the choice of a cultural marker for identity formation. For instance, the use of the word ‘Naga’ as an umbrella identity was used to consolidate the cohesion among disparate groups.

The cultural and ethnic issues are inextricably linked with the economic issues. If two communities raise the demand for self-determination over the same tract of land and their defined ‘homelands’ crisscross, none of them seems willing to enter into a dialogue with the other and to review its demand. Consequently, violence and coercion become the only means left for the resolution of these conflicts. Therefore, much of the fratricidal conflicts that take place amongst communities struggling for their rights of self-determination can be attributed to their staunch refusal to compromise on their defined ‘homelands’ and most importantly, to come to terms with each other.

Like any other plural societies which have been composed of multiple identities on various groups, Manipur has also experienced societal conflict and tensions between people with different identities. This indicates that most societal conflict become a reality in all plural societies. Ethnic conflict takes place both at vertical and horizontal levels as the conflict of the society is the result of vertical and horizontal division of the society. In most cases, ethnic conflict emerges when the minority ethnic groups resist the dominant group’s effort to monopolize the social resources and hamper the interests of the minorities. Thus, both the
majority and minority groups strive to control the state and its various machineries because control over the state means control over the resources of the society. It is in fact because of the tensions between the dominant group and the minorities that erupts as the former tries to impose its own idea of nationalism and own model of development and progress on the minority. Generally, it is believed that ethnicity reflects the condition of traditional society and that spread of education would reduce ethnic cleavages and parochial sentiments would be replaced by universal ideas. However, such beliefs have been largely dispelled by now. The politics of ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’ of members into the ethnic groups leads to group rivalries and causes social tension.

The case of the infamous Kuki-Naga clashes which began in mid-1992 is one such kind. The clashes began in early May 1992 in a small Indo-Myanmar border town called Moreh. A kind of tension between the two groups was created as some of the Kukis living in the periphery of Moreh had apparently refused to pay ‘tax’ to Naga insurgents on the ground that they did not subscribe to Naga nationalism. It is claimed that Naga insurgents have been collecting this ‘house tax’ in the area which they claim to be Naga areas. In such a tense situation, the killing of one Kuki on June 3, 1992 in a shoot-out between Kuki underground men and Naga insurgents near Moreh triggered the Kuki – Naga clashes. The casualties on both sides during Naga-Kuki clash have been severe though casualties on the Kuki side were greater. More than 10,000 houses belonging to the Kukis and the Nagas were torched in arson. Most of the tribals were displaced not only once but twice or thrice. More than 600 villages were uprooted. Since then, the ethnic cleansing of the Kukis by the Nagas has resulted in an open confrontation thereby leading to the displacement of about 11000 Kukis and Nagas. The conflict that was originally confined to a district finally spread to other districts and even to Nagaland.

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The rise of tension between the two communities can also be attributed to the fact that some of the old Kuki tribes joined and participated in the Kut\(^{358}\) celebrations as a Kuki tribe also joined and participated in the Naga festival as well. However, the Naga underground leaders seriously viewed the participation of some Maring tribes in the Kut celebration three years before the incident at Moreh, a town bordering the Myanmar and warned them not to do so in future. This created a tense situation in the town for quite a long time. As a result, majority of the victims in the clashes were from these smaller tribes.

It may here be noted that in Manipur, there are numerous smaller tribes anthropologically known as the old Kukis. This classification of the Kukis into ‘old Kukis’ and ‘new Kukis’ by the earlier writers was responsible for the disunity and disintegration of the Kukis in the state. Such erroneous classification has also resulted in the identity crises of these smaller tribes in the hills of Manipur. The fact is that the old Kukis are Kukis by any social, linguistic and cultural yardsticks. They are also close to the Meiteis by their long settlement in the vicinity of the Meiteis but have joined the Naga nomenclature in a political sense due to deep influences of the Naga political movement.

The clashes proclaimed the differences of the Kukis from the leading to the Nagas and ultimately leading to the demand of an independent Kuki Autonomous Council for Kuki dominated districts of the state. The role of Kuki National Army in resisting the dictat of the NSCN (I-M) in Churachandpur District resulted in Kuki-Naga clashes between 1990 and 1995.

Historically, it was in 1947 that Shri Lunneh of Motbung and Shri Lorho initiated the Kuki Naga unity move but it did not last long. The Naga armed rebellion of 1956 provided an opportunity to retaliate against the Kukis. As a result, the Nagas devastated nearly 60 Kuki villages in Tamenglong and Ukhrul

\(^{358}\) Kat is the biggest festival for kuki-chin tribes.
districts during 1955-64.\textsuperscript{359} It is during this period that the Naga movement gained momentum with a strong emphasis on the ethnic formation of the Naga nationality in both political and sociological terms through a process of Naga-isation. As a result, a number of these smaller tribes are found to have been converted into the Naga fold.\textsuperscript{360} Some of these tribes are not yet in a position to determine whether they will be Kuki or an old Kuki or be absorbed as Naga. Both the Kukis and Nagas claim that these smaller tribes belong to their respective folds. Thus, the-one time Kuki tribes of Manipur who are not supposed to be a Naga are drifting towards and affiliating to the Naga constellation. For instance, the old kuki tribes mainly Anal, Chothe, Lamkang, Chiru, Maring, Moyon, Monshang now align themselves with the Nagas, though they fail to furnish sufficient cultural or historical evidence in support of their being Naga. As a result, Chandel district, the home to these smaller tribes for ages, became the main battlefield for the Naga and Kukis. Interestingly, both the Nagas and Kukis have included this district in their homeland maps.

Therefore, it may be said that the major reason for the intensification of tensions between the two lies in the fact that the Kukis who co-inhabit the hill districts of Senapati, Chandel, Tamenglong and Ukhrul in Manipur Naga tribes are averse to the concept of a Greater Nagaland engineered by the Naga insurgent group, NSCN (I-M). At the same time, the Kukis are also demanding a separate state to be carved out of the areas inhabited by them in these districts in addition to the entire Churachandpur district. It may here be pointed that the Kuki demand for the creation of Sadar Hills District was first made in the Kuki Chiefs Zonal Council Meeting held on 3 September 1970. However, the Nagas of Manipur are against the conversion of the Sadar hill sub-division in Tamenglong district into a fullfledged revenue district claiming that the area belongs to them.

A similar kind of violence took place in Manipur in May 1993 involving the Meiteis and the Pangals or Manipuri Muslims. Though the event lasted for less than a week, the violence led to the killing of almost 100 civilians in the Imphal valley. The riot has also marked a beginning of an enmity between the two ethnic groups of the valley which have created a sense of insecurity among the people on both sides.

The last in the series of this kind was the Kuki-Paites clashes in Churachandpur District of the State in 1997. Sparked off by the killing of 10 villagers at Saikul Village by Kuki militants on June 24, 1997, it led to the killing of more than 400 people before the signing of final Peace Accord by the parties involved on 1st October 1998. A number of factors that have been responsible for the outbreak of the clashes are: the issues of tax collection from the Paites and other tribes by the Kuki National Front (KNF), a Kuki underground outfit; Paites' initiation to rename Churachandpur as Lamka which the Kukis did not favour; disagreement between the Thadou speaking Kukis and Paites over the acceptance of the term to be used as the common nomenclature to describe all Kuki Chin Mizo groups as the former is in favour Kuki to be used as common nomenclature whereas the latter favoured the term, Zomi. With this, Paites who traditionally remained with Kukis felt alienated as a group within Kukis and formed their separate outfit to get their ethnic rights recognized as different from Kukis.

Although an ethnic group fights to safeguard the interests of its members it can not be considered an interest group 'for it ignores the cultural matters that are important to all ethnic groups and that distinguishes such groups from other types of interest associations. Ethnic group, by definition, like the state itself, are concerned not only with material interests but also with symbolic interest. Another factor of such conflict is to benefit from the facilities available to the

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minority groups that each minority group tries to assimilate its own members and differentiate with outsiders. As a result, ethnic conflicts have increasingly been seen as a result of the loss of legitimacy of the state and its failure to control the feelings of discontent among the groups.

It is worth mentioning the fact that 'the more a society is modernized, the more ethnic demands are manifested; and the more is economic development, the more is manifestation of ethnic conflicts and cleavages. Thus, prosperity and poverty both have created ethnic problems.'

Thus, resources play a significant role in accelerating ethno-political conflict. It may be hypothetically argued that when resources are scarce, identity groups may feel the need to secure them for their group more than when economy is healthy and there is much prosperity.

According to Paul Brass, the process by which elites mobilize ethnic identities simplifies those beliefs and values, distorts them, and selects those which are politically useful rather than central to the belief system of the group concerned. This process invariably involves competition and conflict of political power, economic benefit and social status between competing elites. This emphasizes the view that the ethnic mobilizations involve political, economic and cultural components locked with each other in a complex web of interaction.

Thus, the emergence of political consciousness cannot be seen as the only factor determining the process of identity formation and subsequently, conflict. For instance, in Manipur, there has been an increasing awareness amongst the tribes or communities of land as the only long term reliable capital for all development purposes. It is this realization that triggers an atmosphere of conflict.

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91. Paul Brass, op. cit, p. 17.
Further, the extension of ceasefire agreement between the Government of India and the NSCN (I-M) to Naga inhabited areas of Manipur was seen by the Valley people and sections of hill people belonging to the Kuki conglomeration as a diabolical move to claim and consolidate Manipur as parts of a greater Nagaland. Especially the valley people saw it as a move to disintegrate the state which has a history as an independent kingdom with control over these areas since 33 A.D.\textsuperscript{365} Subsequently an agitation was launched to save the ‘territorial integrity’ of the state. All these crises mark an emergence of another divide based on politicized collective identities between the Nagas and the valley people, especially Meiteis.

The process of emergence of Naga Nationalism has often been examined through attempts to relate the colonial policy of administration of the hill region to the separate Naga identity of today. By isolating the hills from the plains, the colonial British succeeded in keeping the Nagas cut off from the rest of the Indian subcontinent.

The demand for separate Nagaland was first raised when the Naga Club which was formed in 1918 and submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1919. Though the demand was not fulfilled, a collective identity of more than 20 representatives from different tribes who signed the memorandum was established sowing the seed of the Naga concept of nationality and aspiration for building an independent Nagalim.\textsuperscript{366}

\textsuperscript{365} Gangumei Kabui, op.cit, p. 34 (also see, Cheitharol Kumbaha, the most important royal chronicle of Manipur which records the historical events of nearly two thousand years covering the reign of 78 Kings from Nongda Laiel Pakhangba (33-154 AD) to Bodha Chandra Singh (1941-55).


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With ideas and efforts of movement for an autonomous state, the Naga Hill District Tribal Council was formed in 1945 which was reorganized later as Naga Nationalist Council (NNC) in 1946, thereby enlarging the body with 29 members representing the various tribes on the principle of proportional representation.\(^{367}\) The attempt to bring Naga people under a single political organization could not last long when on the eve of Indian independence some of its powerful leaders demanded immediate independence whereas others were not in favour of a complete break from India. The strategy and potential of A.Z. Phizo paid immediate dividends as was demonstrated by the support he received from the village chiefs and tribal councils for the cause of Naga Independence. Since then, Naga Nationalist movement continues to be an issue in India till today. Even after the state of Nagaland emerged within the Indian Union and the significant conclusion of the Shillong Accord of 1975\(^{368}\), the struggle for Naga nationalist movement remains the same as sections of the Naga people are still continuing the struggle with the formation of an underground organization called National Socialist Council of Nagaland in 1980. It must here be remembered that when Phizo led the NNC as the only recognized political force of Naga people, the situation was quite different from the way NSCN has managed to exert the influence that it has been wielding till the recent past. The difference is evident from the fact that the NNC had carried out a ‘plebicite’ and boycotted the first general election to Lok Sabha in 1951 in ‘Nagaland’ to establish its credentials to the movement while the voice of NSCN has carried weight amongst the Nagas because it has the largest arsenal and best fighting machinery among the insurgent outfits of the Northeast region and it has not gone back on its two major demands relating to sovereignty and territoriality.\(^{369}\)

Again, because of the disagreement among the leaders on the issue of leadership, the NSCN got divided into two rival groups as NSCN (K) led by Khaplang, a sema tribe having a strong hold in Nagaland and parts of Myanmar.

and NSCN (I-M) under the leadership of Issac Swu and Muiva, belonging a Tangkhul tribe from Manipur dominating some parts of Nagaland and Manipur. Since then, the Naga issue has been threatening other communities in the state of Manipur with the fear of losing their territory, thereby creating tension between the Manipuri Nagas on one side and the Meiteis and the Pangal in the valley as well as some unclassified hill tribes living in the Naga claimed area of Manipur on the other side.

The NSCN has increasingly deployed the language of sovereignty and distinct territoriality. Supporting the territorial claim of the NSCN, Kaka D. Iralu writes: All political histories of every nation have their origin from some concrete geographical lands. Within the boundaries of this geographical land the people of the land develop their national identity. The inhabitants of the land call the land their land. The Nagas, like any other nation on earth, call their geographical land Nagaland. However, it is equally important to note that the way in which these political histories evolved in the course of time have to be understood within the genesis of their existence in those lands as well as the existence of their nationalities in those areas. As Udayon Mishra argues, 'prior to coming of the British, the idea of a well defined territory for the Nagas, or the other tribes was virtually non-existent. Similarly, it has been pointed out that 'each Naga village was more or less a village republic engaged in inter-tribal rivalry and head hunting. Most of the hill areas remain uninhabited, the population concentrated only in few pockets. It is because of this that the struggle for Nagas has been a long journey from the Naga 'village republic' to the concept of an unified 'Nagalim' covering some hundred twenty thousand kilometers of land which include all those who consider themselves or are compelled to be Nagas, irrespective of whether they reside in Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh.

370 Kaka D. Iralu, op. cit. p. 92.
V: V: Dams and the Making of Ethnic Identity in Manipur

Given the intensity as well as complexity of the ethnic phenomenon in Manipur, it has become necessary to analyse the impact of big dams on the existing ethnic relations. In this context, the modes of conflict resolution becomes significant as the dams, existing or emerging, do possess the potential to alter and transform competing ethnic claims and conflicts either positively or negatively. Conflict and conflict resolution in the past were mechanisms embedded in the lived experiences of the ethnic peoples due to inter-ethnic dependence on sharing material needs. Violent clashes, including even head-taking and burning of villages, and attempts at rationalization of authority relations were settled amicably between disputing parties with the participation in mutual rituals and recognition of inter-dependence. Disputes and settlement of disputes were in the realm of accessibility and possibility. Earlier tribal animosities in matters of dispute over land, resources and human relations were settled though mutual avenues of cultural knowledge and banking on traditional norms.

The question of the impact of dams assume significance as in the region, conflicts have often arisen when displaced communities are relocated in areas already inhabited by other communities. A good example is the case of Chakma and Hajong tribes resettled in Arunachal Pradesh as a result of the Kaptai dam in Bangladesh. There were internecine fights between them and already settled communities. In the northeast Indian states, five types of factors responsible for displacement have been observed:

i. Displacement caused by developmental projects;

ii. Displacement caused by government designs like the massive relocation during the regrouping of villages by the Indian army to tackle the insurrection unleashed by the various insurgency outfits;

iii. Displacement caused by natural calamities like floods and earthquakes;

iv. Displacement caused by takeover of land by migrating communities; and
v. Displacement caused by ethnic or religious strife, belatedly marked by systematic ethnic cleansing.

It is to be noted here that displacement affects not only the cultural life of peoples but also their access to resources and power structures. In Manipur, out of some thirty communities, some major communities have already been deeply affected by the changing balance in the post-independence power structure, and their place in the overall control and distribution of the meagre resources. Many in the margins or the periphery needed to re-consolidate their strength through cultural models of alterity and difference. Besides, the religious divisions of Hinduism in the plains and Christianity in the hills, and notions of social purity and pollution derived from Hindu discourses have also increased the differences. The post-British state of Manipur made a bold but feeble attempt at introducing constitutional monarchy and democracy and tried to consolidate the plural forces through reintegration of tribal communities in the power structure through the Hill Areas Regulation Act of 1947. The British colonial rule had earlier ruptured the organic hills and plains relationship through their ‘exclusive’ policies towards tribal, thereby helping the tribes grow in insularity and differences over their plains brethren. The disturbances in the social and political life of the state that any dam induced displacement will bring to this scenario can only be enormous.

The region has already been experiencing a contemporary politics revolving around newly discovered resource giving rise to debilitating conflicts of various kinds such as conflict between the state and communities, between different communities and between settlers and refugees. In Manipur, slow economic pace and the failure to meet the rising aspirations of diverse ethnic communities continue to perpetuate conflict within the democratic set-up for allocation of power amidst continued re-alignment of hill peoples in the eighties.

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373 This religious difference can be traced back to the Meitei’s adoption of Hinduism in the 17th Century and widespread adoption of Christianity as a result of the Western influences in the 19th Century among the tribes of the hill areas in Manipur.
The major factors which have intensified these conflicts include the growing contentions around issues of state repression, territory, identity, developmental neglect, alienation and the desire for greater political and cultural autonomy.

These issues gain tremendous urgency because an unprecedented number of dams are being planned for the region. Some of the conflicts that have already been experienced in the region are between host and resettled communities, and between imported labour and local communities. There obtains a web of complex relationship between displacement and militancy; territoriality, land alienation and tribal resistance and the impacts of largely man-made flood etc. intensifying inter-community tensions and even acquiring regional and trans-boundary dimensions.

Conflicts have also arisen when displaced communities are relocated in areas already inhabited by other communities. One such instance is the case of the Chakma and Hajong tribes who have been resettled in Arunachal Pradesh as a result of the Kaptai dam. Between 1980 and 1997, almost 10,000 people are known to have died in the low-intensity war which ravaged the already damaged environment and culture of the Chakmas.374

The major reason for emergence of such conflict ranges from questions of citizenship to providing of governmental job opportunities in the state. The Chakma issue can be reclaimed as follows:

Transit camp cleared. Thus 20,000 Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh reported to the Census of 1971.\(^{375}\)

The Chakma migration may be traced back to the massive influx of Bengali settlers from the plains in the 1970s. Since then, the 5,093 square miles of the Hill Tracts, forming only 10 percent of the land mass of Bangladesh, became highly militarised; 70,000 people crossed the border to India and 60,000 more were internally displaced by massacre, burnings and evictions.\(^{376}\) At the same time, the Chakma migration may also be directly traced back to the construction of Kaptai dam in 1957 on the river Karnaphuli about 65 km. away from the Chittagong City of erstwhile East Pakistan. The river originates in the northeast India and runs through the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) before draining into the Bay of Bengal. With its 50m. high and 600m. long, the dam submerged an area of 400 sq.km., including 16sq.km. of reserved forest. About 54,000 acres of arable land were lost under the rising water, uprooting 18,000 families.\(^{377}\) Insecurity, loss of land and livelihoods and the fear of politico-religious persecution forced thousand of Buddhist Chakma families to flee to India creating a serious refugee problem on this sensitive border. By the middle of July 1964, some accounted that at least 1, 40,000 Chakma and Hajong, a Hindu tribe from Mymensingh district, are found to reach Assam, through tenuous jungle tracts in Tripura and Mizoram while several thousands were accommodated in Arunachal Pradesh, despite strong opposition from these states.\(^{378}\) Since then, the question over their citizenship rights in India has been a source of conflict between local people and these refugees which remained as a complex in the region till today. In such a highly vulnerable situation in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, construction of a large number of big dams which requires a massive number of unskilled and skilled workers from outside the state is akin to fomenting conflict similar to those witnessed where the Chakmas have settled.

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In Manipur too, a similar kind of conflict is found to prevail in the case of Mapithel Dam where a large population of migrant labourers from outside the state are settling down in the project sites. Recently, there have been signs of frequent conflicts between the local people of the surrounding villages and the migrant labourers who have been given settlement in the project sites. It was due to delay in the construction process of the dam that these cheap migrant labourers numbering around 20,000 at present, started settling at these sites. In fact, villages in this region, prior to such settlement were compact and had traditional communitarian social set ups for which immigration of people from ‘other’ world was something deeply alien. The expectations of villagers following promises made by the dam agencies, as discussed earlier, have not been fulfilled. It has led to agitations against the construction of the dam which has in turn has caused a delay in the completion of the project and alongside a change in the demographic profile of the region.

It may here be noted that in a region where the issue of immigration has been a crucial issue since a long time, importing cheap labourers from outside the region for the purpose of these projects is a threat to the local communities. The encroachment on their land by immigrants, denigration of their culture and attacks on their identity are the major causes of this complex issue. As much of these migrant labourers are from the Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, there is a frequent confrontation between local peoples and migrant labourers who have different identity. Apart from this, recently there is emerging issues in the policy of job allocation which have turned into another form of conflict between other communities and local communities in the region. Thus, the promises made by project agency as a part of the project have been often refuted by the local people. For instance, it may noted that during the public hearing on Tipaimukh dam in Mizoram, Shri P. Sharma, Project manager, NEEPCO revealed that:\(^\text{179}\)

\(^{179}\) Public Hearing on Tipaimukh Dam, \textit{ibid.}

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A new town one-third the size of Aizwal will be coming up in this remote border of the state for the benefit of the villagers. Only 1680 sq.m. of their land will be submerged in lieu of which they will enjoy the benefits of a good higher secondary school, a well equipped hospital, a post office, a bank, markets, good roads and highway and employment...

Further he mentioned that:

NEEPco will try to give 100% reservation in the grade 3 and 4 category to the affected people. Old roads will be repaired and some will be made shorter, even new double land roads will be built to connect to Aizwal, Silchar and Imphal.

However, the hearing ended without any fruitful result due the opposition from the people attended. Responding the above promises, one of the participants expressed his views in the following lines:

"...if our land is the price we are going to pay for modernization and development; the price is too high; rather keep the land and remain as we are."

Thus, crucial questions have emerged on the issues of territoriality, land alienation and tribal resistance in the case of the proposed Tipaimukh dam. The Barak river, starting in the Senapati district of Manipur, begins at Poumaindominated areas and streams into the Zeliarong inhabited zones in Tamenglong district before moving on to Hmar dominated Churachandpur district. From here, taking an almost complete turn, it enters Assam in the Cachar plain where, again, different communities share its waters before it finally enters Bangladesh. In a state like Manipur where ethnic boundaries and their claims over natural resources have resulted in decades of conflict and bloodshed, the impounding and diversion of waters will horribly compound the tension and the confrontation the region is already experiencing.

Despite the existence of different religious or other groups, the state has been traditionally free from communal conflicts that affect the growth of its political and social settings. It was in the 1990s that the state witnessed a politics increasingly affected by politicized collective identities. Series of clashes erupted between Nagas and Kukis in the hills followed by the Kuki – Paite clashes in late 1990s and between the Meiteis and the Pangals in the valley leading to

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"Ibid."
breakdown in the existing consensus. In particular, the claims and the counter
claims of Nagas and Kukis have brought 'underground politics' as an active
ingredient of the hill politics in the state.

In such complex circumstances of rival claims, construction of dams like
Tipaimukh dam, Mapithel dam, etc, which involves common sharing of their
water courses by several tribes, has to be critically observed. In the case of
Tipaimukh, it is more critical because the project sites lie in an area where
different tribal communities belonging to distinct tribal identities inhabit. The
Nagas and Kukis are very sensitive to the implications of this project. The recent
emergence of Hmar as a distinct identity out of the Kuki fold and Zeliarong as a
separate identity by forming its underground group called Zeliarong
Revolutionary Army (ZRA) acting against the NSCN (I-M) are worth mentioning
in this context.

The complexity of the Tipaimukh Dam can be seen from the nature of the
ongoing protest against the dam by a variety of Naga organizations including the
Naga Women's Union and the United Naga Council, which served a 'quit notice'
to the Kukis from Naga inhabited areas in 1992. Moreover, the Naga nationalist
movement depicts the area as falling within their homeland, Nagalim and is
against the construction of this dam. Such projects are viewed by the movement
rather as exercises in resource extraction than as developmental projects. The
presence of the All Naga Student Association of Manipur, Zeliarong Union,
Zeliarong Women's Union, Zeliarong Students Union of Manipur, etc, suggests
an interest of the Nagas in the area although the project site is situated in the Kuki
dominated district of Churachandpur.

Another critical issue of Tipaimukh project is its impact on the ethnic
boundaries of the state. It may be well noted that the project which tends to affect
some sections of population may also benefit some sections too. With this, there


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are supporters who believe that the dam will bring about socio-economic development of the state. It is worth noting that such pro-dam and anti-dam divide among ethnic groups has the potential to create clashes among the communities of distinct identity. Thus, one group’s view on the project becomes threat to another. For instance, the Village Chief Association of Nungba Sub-division of Tamenglong District has expressed its gratitude to the State Government for signing the MoU of Tipaimukh dam. The Chairman and Secretary of the Association who belong to Kuki tribe asserted in a joint press statement that the people of these most backward and neglected areas will have a chance to see the light of development and modern civilization with the construction of the dam. Calling the statement irresponsible and immature, another organization belonging to Zeliarong tribe came out with a press release condemning the above statement and requested not to repeat it in future. In this regard, the Kuki Inpi Manipur (KIM), a Kuki organization, has strongly deplored these chains of reaction and counter-reactions on the proposed Tipaimukh dam along, what it called, ethnic lines. Therefore, the Kuki Inpi appealed to all sections to see things in their correct perspective rather than in terms of ethnically determined interests. Such exchanges of statements among the different ethnic groups are sign of serious issue which might have implication in maintaining the ethnic relations in the state.

Finally, it is a point to be noted that in Manipur, the new phenomenon of ‘ethnic fragmentation’ has often led to clashes among tribes once belonging to a united body like Kuki. At the same time, the process of amalgamation among the different tribes within the Naga nomenclature has produced the phrase ‘Naga inhabited area’ in preference to its earlier terminology ‘Naga dominated area’.

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382 “Pro-Dam Lobby Hails Tipaimukh MoU”, The Sangai Express, Imphal, 27 January 2003.
383 Zeliarong Students Union, Manipur came out with a press release to respond the statement after two days (For details, see “ZSUM Negates Pro-Dam Lobby”, The Sangai Express, 29 January 2003).
385 A comparative observation on the existing literature of Naga Nationalism between the Pre-Kuki-Naga Clashes and Post-Kuki-Naga Clashes indicates this phenomenon.
after the Naga-Kuki clashes. It is also a pointer to the serious issues revolving around the question of the dams in Manipur. A consideration of all these complex issues requires a strict adherence to the principle that the benefits of one community should not result into the loss of other communities. Therefore, it is essential that there be popular participation in the process of planning in order to accommodate different claims and thereby minimize adverse impacts.

Therefore, the state government should play an important role in resolving these ethnic clashes for smooth implementation of developmental policies in the state. These clashes emerged out of a historically developed frustration among the groups due to the widening disparity in the socio-economic condition among the different ethnic groups in the state. Their emergence is also due to competing claims over resources that have been left for ages without any proper legal control over them. Therefore, the state government should make an attempt to formulate a legal policy for controlling theses resources in a proper manner.