

Ethnocracy in Manipur

Rather than looking into the demand for internal autonomy by minority groups, the government has been trying to achieve instrumental ends



Meitei women protest for Inner Line Permit in 2015 in Imphal. The Hills Area Committee was not consulted before bills were passed to pave the way for Inner Line Permit for Manipur.

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On 8 November 1968, the Manipur Territorial Congress Committee submitted a memorandum to then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi demanding the grant of statehood to Manipur, which they claimed to be “embodying the feelings and aspirations of the people” of Manipur.

In that memorandum, the Manipur Congress Committee made a comparison with Nagaland -- that after it was “granted statehood the people of Manipur, more specially those living in the contiguous area of Nagaland, are naturally tempted to go to Nagaland where they can enjoy greater political rights and greater advantages for development”. Blaming the political deprivation of “statehood”, as resulting in “separatist and fissiparous tendencies all around, which was never known before”, it put an argument that “the question of economic viability as a criteria to grant statehood does now hold no water after the grant of statehood to Nagaland”.

Almost five decades on since the attainment of statehood by Manipur in 1972, it is worthwhile to examine how much the people of Manipur have enjoyed “greater political rights and greater advantages for development”, particularly those living in the hill areas of the state, as was perceived before the attainment of statehood by the Manipur Congress Committee.

Politics in the Census

Ethnocracy is a type of regime which promotes expansion of the dominant group in a contested territory while maintaining a democratic facade. Such regimes, Israeli professor Oren Yiftachel said, are the “legal, political, and moral frameworks determining the distribution of power and resources”, which reflected the “identity, goals, and practical priorities of a political community”. And “the state is the main vehicle of the regime, providing institutions, mechanisms, laws, and legitimised forms of violence to implement the projects articulated by the regime”. Ethnocracy in Manipur, however, is vernacularised, in that it is shaped by the competition between clans, tribes and communities.

How is it possible in a democracy that territorial constituencies, particularly the sub-national state Assembly constituencies, are not delimited for almost five decades when the Constitution stipulates that they are to be delimited after every decadal Census? Ugandan academic Mahmood Mamdani illustrates how the Census is a political device or, more accurately, a technical complement to a political agenda and it is of a “profoundly political nature”, which is “in response to political necessity”. A Census is a tool to shape the present, and also, “the future through a legal and administrative project”. It is a means to maintain domination. But how is such domination ensured in a post-colonial democratic state?

A Census can be manipulated, suppressed or rejected to achieve instrumental ends as seen in Nagaland and three sub-divisions of Senapati district in Manipur. In the 2001 Census, three sub-divisions in Senapati district, namely Mao Maram, Paomata and Purlul, were identified as having an abnormal growth of population but the data classified them as bogus population figures. It was not only these three sub-divisions, but the whole of Churachandpur district, as well as Chakpikarong sub-division in Chandel district, that were perceived by the state government to be having an abnormal growth of population when there were attempts of a

delimitation exercise in the state.

The then ruling party of the state, Manipur Pradesh Congress Committee (Congress I), and nine other political parties filed a writ petition against the “Union of India and Others” on the delimitation exercise in 2005. While acknowledging the ethnic clash between the Kukis and Nagas between 1992 to 1998 in the hills, the judgement by the then Imphal Bench of the Gauhati High Court on 19 January 2007 noted that “a large number of innocent people had been massacred and hundreds of Kuki villages from the three hill districts of Manipur, namely, Senapati, Ukhrul, Chandel were uprooted, as a result thereof, many people of the Kuki tribes migrated to the other districts by shifting their homes, particularly to the valley districts”. With this assumption the judgement viewed that, “In other words, the population growth rate of hill districts should not be higher than that of the state as well as valley districts”. And “eventually the population in the said three hill districts i.e., Senapati, Ukhrul and Chandel were drastically decreased”.

Having noted the “abnormal growth of population” and “bogus population figures” the judgement also took note of the investigations by the Census Office which “found in physical examination of the census records that there were *prima facie* irregularities/manipulation in respect of 3 Sub-Divisions viz, Mao-Maram, Paomata and Purlul of Senapati district and also that there was evidence of an deliberate attempt to overstate the population of households. The schedules appeared to have been tempered with and signatures of households looked forged”.

The position taken by this judgement that the internally displaced Kuki tribes settled in the “valley districts” was totally baseless and had no ground at all. The valley districts at best acted as a transit area since it had no industrialisation and no labour market that could absorb labour supply.

Resolution in the Manipur Assembly

The period from 1991 to 2001 was crucial in the social history of Manipur. The state witnessed three ethnic conflicts — between the Kukis and Nagas in 1993, between the Meiteis and Pangals in the same year and between the Paites and Thadou-Kukis in 1997. The Kuki-Naga conflict resulted not only in huge human casualties but also internal displacement. Inter-district displacement mostly occurred in Chandel, Tamenglong, Senapati, and Ukhrul. While in Chandel the displacements were mainly confined within the district, in the other three, there were massive inter-district displacements as the decadal census showed.

In Ukhrul district, the Thadou-Kuki population had a negative decadal growth of -42.05 per cent between 1991 and 2001. Likewise, in Tamenglong district the decadal growth rate of Kuki-Chin (Thadou and Gantge) was -30.50 per cent. Correspondingly, the Thadou-Kuki population increased by 110.75 per cent in Churachandpur and 172 per cent in Chandel districts respectively during that period.

The matter was also debated in the Manipur Assembly on 1 August 2007, and after passing a resolution, it “resolved to strongly urge upon the Union Government” to “order a fresh Census for the whole of Manipur by cancelling the Census 2001”, “impose a moratorium on all the delimitation exercises until the fresh Census figure is published”, and “pending publication of the fresh Census, *status quo* of the existing Assembly con-



stituencies be maintained and the Delimitation (Amendment) Act, 2003 (No. 3 of 2004) be exempted”.

Ten political parties in Manipur, led by then chief minister O Ibobi Singh, requested the Delimitation Commission and the Union ministry of home affairs that the delimitation “exercise be deferred till such time anomalies in Census figures were corrected”. The Commission put on hold the delimitation exercise “till the Census figures thought to be dubious were reviewed and corrected”.

A re-Census was carried out in the three sub-divisions declared as “abnormal growth areas” after an order by the Registrar General of India. It was carried out under then Chief Electoral Officer R C Mishra. It was, however, claimed that “the re-Census was not carried out properly due to lack of co-operation from the people of the area”.

One of the members of the Assembly, V Hangkhanlian, indicated that due to non-cooperation to the re-Census, the census department reduced the figure by nearly 100,000 in the publication of the final data. Despite the re-Census and rectification of figures, particularly of the three sub-divisions, it was not accepted by the Manipur government.

Question of representation?

Population is dynamic and recognising this, the Constitution has specified delimitation after every decadal Census. Looking into data starting with Brown’s 1873 Census report and the 1881 and 1901 Censuses to the 1971 and 2001 Censuses, the population of the hills is fluid. In the Census of India 2011, out of a population of 28,55,794 in Manipur, the hill population was 12,22,122, or 42.79 per cent and the valley districts had 16,33,668 people, or 57.2 per cent.

Population growth and stability depends on improved medical facilities and family planning. Citing the “abnormal growth figures” in the 2001 Census, the Central government deferred the delimitation exercise in Manipur and three other North-eastern states. The overriding concern of the Central government was that “any attempt to delimit Parliamentary and Assembly constituencies could have resulted in clashes and conflicts between affected parties”.

The abnormally high population figures in the three sub-divisions of Senapati district and the “non-cooperation” to Census enumeration may be understood in two ways. First, ethno-politics in the hills of Manipur is largely fragmented along tribes and clans. There is competition among tribes for having a representation or more representation from their tribe in the state Assembly.

Second, who within the tribe and who among the clans will represent the constituency. A study by Agrawal and Kumar in 2018 conducted in Nagaland on a similar case of “high growth in population during 1991-2001” showed “tribal competition for

greater political representation, which in turn is linked to access to public resources, including allocations of development funds, government contracts, and government jobs because political connections are usually needed to secure these”.

Majoritarianism, however, is indeed perpetuated by the control of representation in the state Assembly by resisting delimitation in the guise of an abnormal increase in population in certain districts even after 100,000 people were deducted. Recently, under an initiative of the Election Commission of India, an “elector verification programme” was conducted in Manipur, and the government “removed 70,000 illegal voters from the electoral roll of the state”, which is still lesser than the deducted population in the 2001 Census.

Delimitation could have been carried out in the state by excluding the three sub-divisions claimed to have an abnormal growth of population. The intention, however, was not parity as such but the delaying or denial of the delimitation exercise itself.

Demand for internal autonomy

Before Manipur attained statehood in 1972, the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Councils Act, 1971 was enacted by the Parliament of India to give the hill people a kind of paternal government. Far from being close to the kind of self-governance given to their counterparts in Assam under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, this Act merely provided limited administrative powers to the district councils under the control of the state government. In the words of S C Chaube, the “councils have no legislative powers, but can only make recommendations to the government about legislations on appointment and succession of chiefs, inheritance of property, marriage and divorce and social custom”.

Within the first tenure of the councils, dissatisfaction grew with the powers provided. The Hill Areas Committee, which was formed from a special provision under Article 371C of the Constitution on 5 March 1978, passed a resolution demanding extension of Sixth Schedule provisions for the hill areas of Manipur. It reaffirmed its 1978 resolution on 8 June 1983, 18 July 1990, 5 March 2000 and once again in 2003.

Beginning in 1987, district council elections were first boycotted, and the Sixth Schedule Demand Committee was formed after that to pursue this demand with the slogan, “No Sixth Schedule, No Council Elections”. The All Tribal Students’ Union Manipur strongly supported the Committee, and several memorandums were submitted to the Central government including petitions to then National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. They also published pamphlets and booklets on the demand for such internal autonomy.

The reluctance for granting inter-

nal autonomy itself shows a reaction against the ethnocracy pursued by the dominant group. The gradual unfolding of insurgency in Manipur, demanding statehood and integration with the neighbouring state, was the outcome.

About a decade thereafter, a consultation paper by the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution in 2001 observed, “Manipur has been seeking Sixth Schedule status for its hill areas for decades and nothing much has come of it, leading to opinion that the demand was not really serious”. The rising ethno-nationalism among ethnic groups and conflicts in the 1990s coupled with differences between the Kukis and Nagas on the number of district councils to be created drew the movement aback.

While the Kukis wanted to retain the existing district councils, the “Nagas proposed creation of two Councils for the existing five hill districts, one incorporating the four Naga-dominated hill districts and the other for the Kuki-dominated Churachandpur district”. In 1995, then CM of Manipur Rishang Keishing wanted a single council for all the hill districts when the Sixth Schedule was introduced. But the difference among different leaders and groups was apparent. They were, however, unanimous in the decision to bring the district councils under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

The Manipur government agreed to extend the Sixth Schedule to Manipur but with “certain local adjustments and amendments”. These so-called adjustments and modifications were perceived to be the very mechanism that would hinder the autonomous functioning of the district councils, and hence perpetuate, if not exacerbate, the ethnocratic regime. They wanted the Sixth Schedule to be applied *in toto*.

There was a fear that even conceding a little autonomy would eventually result in bigger demands threatening the territorial integrity of the state. The Manipur government was stuck with that dilemma. But the reluctance for concessions caused more harm than imagined.

Inordinate delay

Take for instance, the accumulated sense of disillusionment over the delay by the state government. It was reported on 1 November 2002 that “the Sixth Schedule Demand Committee yesterday decided not to go ahead with their demand now, but to support the All-Tribal Students’ Union, Manipur’s demand for a separate Union Territory by carving out the five hill districts from the state”. The delay instead built up a sense of alienation.

While the state government on 13 May 1991 agreed for the implementation of the Sixth Schedule, it only decided to constitute a Cabinet sub-committee in 2002 to look into the demand. It was seen as “delaying tactics”. Several reminders were sent by the Government of India to the Government of Manipur for their response on this matter.

On 7 May 2015, the Union ministry of home affairs (North-east Division) once again sent a letter reminding that “the Government of Manipur has not sent details of local adjustments/revised proposal in this regard so far” and a “reply of the Government of Manipur to this Ministry’s letter dated 21.09.2001 and 17.10.2001 is required”. The letters of the Union home ministry reveal how the state government did not pay attention to the matter, and perhaps, its reluctance to grant internal autonomy.

Managing differences

The aspirations of the hill people for adequate internal autonomy today is similar to the aspirations of the Manipur Territorial Congress Committee four decades ago: to “enjoy greater political rights and greater advantages for development”. The relative deprivation felt by the Congress Committee vis-à-vis the state of Nagaland is exactly felt by the hill people in Manipur today. As Mamdani would put it, “the management of difference is the holy cow of the modern study of society, just as it is central to modern statecraft”, the management of diverse aspirations and difference is key in moving the State forward.

The future of the State depends on how well it moves away from ethnocracy to consociational democracy, wherein the State not only refrains from majoritarian decision-making but promotes “dialogue between segments of plural societies” to secure the group rights of minorities.

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PLUS POINTS

Sikkim landslides



Normal life was thrown out of gear in Sikkim last week as torrential rain caused landslides at several places, blocking National Highway-10 and snapping the arterial road link with neighbouring West Bengal, officials said. Following heavy rain, one of the landslides hit the highway at 29th Mile area in West Bengal, around 60 km from the Himalayan state’s Rangpo border.

Another landslide occurred at Pani House near Gangtok last Wednesday, disrupting vehicular movement, officials said, adding that efforts were underway to remove debris from the road.

The supporting pillars of a steel bridge at Rangpo, the gateway to Sikkim, got damaged due to heavy flow of water in the Teesta river which has been in spate over the past few days, they said. The authorities have started restricting the movement of vehicles on the bridge.

The downpour also damaged crops and properties at several places, the officials said. As rain continued to batter Sikkim, a large number of people were rescued and moved to safe places and relief materials were sent to the affected areas.

—PTI

Long-term strategy



Expressing concern over a probable electricity crisis due to the shortage of coal supply to various thermal plants in the coming days, an Assam-based technical forum advocated for a long-term strategy to overcome the crisis focusing on non-fossil fuel (renewable energy) projects. The All Assam Engineer’s Association also urged the Union government to undertake a mission to develop an efficient energy storage technology.

Demanding the installation of household solar power generation units (for own consumption) across the country, the forum of graduate engineers especially urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to take a personal interest in encouraging scientists to improve batteries as reliable energy storehouses so that the crisis of power can be resolved forever. “As electricity cannot be warehoused after production like other objects for future use, a scientific arrangement for preserving the energy for a longer period should be developed,” said the forum.

According to the Central Electricity Authority of India, around 60 per cent of the country’s 135 coal-fired power plants are in serious trouble because of reduced supply of coal for a number of reasons. The country’s government-run coal producer, Coal India Limited, assumes that the demand for electricity is rapidly increasing with near normal economic activities after the Covid-19 pandemic-induced lockdown.

Thermal power is accountable for nearly 70 per cent of India’s electricity generation. The country has to import a large volume of the “black gold” from Indonesia, South Africa, Russia, Australia, Colombia, Kazakhstan, Mozambique, etc. Though India has a large coal reserve, its heating quality is relatively low and so the country has to depend on coal imports. The government, however, now wants to cut the volume of its imports gradually.

“The electricity produced by coal-fired projects is always expensive and it will increase further along with its significant negative environmental impacts. Hence the government should consider decreasing the use of coal and gas (for moving turbines to finally generate electricity) and start activating other means of power generation,” said the AAEA, adding that the price of renewable energy like solar or wind power is also going to get cheaper.

—Nava Thakuria

