



Research Article

Peace Process in Manipur and Nagaland: A Comparative Study of Conflict Transformation, State Response, and Negotiated Settlements in Northeast India

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Abstract

This research compares the peace processes in Manipur and Nagaland, two of the most violent states in the Indian Northeast. Nagaland has seen one of India's longest peace negotiations (starting with the Shillong Accord of 1975, ceasefires in 1997, and the Framework Agreement in 2015), while Manipur has witnessed fragmented non-state actors between Meitei, Naga and Kuki groups with little movement towards holistic peace. This paper examines why peace talks in Nagaland have been more successful and why ethnic violence and multiple peace talks continue in Manipur. Using comparative historical analysis, theories of conflict transformation and the state-society nexus, the paper examines the role of sovereignty (independence) claims, territorial, ethnic mobilisations, civil society activism and national government initiatives. The paper concludes that while Nagaland's peace process has evolved from a sovereignty claim into negotiated autonomy and shared sovereignty, Manipur's conflicts are fragmented because of competing claims around sovereignty, territorial integrity, ethnic homeland and lack of inter-ethnic trust. The paper argues that lasting peace in Northeast India needs multi-party negotiations, constitutional reform, mechanisms for inter-ethnic reconciliation and greater civil society involvement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The northeast part of India has always been one of the most politically restive regions of the Indian Union because of its multifaceted colonial history, ethnic diversity and its contested relationship with the Indian state. Under British colonialism, it was governed through exclusionary frontier policies such as the Inner Line Regulations and designations of tribal lands as "Excluded" or "Partially Excluded Areas" that curtailed political integration with the Indian Union while also entrenching ethnic divisions (Baruah, 2005) ^[1]. Post-independence, nation-building processes exacerbated tensions as ethnic groups felt their integration into the Indian polity was a form of assimilation rather than inclusion (Baruah, 2005) ^[1]. The incorporation of Manipur into the Indian Union in 1949 and Naga demands for sovereignty became critical junctures that turned political resistance into armed struggle (Dasgupta, 1997) ^[3]. The regional ethnic diversity - comprising the Nagas, Meiteis, Kukis and several tribes - contributed to the challenges of governance by creating competing claims over territory, identity and power (Hausing, 2022) ^[6]. As Baruah (2005) ^[1] argues, the situation in Northeast India is one of "durable disorder" - policy of "military governance with a sprinkle of concessions].

The second way the northeastern states are significant is that they have experienced some of the longest non-state actors in the world based on ethnic nationalism, but with different results. Nagaland has seen the earliest separatist insurgency in India and has had several phases of negotiation, such as the Shillong Accord (1975), 1997 ceasefire accord and the Framework Agreement (2015), which demonstrate an institutionalized peace process on sovereignty negotiations (Goswami, 2017) ^[4]. On the other hand, Manipur continues to be marked by multiple non-state actors by the Meitei, Naga and Kuki militant outfits where peace processes are intermittent and prone to ethnic violence (Mukherjee, 2017) ^[8]. Contrary to the centralised nature of the peace process in Nagaland, Manipur's conflict encompasses multiple demands that include territorial integrity, Scheduled Tribe status, autonomy, and ethnic homeland claims. This presents a research question: why has Nagaland maintained formal peace talks despite the unresolved sovereignty claims, while Manipur continues to suffer from fragmented violence despite several ceasefire agreements? This research aims to understand the role of sovereignty, autonomy and territorial integrity in peace negotiations in these states. What has led to institutionalization of the peace process in Nagaland, why is peace in Manipur so elusive and what can be learned from the two cases.

This paper aims to assess the peace processes of Manipur and Nagaland, to identify structural differences in peace processes, to explore the roles of the state and non-state actors, and to offer policy options for a peaceful and sustainable Northeast India.

2. Theoretical Farmwork

The paper uses an interdisciplinary theoretical approach to explain the peace processes in Manipur and Nagaland. First, Conflict Transformation Theory by John Paul Lederach (2003) ^[7] offers the main framework to understand peace as an ongoing

endeavour, rather than the mere absence of violence. This theory highlights reconciliation, trust-building, dialogue and institutional change. In Nagaland, this approach explains how the protracted negotiations between the Government of India and Naga groups transformed from violence to political negotiations through the 1997 ceasefire and the 2015 Framework Agreement. Domination of Manipur into the Indian Union in 1949 and Naga demands sovereignty became critical points where the political struggle transformed into armed struggle (Dasgupta, 1997) ^[3].

The ethnic heterogeneity of the region - the Nagas, Meiteis, Kukis, and a variety of tribes also helped to form the problems of governance by establishing opposing territorial, identity, and power claims (Hausing, 2022) ^[6]. The Northeast Indian situation as put forward by Baruah (2005) ^[1] is that of a durable disorder policy of a military rule with a touch of concessions. Third, inter-group violence in Manipur is part of the Ethnic Security Dilemma. Barry Posen (1993) ^[9] argues that ethnic groups organise because of threats from other groups. This is applicable to the Meitei-Kuki-Naga conflicts over land, identity and politics. Finally, Federalism and Asymmetrical Autonomy have a role in the relatively institutionalised Naga peace process. Article 371A is an example of special constitutional provisions for Nagaland, and shows how India has used asymmetrical federalism to respond to ethnic demands (Stepan, Linz, & Yadav, 2011) ^[12]. This can also be used to understand issues of joint sovereignty and special political status in the Naga peace process.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research uses a qualitative comparative research design to study the peace processes in Manipur and Nagaland. It adopts a comparative case study method to examine the commonalities and distinctions in conflict genesis, peace negotiations and results in both states. Secondary sources such as books, peer-reviewed journals, government documents, peace agreements, and policy papers like the Shillong Accord (1975), the 1997 Ceasefire Agreement and 2015 Framework Agreement are used as sources of data. The research further uses historical analysis to understand the trajectory of insurgency and assess the contributions of the state, insurgents and civil society.

4. Historical Roots of Conflict

The conflict histories of Nagaland and Manipur have their roots in colonialism, integration and ethnic contestations. Both states saw non-state actors against the Indian state, but the courses of non-state actors differ. While the insurgency in Nagaland centred around a single nationalist goal of independence and self-determination, there were multiple non-state actors in Manipur centred around different ethnic identities and sovereignty.

4.1 Nagaland: From Naga Nationalism to Armed Insurgency

The Naga insurgency started with the establishment of the Naga Club in 1918, which marked the onset of politicisation among the Nagas. In 1929 it submitted a memorandum to the Simon

Commission, requesting an autonomy post British withdrawal, showing early signs of autonomy (Goswami, 2013) [4]. This eventually resulted in the formation of the Naga National Council (NNC) in 1946, spearheaded by A.Z. Phizo, who stood against integration with India and declared Naga independence on August 14 1947 (Baruah, 2005) [1].

The insurgency took place in the 1950s when Phizo organised a rebellion against India, which led to prolonged battles and insurgency. Nagaland achieved statehood in 1963, but this did not fulfil the desire for independence (Chasie & Hazarika, 2009). The Shillong Accord of 1975 between the Government of India and a faction of the NNC was an attempt to bring about peace but this accord was condemned by young leaders who considered it a betrayal of Naga nationalism. This led to the formation of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980 by Isak Chishi Swu, Thuingaleng Muivah and S.S. Khaplang. Further factionalism - the NSCN (IM) and the NSCN (K) - further complicated the peace process (Kolås, 2011).

4.2 Manipur: Fragmented Ethnic Non-state actors

Unlike Nagaland, the conflict in Manipur stemmed from the resentment surrounding the controversial Merger Agreement of 1949 that brought Manipur into India. The merger was perceived by many Manipuris as an imposition, and resulted in long-standing political resentment (Singh, 2000). This ultimately resulted in the formation of Meitei insurgent groups, including the United National Liberation Front (UNLF, 1964), the People’s Liberation Army (PLA, 1978) and the People’s Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK, 1977), which all called for independence from India (Singh, 2008) [11].

This insurgency became sophisticated as the Kuki insurgency was launched in the 1990s, which demanded a homeland and power. Meanwhile, Naga insurgents also made inroads to the hill regions of Manipur, claiming they wanted to be part of a larger Nagalim. The conflict of ethnic identities resulted in the violence between Meiteis, Kukis and Nagas (Hausing, 2022) [6]. The insurgency in Nagaland had presented around a single available narrative of sovereignty, but Manipur remains a state marred by a series of non-state actors, making it challenging to build peace.

5. Peace Process in Nagaland and Manipur

The peace process in Nagaland has entailed institutionalised discussions between non-state actors and the Indian

government, as compared to Manipur, which has several non-state actors and multi-dimensional ethnic claims, which complicates peace. The first peace accord in Nagaland, the Shillong Accord of 1975, saw some of the Naga National Council (NNC) accepting the Indian Constitution and surrender weapons. The accord resulted in a short-term peace, but it was unsuccessful since most of the Naga leaders thought that it restricted their sovereignty (Chasie and Hazarika, 2009). This resulted in the formation of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980 which was further fragmented to become National Socialist Council of Nagaland (IM) and National Socialist Council of Nagaland because of tribal/ideological differences (Kolås, 2011).

The peace process started with a ceasefire agreement between the Government of India and the NSCN (IM) in 1997. The peace process has also been signed in the Framework Agreement of 2015, with the idea of co-sovereignty, uniqueness of the Naga history and special federal arrangements. However, the Naga's demand for a separate Naga flag and constitution and incorporation of the Naga populated area of Manipur in "Greater Nagalim" is delaying the peace process (Waterman, 2021) [13]. Peace and conflict reduction in the region is supported by civil society organisations such as Naga Hoho, churches and Naga Mothers Association.

In contrast, the peace process in Manipur is fractured by several non-state actors. Meitei militant groups such as the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) pose a challenge to India's sovereignty, while the Kuki militant outfits - Kuki National Army (KNA) and those under the banner of the United People's Front (UPF) - want autonomy. Although Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreements have been signed, these have not led to peace (Mukherjee, 2017) [8]. Naga groups from Manipur also pose a challenge with demands for Greater Nagalim. The 2023 Manipur violence, triggered by the Meitei demands of a Scheduled Tribe (ST) status and the forced displacement of thousands of the Kuki people, reflected the breakdown of state and ethnic demarcations. Civil society organisations such as the Meira Paibis, student unions and tribal bodies are strong and divided. Unlike Nagaland, Manipur lacks peace due to multiple actors, ethnic divides and a lack of consensus on negotiating. The comparative analysis is discussed in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis: Peace Processes in Nagaland and Manipur

Variables	Nagaland	Manipur
Historical Origin of Conflict	Rooted in Naga nationalism and demand for sovereignty since the formation of the Naga Club (1918) and NNC (1946) (Baruah, 2005) [1].	Rooted in resentment over the 1949 Merger Agreement and multiple ethnic grievances (Singh, 2008) [11].
Nature of Conflict	Primarily, a state vs insurgent conflict centred on self-determination.	Multi-layered ethnic conflict involving Meiteis, Kukis, and Nagas along with anti-state insurgency (Mukherjee, 2017) [8].
Primary Demand	Sovereignty → Shared sovereignty → Special political arrangement.	Territorial integrity, autonomy, ST status, homeland demands.
Major Armed Groups	NNC, NSCN (IM), NSCN (K), NNPGs.	UNLF, PLA, PREPAK, KNA, UPF, Naga groups.
Peace Negotiation Structure	Formal and sustained negotiations since 1997 ceasefire.	Fragmented and issue-specific negotiations with no unified framework.
Major Peace Agreements	Shillong Accord (1975), Ceasefire Agreement (1997), Framework Agreement (2015).	Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreements; no comprehensive peace accord.

Role of Civil Society	Strong role played by Naga Hoho, churches, and Naga Mothers Association in peace mediation (Das, 2007) [2].	Civil society active but divided along ethnic lines—Meira Paibis, tribal councils, student bodies.
Territorial Issue	Demand for Greater Nagalim includes parts of Manipur.	Strong resistance to territorial division of Manipur.
State Response	Combination of military action and political negotiation.	Predominantly security-centric with inconsistent political dialogue.
Current Status	Negotiation process ongoing but unresolved due to flag and constitution demands.	Renewed ethnic violence in 2023 reflects institutional breakdown.

6. Challenges to Sustainable Peace

While several peace deals have been signed in Nagaland and intermittent ceasefires in Manipur, peace remains elusive owing to institutional, political and transnational factors. A major challenge is the continued application of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), 1958, which endows the security forces with sweeping powers in "disturbed areas". AFSPA is argued to have led to human rights abuses, alienation of local populations, and a loss of trust in the Indian state, especially in Manipur where anti-AFSPA protests like Irom Sharmila's became national symbols (McDuie-Ra, 2012). Related to AFSPA, is the problem of militarization, where security-oriented decision-making has taken precedence over democratic processes. Baruah (2005) [1] suggests the Indian state has historically resolved non-state actors in the Northeast of the country through "durable disorder," where conflict is contained but not resolved. The next issue is the trans-border insurgency networks in Myanmar, Bangladesh and other areas. Some insurgent groups from Nagaland and Manipur have had camps in Myanmar, complicating conflict resolution efforts (Singh, 2008) [11]. The current political crisis in Myanmar since the 2021 coup has further increased arms smuggling, influx of refugees and non-state actors. The flow of narcotics and illegal arms, particularly along the India-Myanmar border has also increased. Manipur, being close to the "Golden Triangle" has witnessed drug trafficking and other crimes. Additionally, there is continued ethnic politics in terms of claims of territorial and political rights, especially amongst Manipuri (Meiteis), Kuki and Nagas (Hausing, 2022) [6]. Weak institutions and poor governance also play the role of undermining peace.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 For Nagaland

The final peace settlement should be transparent in order to remove any doubts in the minds of people about the Framework Agreement. The Government of India must engage with all Naga political groups, namely the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (IM) and Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs) to avoid a split.

7.2 For Manipur

Organised inter-ethnic dialogues between Meitei, Kuki and Naga communities are essential for lasting peace. Legislative protections for minorities and rehabilitation for the internally displaced during the 2023 conflict is crucial.

7.3 For the Government of India

The Indian government must work step by step towards adopting a dialogue-based conflict resolution strategy. Chronic issues in the two states can be solved through asymmetrical federalism, decentralization, and participatory governance mechanisms.

8. CONCLUSION

This comparative study reveals that while Nagaland and Manipur have had non-state actors based on legacies of

colonialism, political marginalisation and ethnic nationalisms, their peace processes have varied. Nagaland has come a long way from seeking total independence to negotiating on the basis of co-sovereignty and asymmetrical autonomy, but is still not settled. But, Manipur continues to suffer from multiple armed conflicts grounded in ethnic supremacy, territoriality and poor governance. The study demonstrates that achieving peace in Northeast India requires inclusive dialogue, constitutional reforms, inter-ethnic building of trust and a transition from militarised to participative peacebuilding.

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