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*Editorial*

## Thinking Beyond Ethnicity, Fostering Peace

The articles carried in this edition of *Alternative Perspectives (AP)* delves into some pressing issues confronting the India's northeast region and its neighbourhood. Some of the articles bring out how the trans-national cultural and ethnic solidarities in the borderlands have a tendency to recoil itself for a larger political project often leading to inter-ethnic conflicts. The articles also explore how humanitarian interventions, innovative institutions and retraction from excessive ethnicisation can pave way to peaceful conflict transformation. The first article by Arambam Noni extensively deals with trans-border ethnicity and its associate complexities. The second article by Konthoujam Indrakumar discusses the historical backdrop of the crisis in Myanmar and its ramifications on India-Myanmar relations. The third article by Rami Desai discusses the recent developments in Myanmar. Desai's article explains why the crisis in Myanmar needs to be taken seriously by India. Given the complex geo-political fragility and ethnic equations in Myanmar, Desai explicates the reasons why India and its northeast borderlands continue to remain vulnerable to regional political and strategic developments. Desai argues that the repercussions of the civil war like situation in Myanmar extends far beyond a refugee crisis for India with grave consequences for states like Manipur in the northeastern region.

The fourth article by Md. Farijuddin looks at the geopolitical developments in India-Myanmar region. The article analyses the political development in the borderlands of India-Myanmar region that has left significant cross-border implications. Farijuddin tries to explain the ethnic tension in Manipur with reference to instability and displacement in Myanmar. Farijuddin's paper unravels the diplomatic scramble amongst nations in India and Myanmar region involving global powers.

The fifth article by Sapam Dilip discusses some of the significant multilateral agreements on mitigating illicit drug-related and criminal activities in South Asian region. He discusses the role of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and BISMTEC in forging regional cooperation and peace. Sapam is of the view that adhering to regional multilateral agreements can re-

assure peace in the region, particularly in the field of illicit drug trafficking. The sixth article by N. Pramod and Pamreiso looks at the customary humanitarian laws and international mandates that governs conflicts around the world. While doing so, Pramod and Pamreiso brings out the rich humanitarian customary resources that deals with combat, conflict and war-like situations. Their article makes an interesting analysis of the traditional knowledge systems and the humanitarian ethos embedded in such traditions with reference to Meetei/Meitei and Tangkhul customary laws. Maintaining the publication structure of AP, the commentary for the current edition is contributed by R.K. Nimai. Nimai gives a detailed canvas of the opium poppy cultivation and its processing industries in Manipur. While referring to empirical information, Nimai makes a poignant point that growth in poppy cultivation has had a detrimental effect on social, economic and political fabric of the region.

The review section carries a book review by Wangam Somorjit. The reviewer has taken his liberty to focus on a chapter of the book entitled 'His Majesty's Headhunters: The Siege of Kohima that Shaped World History'. The book is authored by Mnhonlumo Kikon. Wangam makes a compelling revisit to a select historical moment, of the invasion and repulse between Manipur and Kohima. To do so, Wangam takes up a relevant chapter from the book entitled 'The Maharaja and His Long-haired Warriors'. The chapter narrates how the encounter between the troops of Manipur King and the villages in Kohima took place. The chapter narrates the story of brutality of conquest and sufferings of the conquered.

The articles in the current edition are diverse, yet draw a common trajectory of analysis. The articles have dealt with some of the pressing issues of our times such as ethnicity, conflict, displacement, trans-border issues, geopolitics and humanitarian means of conflict transformation and resolution. Some of the articles have reasoned to understand the nature of ethnic violence that erupted on May 3, 2023, in Manipur, has left over 200 people dead, thousands injured, and approximately 70,000 people internally displaced.

This edition of AP gives significant attention to ethnicity and its ramifications. Ethnic conflicts have a tendency to become more entrenched as it can vertically divide communities, academics, media and public sphere. Even the non-participants are likely to succumb to the divide (binary in the present context), thereby impeding the scope of a non-participant's non-motivated view. Such divisions can easily deprive one of having a prospective prognosis of the ugly ruptures of ethnicities. Women, children and farmers are the most affected sections of society when such divisions become a new normal. The

story of Manipur violence since May 3, 2023 is of a similar kind. A fundamental aspect of ethnic romance is that it is embedded in exclusivity which Paul R Brass terms as a 'construed proposition of some elites' who thrive on such exclusive scheming.

The spectacle of violence that qualifies ethnicity is deadening for a civic order. It easily defaces humanitarian juridical conventions with impunity. The brutal killing of the unarmed persons, deceptive acts of murder, blockade of highways and counter-politics expose the gory tales of ethnicity. Ethnicity often plays out in a fashion as if it thrives in the absence of civility or in an ambience of lawlessness. The question, therefore, is how a society can moderate its ethnicities, and recoil itself as a civic political space. The 35-odd communities that constitute the modern political Manipur shall need to rethink such an intriguing aspect of ethnicity in its quest for a reconcilable lived world. The same question can be considered non-evasive for the entire Northeast India which is home to 220 odd ethnic identities. Myanmar, which is again home to 135 officially recognised communities cannot be an aberration. The complex of ethnicity, however, is recent as it became more evident after the end of British colonialism. There were no significant uncanny heads of ethnicity in Manipur in the years between 1947 and 1949. Similarly, the Panglong Conference of 1947 in Myanmar produced a calmer phase of ethnic co-existence imagined through a modern institutional co-option. However, such finer moments of history proved either short-lived or indefensible.

Taking on the geopolitical concerns, the first four articles in the current edition talks about region's fragility and critical trans-border issues. The 1640 km porous border between India and Myanmar, unresolved questions of democracy, insurgency, ethnicity, militarisation and illicit trade regimentations have made the borderland between the two countries precarious, more than ever before. The bitter story of ethnic conflict with which Manipur is identified, of late, would require a perspective through the lens of historical reasoning. Ethnic conflict competitiveness is a handiwork of a few sections of political class to manoeuvre its own illicit interests and during which there is the condition of obstruction of people to people contact on a daily basis; even to think of a democratic convergence of differences in the situation is made bleak. The continued inability to restore ethnic tranquillity in Manipur, in particular, and India-Myanmar borderlands, in general, appears to hover around such causalities. If Manipur state is home to more than 40 armed insurgent groups, the India-Myanmar borderland region is infested equally with the rise of the armed (three) 'ethnic brotherhood alliance'. The resultant ambience, then, is

violence with a trans-border 'spill over effect' of small arms proliferation, and illicit (drug and human) trafficking.

The article by Arambam and Sapam bring out how the overtaking of Afghanistan by Myanmar in terms of opium production as indicated in the UNODC 2023 Report, particularly the growth in the production of opium poppy cultivation in the Chin State in the post-2021 military coup in Myanmar is a worrisome trend for India's northeast borderland states. On the Indian side of the border, over 17,000 acres of opium poppy fields in Manipur state were destroyed between 2018 and May 2023, according to the Ministry of Home Affairs. A total of 1,869 cases relating to the seizure of drugs were reported between 2018 and May 2023 in Manipur state. In addition, the skewed distribution of poppy-cultivated areas in the state of Manipur revamps ethnic anxiety and suspicion over one another, which is among the key factors as to why Manipur burns today.

Another tale is of trans-border displacement and un-solicited immigration. Trans-border displacement has been rampant in the region. After the military coup in Myanmar in 2021, according to the UNHCR, some 430,000 people were internally displaced in Myanmar. The UNHCR reports that 600,000 Rohingyas are currently sheltered in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. And, there are nearly 60,000 Burmese and Chin-Kuki displaced persons sheltered in Mizoram and Manipur. Undoubtedly, displacement is a humanitarian concern as discussed in the article by Pramod and Pamreiso.

The issue of displacement and statelessness requires proper arbitration under the International Humanitarian Laws. This is where contracting and non-contracting parties can look out for solutions. A lingering situation of 'large-scale' influx of aliens due to the displacements in a neighbourhood, trans-border in this case, can easily lead a society into a direct clash between the 'old' and the 'new' settlers or between the natives and the aliens. The 'influx of aliens' on a large scale has the potential to affect the established social organisms when it reaches a point of saturation as it can become distressing for the communities in a host country, further disrupting the cordiality between ethnicity and citizenship. The 'anti-foreigner or outsider' sentiments in Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya and Tripura can be read in a similar vein.

In a borderland where trans-cultural solidarities historically exist, the desire to convert the same solidarity into a politico-territorial ethnic solidarity is high. Ethnic strife in Manipur has a similar trajectory which has to be comprehended shedding away one's ethnic predilections. In the absence of an institutional scheme to absorb such solidarities, competitiveness amongst ethnicities is

likely to increase fuelling conflicts. R. Brubaker in his work 'Ethnicity Without Groups' argues that nowadays there are many more actors that are interested in 'ethnicising' political violence, such as incumbents, kin states, organizations, politicians and the actors of political struggle themselves. He further argues that in such conditions 'ethnicity' as such is not a source of conflict, rather conflicts or violence for specific political interests are being deliberately framed in ethnic terms.

One likes it or not, ethnic conflicts cannot go on uncontained and un-negotiated. Reducing every democratic institution to ethnicity and identity cannot be always the best way out. Therefore, identity politics has its own limitations. Ethnicity is more affluent with the sectional rights and asymmetric claims, but lacks agility in absorbing multitudes and inter-sectionality. The articles in the current edition re-interrogate issues pertaining to integration, identity politics of ethnicity, regional power scramble, geopolitics, violence and the need for adherence to humanitarian principles as a way forward.

