

# Politics of Trans-national identities: A Study of India and Myanmar Borderlands

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## Abstract

Imperiled identity of a borderland may emerge on the horizon when there are a myriad of historically unsettled questions. Democratic deficiency, militarization, displacement, trans-border affiliations and unauthorized movement of the population make the borderlands a site of perennial conflict. The historically bludgeoned aspirations in India's northeastern borderlands and the unmet aspirations for autonomy and federalism in Myanmar continue to resuscitate violence. The unsettling insurgent politics in several states of India's northeastern borderlands has had significant ramifications on trans-border ethnic and geopolitical equations. In the absence of an actual democratic and humanitarian absorption of the turbulences, the borderlands in the India-Myanmar region tend to be far more susceptible to violence, illicit narcotic businesses, displacement, etc. The emergent conflict between the 'old' and 'new' settlers in the borderlands of the India-Myanmar region has often taken an ugly turn marked by violence on a regular basis.

**Key words:** Borderland, Displacement, Geopolitics, Northeast, Insurgency, Trans-border

## Introduction

The fragility of borderlands tend to increase manifold when democracy coexists with authoritarian modes of governance with disturbing ease (Baruah 2001). The prolonged insurgent identity of India's northeastern borderland states and military rule in Myanmar have played their part in fracturing the lives in the borderlands of the India-Myanmar region. The growing contestation and overlap between ethnicity and citizenship have also made the borderlands imperiled. Ethnic identities having trans-border cultural affiliations have over the years been seen to be assertively desirous of regrouping itself. Trans-border ethnic solidarity, which seeks to undermine the modern state's established political boundaries, also brings up new political ruptures. When such cultural solidarities merge with political and territorial intent, the post-colonial states have been seen to be caught largely oblivious.

India's northeastern region has witnessed trans-border ethnic solidarities and a frequent call for trans-national homelands, often giving rise to inter-ethnic competitiveness. The ethnic solidarities of the Naga and Kuki-Zo tribes in the borderlands of India and Myanmar imbues such a trans-national political and territorial intent. The political intent is expressed in the form of pan-ethnic greater homeland imaginations. The convergence of trans-cultural solidarity and political solidarity has been perceptively seen as untenable for the existing post-colonial states to deal with. For it has elements of overlapping and friction.

Having understood the background presented above, the current paper seeks to unravel the intriguing issues of spiraling insurgency movements, trans-border ethnic solidarities, displacement and illicit narcotics businesses in the India-Myanmar-Bangladesh (IMB) region. It also seeks to understand the impact of the routine securitizing tilt and infusion of global capital as it has apparently brought in new geopolitical churnings. The overlapping networking of cultural and political aspirations of the trans-border ethnic groups has become a tedious site of engagement for the postcolonial states in the region. One such tedious aspect can be explicated by delving into the debate over the abrogation of the Free Movement Regime (FMR) between India and Myanmar, which allows citizens of the two nations to travel 16 kilometres on either side of

the border without a document. Given the complicated nature of ethnicity and territoriality, the paper seeks to understand the ramifications of fluid identity politics.

### **Borderland Intrigues**

The turbulent political history of modern Burma (Myanmar) and the frequent military coups since 1962 has had distinct impacts on the borderlands of IMB. The ethnic violence that erupted in Manipur on May 3, 2023, has hovered around the perilous anxieties over trans-border 'illegal influx' from the destabilised neighbouring Myanmar. As a result, the locals perceive a demographic threat and feel a sense of pressure on their land and resources. To borrow a concept from Ian Morris, the IMB region appears to have been embroiled in a situation destined by its weak geography (Morris 2022). Most of the states in the region have experienced undocumented influx of persons from across the borders as and when there is a turn of events in its neighbourhood. During each major political upheaval in Myanmar such as the one in 1962, 1988 and 2021, India's northeastern borderland states like Manipur and Mizoram witnessed a sizeable influx of displaced persons from Myanmar seeking shelter. According to a report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 79,000 Myanmar refugees and asylum seekers were living in India as of June 2023 which included the Rohingyas (Sood 2024).

In the absence of regional bilateral and multilateral agreements, the region is marred by controversies about the refoulement of shelter seekers and inter-ethnic violence. The growing demand for conducting National Registrar of Citizens (NRC) in Manipur—updating of NRC in the case of Assam state, and the proposed riders to be placed on land ownership in Mizoram reflect the simmering conflict between the old-settlers and new settlers. The Kuki-Zo trans-border ethnic solidarity in IMB borderlands is evident in the constructs of Zale'n-gam (or Zofate), espousing an ambition to bring together dismembered Kuki lebensraum in 'three independent nations: India, Burma and East Pakistan' (Haokip 2018, 1). Trans-border cultural solidarities rely on creating a material base through cultural grouping, resurrecting new

infrastructures of memorialisation, and strengthening newer alliances and congregations. The memorandum submitted by the World Kuki-Zo Intellectual Council (WKZIC) to the Prime Minister of Israel on June 30, 2023 to help 'to grant statehood to Kuki...by integrating all Kuki-Chin territories of Chin state (Myanmar), Chittagong Hill Tracts (Bangladesh) and Mizoram and Kuki Hills in outer Manipur' (WKZIC 2023). The memorandum of WKZIC reflects a trans-national ethnic mobilization that not only aims at consolidating geographically contiguous areas for a new ethnic lebensraum, but also congregate a larger world of solidarity invoking every available connection, even if it is remote and outlandish.

Therefore, the borderlands of the IMB region have seen a seething contest between ethnicity and citizenship, fuelling competitiveness amongst the ethnic identities. The contest becomes evident when markers of ethnicity and citizenship are blurred for the purposes of consolidating new ethnic territorialities. One such aspect of the contest between ethnicity and citizenship can be inferred from debates on the abrogation of FMR. The resistance to the recent of abrogation of FMR by the Government of India from several ethnic groups—such as the Nagas and Mizos—reflects how ethnic groups having trans-border cultural ties are at loggerheads with the modern state territorialities. The complexity of the relationship between ethnicity and citizenship acquires enormity as the existing procedural norms of the states begin to run short of an adoptable alternative. The binary between the ethnic communities aspiring to sustain trans-border cultural territoriality and relatively far more settled ethnic citizens produces a near insurmountable situation of conflict and violence. Moreover, the bio-political approach and geopolitical brittleness which Bertil Lintner terms as some sort of a 'great game east' (Lintner 2016), have put the borderlands to the boil. The saga of unresolved armed insurgency in India's northeastern region and the prolonged movement for democracy in Myanmar are closely intertwined as far as its implications on the region are concerned.

### **Dynamics of Ethnicity**

At several phases of its past, the peopling in the India-Myanmar borderlands was crafted through meticulous colonial administrative delineations

and by creating new elites. The colonial maneuver to govern difficult topographies resulted in the delineation of administrative units. Reflecting on such dynamics of peopling in Northern Arakan, Bianca Son Suantak argues that the 'delineation, initially drawn for the ease of administration, was justified by the British using arguments about ethnicity, culture and history' (Suantak 2013, 7). She further adds that the American Baptist and Welsh Presbyterian missions took charge of the western and eastern parts of Northern Arakan respectively with a determination to improvise Zo languages for the new elite that it was construing. Bianca notes that, 'the reading elite in Asia, America and in Europe began to demand stories, anecdotes and articles about the Zo. Hence, the writers and editors relying on very little information, made sweeping generalizations about the new British subjects in the hills' (Suantak 2013, 7).

The colonial haste, sweeping generalizations and ambitious maneuverings of the newly created elites helped in the invention of the Zo identity. The invention of the Zo identity, in its sweeping and robust design, remains fluid, overlapping and conflicting. In the words of Paul R. Brass,

ethnicity and nationalism are not given but are social and political constructions. They are creations of elites, who draw upon, distort, and, and sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent in order to protect their well-being or existence or to gain political and economic advantage for their groups as well as themselves (Brass 1999, 8).

The post-colonial history of India's northeastern borderlands is replete with the story of ethno national aspirations of a similar genre. The pan ethnic and greater homeland movements have cast on the region's polity like a cracked mirror. Despite the introduction of several special identarian legislations, the region continues to confront spiraling ethnocentric aspirations. When such aspirational politics acquire a trans-national proposition, the capacity of state(s) to innovate sufficient institutional mechanisms to deal with the issue appears bleak. The opposition of ethnic groups having close cultural ties across the border to the recent abrogation of the FMR with Myanmar by the Government

of India is a case in point. The official reason given for the abrogation of FMR is to contain the 'influx of outsiders' from across the border (Myanmar). Explicating the reason for the abrogation of FMR, the Union Minister of Home Affairs, India, stated that it was to 'ensure the internal security of the country and to maintain the demographic structure of India's North Eastern States bordering Myanmar' (PIB 2024).

Apparently, beyond the existing constitutional landscape, the abrogation of FMR and the decision to fence India-Myanmar border has been opposed by ethnic groups with trans-border fraternal ties citing that it 'will affect the ethnic and cultural connections between the Mizo people residing in the two countries' (The Hindu 2024). Ethnic contestations in India's northeastern borderlands elucidate a perennial case of inability to fully cope up with modern territoriality. The controversies surrounding the cause of ethnic violence that erupted on May 3, 2023, in Manipur state also shed light on how the modern state borders have proven not only porous for trans-border ethnic groups but also perceived to be generally permeable.

The main hunch of the paper is that the conflict in the borderlands of the IMB region is not necessarily between the (modern) state escaping Zomia (Scott 2011) and the state desiring citizens. Instead, the region is marred more by a battle between the two overlapping trajectories, i.e. between the trans-border political aspirants and the relatively settled identities. To understand these trajectories, the insurgent identity of the triadic IMB region needs to be historically reasoned. The unruly history of integration politics in India's northeastern borderlands and the undelivered promises of the Panglong Conference<sup>1</sup> continue to be among the major historical sources of instability and conflict. Commenting on the geopolitical race amongst the powers in the subcontinent, Subir Bhaumik argues that with the British withdrawal from the subcontinent, nations in the region have been at war with each other. In 1948 and 1965, Pakistan first tried to have its way in Kashmir by sponsoring irregulars on a large scale and then followed it up with unsuccessful military campaigns aimed at ensuring the state's secession from India. In 1962, China attacked India not so much over a disputed border or India's much-publicized Forward Policy but essentially in response to what it felt was a joint Indo-US

covert effort in Tibet. In 1971 India rounded off its successful sponsorship of the Bengali guerrilla struggle in erstwhile East Pakistan by a speedy military campaign that resulted in the breakup of Pakistan. Patronised insurgencies have shaped South Asia's tense diplomatic environment. Bhaumik further argues that the multitude of tribes and battling ethnicities have converted the 'far eastern slice of the subcontinent into the durable theatre of insurgent crossfire—in which nations like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and China (a major actor in South Asian politics) have backed insurgencies against each other' (Bhaumik 1996, 12).

The postcolonial nationalization politics in the region has been that of a boisterous tale of wars, militarization, displacement and insurgency. India's coercive integrationist approach adopted during the end days of the British rule in the subcontinent and the subsequent rise in ethnic maneuverings have complicated the region's civic life. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal report, 2017 Manipur alone has forty-two active insurgent groups (Institute of Conflict Management 2017). The ever-growing contestations around the narrative of 'old' versus 'new' settler have ignited social and political binaries. The ethnic conflict between the Meeteis and Kukis in Manipur that erupted on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023 has seen a similar tinge. Politics in the region has a bio-political dimension because of the constant re-aligning nature of trans-border ethnic identities and the nature of the managerial containment and appeasing programmes adopted by the states in the region.

In other words, it is conventional to witness socio-economic displacement when there is a protracted situation of instability. The growing violence in Myanmar since the military coup in 2021 has had wider ramifications on the region's polity and economy. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report published on 12 December 2023, Myanmar has become the world's largest opium producer due to the economic and political crisis following the military coup in 2021 and the widening conflict between the military junta and the armed groups. The prolonged conflict has driven the country's farmers towards illicit opium production. According to the report, the area under opium cultivation is estimated to be 47,100 hectares this year (2023), up from 40,100 last year (2022), while the corresponding yield is estimated to

be 1,080 metric tonnes, up 36 per cent from 2022 estimates. During the same period, the area of cultivation increased by 20 per cent, followed by Chin and Kachin states—bordering India—where it increased by 10 per cent and six per cent, respectively. The report further adds that the average estimated opium yield expanded to 22.9 kilogrammes per hectare, up from the previous record of 19.8 kg/ha set in 2022, 'reflecting more sophisticated farming practices and investments in irrigation systems and fertilizers by farmers and buyers' (UNODC 2023).

Indubitably, the India-Myanmar borderlands continue to be imperiled by militarism, trans-national identity mobilizations, insurgency, displacement and geo-political ruptures. Any further deferral in innovating administrative mechanisms to deal with the pressing issues of demography and ethnic conflict would lead to the furtherance of more human tragedies in the region.

### **Why do Identities have Conflicts?**

Given the tumultuous history of colonialism, partition and intricate process of state formation, identity politics in India's northeastern borderlands continue to animate frictions. Such an animated aspect of its politics comes from demographic anxieties. More so when a seemingly non-sedentary group and the new population begin to harbor political aspirations. In such a scenario, the old settlers claim to have become marginalised and clamour for legal shields. One such evidentiary phase was found in the political discourse of the 1970s which was marked by a search for institutional redressal of demographic anxieties. The resurgence of Assamese (sub) nationalism in the 1970s revolved around the issue of the 'influx of outsiders' and threat perceptions felt by the native Assamese. There was violence, a rising tide of students' movement and the formation of a regional political party. Subsequently, it led to the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 (Baruah 1999) to institute an institutional mechanism to detect foreigners.

Around the same time, the 'foreigners' issue' had acquired a significant place in the identitarian discourses of the students' movement in Manipur. It led to the signing of 'Memorandum of Understandings' on detecting foreigners

in Manipur in 1980 and 1994 respectively. State politics in the region, thus, have hovered around (old and new) identities and contestation over land and resources. The perceived sense of anxiety on the part of the old settlers continues to resurrect the calls for institutional protections. The movement for an 'Inner Line Permit system' and NRC are the actual signs that call for effective institutional innovations for demographic governance. While it searches for institutional mechanisms to manage the intricate issues, the recent history of India's northeastern region has been a grisly tale of ethnicity and violence. The conflicts between Kuki-Tamils in 1995, Kuki-Naga in 1993-1997, Kuki-Paite in 1997, Kuki-Karbi in 2004, Kuki-Dimasa conflict in 2011 and Kuki-Meetei in 2023 explicates the volatile ethnic equations in the region.

The pertinent question that needs to be raised is whether the existing institutions can cushion to resolve the conflicts. One of the possible ways would be to align the domestic institutional norms with the international humanitarian protocols. However, the need for striking a fine balance between the regional complexities and humanitarian norms would be of utmost significance. Poor cooperation amongst the conflicting and contracting parties has made the process complicated. The legal standing of the displaced and refugee persons remains vulnerable due to the trans-border character of the political aspirations that are often espoused by the displaced groups. As argued above, the displaced who often claim to have been 'free moving' across the borderlands have come into conflict with the seemingly settled political worlds (Sattin 2022).

The contest between the 'free moving people' and the sedentary population is rather apparent in the region. Unlike James C. Scott's postulation, the ethnic upland tribes in the borderlands have been constantly subsumed by the state systems for decades. The post-colonial histories, including that of the highlanders in borderlands, have struggled to either constitute a state of their own or aspired to live under some form of loose federating modern arrangement. The idea of conceiving uplander Zomia as state escaping, in this case, fails to acknowledge the processes of state-making that have already undergone in the uplands based on the remnants of pre-colonial politics and cartography, and the mediations thereafter.

The pitfalls of unsettling state-making, democratization, fluctuating federal institutionalism and violence have also made citizenry fluid. The displacement that occurred due to the 1971 Bangladesh war and the 8888 uprising in Burma left an indelible mark on the region's demography, citizenship and ethnic equations. One of the ways to engage with such a perilous situation would be to strike a fine balance between the normative foundations of protecting the rights of the displaced and the anxieties of the natives at the same time. In the absence of adherence to the legal mandates further accentuated by complacency on the part of the country of their origin or the host country, the displaced population potentially lock horns with the natives. The anti-foreigner movement in Assam and Manipur in the 1980s can be read as an offshoot of demographic anxieties. A critical aspect of the trans-national identity assertion is that it tries to become malleable and fluid as it attempts to recoil itself through construing new solidarities, territorialities, and home lands. Such a recoiling of ethnic identities in the borderlands of India-Myanmar region became more evident when the administration of Burma fell into the hands of Junta in 1962. The promises to share power dwindled for the ethnic states while there began gross violation of human rights in Myanmar fuelling displacement and statelessness. The ramifications of the political developments in Myanmar are felt widely in its neighbourhood. Hinting to the grave situation of 'illegal influx' in Manipur, the Chief Minister of Manipur on the floor of the Assembly reported that the state government was able to identify 6746 'illegal immigrants from Myanmar' in a span of ten months (The People's Chronicle 2024). Without a synchronized institutional mechanism to look after the well-being of the displaced persons and just demographic policy, the IMB region is likely to suffer from such a perilous humanitarian issue. As India's northeastern region shares 5182 kilometres of international borders, it has remained susceptible to undocumented trans-border movement of populations, and managerial arrogance of the states.

### **Can the institutions play a cushioning role?**

The post-colonial insurgent identity of the India-Myanmar frontier resembles a situation of perennial non-conventional war-like situation. In the parlance of international jurisprudence, the situation in the region

can be broadly said to have resembled a situation of 'low-intensity armed conflict' (Chaddha 2005). Low Intensity Armed Conflict (LIAC) is a concept to understand the intensity of armed conflict situations. The concept evolved more distinctively in the years following the Vietnam War of the 1960s. Legally speaking, LIAC is an armed localised conflict between two or more parties or groups which is below a full-scale conventional war (Blank 1991, 223). The armed insurgencies tend to operate in the form of a lingering LIAC to derive their political strength. Regions facing such conflicts are further complicated by a weak institutional capacity to cushion aspirations. Moreover, the truncated adherence to international humanitarian protocols to address displacements and to comply with political arbitrations has proven detrimental to a consensual resolution of conflicts. The borderlands have become precarious as far as the displacement and its redressal mechanism are concerned as all the displaced do not necessarily qualify to be 'refugees'. According to the mandates of the United Nations Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons Convened under General Assembly resolution 429 (V) of 14 December 1950, the term refugee shall apply to any person who has been displaced [Article 1 (2),

owning to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group of political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it<sup>2</sup>.

The current paper perceives that the United Nations (UN) Refugee Convention of 1951 and its subsequent mandates of 1967 in addition to the existing national laws, even if selective in some sense, lay the foundation for the governance of displaced persons around the world (UNHCR 2013). The updating of the National Registrar of Citizens in Assam state of India and enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 exemplifies how the displaced persons and 'refugees' are detected and even 'selectively' absorbed through institutional mediations (Mahanta 2021).

## A Daunting Task Ahead

The struggle to resolve the plight of the world's most uprooted people remains as serious as ever. UNHCR acknowledges that there are more than 62.5 million internally displaced people (IDMC Report 2022) out of which 36.4 million are refugees, 6.5 million are asylum seekers and 5.3 million are other people in need of international protection. Over half of all refugees under UNHCR's mandate and other people in need of international protection come from just three countries, namely the Syrian Arab Republic (6.5 million), Afghanistan (6.1 million) and Ukraine (5.9 million) (UNHCR 2022).

According to the estimates of UNHCR, 2023, the number of people forcibly displaced is now over 110 million, with over 36.4 million refugees (Refugee Council of Australia, 2023). The humanitarian and development impact of forced displacement which is seen within a country and across the countries is nothing sort of a catastrophe. Over the years, the General Assembly has also expanded UNHCR's responsibility to include protecting various groups of people who are not covered by the Refugee Convention and Protocols. Some of these people are known as 'mandate' refugees (UNHCR 2020) while others are termed returnees, stateless persons and, in some situations, internally displaced persons. Another key concept that has come into significance is the 'persons of concern to UNHCR' (<https://help.unhcr.org/faq/how-can-we-help-you/seeking-help-with-unhcr/>). 'Persons of concern' include refugees and asylum-seekers, refugees returning home ('returnees'), the internally displaced and stateless people. Globally speaking, the recent conflict between Israel and Palestine has ravaged the latter leaving thousands of people dead including children and women. 20,000 are dead and 1.9 million displaced since the brutal October 7, 2023, in the Gaza Strip (U.S. News 2024).

A total of 6 million Palestinian refugees are scattered across the world. The Ukraine-Russia war has had a similar story to tell. According to the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission, there are 30,457 civilian casualties with 10,582 civilian deaths while 19,875 have been injured (The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine 2023). According to the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU) covering the period between

February 1 and July 31, 2023, nearly six civilians were killed and 20 injured every single day. According to UNHCR 2023 reports, there are 6.3 million Ukrainians refugees sheltering in other countries while 3.7 million people Ukrainians have been driven from their homes but remain in Ukraine (UNHCR 2023).

Similarly, the rising violence in Myanmar since the military coup in 2021 and the recent heightening of conflict under the rubric of '1027' campaigns have resulted in scores of human displacement and killings. According to the Peace Research Institute (PRIO) Report, on 13 June 2023 at least 6,337 civilians were reported as killed and 2,614 as wounded for political reasons in Myanmar in the twenty months between the military coup of February 1, 2021 and September 30, 2022 (Oo & Tonnesson 2023). According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), the situation in Myanmar is among the most violent 50 wars it has tracked globally with an estimated death toll of at least 50,000 since the 2021 military coup (ACLED 2023).

The situations of displacements are much more complex when it is trans-border in nature and complimented by cross-border ethnic solidarity. The enormous trans-border movement of ethnic groups has resulted in juxtaposing ethnicity and citizens. The Manipur violence that erupted on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2023 in Manipur resulting in the loss of more than 200 lives has a similar trajectory. According to Bertil Lintner, the ethnic tension in Manipur can be understood as 'a spillover effect of what is happening in Myanmar'. According to Mizoram Government reports, around 40,000 Myanmar nationals have crossed into Mizoram since 2021 (The Hindu 2023). As of 17 December 2023, there were 6000 Myanmar Refugees taking shelter in Manipur (NDTV 2023). The ethnic conflicts in Manipur cannot be deciphered without looking at such trans-border political developments and equations. In lieu of a conclusion, it looks like the volatile situations in the borderlands of the India-Myanmar region may linger on if there is no sufficient institutional innovation to govern the delinquent questions of demographic shifts. Moreover, the exclusive identarian of perceiving ethnicity and territoriality needs to reinvent itself to adjust to the egalitarian worldviews and praxis.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Panglong Conference was held in February 1947. It was conference that took place at Panglong in the Shan States. The Conference was participated by representatives of Burma, the Shans, Kachins and Chin ethnic minorities. The participants unanimously resolved to join the Union of Burma with a promise to establish a federal Burma.

<sup>2</sup> The Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 28 July 1951. See Article 1(2) of the Convention. Also see, Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, Geneva, 28<sup>th</sup> July 1951, V 2.

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# Geo-Politics and India-Myanmar Relations

2

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## Abstract

Given the fragile geo-political instability in the Northeastern borderlands, there are important aspects that the policy makers in New Delhi need to consider. Prolonged political crisis in Myanmar may not prove beneficial to India's national interest. It will not only impact negatively India's strategic and economic interests but also pose a grave challenge to India's internal security. For a proper understanding of India-Myanmar relations and importance of Myanmar to India, the paper briefly discusses the evolution of India-Myanmar relations before analysing the current situation that has unfolded in Myanmar post February, 2024 military coup. Strategic importance of Myanmar to India's security is evident by the fact that the invasion of Japan to the territories of Nagaland and Manipur in the Indian sub-continent during WW II took place through Myanmar. The importance of Myanmar in India's security is also enhanced due to the insurgency movements and ethnicity in the borderlands of Northeast India.

**Key words:** Strategic, Geo-Politics, Conflict, Insurgency, Democracy, Movement.

## Introduction

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, had been an international pariah for decades. The country had been under the military junta, beginning from General Ne Win's coup of 1962 until civilian rule under former military General Thein Sein was installed in March 2011. During Ne Win's rule, Myanmar gradually slipped from 'neutralism' to 'isolationist' policy. The brutal suppression of the movement for democracy in August-September 1988 was condemned by the international community. Following the imposition of economic sanctions by the European Union (EU), the United States, Canada, Japan, etc., had pushed the country into a shell of isolation. It was during this period that China and Myanmar cultivated intimate relations with the former providing the much-needed economic assistance, diplomatic support and military hardware. Eventually, Myanmar expressed sympathy with Beijing in the aftermath of Beijing's suppression of the students' movement demanding democracy at Tiananmen Square in 1989. November 2010 election, though criticised for irregularities, intimidation and manipulation, has led to some reforms and a gradual opening up of the country to the rest of the world. Following the elections, a military-backed civilian rule under the former military General Thein Sein came into power in March 2011. With the participation of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) in the bye-elections held in April 2012 hope for gradual transformation to democracy was heightened.

The hope for gradual transformation to democracy was reinforced by the successful conduct of the general election in 2015 in which Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD had won landslide victory. Following the election, NLD and the military combined semi-democratic regime was installed and this continued till 2020 November general election, in which NLD again won the landslide victory. November, 2020 election, however, was followed by a military coup on 1<sup>st</sup> February, 2021. Myanmar, once again came under the military junta. The recent political development suggests that the road to democracy and political stability in Myanmar will be a long haul.

In the unfolding political crisis in Myanmar, after the February 2021 military coup, India-Myanmar relations started to entangle in a complex web

of challenges. In the emerging geo-political situation within Myanmar, will New Delhi continue to support the military junta? Will New Delhi maintain a policy of neutrality or will India pursue a policy of constructive engagement with the military junta as well as rebel groups and newly formed National Unity Government (NUG) for a federal democratic Myanmar? These are some of the important aspects that the policy makers in New Delhi need to consider. Prolonged political crisis in Myanmar is not in the national interest of India. It will not only impact negatively India's strategic and economic interests but also pose a grave challenge to India's internal security. For a proper understanding of India-Myanmar relations and the importance of Myanmar to India, the paper briefly discusses the evolution of India-Myanmar relations while analysing the current situation that has unfolded in Myanmar post-February, 2024 military coup.

### **India-Myanmar Relations: Historical Contexts**

Myanmar with a surface area of 676,577 square kilometres (sq. km.) lies at the intersection of three large geographical masses of China, India and the Indochinese peninsula. It is surrounded by five countries – China, India, Laos, Thailand and Bangladesh. China shares a 2,171 km long borders – almost fully along the Yunnan plateau with Myanmar, Laos shares a 235 km long borders, and Thailand and Bangladesh shares 1,770 km and 190 km border, respectively with Myanmar (Egreteau 2003, 49). Situating in the midst of China and India, Myanmar is a buffer state between the two. It is India's eastern neighbour with whom India shares a long land boundary of 1643 km along the four sensitive states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram in India. It has also a long maritime boundary close to India's strategic Andaman and Nicobar Islands chain in the Bay of Bengal Sea, which provides access to the Indian Ocean (IO).

Strategic importance of Myanmar to India's security is evident by the fact that the invasion of Japan on the territories of Nagaland and Manipur during the WW II took place through Myanmar. The importance of Myanmar in India's security is also enhanced due to the insurgency movement and reportedly having camps and sanctuaries of North East India's insurgent

groups in Myanmar. The inextricable relation between India's security and that of Myanmar is best echoed in the words of Sardar K.M. Panikkar, one of India's pioneer strategists. He perceptively remarked in the early 1940s that:

The defence of Burma is in fact the defence of India, and it is India's primary concern no less than Burma's to see that its frontiers remain inviolate. In fact no responsibility can be considered too heavy for India when it comes to the question of defending India (Panikkar 1945, 13).

India and Myanmar had experienced warm and cordial relations during the period of U Nu. When Myanmar was threatened by the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) and ethnic minority insurgencies, India took a major initiative along with other Commonwealth Nations to offer a loan of six million pounds in June 1950 (Ayoob 1990, 172). India also assisted Myanmar with needed arms to fight ethnic insurgents and BCP cadres in the 1950s. In 1949 when Karen rebels reached the outskirts of Rangoon, India sent arms and ammunition to Myanmar. On 7 July 1951, a five-year 'Treaty of Peace and Friendship' was signed between India and Myanmar. The treaty was signed against the backdrop of a reported incursion of Chinese communist troops in the northern Myanmar in the hot pursuit of Kuomintang troops and Chinese officials showing off large parts of Myanmar's Kachin, Shan and Wa region as the Chinese territory (Subir 2006, 219).

From the initial bonhomie, the relations between the two saw a downward trend due to series of political developments in Myanmar following Ne Win's military coup in 1962. Plagued with internal political and security problems, Myanmar under General Ne Win's period followed a policy characterised by what J.N. Dixit called, 'an amount of assertive individualism' and the country gradually withdrew into a shell (Dixit 1996, 165-66). The policy of isolation, which Myanmar pursued during Ne Win's rule from 1962 till the later part of 1980s, coupled with certain policies undertaken by General Ne Win, such as 'Burmese Way to Socialism', its neutral stand in 1962 Sino-India border conflict; and the passing of Nationalization Law of 1963, which forced the Indians and others to leave the country without compensation (Singh 2006, 236-48) were perceived as 'anti-India' and 'pro-China'.

The period from 1988 to the early 1990s saw further deterioration in the relations between the two neighbours. From March to September 1988, Myanmar witnessed an intense students' uprising for the restoration of democracy, which became popularly known as the '8888 movement' in the history of Myanmar, which was generally seen as an outcome of a socio-economic crisis due to prolonged military rule. The students' uprising which erupted in 1986 and gathered momentum in 1987 led thousands of students to cross over Thailand and India's Northeastern states to take shelter. New Delhi provided both moral and logistic support to the pro-democracy movements in Myanmar by giving shelter and allowing students to open offices in India. Indian Embassy's library was even turned into a makeshift hospital during the black day of 8 August 1988 and the then Indian Ambassador, PMS Malik, welcomed students who jumped over the Embassy's walls on Merchant Street. New Delhi issued strict instructions not to let any genuine refugee turn away. India, also secretly supported the activities of opposition groups of U Nu's All Burma Federation of Students' Union and Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (Egreteau 2003, 39).

The Rajiv Gandhi government came out in open support of the 'cause of democracy in Burma' (Bhaumik 2006, 223). All India Radio (AIR) stepped up its campaign which was very critical to the State Law and Order Restoration Council popularly known as SLORC. Its coverage on Myanmar overtook that of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on the country (Bray 1995, 45). Meanwhile, the Myanmar military regime accused India of funding the Myanmar government in exile called the National Coalition Government for the Union of Burma (NCGUB). The Calcutta bound Thai Airways hijack incident of November 1990 and India's covert ties with the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), a conglomerate of twenty-three ethnic rebel armies fighting to overthrow the military government in Myanmar had also irritated Myanmar's military regime. India's intelligence organization, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), also reportedly established close links with the Kachin Independence Organisation/Army (KIO/KIA), the Chin and the Arakanese rebels. India's RAW reportedly had supplied arms and ammunition to KIO/KIA from an Indian Army base located at Vijaynagar. KIO was even reported to have been allowed to open an office in Delhi. New Delhi also cultivated ties with the Chin National Front (CNF) and the National Unity Party of Arakan (NUPA).

India even allowed CNF and NUPA to set up their bases in Mizoram and they were even provided a limited amount of weapons and training. India's cultivation of ties with KIO, CNF and NUPA was ostensibly guided by the objective of denying all forms of support extended to the insurgent groups of the Northeast Region of India by these groups (Singh 2006, 285-86). It was during the period of isolation, economic sanctions, New Delhi's unwavering support for democracy and international criticism following the 1988 event that Nay Pyi Taw and Beijing developed intimate relations supporting each other. Thus, until India initiated the 'Look East Policy', New Delhi's Myanmar policy was characterised by inconsistency and lack of realism.

### **India's Myanmar Policy: Strategic and Security Concerns**

The unfolding geo-political dynamics in the Post-Cold World War period compelled the New Delhi government to rethink and reorient its policy towards Myanmar in particular and South East Asia (SEA) in general. The initiation of India's Look East Policy (LEP), later on rechristened as Act East Policy (AEP) can be seen in the context of shifting geo-political dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly the rise of China and the U.S. withdrawal from the South East Asia. The shift in India's Myanmar policy in the post-Cold War period is propelled by three major factors such as; China factor; ASEAN's policy of constructive engagement with Myanmar; and containment of insurgency movements in North East India (NEI) and control of drug trafficking and arms trade along international border. These factors are deeply related to India's security. In the process the relations, however, have become multifaceted involving concerns for trade, commerce, energy and opening NEI to SEA.

India's Myanmar policy, however, will, to a great extent, continue to be guided by the China factor and New Delhi's perception of Myanmar in its security calculations and its broad-based LEP. Analysts consider China's influence in Myanmar can disturb India's maritime interests as China can access the Arabian Sea via Pakistan's Gwadar port and the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Seas via Myanmar. Decades of cordial relations with Beijing enabled Myanmar's military to equip itself with the Chinese-supplied weaponry and equipment, and it has more than doubled the size of its armed forces. One crucial reason which prompted China to arm Myanmar may be to provide a military umbrella

to protect new trade routes through potentially volatile territory (Lintner 2012, xxi). Even indirect access to the Indian Ocean (IO) through Myanmar, in the event of disturbances in the Malacca Straits, may provide China an alternate route. Strategist, Mohan J. Malik, observed that the growing military relationship between Beijing and Nay Pyi Taw aroused Indian apprehensions, which forced New Delhi, for the first time, to pay increasing attention to events across its eastern frontier with Myanmar (Mohan1998, 112-3). China not only became the major supplier of defence equipment to Myanmar's military junta but also a source of much-needed financial help. India was concerned about this relative gain of China in Myanmar because it had paved the way for a possible encirclement of India by China through three pro-Chinese regimes in the neighbourhood such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Besides, China has accessed to strategic ports of Sri Lanka and Maldives, the two Island Nations in IO.

The year 2011 saw Myanmar starting work on a railway line from its planned deep-sea port at Kyaukphyu in Rakhine State to south-western China's Yunnan province. The railway line, will transport Chinese goods for export, and also be used by China to expand its access to Myanmar's natural resources. China's oil pipeline from Kyaukphyu to Ruili in Yunnan can facilitate China its oil imports from the Middle East bypassing the sensitive and potentially volatile Malacca Straits. In order to import natural gas from the fields the area south of Myanmar, China is also building a natural gas pipeline under an agreement signed in March 2009 (Lintner 2012, xx).

In recent years, Chinese companies, particularly those based in south-western Yunnan province which neighbours Myanmar, have accelerated investments in oil, gas and natural resources in the country. China has also invested in developing deep-sea ports, such as Kyaukphyu in Maday Island, as part of a larger plan to secure greater access to ports in the IO thereby reducing its dependence on the narrow Malacca Straits for its imports of oil from West Asia and Africa. India cannot afford to allow China's complete domination over Myanmar, a strategically vital neighbour. China factor will continue to determine the nature of India's Myanmar policy to a great extent. The massive infrastructural development that China had invested in as part of

the China-Myanmar-Economic-Corridor has become integral to China's grand strategy of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as New Silk Road initiated by China in 2013.

In response to China's massive infrastructural initiative in Myanmar, India signed a framework agreement with Myanmar in 2008 for the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) at an estimated cost of \$500 million. It is one of India's flagship connectivity programmes to enhance road and maritime connections between India and Myanmar. KMTTP was aimed at connecting the port of Kolkata with the port of Sittwe in Rakhine which would then be connected to Mizoram by road and the Kaladan river which flows by Paletwa. The project was delayed due to rugged terrain and Rohingya crisis in 2017. KMTTP is strategically important for the landlocked Northeast region of India not only for trade and commercial interests but also for security reasons in case of an India-China conflict in future.

The partition of the subcontinent and the subsequent hardening of borders converted northeast India into a landlocked region. Transporting goods to and from northeast India via the narrow Siliguri corridor is an expensive affair, and in a worst-case scenario with China, there is a possibility of movement along the corridor being adversely affected. Therefore, the Kaladan project was conceptualised as an alternative route that gives northeast India access to the sea. (Pulipaka 2024). The experts opine that the capturing of Paletwa from Tatmadaw by the Arakan Army (AA) on 15 January, 2024 was a massive setback for India's KMTTP as the AA is seen as having good relations with Beijing. With AA capturing Paletwa, a contested place between AA and Chin Ethnic groups, the Sittwe port is said to be in danger as there is a likelihood of capturing the Sittwe port too by AA. In such scenario, both the components of KMTTP may be in danger. As mentioned above, KMTTP consists of connecting Kolkatta port with Sittwe (539 km), Sittwe to Paletwa inland water transport (158 Km) and road connectivity from Paletwa to Aizawl through Zorinpui and Lawngtlai in Myanmar (Pulipaka).

The realist perspective suggests that China will use its influence to derail India's interests in Myanmar, particularly by delaying strategic projects

like KMTTP. The core foundation of China's Myanmar policy is to safeguard its economic and strategic interests, no matter if there is a military rule or a civilian rule in the country. China's influence on the military junta and the Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) is evident. China was able to broker a ceasefire deal between the military junta and the Three Brotherhood Alliance consisting of the Arakan Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance and Ta'ang National Liberation Army in January, 2024 after two days of talks between the two in the Chinese city of Kunming. China had urged both the Junta and rebel groups for maximum restraints. The Alliance is said to have pledged to protect Chinese investment in Myanmar. India's national interest demands that New Delhi should also pursue a policy of engagement both at the Junta and EAOs particularly Arakan Army and Chin National Front and Chin Defence Force to protect its investment in Chin and Rakhine states.

### **Insurgency and Regional Dynamics**

Geographical isolation, lack of connectivity in the past historical memory, racial and cultural distinctiveness of the peoples of India's NER resulted in the formation of a distinct and exclusive identity. Marginal influence of India's freedom struggle against the British colonial subjugation in hill areas of Assam and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura also contributed to the exclusiveness of the NER of India. The cultural and racial affinities with the peoples of SEA, the existence of the Ahoms, Manipur and Tripura as the 'sovereign' political entities in the past coupled with the British policy of non-interference in the socio-cultural lives of the peoples of this region fuelled insurgency movements in the region at different periods starting from the 1950s.

Though a number of armed organizations entered into peace process with the Government of India, there are many insurgent organizations still active in the states of Assam, Manipur and Meghalaya. The vital point from the perspective of New Delhi is the external dimension or networks of insurgent groups in the regional affairs. Many analysts have pointed the logistics and military support that the insurgent organizations in India's NER received from foreign countries. These groups are suspected to have their base camps in

Bangladesh, Bhutan, China's Yunnan Province and Myanmar. From India's security perspective, containment of insurgency is one crucial dimension of its Myanmar policy. Within the strategy of containment that includes deprivation of bases, cross-border movements of insurgents and prevention of small arms proliferation into India. In line with this object, New Delhi has been putting diplomatic pressure on Nay Pyi Taw to conduct a Bhutan-type joint namely 'Operation All Clear' to flush out the insurgents belonging to India's northeast region having their camps and sanctuaries in the Sagaing province of Myanmar.

It can be recalled that 'Operation All Clear, which the Bhutanese Army had launched with the active support of the Indian Army can be described as the most successful military campaign against Assam-based United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), KLO and NDFB. It was conducted in December 2003 in which many camps belonging to ULFA along the Samdrup and Jongkhar Indo-Bhutan border were destroyed, many leaders were arrested and huge quantities of weapons were also seized. In this light, New Delhi's cultivation of Kachin, Chin and Arakanese insurgent groups in the late 1980s can be seen as strategy to deprive India's insurgent groups of their sanctuary and other logistics support from these groups.

Another vital security concern of India is the reported procurement of small arms from SEA, Yunnan province of China and meant to be brought back to NEI via Myanmar. This can be evident from the fact that in the later part of 1995, a huge consignment was seized by the Bangladesh army and navy near Cox Bazar, and again in 1996 in which 600 rifles were seized. In the third incident a consignment of arms belonging to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur was intercepted in May 1997 and Myanmar's nationals by the Royal Thai Navy while smuggling arms in a motor boat (Singh 2005, 290). In November 2001, the Myanmar army raided five Manipuri rebel camps in and around Tamu in which 1600 weapons including mortars and rocket launchers were recovered. Investigations had revealed that the weapons were purchased from the Yunnan mafia (Bhaumik 2005). The largest arms haul in South Asia, however, took place in April 2004 in which a huge consignment of military material was seized in Chittagong. The huge consignment of arms included automatic and semi-automatic weapons, Kalashnikov-type assault

rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, hand grenades and large quantities of all types of ammunition. The total value of the shipment was estimated at between 4.5 and 7 million US dollars (Lintner 2012, 185). It was opined that the nine truckloads of munitions seized in Chittagong, Bangladesh on 2 April 2004 were good enough to arm a whole army division. The consignment was meant for the insurgent groups in the Northeast, particularly ULFA.

In the analysis of Indian military officials, unless this new weapons route is blocked (a) the Northeast Indian rebel groups will have much more arms to fight with; (b) they will have much more money raised through weapons trafficking to other groups; and (c) they will have close fraternal ties with these groups and have access to their support networks in the subcontinent and abroad that may have a direct bearing on their potential to make trouble. India will have to engage China on this whole issue of small arms proliferation in South Asia (Bhaumik 2005). But it is unlikely, at least in the near future that the Chinese would be willing to restrain its profit-making weapons industry for the sake of regional peace and stability. In view of the competitive nature of the New Delhi- Beijing relations, a wider game of geo-political over Asia-Pacific and the northeast region seems to unfold in the days to come.

In the recent decades, several high-level military exchanges were seen between India and Myanmar. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), South Asia, quoting Indian Officials also reported about the Myanmar military attacking a base of NSCN (K) in November 2009 (BBC News 6/11/2009). In the preceding months, India's then Army General Deepak Kapoor paid a visit to Myanmar from 11-13 October 2009. In a landmark development, General Than Shwe visited India from 25-29 July 2010 and five important agreements were signed, which included the 'Treaty on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters'. Under this treaty any insurgent captured in Myanmar could be deported to India for trial. Another aspect of the treaty is the extension of mutual legal assistance for combating transnational crimes; drug trafficking, money laundering and smuggling of arms and explosives (Indian Express 28/7/2010).

Instrument of ratification of the above agreement was exchanged between Home Secretary G.K. Pillai and Phone Swe at the 16<sup>th</sup> Home Secretary

level meeting held on 29 December 2011 (Singh 2012). Before Than Shwe paid a visit to India, New Delhi and Nay Pyi Taw had appointed a nodal officer for the real time intelligence sharing to curb insurgency operating on both sides following an understanding reached at a Home Secretary level meeting held from 19 – 21 January 2010 at Nay Pyi Taw (The Pioneer 2010). The issues of insurgency, the need for intelligence sharing and the intensification of cooperation between the armed forces of the two countries were reportedly discussed when India's Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh visited Myanmar from 27-29 May 2012 (Times of India 2012). Following the visit of Dr Manmohan Singh, Indian media reported that Myanmar's President Thein Sein had issued orders to its army to drive out Indian insurgents operating from their territory particularly from the Taga area. The Asian Age reported that the meeting of military commanders had already taken place to carry out the Bhutan-type of operation (The Asian Age 2012).

As India and Myanmar strengthened their strategic ties, the insurgent groups of NEI in Myanmar are likely to face frequent military offensives from the Myanmar army. New Delhi's diplomatic pressures on Nay Pyi Taw, supplemented by financial aid and military hardware are gradually showing positive results. The Myanmar army launched a series of offensives against NE rebels time and again as mentioned. Apart from other strategic concerns, the containment of insurgency in India's troubled NER is one crucial factor of courting Myanmar's military junta. In order to prevent cross border illicit activities, the New Delhi government has started to erect an 8-foot-tall iron fencing in the Indo-Myanmar border.

Myanmar's reluctance to come heavily on the insurgents belonging to India's northeast region can be explained in the light of the casualty that its military had suffered in the offensive against Indian insurgents and the remote and difficult terrain. New Delhi, acknowledging the difficulties, is providing financial aid for the development of infrastructures in remote areas; particularly Myanmar's insurgency-infested Sagaing Division. In the 8<sup>th</sup> North East Business Summit held on 9 – 10 January 2013 in New Delhi, the Chief Minister of Sagaing Region, Mr. U Tha Aye was invited. New Delhi assured him of investing US \$25 million, \$5 million each year starting from 2013 for the construction of schools

and hospitals in the division. It can be noted here that Sagaing Division, is adjacent to Manipur, Nagaland and the eastern districts of Arunachal Pradesh in which camps belonging to ULFA, NDFB, PLA, UNLF, KYKL and PREPAK are reported to exist (Seven Sister Post 11/1/2013). This may be a part of New Delhi's strategy to help in developing remote areas of Myanmar, where India's insurgent groups are reported to have base camps. This may in turn give Nay Pyi Taw a stake in maintaining peace and tranquillity in the border areas. Thus, the containment of India's Northeast insurgency has been a major factor of India-Myanmar relations.

### **Post 2021 Military Coup and Emerging Dynamics in Myanmar**

Several factors like Western sanctions and criticism, people's movement for democracy, opening up of Myanmar with its inclusion in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the policy of constructive engagement by the ASEAN, the gradual democratization of Myanmar politics and society began. The Myanmar military junta under a new Constitution held elections in November 2010. November 2010 election, though criticised for irregularities, intimidation and manipulation, has led to some reforms and a gradual opening up of the country to the rest of the world. Following the election a military backed civilian rule under former military General Thein Sein came into power in March 2011. With the participation of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) in the bye-election held in April 2012, hope for gradual transformation to democracy was heightened. The hope for gradual transformation to democracy was reinforced by the successful conduct of general election in 2015 in which Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD had won landslide victory. Following the election, NLD and military combined semi-democratic regime was installed and this continued till the 2020 November general election in which NLD again won the land slide victory. November, 2020 election, however, was followed by military coup in 1<sup>st</sup> February, 2021. Since the coup Myanmar General Ming Aung Hlaing is ruling the country as head of the newly installed State Administrative Council. The hope for gradual democratization of Myanmar politics once again shattered. The military coup is followed by wide spread protests and subsequent military crackdown leading to a great humanitarian crisis. Unlike in the past movement for democracy that

was witnessed in the mid-80s and 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this time it was a different story. In the past, though EAOs have been in existence in the ethnic minority areas, the majority Burmans movement for democracy was based on democratic nono-violent form having wide mass support but at present the movement for democracy has transformed into direct armed confrontation with the military junta. Most of the pro-democracy elements have organised themselves into armed defence force called People's Defence Force (PDF) and ousted law makers have formed a government in exile known as National Unity Government (NUG). It may be mentioned that PDF is fighting as the armed wing of NUG and it has aligned with the battle hardened EAOs. So the present resistance movement for the restoration of democracy is no longer similar to the dynamics of 1990s.

Since the start of Operation 10/27 by the Three Brotherhood Alliance comprising of AA, TNLA and MNDAA in the Shan State military had suffered heavy casualty and the Alliance had taken nearly 100 military outposts. 10/27 offensive has emboldened other EAOs and People Democratic Front (PDF). The spread of fighting in the Chin state, Rakhine state and Sagaing division near Indo-Myanmar border and Bangladesh-Myanmar border led to defeat of military junta in several battles and there is report of rebels capturing military outposts and dozens of important towns. At the moment the military is at the back foot and balance of power at least for now seems to be in the favour of PDF and EAOs. It is against this backdrop that media across the globe widely reported that Myanmar military was on the verge of collapse. Myanmar's military regime is facing an unprecedented challenge to its survival from the various EAOs and PDF. PDF is the armed wing of NUG. It may be noted here that NUG is national coalition government of Myanmar in exile formed by the ousted lawmakers. The spill over effects of the ongoing conflict in Myanmar is deeply felt in India's Northeast particularly in the state of Manipur and Mizoram where thousands 'refugee seekers' and displaced have entered into these states. Myanmar refugee and illegal immigrants entering into India has been a phenomenon that has been going for decades.

This will definitely have long term effect of disturbing India's internal security and fragile demographic structure of bordering Indian state like

Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. Al Jazeera reports that massive displacement has taken place since the military coup of February, 2021. According to report between October 26 and December 8, more than 578,000 people were newly displaced on top of nearly 2 million who were already displaced before the October offensives, according to the United Nations (Al Jazeera News Agencies 9/2/2024). Significantly the ethnic conflict between the Meetei and Chin-Kuki-Zo communities that Manipur has been witnessing since 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 2023 suspected to have a Myanmar connection. In a significant move New Delhi has decided to fence the entire 1643 Km long border with Myanmar and Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, has decided to scrap the Free Movement Regime between India and Myanmar 'to ensure the internal security of the country and to maintain the demographic structure of India's Northeastern states bordering Myanmar' (PIB, Delhi, 8/2/2024).

Given the tumultuous historical backdrop of regional politics in India and Myanmar region, democratic institutions and inter-ethnic ties are likely to be disturbed. Extensive displacement in the region has raised the eyebrows of the native dwellers resulting in distrust and conflicts. The Manipur violence that erupted on May 3, 2023 has a similar angle. Prolonged and frequent political crisis in Myanmar can be always advantageous to India. While New Delhi seem to have been inclined to a federal democratic polity in Myanmar, the emerging geo-political scramble in the post-10/27 operation wide open the possibilities of a difficult time in the days to come. An increase in the involvement of global powers, conflicts within Myanmar and its ramifications on ethnic ties in the borderlands are all set to produce a complex of web geo-politics in the region.

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# The Civil War in Manipur : What it means for India?<sup>1</sup>

3

Rami Niranjana Desai

## Abstract

Since the take-over of the Tatmataw on 1 February 2021, Myanmar has seen growing internal instability. What was meant to be a move by the military to restore the integrity of the military drafted Constitution in order to uphold the rule of law, three years since the coup has come a full circle. The Tatmadaw, that has viewed itself as the protector of national unity, today is dealing with the potential splitting of the country. With Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAO's) launching attacks on military assets and democratic forces battling to dislodge the junta, the growing complexity of issues in Myanmar is impacting India. With over 1643 kms of porous land borders with the northeast region of India and transnational ethnic relations, 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.

**Keywords:** Military, Transnational, Refugee, Northeastern, Ethnicity, Integrity, Constitution.

## Introduction

Myanmar, which is India's immediate eastern neighbour, always found an important place in the strategic thinking of post-colonial India. Geographically, Myanmar and India share a 1643 Km long boundary along Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. It has

been an accepted fact that physically, culturally and historically India and Myanmar are close (Chetty 2005, 171). The Buddhist period saw deep cultural and intellectual interaction between the two countries. During the British colonial era, Myanmar formed one of the provinces of British Indian Empire till 1935. It is due to this political connection a large Indian community, consisting of traders as well as other professionals, were present in Myanmar till the end of the World War II. It may be reminded that leaders of the freedom movement of Myanmar and India carried on their respective struggles in parallel and were in close contact with each other, which was reflected in the close personal relationships between Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Colonel Aug San and Thakin-Nu (Dixit 1996, 165). Strategically speaking, there is an inextricable linkage between India's security and peace, progress and stability in Myanmar. The following the statement of Sardar K.M. Panikkar, one of India's pioneer strategists, best encapsulate such a linkage. The defence of Burma is in fact the defence of India, and it is India's primary concern no less than Burma's to see that its frontiers remain inviolate. In fact, no responsibility can be considered too heavy for India when it comes to the question of defending India (Panikkar 1945, 13).

The strategic unity between India and Myanmar was also emphasised by V.K. Krishna Menon, then Defence Minister of India. Speaking at the UN General Assembly on 17 April 1953, he said: 'What hurt Burma would hurt India because of links of friendship, geography and history between the two countries' (Official Records of the UN General Assembly, 7<sup>th</sup> Session, April 1953). The above statements only revealed the intimate strategic connection between the two countries. Despite the age-old ties, the past political and cultural linkages, strategic location and geographical proximity, the history of India-Myanmar relations has been marked by many hiccups due to several external and internal geo-political factors. But from the early 1990s, there has been persistent efforts on the part of New Delhi to improve relation with its strategically vital neighbour – Myanmar, particularly when Myanmar came under the influence of Beijing to the detriment of India's interests. Ever growing Chinese influence in Myanmar; India's internal security problems arising out of insurgency movements in its troubled North Eastern Region (NER) and the concern for developing its landlocked North Eastern Region;

New Delhi's determination to expand its relations with ASEAN in the changed geo-political milieu of post-Cold War period and India's desire to find a foothold in the resource rich Myanmar's economy are the important factors which have prompted New Delhi to change its approach towards military regime in Myanmar. As a result of consistent efforts of New Delhi, India and Myanmar have come a long way to reconcile its past differences to establish a good neighbourly relationship.

The improving relationship between the two neighbours is best reflected in the pattern of their engagements. At present, India is engaging Myanmar at the bilateral level, at the sub-regional grouping like BIMSTEC and also at the ASEAN level. The relationship, however, has been disturbed by the current civil war in Myanmar following the military coup in February, 2023. Three years after the military coup in Myanmar, Operation 1027 was launched against the military junta by the Three Brotherhood Alliance members comprising of the Arakan Army (AA) based in the Rakhine State, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) from the Kokang Region of Shan State and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army also from the Shan state. On 27<sup>th</sup> October 2023, the Alliance simultaneously attacked military outposts, police stations and took control over key cities and highways in the northern part of Shan State. The rebellion quickly spread to the Saigang region and by the 6<sup>th</sup> of November the second biggest city in the country, Kawlin, fell in the hands of the ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) becoming the first district level town to be taken by the insurgents. By the 7<sup>th</sup> of November and with the launch of the 'Operation 1107' in support of the Operation 1027 many other insurgent groups across the country joined hands. This was perhaps one of the rare occasions in the troubled history of Myanmar where insurgent groups from a variety of ethnic groups had come together to carry out meticulously coordinated attacks against the junta.

The Peoples Defence Forces (PDF), a militia group that has branched out of the shadow of National Unity Government (NUG) also joined the fray. The NUG has the unstinted support of the United States (US) and has its office in Washington DC, a short distance away from the White House. The NUG welcomed the US Congress has passed the HR 5497 Burma Unified through

Rigorous Military Accountability Act, 2021, which authorises appropriations to provide humanitarian assistance and ‘other’ support to Myanmar, in addition to taking upon itself to promote democracy and human rights (<https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2022-02/hr5497.pdf>). The name itself is provocative as Burma was rejected by the junta for Myanmar.

### Myanmar and China Relations: Possible Consequences for India

The Western policies have almost over the years coerced Myanmar to look towards China and Russia for support. The Washington government had even accused Myanmar’s defence ministry of importing nearly \$1 billion worth of material and raw materials to manufacture arms. (<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/myanmar/crp-sr-myanmar-2023-05-17.pdf>) and China remaining Myanmar’s major source of foreign investment with 40% of its foreign debt owed to China. Further, there is a danger of sanctions naturally exacerbating Chinas debt trap policy. Considering Chinas projects in Myanmar that have advanced under the junta creating an ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India has every reason to worry about Chinas interest in a ‘back door’ access to the Indian Ocean.

**China’s projects in Myanmar Post-Coup: (BRI)**

Name of the project	Total Investment	Location	Status	Development under the regime
Mee Lin Gyaing LNG	US \$2.5 billion	Ayeyarwady region	On Going	Approved by Myanmar Investment Commission
Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (KPSEZ)	US \$1.5 billion	Kyaukphyu Township, Rakhine State	On Going	Reorganised the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone management committee with further planning to construct.
New Yangon City project	US \$1.5-billion	Yangon	Planning	The land acquisition process is being finalised
Chinshwehew CBECZ	-	Northern Shan State	Planning	Officials to expedite work on new land border crossing
Kanpiketl CBECZ	US \$22.4 million	Northern Kachin State's Special Region 1	On Going	Approved by Myanmar Investment Commission
Kyaukphyu Power Plant	US \$180 million	Kyaukphyu Township, Rakhine State	On Going	Completed Phase I
Kyaukphyu deep sea port	US \$1.3 billion	Kyaukpyu Township	On Going	Joint venture between the Chinese consortium CITIC Myanmar Port Investment Limited and the KPSEZ management committee.

Source: Sreeparna Banerjee and Tarushi Rajaura, 2021. “Growing Chinese Investments in Myanmar post-coup”. Observer Research Foundation (ORF).

Further, rich oil and natural gas reserves of Myanmar along with its fragile geographical location has made it a priority in China's future plans. China has constructed a natural gas and oil pipeline, which starts from Kyaukphyu city of Myanmar's Rakhine State, traversing through the Chin state to China's Yunnan region, which is China's springboard to the ASEAN, just the way the northeast region is a springboard to the ASEAN for India. Gwadar port, part of CPEC along with Kyaukphyu port, gives China an advantage at strategically containing India and blocking our access to both the West and the East. Even though India-US relations have strengthened, especially after Prime Minister Modi's visit to the US, the US' concerns in the region may have an impact on India's Act East policy. For instance, in May 2023 Adani Group's ports arm APSEZ had to sell its Myanmar port project for an enormous loss due to the sanctions imposed by the US on Burmese military-owned Myanmar Economic Corporation Limited. The project could have established India's port footprint in Southeast Asia.

Myanmar is also paying the price for the world's conflicts over rare minerals and green house gas, particularly in the wake of West's transition to green energy. With the politics of critical and rare earth minerals, an investigation by Associated Press, Myanmar is being called the 'Sacrifice Zone' (<https://apnews.com/article/technology-forests-myanmar-75df22e8d7431a6757ea4a426fbde94c>). Amongst other findings, the investigation revealed that even though the US Congress required companies to disclose conflict minerals with an assurance that it does not benefit armed groups, the law did not cover rare earth minerals. Rare earth elements were also found to be omitted from the European Union's 2021 regulation on conflict minerals. Today, Myanmar is one of the top four countries in the world that produces rare earth elements. The unregulated mining combined with political instability has created an atmosphere of underhand deals and profits being shared by militias and insurgent groups. Chin and Rakhine states as well as the Saigang region, apart from Kachin State, are also rich in resources such as aluminium, nickel, iron, chromite, oil and gas, but most importantly, rich in heavy rare earth elements, such as dysprosium and terbium, classified as the single-most critical element among rare earth.

With growing world economies, geostrategic competition based on critical minerals that will fuel these economies, it will be across India's Northeast frontier that will suffer consequences. Manipur is only an indication of what India may have in store for the future. Conflicts, such as seen in Manipur, will demand a wider perspective, geostrategic and geopolitical understanding. Stepping away from short-sighted analysis, especially by vested Western interests who have misunderstood complex sensibilities historically, might be the first step towards unravelling the changing dynamics of a complex conflict with wider ramifications. The successive US, EU and UK policy failures in this region have already created a complex situation. For instance, while EU was imposing its seventh round of sanctions last year, its imports from Myanmar surged increasing substantially from the pre- coup years (<https://indianexpress.com/article/world/eu-imports-from-myanmar-surge-despite-sanctions-8860003/>). Arguably a better policy than sanctions that impact the common man on the ground without facilitating a regime change. However, alienation of the junta has not only exacerbated the insurgency in Myanmar but also given China a stronger foothold. China not only maintains a good rapport with Tatmadaw, it tries to improve its relation with conflict groups such as Ethnic Armed Organisation (EAO), non-state combatants by offering arms. Thus, China exploits every possible tactics to build trust with Tatmadaw and at the same time with opposing groups. (<https://www.claws.in/chinas-investments-in-the-post-coup-myanmar-an-assessment/>)

### **Consequences for the northeast region- Epicentre Manipur**

Across the border in Myanmar, after the regime change in Naypyidaw, the military crackdown has caused many to be displaced. In the Sagaing region across Manipur, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk has said, 'since the beginning of the coup, the military has scorched at least 70,000 homes across the country, 70 per cent of which were in Sagaing region. Over 1.5 million people have been forcibly displaced with minimal access to humanitarian aid' (<https://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/unifeed/asset/3067/3067844/>). The porous border of Manipur has absorbed this influx with Mizoram next door recording over 40,000 Myanmarese refugees. In addition, active anti-Junta insurgent groups, such as the Chin National Army (CNA) or the Arakan Army, are only a

few outfits operating across the border of India, with many like the CNA and Kachin Independence Army having transnational ethnic ties with communities in the Northeast.

Manipur having borne the brunt of the influx of illegal immigrants from Myanmar, weapons to fuel the recent Manipur conflict between the Kukis and Meiteis and the increase of drug trade from Myanmar was only the precursor of what could potentially have far reaching consequences for India's national security. As long as instability continues to grip Myanmar, it gives incentive to insurgent groups with transnational ethnic ties to create grander designs that remain unfulfilled after the containment of the Manipur conflict. Although faultlines within communities in Manipur and Mizoram may have been created, the territorial integrity of these states remain indomitably intact. However, it would be foolhardy not to recognize the vulnerability of the over 1643 kms porous borders between India and Myanmar with Free Movement Regime - 16 km on both sides, which stands abrogated as of today.

Strategically, after the Manipur conflict, in a not so remarkable concurrence of events, the Chin National Army on November 7<sup>th</sup> 2023 supported by PDFs that operate from the Chin State and Sagaing Division of Myanmar captured key military outposts and towns on the border of India. Khampat town on the Kale- Tamu road, an important trade route and Khampat police station in the Sagaing region were the first to fall (<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/sagaing-resistance-seizes-indian-border-town-from-myanmar-junta.html>). The Indian border town of Rikhawdar in Falam township was also seized, it is the first town in Chin state that is fully in control of the Chin National Force (CNF). It was widely reported that CNA spokesperson Salai Htit Ni described Rikhawdar as a hub for trade with India and noted that it was close to outposts of the local CNA groups (<https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/myanmar-battlefield-updates-november-15/>).

Rikhawdar is located a short distance from Zokhawthar town in Mizoram and critically has one of the two land border crossings between India and Myanmar. In an ominous declaration of rebel victory, the Chin National Army flag flew high over the border crossing. The CNA and PDFs were aided

by their Thantlang Drone team which allegedly has access to drones made from commercially available parts and similar to the MR-10 cargo drones used by the Indian Army. To add to their string of strategically captured towns and military installations, it took a group of 80 insurgents to take control over the Khawmawi military camps in the Chin state. Many amongst these groups are active along the Mizoram border. The offensive in Chin state resulted in 75 soldiers of the junta having to take refuge in Mizoram. However, it is not just the junta that needs to take cover but also the civilians. The capture of these areas prompted over 2000 civilians to pour into India within a week. With an estimated 50,000 refugees in Mizoram and countless unregistered ones in Manipur, the issue continues to be unsettling. (<https://northeastlivetv.com/topnews/fresh-fighting-in-myanmar-over-5000-refugees-enter-mizoram/>).

Further, PDF Zoland, a smaller group but with an ambitious name took over the junta hilltop base on Kennedy Peak in the Tedim township. Zo or Zou is the northern Kuki-Chin- Mizo language spoken amongst tribes in Myanmar and India. During the Manipur conflict it was this transnational ethnic identity propelled by the idea of Zalen'-gam (land of freedom for all Kuki people). In India, Zalen'-gam constitutes parts of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Karbi Anglong District in Assam, in Myanmar the Kabaw Valley, the Chin State and parts of Sagaing Division and in Bangladesh the Chittagong Hill tracts. The situation is reminiscent of the now partially exhausted Naga insurgency that dreamt once upon a time of 'Greater Nagalim for Christ'. The Naga umbrella identity was founded upon bringing together over 16 main tribal groups with their own distinct names and languages, with a sense of unity that was forged with the advent of the British administration and Christianity. The idea of Nagalim, similar to the idea of Zalen'-gam pursued the idea of bringing tribes under an umbrella identity across the northeast region and in Myanmar.

Besides countering the dream of a 'Land of Freedom', which sounds innocuous but hides a subtle secessionist agenda, India should hope for a unified and stable Myanmar. The US involvement in the internal affairs of India's neighbours, whether it is Myanmar or Bangladesh, will have a spill over effect. India is not new to the geopolitical games played by the US from time to time. The US- CIA involvement in the Naga insurgency is well recorded. A paper

published by the Indian Council of Social Sciences Research claimed that a former secret service agent revealed that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had supported and financed the Naga underground movement till 1950s. The USA continued to be the patron and supplier of arms and ammunitions to the insurgent groups of Northeast India from Bangkok in 1970s. (Naga 2011, 95-105).

Myanmar too has borne the brunt of foreign interference, whether it was during the 1950s when the CIA supported the Kuomintang (KMT) ([https://irp.fas.org/congress/1998\\_cr/980507-l.htm](https://irp.fas.org/congress/1998_cr/980507-l.htm)) or pro-democracy forces in the 1980s, giving them funds and training in Thailand. Today, the NUG and the allied EAOs have reportedly asked the US Congress for \$525 million in aid and \$200 million in nonlethal humanitarian aid (<https://www.voanews.com/a/burma-act-debate-pushed-into-early-2024/7356280.html>). Finally, the reality of the situation brewing in Myanmar is that it is too close for comfort for India. The conflict in Manipur has left not just the region but also the country anxious. The fall of crucial towns, military installations and infrastructure just across the border of India, will not only give impetus to anti national elements and insurgents but also to illegal trade of contrabands including drugs, gold and areca nuts that is already common in these areas. The US support to EAOs will give insurgents hope for independence. As Acting President Myint Swe, in an admission of the challenge faced by the junta, stated that the conflict in Myanmar risked breaking the country apart. This would plummet the region in utter chaos. It is in India's interest to hope for Myanmar to regain its stability, not just for India's future ambitions in South East Asia, but for India's immediate concerns of stabilising the northeast region, especially Manipur.

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup>A section of this article first appeared in OPEN Magazine and Firstpost.

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## 4

# Exploring the Geopolitical Shifts in Myanmar: Implications on India

Md. Farijuddin Khan

## Abstract

With its 'Act East' policy and shared borders with Myanmar, India cannot remain a detached observer. The strategic posture of India is complex; shaped by the need to balance its security interests, economic ambitions, and the pursuit of regional stability. The article highlights India's multifaceted approach, which includes diplomatic engagement, a balanced approach, and developmental partnerships, all aimed at strengthening ties with Myanmar. India's foreign and national security in the wake of Myanmar's evolving political narrative and the security challenges that spill over the porous borders into India's northeastern states require a serious perusal. It does not merely assess the geopolitical calculus regarding state-led initiatives but also consider the subaltern perspectives, including the impact on cross-border ethnic groups and local economies. The article endeavors to unravel the complexities of India's strategic posture in response to the geopolitical churning in Myanmar.

**Key Words:** Security, Strategic, Geopolitical, Economies, Power, Countries.

## INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia is witnessing a profound transformation, with Myanmar emerging as a critical node in regional power dynamics. The article highlights an analysis of the tumultuous changes in Myanmar and the consequential recalibrations in India's foreign policy and security strategies. The article begins by highlighting evolving geopolitical dynamics in Myanmar within the broader geopolitical churn of the Indo-Pacific region. It is a country at a crossroads, grappling with internal strife while simultaneously being courted and contested by regional and global powers. The country's strategic position as a maritime and land gateway, nestled between the South and Southeast Asian corridors, amplifies its importance. The piece examines the layers of this geopolitical churn, from the internal democratic upheavals to the expanding footprints of China and the responses of ASEAN countries, and how these layers are interwoven with the interests of global powers.

With its 'Act East' policy and shared borders with Myanmar, India cannot remain a detached observer of these events. The strategic posture of India is complex; shaped by the need to balance its security interests, economic ambitions, and the pursuit of regional stability. The article highlights India's multifaceted approach, which includes diplomatic engagement, a balanced approach, and developmental partnerships, all aimed at strengthening ties with Myanmar. It further scrutinizes the impacts on India's foreign and national security in the wake of Myanmar's evolving political narrative and the security challenges that spill over the porous borders into India's northeastern states. The analytical narrative also sheds light on the socio-cultural dimensions that underpin the India-Myanmar relationship. It does not merely assess the geopolitical calculus regarding state-led initiatives but also considers the subaltern perspectives, including the impact on cross-border ethnic groups and local economies. Through a methodical examination, the article endeavors to unravel the complexities of India's strategic posture in response to the geopolitical churning in Myanmar. The introduction sets the stage for a discourse as much about the changing contours of international politics as the enduring links between geography, culture, and strategy. The article aims to

offer readers a holistic understanding of the stakes involved and the delicate balancing act India must perform in this dynamic geopolitical theatre.

### **Shifting Geopolitical Dynamics in Myanmar**

Myanmar, a Southeast Asian nation with a complex history of political turbulence, faced a significant turning point in February 2021 when a military coup ousted the democratically elected government led by Aung San Suu Kyi. This event triggered a cascade of geopolitical shifts, impacting the nation's internal dynamics and its relationships with key global actors. The Tatmadaw, Myanmar's military, justified its actions by alleging electoral fraud in the November 2020 elections, which saw the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, securing a landslide victory. The coup resulted in the arrest of key political figures, including Suu Kyi, leading to widespread protests and a resurgence of civil resistance.

The domestic response revealed a deep-seated desire for democratic governance amongst the people. Despite the military's attempts to quell dissent through force and censorship, the protests persisted, highlighting the resilience of Myanmar's civil society. The coup triggered a humanitarian crisis, with widespread human rights abuses, including violent crackdowns on protesters, mass arrests, and an internet blackout. The international community, including regional actors, responded with varying condemnation. While some neighboring countries, such as China and India, adopted a cautious approach, others, like Indonesia and Malaysia, expressed concern and called for a peaceful resolution to the crisis. The United States, European Union, and others imposed targeted sanctions on the military junta, its leaders, and affiliated businesses. These sanctions aimed to pressure the military to restore civilian rule and respect human rights.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) leaders called on General Hlaing, the ruling leader, to demonstrate the development of the mutually agreed-upon conditions—the "Five-Point Consensus"<sup>1</sup> of April 2021 (Dolven 2023, 2). ASEAN, traditionally committed to the principle of non-interference, faced criticism for its measured response. However, the regional

bloc eventually played a role in facilitating dialogue between the junta and opposition forces, reflecting a nuanced shift in regional dynamics.

Myanmar's economy, already facing challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, bore the brunt of the political turmoil. The imposition of sanctions by Western nations impacted foreign investment and trade, adding to the nation's economic woes. China emerged as a crucial economic lifeline for Myanmar, with ongoing infrastructure projects and economic partnerships continuing despite the political instability. The economic ramifications further underscored the interconnectedness of geopolitical, economic, and humanitarian factors, shaping Myanmar's trajectory in the coup's aftermath.

### **Role of China**

China's role in Myanmar's geopolitical landscape has been central. Historically, China has maintained a pragmatic approach, engaging with military and civilian governments to safeguard its economic interests and strategic influence. The coup presented China with a delicate balancing act between its non-interference policy and the need to maintain stability along its border. China's continued economic engagement with Myanmar raised questions about its commitment to democratic values, but it also highlighted the complexities of international relations in the region. China's influence was pivotal in preventing more stringent international measures against the junta, providing the military regime with a degree of diplomatic cover.

According to an *Al Jazeera* report,

China has emerged as the dominant foreign power in terms of shaping possible outcomes in Myanmar's spiralling political crisis as Beijing seeks to exert its influence over several armed groups who have staged the biggest challenge to the generals since they seized power in the February 2021 coup (Chau 2023, 2).

Several intelligence reports that it was China that made the three most potent ethnic rebel groups—the Arakan Army (AA), the Mandarin-speaking

Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDA), and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) - formed a coalition and agreed to a truce that pushed the otherwise more powerful General Hlaing's Tatmadaw from various strategic outposts since October last year's offensive campaigns under Operation 1027<sup>2</sup>.

According to a study in October and November 2023 by the Institute of Strategy and Policy – Myanmar (ISP-M), the dominant issues affecting China – Myanmar bilateral relations are transnational crimes, political economy, and geopolitics. The study reports by the think tank mention China's uneasiness with the cyber-scramming industry, which has affected thousands of Chinese nationals in and outside Myanmar. A heavy crackdown against alleged cronies of General Hlaing and the State Administrative Council (SAC), including members of five powerful families who collectively ruled Kokang region, bordering China Yunnan province, by China sent shockwaves to the junta leadership. According to ISP – M data released in December 2023, since the launch of Operation 1027 by the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA) last year, the ethnic armed groups' armies have captured a substantial chunk of land from the military junta, especially lying along the Myanmar – China international border, which marked a turning point since the February 2021 coup civil war that has ravaged ASEAN's poorest country.

In Myanmar's northern Shan State, adjoining China, the 3BHA has occupied various territories from the junta, where several of China's key projects are located. Following pleadings from the junta's (SAC) Foreign Minister for Chinese intervention in December last year, China has been able to bring a truce (a ceasefire agreement) between 3BHA and the SAC, but not before China issued arrest warrants against internet scammers and their crony leaders in Myanmar (Chau 2023). Now, China is determined to implement plans such as the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone linking China's Yunnan province directly with the Indian Ocean via Myanmar's land route.

The internal churnings in Myanmar and the deteriorating junta's control over the territories of Myanmar made China the de-facto most significant power in Myanmar. China's control of the mighty rebel groups, especially the

3BHA and the SAC, its healthy diplomatic engagement with Moscow (another power the junta leadership heavily relies on), Washington's open anti-coup/junta stand, its sanctions against the regime and a lack of unity of efforts on the part of ASEAN due to their 'divergent positions' (Jones & Rhein 2023) on the Myanmar crisis have rendered Myanmar's unfolding geopolitical dynamics complex and dangerously unpredictable.

### **Myanmar Turmoil And Its Implications on India**

Several concerns, including insurgency and cross-border activities, have shaped India's security policy vis-à-vis Myanmar. Over the years, the northeastern states of India have witnessed the presence of various insurgent groups taking shelter and receiving support from across the border in Myanmar. Guwahati-based journalist Rajeev Bhattacharya (2023) has narrated how India's northeast 'separatist insurgents' such as the NSCN groups (Naga outfits) and Manipur-based outfits of Manipur such as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and United National Liberation Front (UNLF) were sheltering inside Myanmar since the 1980s in his well-documented book – ULFA: The Mirage of Dawn (Bhattacharya 2023, 42-43 & 57-58). He also mentions that ULFA, the most powerful insurgent group in Assam, and Manipur's PLA received training and weapons from Myanmar's rebel group, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), 'possibly at China's behest' (Bhattacharya 2023, 69).

The military coup and the ensuing instability have already heightened apprehensions about the potential spillover of violence and the resurgence of the insurgent groups. Despite New Delhi's efforts to ensure its security interests are not compromised due to the volatile situation in Myanmar, it has partially failed to prevent violent ethnic strife in the northeastern state of Manipur, where the worst ten-month-old ethnic conflicts have claimed (and still claiming) hundreds of innocent lives and pushed thousands into refugee camps across and beyond the state's boundaries. Domestically, the spillover effects of the Myanmar crisis along the international border have disturbed the long-established communal and ethnic balance in the northeastern region. Across the international border, the multi-dimensional Civil War has halted the progress of India's critical economic and logistics projects in Myanmar.

In an article by Keshav Padmanabhan on ThePrint titled, “Delays, security challenges: How turmoil in Myanmar is holding back India’s Act East Policy?”, he argues that India’s key infrastructure projects, which were rolled out many years ago in Myanmar, had been stuck due to multiple reasons. One among them was the delay in issuing licenses linked to the invested projects in various regions due to the ‘political turmoil’ in the country. These projects run through the affected states of Rakhine and Chin in Myanmar, which have been the centers of the Civil War between the Tatmadaw and the Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs). Another reason for projects not going forward is the complexity of the new military regime’s challenges given the recent concession of key outposts by Tatmadaw to EROs due to their major offensives, especially along the international borders adjoining China and India. Quoting statements from an interaction with the former Ambassador to Myanmar, Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, the analyst argued that the ‘political and security situation in Myanmar is radically different’ from the previous regime in 2002 when India embarked on the IMT Highway project or the KMTTP” (Padmanabhan 2023). Thus, India needs help navigating the hurdles to effectively implement its critical projects linked to New Delhi’s broader geopolitical interests.

In their joint article titled, *Over a Year Later, Myanmar’s Military Coup Threatens India’s National Security*, Saket Ambarkhane and S.V. Gathia in May 2022, argued that fighting between the Tatmadaw and anti-Junta heavily intensified EROs, especially in the north and north-western parts of Myanmar, has weakened the military Junta’s efforts to consolidate power and its ‘capability to support India’s counterinsurgency efforts against Indian EAOs that operate from Myanmar’ (Ambarkhane & Gathia 2022). They further opined that instead of the Myanmar military regime taking control of India’s rebel – EAOs to defeat the pro-democratic People’s Defence Forces (PDFs) and allied EROs to regain the lost grounds along the India-Myanmar borderlands, the Junta has ‘sought assistance from Indian EAOs,’ that have posed serious national security concerns for India.

Another article titled, ‘Time is Running Out for India’s Balancing Act on the Myanmar Border’, co-authored by Zo Tum Hmung and John Indergaard in June 2023 for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), pointed out India’s

failure to ensure that Myanmar did not provide safe havens for anti-India EAOs operating out of Myanmar's soil. Hmung and Syndergaard (2023) argued that the weak military regime offered shelter to these rebel groups (EAOs) in return for their help fighting against PDFs and EROs in the Sagaing region of Myanmar. They named the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur as one such organization. Similarly, Kullashri (2021) wrote that NSCN-K, CorCom (Coordination Committee), and ULFA-I, all declared unlawful organizations by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), were reported to have continuously used Burmese soil to strike against Indian security forces, especially in Manipur and Nagaland. This development, they opined, could not be in India's long-term security interests.

In a new development, on January 10 and 11, 2023, the Tatmadaw conducted airstrike campaigns near the Indian borders in Myanmar against EROs, targeting the rebel groups Chin National Army (CNA) and Chin National Front (CNF). It reportedly carried out airstrikes<sup>3</sup> across the Mizoram–Myanmar border on January 12, 2023, as per the report by Myanmar's The Irrawaddy (Zan 2023). Mumbai-based national news channel, the Times Now, confirmed the report on the same day. The Print's report on January 28, 2023, mentioned airstrike campaigns by the military regime conducted just 10 (ten) kilometers from the international border and near the Farkowan village in Mizoram (Hasnat 2023). Tatmadaw's campaign caused chaos and apprehensions in Mizoram, apparently due to a report that two bombs landed on the Indian side in Mizoram. Following the incident, Mizos immediately offered relief and medical aid to those affected victims in the area. Neither the Assam Rifles, guarding the international border nor the Government of India confirmed the news of the airstrikes affecting Indian territory (Zaman 2023). The civilian NUG (Myanmar opposition) denounced the airstrikes through a statement. Subsequently, New Delhi has reportedly taken the issue of bombings with the SAC through diplomatic channels. It may be noted that India's Chief of Army Staff (COAS) lauded the Tatmadaw for its role in curbing anti-India northeast insurgents/militant groups in a well-attended seminar (Kullashri 2021).

## **Glocal Angle: The Case of Manipur Ethnic Violence**

Myanmar shares approximately a 400 kilometer border with India's northeastern state of Manipur. Historically, there have been cross-border interactions, including cultural, economic, and social ties between the people of Myanmar and Manipur. The crisis in Myanmar, which refers to the military coup in February 2021 and the subsequent political instability, has had a severe impact on India in the form of creating political unpredictability, anxiety, and apprehensions among local inhabitants, pressure from refugees and illegal migrants crossing the unfenced porous international border, and ethnic strife, among others. Manipur is in turmoil due to ethnic clashes between two major communities, which started in early May of 2023.

Given the geographical proximity and historical connections, the developments in Myanmar have seen reverberations in Manipur. The worst ongoing ethnic clashes in Manipur are primarily driven by factors such as identity politics, protection of land and forest resources from 'illegal encroachments', and, to an extent, historical grievances among different ethnic groups in the region. While the exact impact of the Myanmar crisis on these clashes can be inferred at multiple levels from diverse perspectives, it is evident that the situation in Myanmar has a role in influencing the dynamics of the conflicts in Manipur in different ways. For instance, a significant influx of refugees from Myanmar into Manipur due to the violent persecution and civil war in the aftermath of the February 2021 military coup has reportedly strained local resources and potentially exacerbated existing tensions among different tribes and ethnic communities inhabiting the hills and valley areas of the tiny Indian State.

Additionally, there have been reports of armed groups from Manipur establishing connections or alliances with certain groups in Myanmar. A piece of news exposed a vivid example of this link of the arrest of four individuals, including three armed cadres of Myanmar-based 'resistance groups' along with heavy weapons and a massive amount of Kyats (the Myanmar currency), in the Sahia district on July 13, 2023 (Bawitlung 2023). The arrests were made by the Assam Rifles, India's premier counterinsurgency forces guarding the international border, after a joint counter-operation with the local police.

Myanmar's Chin State, which borders primarily with Mizoram, has strong connections with tribes from Mizoram and Manipur. The Konyak Nagas in Nagaland have close ethnic ties with similar Naga groups on the other side of the international border with Myanmar. Tribes such as Mizos, Kukis, Zomis, etc., from the Indian side share closer ties with other tribes in the Chin State of Myanmar, such as Lai, Tedim, Zomi, and Nato. Mara tribe of Chin State, for example, has an Autonomous District Council with a local governance system. Hazarika (2023) stated that such ethnic tribes' migration across the porous borders for a long time has effectively made the 1,643 kilometer-long Indo-Myanmar border a mere geographical demarcation. An example of such cross-border strong ties among the ethnic tribes giving formal recognition is that residents in Mizoram and Myanmar can travel up to 16 (sixteen) kilometers on both sides of the border and stay for at least 14 (fourteen) days without visas under an Agreement called the 'Free Movement Regime' or FMR, in short (Hazarika 2023). The unique arrangement facilitated people-to-people contact between the two countries until the arrangement was officially suspended through an announcement by the Union Home Minister, Amit Shah, in February 2024. The February 2021 military coup in Myanmar had a significant impact on India as the pressure to accommodate refugees and displaced Myanmar citizens in Mizoram and Manipur, in particular, solidified ethnic solidarities across international boundaries. Thus, ethnic inhabitants along the border states of Myanmar became anti-coup, anti-regime rebel groups in the eyes of the ruling Tatmadaw, and the pressure to suppress them along the north-western borders of Myanmar led to a massive influx of these Myanmarese into Mizoram and southern Manipur which is considered to have factored ethnic tension in Manipur.

On November 13, 2023, ThePrint reported that more than 2000 Myanmar citizens had crossed the Myanmar-India border and entered Mizoram's Champhai district to escape the military's fresh airstrikes along the international border. Many injured refugees have received treatment in local hospitals in Mizoram (ThePrint 2023). The decades-old cross-border relationship among the tribes across the international border creates and re-creates different ethnic identities. Hence, their aspirations for 'collective identity' transcending established geographical boundaries of states, eventually transforming into

'ethno-territorial claims' for an aspiring conglomerate has troubled India's northeastern states.

## **Overview of India's Strategic Posture in Myanmar**

The military coup that unfolded in Myanmar in February 2021 has had significant implications for the people of Myanmar and the neighboring countries. Among these neighboring countries, India's security policy has played a crucial role in shaping its response to the political upheaval in Myanmar. The impact of India's security policy in the context of the military coup, considering its historical ties with Myanmar, security concerns, and geopolitical considerations, is significant. There is a long history of cultural, economic, and strategic exchanges between India and Myanmar. India's security depends critically on Myanmar's stability since its shared border is more than 1,643 kilometers long. With a focus on improving connectivity, trade, and energy cooperation, India has made investments in Myanmar's development through programs like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT), the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KKTTP).

Hundreds of thousands of dollars went into these critical projects. For example, the official figure of India's investment for the KKTTP was estimated at Rs. 2904.4 crores<sup>4</sup> in 2015. The initiatives are essential components of India's 'Act East Policy' (AEP), which replaced the previous 'Look East Policy' (LEP) formulated in 1991. There are now political and strategic interests in the AEP.

## **Geopolitical Considerations**

India's broader geopolitical considerations, particularly its partnerships with other regional powers, also impact its security strategy towards Myanmar. China, Myanmar's northern neighbor, has significant economic and geopolitical interests and has had a significant role in Myanmar's growth. China views Myanmar as a good substitute for the more popular sea route crossing the Strait of Malacca from Chinese ports across the Indian Ocean. China intends to control Myanmar through its commitment to strategically influence and

control the military regime and its State Administrative Council (SAC) in order to advance its heavily invested infrastructure project in Myanmar, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), which is similar to the one with Pakistan (CPEC), and to protect its strategic interests. Myanmar is a critical geostrategic asset for China's aggressive expansion into the Indian Ocean through its ambitious 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). Through the deep-sea port of Kyaukphyu in western Myanmar, China intends to connect with its military base in Djibouti at the western end of the Indo – Pacific on the Horn of Africa via its bases in Sri Lanka and Maldives in the heart of the Indian Ocean (Mishra 2022). Given China's influence and strategic competition with India in the region, the military coup in Myanmar and its implications raise concerns for India. India seeks to maintain its influence and counterbalance China's growing presence, and the evolving situation in Myanmar presents both opportunities and challenges in this regard.

### **India's Responses**

India's response to the military coup d'état in Myanmar has been cautious, balancing its interests in maintaining stability in the region while adhering to its democratic principles. Initially, India expressed concern over the coup and called for the release of political leaders and the restoration of democracy. It adopted a non-interventionist approach, avoiding direct interference in Myanmar's internal affairs. In its news report, Times Now reported India's official position in Myanmar and on the military regime. It reported, 'in December, India abstained from condemning the Junta in a UNSC vote but called for 'quiet patient and constructive' diplomacy'<sup>15</sup> (Times Now 2022). India has focused on diplomatic efforts, engaging with various stakeholders and advocating peaceful resolution and dialogue. India's security policy also considers the humanitarian dimension of the crisis in Myanmar. Balancing security concerns with humanitarian considerations, India has sought to address the repercussions of the coup on regional stability and the well-being of affected populations. These developments corroborate the high-profile visit of India's External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, and the subsequent meeting with his Myanmar counterpart, U. Than Swe, on July 17, 2023, on the sidelines of the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) meeting in Bangkok.

On February 6, 2024, anticipating further violence, New Delhi released its first official advisory asking Indians to leave Myanmar's Rakhine State for their safety at the earliest (Ministry of External Affairs 2024). The Ministry official spokesman, Randhir Jaiswal, said, 'we are concerned over the deteriorating situation in Myanmar, which has direct implications for us' (Press Trust of India 2024). India's unflinching stand on the Myanmar crisis remained rock-solid. In January 2024, India called for a 'complete cessation of violence' and returning to an 'inclusive federal democracy' in the civil war-torn country (Press Trust of India 2024). Since the significant offensives launched under Operation 1027 by EROs, several important townships along the Indian border were captured by the Arakan Army, especially in the Rakhine State. The development has severely affected India's projects in the region and prompted India to send its delegation to the war-torn neighbor to assess the impact of such development. According to a report by the Hindu on March 1, 2024, an Indian delegation led by Rajya Sabha member K. Vanlalvena (Mizoram) 'met with the Arakan Army inside Myanmar and held talks about the road network that is vital for a flagship Indian project aimed at forming up overland and water connectivity with Southeast Asia' (Bhattacharjee 2024). It was reported that the rebel group took the Indian delegation 12 kilometres inside the Myanmar territory and revealed that the road corridor of the \$484 million Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project was just a 'muddy track'.

## **Conclusion**

Since the junta coup in February 2021, the geopolitical shifts in Myanmar have unfolded against domestic turmoil, regional dynamics, and global responses. The resilience of Myanmar's civilians, coupled with widespread international condemnation and sanctions, has kept the spotlight on the Junta's actions. The regional response, particularly from ASEAN, demonstrated a delicate balance between non-interference and the growing recognition of the need for diplomatic intervention in the face of a humanitarian crisis. It needs a unified response to the crisis. However, it appears challenging to execute owing to its complexity and ASEAN's complex disposable mechanisms to deal with political situations such as those currently unfolding in Myanmar. China's nuanced approach highlighted the intricacies of its strategic interests

in Myanmar, emphasizing economic cooperation while refraining from overt political interference. However, China has acted with authority, using loyal allies such as the Three Brotherhood Alliance and others as proxies when its national interests directly hurt in its periphery. A glaring example was its tacit support of the Alliance's offense against the military regime (SAC), leading to the loss of huge territories and chaos within the SAC. Undoubtedly, China is playing both sides (SAC and rebel anti-coup groups) to protect and maintain its dominant strategic footprints in the country. It has shown to Myanmar and other regional and global competitors that its significant role and power as a geopolitical manager in Myanmar must be noticed. The interconnected nature of these geopolitical shifts underscores the complex web of factors influencing Myanmar's future trajectory. As the nation grapples with internal strife, international pressure, and economic challenges, the geopolitical landscape continues to evolve, leaving the global community closely watching the developments in this Southeast Asian nation.

India's strategic posture and response to the ongoing crisis in Myanmar can be understood from national (internal) and international (geopolitical) lenses. From the geopolitical lens, China's attempt to take advantage of recent gains by rebel-resistance forces could face adverse outcomes as ceasefire agreements between the SAC and the 3BHA showed signs of failure as both have accused each other of firing at each other despite the Beijing-mediated ceasefire truce. By playing both sides, China intends to control any anti-China forces that could hamper its efforts to protect and implement its key infrastructure projects in Shan state adjoining Yunnan province and also strengthen its commitment to complete a geopolitically significant strategic project-the deep sea port of Kyaukphyu-in Rakhine State where India's vital strategic projects have been lying as 'muddy track'. Understanding such complex dynamics of China's strategic interests in Myanmar is critical to safeguarding India's strategic interests in Myanmar and its more prominent geopolitical role in the Indo-Pacific region. Furthermore, Myanmar is the critical node for India's foreign policies in Southeast Asia and maritime security policies in the Indian Ocean. An assessment of the developments in Myanmar suggests that while China has overtly and covertly engaged with all sides in Myanmar to navigate the rough waters and ensure that its vital interests are not only safeguarded

but also maintain its hegemonic control of the troubled neighbor, India's key infrastructure projects along the international borders have not been able to safeguard, sans completion. A lot of strategic dedication and investments are needed for India to counterbalance China's aggressive maritime expansion in India's maritime vicinity. In this context, the role of the U.S. and Japan in Myanmar needs to be inspected, and strategic collaborations with them may help offset critical challenges and resolve many strategic puzzles in Myanmar.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> “ASEAN’s leaders included Min Aung Hlaing in an April 2021 emergency meeting that agreed on a ‘Five-Point Consensus:’ including an immediate end to violence in the country, dialogue among all parties, the appointment of an ASEAN special envoy, humanitarian assistance from ASEAN to Burma, and agreements that the special envoy could visit Myanmar to meet with all parties” (Dolven, 2023, p. 2).

<sup>2</sup> Fishbein Emily et al. (2023) write, “Code-named Operation 1027, the plan is to assert and defend territory against Myanmar military incursions, eradicate “oppressive military dictatorship,” and combat online fraud along the border, according to a statement from its organizers, the Three Brotherhood Alliance. Made up of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Ta’Ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and Arakan Army (AA), the alliance is part of a coalition of seven ethnic armed organizations that maintain close ties with China and has bases or territories near the country’s border”. See: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/3/northern-offensive-brings-new-energy-to-myanmars-anti-coup-resistance>

<sup>3</sup> The Irrawaddy newspaper (online access) report by Hein Htoo Zan on January 12, 2023, stated, “Three fighters bombed the Mt. Victoria headquarters on Wednesday after an attack on Tuesday, killing five CNF members and injuring many others.” A CNF member clarified that the military dropped two bombs, destroying a clinic that provided healthcare to villagers.

<sup>4</sup> The figure was stated in response to an unstarred question No. 1771, which was answered on February 11, 2022, by the Union Minister in Lok Sabha (Lower House).

<sup>5</sup> India abstained from U.N. Security Council Resolution 2669 (2022), which called for an immediate end to the fighting.

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# Illicit Drug Trafficking and Mitigation Mechanisms in India's Northeastern Region

5

Sapam Dilipkumar Singh

## Abstract

The northeast region of India is increasingly becoming a major trade route and destination for illegal drugs as it is situated between the two major drug producers – the Golden Triangle and Golden Crescent. It needs to be recalled that India is a party to all three UN Conventions on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances and Regional Conventions such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperations (BIMSTEC) agreements. The Northeastern States of India have, in one way or another, been on the global map of illicit drug trafficking. What is alarming, at present, is the widespread illegal cultivation of poppy plantations in the hill areas of Manipur which has apparently become a difficult terrain for administration affecting the actual practice of law and order.

**Keywords:** Northeast, Drugs, Trafficking, Psychotropic, Substances, Agreements

## **Introduction**

Considering the threat posed by illicit drug trafficking and the negative impact of drug abuse on political, economic and social development, the international community, under the aegis of the United Nations (UN) has adopted three important international treaties. The objective is to save humanity from illicit drug traffickers against whom, in many instances, legal proceedings could not be initiated due to their nexus with political and economic class. In all likelihood, such political power is derived from the wealth accumulated by illicit means. The northeast region of India is increasingly becoming a major trade route and destination for illegal drugs as it is situated between the two major drug producers – the Golden Triangle and golden crescent. It needs to be recalled that India is a party to all the three UN Conventions on narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances and Regional Conventions such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperations (BIMSTEC) agreements. The Parliament of India has enacted the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 to prohibit the production/ manufacturing / cultivation, possession, sale, possess, purchase, transport, storing, and/ or consume any narcotic drug or psychotropic substance without a license. Three years later, the Prevention of Illicit Trafficking in Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1988 was also enacted to provide for detention in certain cases to prevent illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. The Northeastern States of India have, in one way or another, been on the global map of illicit drug trafficking. The reported widespread illegal cultivation of opium poppy in the hill areas of Manipur coincides with a limited functional presence of the law enforcing agencies.

## **Illicit Drug Trafficking in the Northeast India**

The Northeastern states of India consisting of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Sikkim and Tripura are geographically not only close to the Golden Triangle but also have racial and cultural similarities. Out of the eight states in India's northeast, except Sikkim, most of the states have been embroiled in armed conflict for decades because

of insurgency. With its proximity to the Golden Triangle, which is one of the biggest illegal narcotic drug producers of the world, the prolonged insurgency movements launched by various armed groups clamouring for 'the right to self-determination' or 'autonomy', the region has been susceptible to the ground for illicit drug trafficking. On top of it, political instability resulting from structural discrimination among the states, racial alienation, limited economic opportunity and the inability to understand the effective functioning of political and administrative institutions are among the additional factors facilitating the illegal drug cultivation and trafficking in the region.

It is reported that in 2016, illicit cultivation of opium poppy was found in the states of West Bengal, Manipur, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Bihar and Jammu and Kashmir (Narcotics Control Bureau 2016, 24). In the year 2021, the Narcotics and Border Affairs (NAB), Imphal Sub – Division along with Manipur Police destroyed illicit cultivation of opium poppy which was spread over an area of 440 acres in Chandel, Kangpokpi, Ukhrul and Imphal East districts of Manipur (Narcotics Control Bureau 2021, 30-31). The NAB, Manipur team, also busted a brown sugar laboratory located at the hill range of East Phaijang village, near Saikul Police Station and recovered around 461.83 kilograms of brown sugar as well as equipment related to the extraction of drugs (The Sangai Express 2020). In Manipur, there have been many instances of busting of illegal mobile drug processing laboratories in the past few years. Heroin drug produced in the Golden Triangle especially from Myanmar is trafficked into India through the India – Myanmar border into the states of Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland via Bhamo, Lashio and Mandalay. The most important route is the one which starts from Mandalay and spreads to Monya and Kalewa to enter India (Das 2012, 27). Illegal drugs mainly enter through Moreh in Manipur, Noklak in Nagaland and Champhai in Mizoram. There are three other routes through which the heroine and other Amphetamine type stimulants (ATS) are brought into Manipur illegally which include; the new Somtal- Sugnu-Churachandpur- Imphal route; the Kheiman- Behiang- Singhhat route; and the Homalin- Kamjong route. Mizoram also has alternate routes through which heroin and other drugs are smuggled in. The most important routes in Mizoram include, the Falam – Dawn – Ngaracchiph route; the Falam – Lungbun – Saitha route, and the Teddim- Hnahlan route (Das 2012, 27).

Heroin entering Mizoram is also smuggled out to Bangladesh (Das 2012, 29). Illegal drug trade routes in the northeastern region includes Myitkina- Maingkwan- Pangsau Pass (a thick border forested area in Myanmar) – Nampong – Jairangpur – Digboi and Putao – Digboi – Pasighat. It is further connected to Arunachal Pradesh (Tarapot 1997, 107). In Nagaland, drugs are smuggled through the Homalin – Jessami – Kohima and the Tamanthi – Noklek routes (Das 2012, 29). Once, the heroin or other narcotic drugs reach Imphal, Aizawl, Kohima, Silchar or Dimapur, it moves to other destinations of the country and abroad easily. While parts of the smuggled heroin would remain in the region for the local markets, the remaining would go to cities like Calcutta, Bombay, Delhi, Madras or Bangalore, and abroad where it would fetch a whopping sum (Tarapot 1997, 107). India – Bangladesh border has been susceptible to smuggling of various kinds of drugs ranging from heroin, marijuana/ ganja, hashish, brown sugar, cough syrups, etc. Phensedyl, a codeine-based cough syrup, has become the chief item for smuggling into Bangladesh. Truckloads of phensedyl bottles from the factories are diverted into the Northeast India and West Bengal by distributors and stockists for the same purpose (Das 2012, 30).

The increasing volume of illegal trafficking of drugs in Northeast India has been proved by the huge seizure of heroin and cannabis from different parts of Northeastern states of India in the recent years. NCB Imphal Sub – Zone with the support of 182 Bn BSF and FGT BSF Imphal seized 132.550 kg of heroin in 2020 from Kangpokpi, Manipur (Narcotics Control Bureau 2021, 30-31). The officers of NCB Guwahati Zonal Unit also seized 10.866 kg of opium at Jorabat, Guwahati. Two persons were arrested in 2025. In the same year, NCB Guwahati Zonal Unit seized an altogether 66.695 kg of opium and 4.143 kg morphine from different locations of Guwahati. Seven persons were arrested in connection with the cases (Narcotics Control Bureau 2016, 11). Officers of the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence, Agartala in co-ordination with BSF 130 Bn., Ambassa, Dhalai, Tripura, seized 1137.400 kg of Ganja and one person was arrested in 2018 (Narcotics Control Bureau 2018, 19). In the same year, NCB Imphal Sub-zone in co-ordination with the Assam Rifles seized 1.865 kg of heroin and 10.270 kg tablets of Methamphetamine from Tengnoupal, Manipur and one person was arrested (Narcotics Control Bureau 2018, 14).

Officers of Customs Preventive Unit, Shillong seized a total of 5639.986 kg of Ganja from different places of Meghalaya and three persons were arrested (Narcotics Control Bureau 2017, 20).

The issue of insurgency and weak rule of law may be considered as the factors enhancing illegal drug trafficking in the region. The arrest of Colonel Ajoy Choudhuri in a drug-related case raised a serious question regarding the modus operandi of illegal drug trafficking in Manipur and its complex networks. The acquittal of former Autonomous District Council Chairman, Mr. Lhukhosei Zou, Chandel District of Manipur by the Special Court (ND &PS) from the infamous 2018 multi – core drug seizer also threw up a million-dollar question on the possibility of complacencies. The money and muscle power evidently flexed during the elections in the region, especially in Manipur reverberate the despair of electoral democracy in the region. The possible collusion between the electoral class and illicit money could be understood as an offshoot of the illicit economic practices in the region. The involvement of armed groups in some select areas of Manipur where rampant poppy cultivation is reported cannot be ruled out. Such a deadly mix of narco-cartel networks and political class has the potential of diminishing inter-ethnic ties and political stability in the region. The ongoing ethnic tension in Manipur has seen a sizeable narration around similar dynamics.

### **United Nations and Illicit Drug Trafficking**

Illicit production and trafficking of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances not only pose a serious threat to the health and overall human welfare but also miserably affect the economic, cultural and political foundations of society. It undermines legitimate economies and threatens the stability, security and sovereignty of states. Illicit drug economies can easily flourish in situations of conflict and weak rule of law and can, in turn, prolong conflict. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that in 2020, one in every eighteen people aged 15–64 worldwide—an estimated 284 million people—had used a drug in the past 12 months. The number of people who used drugs in 2020 was 26 per cent higher than in 2019, partly because of world population growth (UNODC 2022, 60). The illicit trafficking of narcotic

drugs and psychotropic substances adversely affected—in one way or another—all nations of the world. Combating and eradicating illegal trafficking is the collective responsibility of all states within the framework of international cooperation. The international community, under the aegis of the UN, adopted the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961 as amended in 1971, the Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971 and the Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 1988 with a grand objective to eradicate illicit cultivation, production and trafficking in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances and to prevent drug abuse in the world.

The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961 obligates the state parties to limit exclusively to medical and scientific purposes the production, manufacture, export, import, distribution of, trade in, use and possession of drugs (Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs 1961, Article 4). Article 4<sup>1</sup> and 5 of the Convention stipulates that the Commission on Narcotic Drugs of Economic and Social Council and the International Narcotic Control Board shall be the international control organs. The important functions of the board includes constant effort to limit the cultivation, production, manufacture and use of drugs to an adequate amount required for medical and scientific purposes; to endure their availability for such purposes; and to prevent illicit cultivation, production and manufacture of, and illicit trafficking in and use of, drugs<sup>2</sup> (Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs 1961, Article 9).

The Convention further mandates a state party that permits the cultivation of the opium poppy for the production of opium to establish a National Opium Agency, say the Article 23(1) of the Convention. The cultivation of opium poppy for production of opium shall be undertaken with strict supervision of the National Opium Agency which designates the area in which cultivation of the opium poppy to produce opium shall be permitted and which issues licenses for authorized cultivation. The parties must furnish information to the Board or Commission relating to illicit drug activity within their borders, including information on illicit cultivation, production, manufacture and use of and illicit trafficking in drugs as per the mandates of the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs 1961, Article 35 (f). The Convention also confers power to exercise jurisdiction for the prosecution of those offenders (national or

foreigner) who commit serious offences to the party in whose territories the offence was committed, or the party in whose territory the offender is found, if extradition is not acceptable in conformity with the law of the party to which application is made, and if such offender has not already been prosecuted and judgment given. However, prosecution and punishment shall conform with the domestic law of the Party which is again mandated in the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs 1962, Article 36 (a) (iv) & 36 (4). The Convention listed four schedules stating list of drugs which are substances under control.

The preamble to the Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971 states that the parties be determined to prevent and combat the abuse of substances and the illicit trafficking. The list of psychotropic substances to be controlled by the Convention is stipulated in the Schedules I, II, III and IV annexed in the Convention. Article 1 (e) defines that Psychotropic substances as 'any substances, natural or synthetic, or any natural material in Schedule I, II, III and IV'. The parties are obligated to control the manufacture of, trade in and distribution of substances through the issuance of license or other similar control measures (Convention on Psychotropic Substances 1971). The parties, having regard to their constitutional, legal and administrative systems, has the responsibility to assist each other in the campaign against the illicit trafficking of psychotropic substances; to arrange repressive action against the illicit trafficking; and to co-operate closely with each other to maintain a coordinated campaign against the illicit traffic as enshrined in the Article 8 of the Convention, 1971.

The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961 and the Psychotropic Substances Convention, 1971 remains the basis for international efforts in the control of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances for decades. However, the Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 1988 was adopted to address the growing magnitude and raising trend in the illicit production of, demand for and traffic in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances.

The Preamble and Article 1 (u) of the Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 1988, defines a transit state as,

a state through the territory of which illicit narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and substances in Table I and Table II are being moved, which is neither the place of origin nor the place of ultimate destination thereof.

The Convention mandates the parties to ensure that any discretionary legal powers under their domestic law relating to the prosecution of persons for offences established under the Convention. Article 14 (1) of the Convention provides that any measures taken under this Convention by Parties shall not be less stringent than the provisions applicable to the eradication of illicit cultivation of plants containing narcotic and psychotropic substances and to the elimination of illicit demand for narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances under the provisions of the 1961 Convention and the 1971 Convention. It also mandates the parties to take appropriate measures to prevent illicit cultivation of and to eradicate plants containing narcotic or psychotropic substances, such as opium poppy, coca bush and cannabis plants, cultivated illicitly in its territory as explicated in the 1988 Convention, Article 14(2). The parties are further obligated to adopt appropriate measures aimed at eliminating or reducing illicit demand for narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, with a view to reducing human suffering and eliminating financial incentives for illicit trafficking, as envisaged in the Article 14(4) of the Convention.

Mutual legal assistance in investigations, prosecutions and judicial proceedings in relation to criminal offences under the convention particularly mentioned in Article 3, Paragraph I shall be afforded among the parties. It is mandated in the Article 7 (2) of the Convention<sup>3</sup>. The obligation of each party to exercise its jurisdiction over the offences is established in Article 3, Para I of the Convention. Such offences shall be deemed to be included as extraditable offences in any extradition treaty existing between parties. The Convention was adopted with a commitment to deprived persons engaged in illicit traffic of the proceeds of their criminal activities and to eliminate their main incentive for doing so. The above three Conventions obligate the state parties to fulfill their international obligations in consonance with their respective state practice relating to the implementation of international law in their legal system.

## **SAARC and BIMSTAC Initiatives**

The positive initiatives of regional organizations for eliminating drug trafficking are immense. The South Asian Association for Regional Co-Operation adopted the SAARC Convention on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 1990 with an impelling desire to eliminate the root cause of the problem of abuse of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, including the illicit demand for such drugs and substances. The purpose of the Convention is to promote cooperation among the member states, so that they may address more effectively the various aspects of prevention and control of drug abuse and the suppression of illicit trafficking in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, which are specific to the SAARC region as envisioned in the Article 2 (1) of the SAARC Convention, 1990.

The Convention listed eleven kinds of offences which broadly include the production, extraction, preparation, offering for sale, distribution, sale, delivery on any terms whatsoever, brokerage, dispatch, dispatch in transit, transport, importation or exportation of any narcotic drug or any psychotropic substance contrary to the provisions of the 1961 Convention as amended or 1971 Convention. The Article 12 of the Convention obligates member states of SAARC to take appropriate measures to prevent illicit cultivation of and eradicate plants containing narcotic or psychotropic substances, such as opium poppy, coca bush and cannabis plants, cultivated illicitly in its territory; and to adopt appropriate measures aimed at eliminating or reducing illicit demand for narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, with a view to reducing human suffering and eliminate financial incentives for illicit traffic. Similar provisions regarding the extradition of offenders and providing mutual legal assistance among the member states as stated in the UN Convention against Illicit Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 1988 are incorporated in the SAARC Convention.

The BIMSTEC Convention on Co-operation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking, 2009 was adopted to cooperate in combating international terrorism, transnational organized crime and illicit trafficking in narcotic drugs and psychotropic

substances including their precursor chemicals. In Article 5 of the Convention, the agreement of the state parties to cooperate in their joint fight against drug trafficking and the manner of cooperation is expressed. The range of co-operation includes sharing and exchanging information on the activities of the individuals and criminal groups engaged in the planning, promotion or execution of acts of illicit drug trafficking; sharing and exchanging information on any sources of financing of illicit drug trafficking; enhancing cooperation between the law enforcement agencies of the state parties including through exchange of professional expertise and training of security and law enforcement personnel engaged in combating drug trafficking and in organizing seminar and conferences, etc. in this field. Members of BIMSTEC were also fully convinced that enhancing cooperation could combat international terrorism, transnational organized crime and illicit drug trafficking effectively.

International Conventions are treaty provisions of which are binding upon the parties and must be performed in good faith as expressed in the principle of *pactasuntsevanda* which is arguably the oldest principle of international law. It was re-affirmed in Article 26 of the Vienna Convention on Law of Treaties, 1969 and underlies every international agreement for, in the absence of a certain minimum belief that states will perform their treaty obligations in good faith, there is no reason for countries to enter into such obligations with each other (Shaw 2016, 655). Article 34 of the Convention provides that a treaty does not create either obligations or rights for a third state without consent. A rule in a treaty may become binding on non-parties if it becomes a part of international custom (Brownlie 1973, 601). The parties to international and regional conventions relating to the eradication of illicit trafficking in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances have international obligations to effectively implement provisions of the conventions in good faith to save succeeding generations from the scourge of illicit drug trafficking which undermines national economies, rule of law and sovereignty of nations.

### **Indian Laws and Illicit Drug Trafficking**

In ancient times, governance was carried out with unwritten laws. As human society progresses from the primitive to the modern age, governance

has been carried out with written laws and policies. Part IV of the Constitution of India is the beacon light which gives direction to the state for the enactment of laws and formulation of policies for the welfare of the people. This may be the reason why Article 31C which provides for saving of laws giving effect to certain directive principles has been incorporated in the fundamental rights chapter of the Constitution of India. It is mandated that the state shall endeavour to bring about prohibition of the consumption except for medicinal purposes of intoxicating drinks and of drugs which are injurious to health, the Article 47 of the Constitution of India. According to Article 51(c) of the Constitution of India, the state (s) shall also endeavour to foster respect for international law and treaty obligations in dealing of organized peoples with one another. India endeavours to fulfill international law and treaty obligations through national legislations and precedents as the country adopted a specific theory for the implementation of international law in the municipal sphere.

### **Legislative Mandates in India**

The Parliament enacted the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Act, 1985 to make stringent provisions for the control and regulation of operations relating to narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances; to provide for the forfeiture of property derived from, or used in, illicit traffic in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, and to implement the provisions of the International Conventions on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. The Act has VI Chapters containing 83 sections. Section 2 (viii b) of the Act defines 'illicit trafficking', about narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances which includes;

- i. Cultivating any coca plant or gathering any portion of coca plants;
- ii. Cultivating the opium or any cannabis plant;
- iii. Engaging in the production, manufacture, possession, sale, purchase, transportation, warehousing, concealment, use or consumption, import inter-state, export inter-state, import into India, and export from India or trans-shipment of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances.

The definition of illicit trafficking in drugs and psychotropic substances has a wide connotation covering a wide range of illegal activities including cultivation of opium poppy, production, possession, sale, purchase, transportation and warehousing of drugs and psychotropic substances. The Act absolutely prohibits the cultivation of the coca plant, the opium poppy, cannabis plant, production, manufacturing, process, sale, purchase, transport, warehouse, use, consumption, import inter-state, export inter-state, import into India, export from India or transship any narcotic drug or psychotropic substance however it can be done for medical or scientific purposes with authorization from the Central Government, Section 8 of the Act, 1985. Section 18 of the Act provides for punishment for contravention in relation to opium poppy and opium. The quantum of punishment is determined on the basis of the quantity of the opium poppy produced, manufactured, possessed, sold, purchased, transported, imported or exported. The minimum punishment for illegal acts is rigorous imprisonment which may extend to one year or with a fine which may extend to ten thousand rupees or both. Whereas the maximum punishment is rigorous imprisonment which shall not be less than ten years but extendable upto twenty years and fine which shall be not less than one lakh which may be extended upto two lakhs, Section 18 of the Act. Financiers and harbouring of offenders involved in illicit drug trafficking shall be inflicted with a similar intensity of punishment. The death penalty shall be inflicted on those offenders who have been convicted of the commission of or attempt to commit, or abetment of, criminal conspiracy to commit any offence involving the commercial quantity of any narcotic drug or psychotropic substances is subsequently convicted relating to engaging in the production, manufacture, possession, transportation, import to India, export from India of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances. The same punishment shall be inflicted on those who are directly or indirectly financing such activities, Section 31A of the Act. Prevention of crime is a hundred times better than infliction of punishment for the commission of crime. Keeping such objectives in view, the Prevention of Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act was enacted in 1988. Illicit Traffic, according to the Act, includes cultivating the opium poppy or any cannabis plant; engaging in the production, manufacture, possession, sale, purchase, transportation, warehousing, concealment, use or consumption, import inter-state, export inter-state, import into India, and export from India

or transshipment, of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances. The Act identifies India–Burma border states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland; India- Bangladesh border in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and West Bengal; India- Bhutan border in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Sikkim, and West Bengal as area highly vulnerable to illicit trafficking in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. The Act empowers both central and state governments to detain a person for a maximum period of two years from the date of arrest.

The legislation provides only the skeleton of the law. It is the judiciary that gives life and blood to the legislation through the interpretation of the laws enacted. It has been a settled position of law that a liberal approach in the matter related to Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances is uncalled for. The Supreme Court acknowledged the need for narrow interpretation especially about the bail provisions of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985. The Court observed that it should be borne in mind that in a murder case, the accused murders one or two persons, while those persons who are dealing in narcotic drugs are instrumental in causing death or in inflicting death – blow to a member of innocent young victims, who are vulnerable; it causes deleterious effects and a deadly impact on the society; they are a hazard to the society; even if they are released temporarily, in all possibilities, they would continue their nefarious activities of trafficking and/or dealing in intoxicants clandestinely (Union of India v Ram Samujh and Ors (1999) 9 SCC 429). It may be said that the Act is a special law enacted to make stringent provisions for the control and regulation of operations relating to narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances.

## **Conclusion**

India lies in between the golden triangle and golden crescent which are known as the two giant centres of illegal drug production in the world. The Northeast states of India have been one of the major illicit drug trafficking routes. Due to its proximity to the Golden Triangle and prolonged deterioration of the law and order situation resulting from multiple factors such as insurgency, corruption and weak efficiency of administration for decades,

the region remains vulnerable. According to NCB reports and newspaper reports, the region particularly Manipur state has in recent years been a fertile land for illegal cultivation of poppy with alleged support of armed groups, mainly operating in the southern hills. The National Policy on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 2012 and Manipur State Policy on Psychotropic Substances, 2019 have acknowledged the prevalence of illegal cultivation of poppy. Internationally speaking, the Government of India has not only signed and ratified three UN treaties relating to narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, the SAARC and BIMSTEC conventions for combating the menace of illicit drug trafficking and country laws against the illicit trafficking of drugs in and outside India is a significant move in the direction of combating illicit drug regime.

The Supreme Court has also categorically stated that the provisions of drug related laws be strictly interpreted to realise the objectives of the legislation. The existing international laws, national laws and policies seem to have not succeeded in containing the trend of illegal cultivation of poppy and illicit trafficking of drugs and psychotropic substances in the entire Northeast India. The prevailing situation strongly suggests that unless there is an international cooperation especially with Myanmar in terms of the exchange of offenders involved in illicit trafficking under the extradition treaty, it would be a herculean task to combat the menace of illicit drug trafficking. The signing of an extradition treaty would bring some real hope and benefit both countries in this regard.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Article 4 of the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961 provides for general obligations of the state parties of the convention which include giving effect to and carry out the provisions of the Convention within their territories; co-operating with other states in the execution of the provisions of this Convention

<sup>2</sup> Article 7 of the Convention; Article 7 para 2 provides that mutual legal assistance to be afforded in accordance with this article may be requested for any of the following purposes: a) taking evidence or statements from persons; b) effecting service of judicial documents; c) executing searches and seizures; d) examining objects and sites; e) providing information and evidentiary items; f) providing originals or certified copies of relevant documents and records, including bank, financial, corporate or business records; and g) identifying or tracing proceeds, property, instrumentalities or other things for evidentiary purposes.

<sup>3</sup> Article 9 of the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961; the Board shall consist of 13 members, out of which three members with medical, pharmacological or pharmaceutical experience from a list of at least five persons nominated by the WHO and 10 members from a list of persons nominated by the members of the UN and by parties which are not members of the United Nations.

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## 6

# Customary Rules of Warfare and Armed Conflict Situation

N. Pramod Singh & Pamreiso Raiping

## Abstract

No human being on this earth is interested in war and armed conflict; however, men-made war and armed conflict continue to exist. The article focuses on international humanitarian laws inter alia the traditional humanitarian principles and rules applied and followed by warring combatants during the war and armed conflict in the ancient times in Manipur. It also discusses the customary combat rules and practices which were strictly complied with more particularly by the ancestors of Meitei and tribes in the region. One of the objectives for revisiting the old customary humanitarian rules is to reveal the relative significance of the aged-old traditional combatant rules and also to find out the ways to overcome the issue and challenges being faced in application of international humanitarian law in such a trouble-torn state of India. The authors dwell upon the implications of international humanitarian law with special reference to the ongoing armed conflict situation in Manipur.

**Keywords:** Armed conflict, Humanitarian, Law, State Party, Citizens.

## Introduction

International humanitarian law is a branch of the law of nations. It is a set of rules which is primarily known as the law of war or the law of armed conflict. It also lays down the standard rules and principles which, in times of

armed conflict or war, seek to protect and safeguard civilians including certain categories of people who are not or are no longer taking part in the hostilities including members of warring combatants who have laid down their arms and those placed hors de combat as the result of sickness, wound or detention. Humanitarian law applies once war or armed conflict occurs; however, it does not call into question the legitimacy of war or armed conflict. Its main objective is to protect and safeguard human rights during war and armed conflict. Man-made war and armed conflict are normally characterized by outbursts of human anger, greed, jealousy and hatred. When the parties to the conflict cannot settle their differences by peaceful means, weapons are often made to speak out. In the ancient period, such human conflict was regarded as a serious business that ought to be guided by moral and ethical principles rather than being pursued recklessly and brutally (Sinha 2019, 110). In a way, history also reveals that such conflict is an inevitable part of every human civilization. The deep-rooted customary practices of humanitarian law are largely found in every human civilization elsewhere in the world, and that is why international humanitarian law per se is regarded as a common heritage of mankind. In a similar way, Manipur has a rich traditional warfare code and the same has been reflected in the ancient Meitei manuscripts and also adequately evidenced both in the Meitei and tribal customary warfare rules. As such, the traditional combatant codes of warfare were followed strictly by the ancestors from generation to generation. Those who breached the codes had to face the wrath of divine penalty, and even the rules authorized to kill the combatants for cheating.

### **Customary rules of warfare**

Codification of the customary rules of warfare began to roll out in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The case in point is the adoption of First Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of Wounded in Armies in the Field in 1864 and the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907. The Martens Clause, which has also been widely accepted as the basis of customary international law, sets forth to protect the victims of war under the rules and principles of international law derived from the established custom, principles of humanity and dictates of public conscience. The 1899 Hague Convention was of its first kind adopted

to respect and honour the customary rules of warfare on land. The adoption of the 1907 Hague Convention was not only to regulate the conduct of hostilities but also provide for the protection of war victims. Technological advancement coupled with the emerging complexities of human relations have eventually paved the road for the global community to undertake adequate measures so as to meet the ever-growing military engagement situations elsewhere in the world. Rigorous attempts have also been made by the international community to outlaw war and armed conflict by adopting the League Covenant in 1919, the Pact of Paris in 1928 and the Charter of United Nations (UN) in 1945, among others.

The traditional term of war is literally prohibited under Article 2 (4) of the Charter of the UN. However, a new dimension of war in the form of armed engagement in the name of national liberation, insurgency, guerrilla warfare or separatist movement has become a universal phenomenon. In such situations of military engagement, using of different methods of warfare, weapons and equipment etc., needs to be regulated as it can procure immeasurable human suffering with terrible effects on defenseless persons and civilians. The relative impact of armed conflict, particularly on the defenseless civilian population is found to be more rigorous than the impact of the traditional regular war. The adoption of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Protocol Additional I, II & III have almost replaced the unwritten humanitarian rules and principles but the major part of the humanitarian rules and practices have remained as un-codified rule in every human civilization. Both the written and unwritten humanitarian rules can be considered as the two sides of a coin, especially for the enforcement of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in conflict situations. Article 1 (2) of the Protocol Additional I to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 endorses the same implication of mandatory nature that makes no difference even if the state party has not signed or ratified the Protocol. The International Court of Justice has also re-affirmed the status of the customary international law in *Nicaragua Vs. USA* in 1986. Some of the customary rules and principles are even accepted as the *Jus Cogens*. It is evidenced that both the treaty law and customary law, in the context of IHL, are found to be quite significant and also to be supplementary to each other with equal values. The contemporary international humanitarian treaty laws provide the legal basis for the protection

of civilians as well as victims of war and armed conflict. The unwritten customary rules also play an important role in protecting the human rights of those defenseless persons in such situations from time immemorial. It is equally important for all the stakeholders to understand and uphold the legacy of old traditional humanitarian codes which were put in place by the ancestors from the time immemorial. Nevertheless, the idea would obviously help to mitigate the human sufferings caused by the armed conflict situations and would also help to overcome the issues and challenges being faced with regard to the enforcement of IHL in the troubled torn regions like India's northeast.

### **Nature and Trajectory of Conflict in Manipur**

Manipur has become a theatre of armed conflict for over six decades and as such, the people of the state have been witnessing horror and terror on an unimaginable scale. In the midst of military engagement between state actors and non-state actors, ethnic conflicts are also not new in the state of Manipur. The scale of ethnic violence is equally unparalleled in terms of the violation of human rights of citizens, and the same casualties have also been found unprecedented due to the perennial issue of the armed conflict in the region. Historically, it is a fact that Manipur has plunged into armed violence and armed conflict situations in the years following the takeover of the erstwhile independent kingdom of Manipur by the Union of India on October 15, 1949 (Prمود & Dilip 2016, 58). Whereas the Naga movement began its excursion in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century with the creation of the Naga Club. Since Manipur is inhabited by various ethnic groups, the armed opposition groups belonging to different ethnic communities have been formed in the name of self-determination and restoration of their lost sovereignty. As such, the perennial armed conflict situation and internal violence have erupted in the state of Manipur that have further exacerbated the ongoing humanitarian concerns.

The prevalence of armed conflict situation in the state is well depicted in the government reports, parliamentary reports, court rulings, and also in the reports submitted by international, national and local human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and other non-

governmental organisations working in the field of human rights. It is also a fact that the central and state governments have been holding a series of peace talks, ceasefire agreements, or Suspension of Operations (SoO) with the armed organizations operating in the state. In addition, the Rajya Sabha report No. 213, the Justice Reddy Commission Report on the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 in 2005, the judgment of the Supreme Court of India in NPMHR case, AIR 1998 SC 431, and EEVFAM case (WP (Cri): 2012) cases, the Justice J.S. Verma Committee Report (2013), the Justice N. Santosh Hedge Commission (appointed by the Supreme Court in 2013) and among others have also directly and indirectly pointed out the existence of armed conflict situation in Manipur (Premananda 2015, 153).

The reports published both by the government and non-governmental organizations have clearly shown that the ongoing armed confrontation between state and non-state actors, on the one hand and the armed engagement between and among the non-state actors have, on the other hand, virtually caused significant number of civilian casualties. There have been adequate number of cases of arbitrary arrest, illegal detention, torture, fake encounter killings, enforced disappearance and extrajudicial killings of innocent citizens both by state actors and non-state actors in the name of counter-insurgency. The South Asian Terrorism Portal (SATP) documented that from 1992 to 2013, an estimated 5842 deaths which included 2193 civilians who did not take direct part in hostilities. It is also reported that around 8000 civilians and 12000 army troops and insurgents have been killed in the conflict from 1979 to 2005 (Ploughshares 2012). Annual report of the MHA, Government of India reveals the facts and figures of civilian casualties of 661 (MHA 2003-2008). The Department-Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs detailed the violent incidents in Manipur that accounted for staggering 54 per cent of the total number of violent incidents in the entire North Eastern region (Rajya Sabha 2017). Though the humanitarian law does not question the legality of war and armed conflict, it aims at humanizing conflicts by regulating the conduct of wars and also by mitigating human suffering. War and armed conflicts are apparently inevitable in human society. Therefore, one of the core objectives of humanitarian law is to mitigate the human casualties and to protect human rights of individuals during the conflict situation.

Henceforth, the unique features of Meitei customary humanitarian warfare rules and Tribal customary warfare rules are still found to be the relevant basis and grounds for making a meaningful realization of humanitarian standards. Literal implications of such traditional practices followed by the ancestors needs to be understood and the same values be put into practice by every warring party in this part of the region. It is also equally important to note the relative values of safeguarding the rights and freedoms of innocent civilians and other protected persons during the war as given in their cultural and religion scripts.

### **Meitei traditional combat rules**

The Meitei traditional combat rules were well regulated, as evidenced by numerous incidents throughout the ancient Meitei history. According to Moirangthem Arunkumar, a Meitei scholar, the Chainarol (combat rules) is one such highly revered Meitei script from ancient Meitei civilization that dictates how war is to be waged (Arunkumar 2012, 12). It narrates stories of legendary warrior fights involving deadly weaponry. The warrior's code enjoins that all the warriors should die on the battlefield with the dignity that a true warrior should have. It prioritizes moral values along with bravery. It is also found that Meitei warfare is an organized, well-managed open or daylight battle. There were no deceptions, artifices, or crafty elements used in secret. It was unaffected by charm or spell. It was carried out to resolve conflicts involving land and other financial matters. The Code of Conduct states that a warrior in armour may not fight the one who is not so clad, an elderly man, or surrendered warrior.

The Chainaba (personal combat between two warriors), who conduct their battles in accordance with a sacred code of ethics, is the fundamental element of the Chainarol. The warriors value the morality of this ancient code. The warriors upheld their honour during battle because they were convinced that betraying their opponent was unethical. The idea of personal rivalry is unimportant and they never try to unfairly advantage themselves over their opponent. The protection of non-combatants is one of the key principles that adorned the Chainarol. Like modern humanitarian law, it makes a clear distinction between civilians and combatants. Its goal is to reduce the unnecessary suffering that civilians endure. The combat zones were chosen to

be remote from populated areas in order to prevent civilians from becoming involved in the fighting. For instance, the foothills of Thangbee Yoinoukol served as one such battleground. The dispute was settled by a duel between the two most accomplished fighters on the opposing sides.

The Chainarol prophesises that a warrior would sink into death if he uses deception to kill his opponent or goes against the fallen warrior's custom. Respectful treatment of the enemy's dead body was a well-entrenched norm with religious origins. Moirangthem Arunkumar claimed that Heirem Kangbisu Athouba, a Meitei warrior, was the exact recipient of this particular prognosis after he was allegedly punished unusually by God for killing his opponent (Arunkumar 2012, 15). The account clearly stipulates the moral qualms and pangs of guilt, if deceased combatants were not respected and honoured. The prospect of heavenly punishments appears to have acted as a deterrent and encouraged adherence to rules. However, it is not clear that divine sanctions were considered certain or predictable. It can be inferred from the above sources that the philosophy of the Chainarol is akin to modern IHL, especially in differentiating between civilians and combatants, treatment of wounded or dead combatants and others. In such conflict situations, it would be a meaningful approach if all stakeholders draw the importance of such traditional humanitarian codes on priority basis.

### **Tribal customary rules of warfare**

The term war was regarded as an essential component of tribal customary law like any other customary practice. The headhunting practice of the Nagas is well-known to the outside world. Although headhunting is, undoubtedly synonymous with Naga war, some writers and scholars argue that the term does not encompass all forms of war that were common in the distant past. They cited the Naga customary laws of 'general war' as evidence for their claim that the act of chopping off human heads and displaying them as trophies was prohibited (Shimray 1998, 39-71). Through his writings, T.C. Hodson, made a compelling case that headhunting is associated with agrarian rites, simple blood feuds, funerary rites and eschatological beliefs (Hodson 2014, 122).

Tangkhum Hao Awo-Ayi, the ancestors, was a living fighting being. They considered conflict as a daily phenomenon. Only when all other attempts at achieving peace have failed, war is declared. Different laws and moral standards apply based on the type of battle. In the ancient Naga civilization, winning battle was considered a sign of manliness and a way to advance to a higher rank. Some scholars and writers embraced the concepts of honour, bravery, intrinsic worth, and fame in an effort to defend and elevate war (Shimray 1998, 73). Their pieces of literatures provide enough information to surmise that war is intertwined with religious sanctions, economic utility, political considerations, social values and justice.

The proportionality principle served as the foundation of Tangkhum warfare. A writer from Langdang village, who is well acquainted with Tangkhum customary practices endorses such an idea. According to him, one of the fundamental tenets of Tangkhum customary laws on warfare is the proscription of weapons and tactics that have the potential to inflict needless harm or suffering (Zingnim 1994, 28). Causing injury to a disproportionate or unnecessary degree is strictly forbidden. Using fire in combat is also stringently prohibited. According to Tangkhum customary norms, fire is an unpredictable and divine disaster that could wipe out countless species, cereals, animals, forest products and goods. Since the village houses were built from forest products like wood and thatch which are vulnerable to fire, the ban ideally is to prevent havoc and mayhem as fire can destroy an entire village. Spears, arrows, daos, helmets, buffalo leather shields, axes, javelins, and other weapons and equipment were regarded as a counterforce in the ancient Tangkhum warfare.

In Tangkhum, the term *ngasungrai* means a war of challenges, which is usually a single-sided battle using deadly weapons to resolve disputes (Shimray 1998, 84). It can be said that such type of war is an alternative to a full-scale war, as it avoids casualties and unnecessary costs. The fight is strictly controlled, so that casualties are limited to the most ambitious or skilled fighters, whose participation is either of their own free will or a response to their Awunga's call to fight on behalf of their respective villages. In this respect, the warriors can be compared to gladiators in ancient Rome. The day and time of the battle were announced in advance, crowds would gather to witness

the specially scheduled battle. The two greatest warriors, fully equipped with weapons, advanced towards the opponent performing war dances and shouting war ho-hoings or war cries. If a fighter adopted treacherous methods during the battle, he would be excommunicated from society. According to a researcher's informant, Rev. Kasomwoshi from Hunpun village, the war history of ngasungrai of Maringthei from Longpi village and Kapang from Ngari village was well known in the Tangkhul hills. Even when they were in battle, they maintained a high level of politeness and addressed each other as "Itao," meaning "friend."

Ngalei khamor, which means no war zone, was established in the Tangkhul hills by an agreement between two warring villages to designate a specific area as a protected zone (Horam 2020, 41-42). This was primarily premised on the principles of mitigating the suffering, atrocities and deaths of the conflict, particularly of women and children. Another reason for creating this zone was to limit further damage and death to the parties who had surrendered or lost the conflict. A warrior, who was on the run, once he entered such a zone during war time, was completely immune from attack or killing. This is a special war custom that existed since time immemorial. If this sacred customary status is violated, the neighboring villages collectively attack the offending village as a form of punishment. Fear of retaliation by the offended party and their war alliance fosters deterrence. No party dares to violate such a wartime tradition. The special war custom corresponds to the 'protection zone' created in different parts of the world such as the Madrid zone in Spain, Shanghai zone in China and Jerusalem zone in Palestine to provide refuge to the people affected by modern warfare (Bimal 1999, 693-696).

Chivalry, individual heroism, the qualities of mercy and nobility of outlook even in the grimmest of fights were not unknown to the Naga warriors. Some Naga tribes in Manipur, particularly the Mao, Rongmei and Liangmei, evolved their own war traditions and customs of showing mercy to the defenseless and feeble adversary warriors who pleaded for mercy. The sanction behind the mercy was that misfortune might come in future if one did not forgive the enemy who had fully surrendered (Shimray 1998, 93). As a sign of submission, the pursued was required to lick the pursuer's palm after running to them

and yell out his identity according to the custom of Rongmei and Liangmei communities. As per Mao tradition, an enemy warrior would be released if he ran into someone's house, covered himself with a winnowing basket, and covered himself with a woman's skirt (Shimray1998, 94). But the common tradition of all the Nagas tribes was that the enemy should be given food and shelter once they entered somebody's house for protection. It became the responsibility of the host to look after the security of the helpless enemy warrior. Even if it may sound difficult in a war time, such as the moral code to be followed when a helpless adversary surrendered. In other words, the customary laws of war that the Tangkhuls inherit are graceful, humane and quite compatible with the norms found elsewhere in the world.

### **Task ahead**

The contemporary humanitarian law deals with both the international and non-international armed conflict. In the case of non-international armed conflicts, the Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Protocol Additional II of 1977 has specifically dealt with the armed conflict not of an international character occurring in the territory of one of the high contracting states parties to the conventions, each party to the conflict shall be bound to treat humanely all persons taking no part in the hostilities including the members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed as hors de combat by sickness, wound, detention or any other cause without any distinction founded on race, colour, religions or faith, sex, health or wealth or any other factor. Such non-international or internal armed conflict was not the subject of the domestic government on whose territory it occurred until the adoption of the 1949 Conventions and the Protocol Additional II of 1977. Further, it is also worth mentioning that Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions not only enumerates the means and modes of using forces and weapons by the combatants during the armed conflict but also provides the mandate for humanitarian organizations like ICRC to render humanitarian services to the needy people (Balachandra 1999). The provision refers to all the parties to the conflict whether it is state or non-state. Every armed dissident group involved in an internal armed conflict is expected to follow the common Article 3 which is in itself considered a mini convention within the Conventions

of 1949. The point is that humanitarian laws are inviolable and also binding on states, armed forces, heads of state, ministers, officials and individuals who participate and are involved in the armed conflict.

IHL has been progressively evolved by the United Nations within the parameters of the UN Charter. In this regard, the Security Council acts as a supreme guardian of humanitarian law under the Charter of the UN, and the Charter does not limit its application only to the peace time but it will also be applied even during war and armed conflict situations. The Security Council has adopted a number of resolutions under chapter VI and VII of the UN Charter in several humanitarian disasters that occurred around the world. The Resolution Number 237 of 1967 of the Security Council stressed that all parties to the armed conflicts should respect human rights and they should also fulfill all obligations as laid down in the four Geneva Conventions of 1949. The UN General Assembly also stated in its Resolution No. 2444 (XXIII) of 1970 that the states parties do not have unlimited means to injure the enemy and they are also prohibited to launch attacks on the civilian population. Moreover, it has also adopted in a series of resolutions since 1970 that all participants in resistance movements and freedom fighters should, if arrested, be treated as prisoners of war. The meaningful enforcement of IHL continues to be challenging because of the inadequate global enforcement agencies. The non-application of the well-meaning customary rules of warfare is another factor that has dwindled the prospects of humanitarian laws. The invocation of special legislation such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 to quell down insurgency movements and violence in India's northeast has proven less effective. The continued insurgency-related violence and the eruption of ethnic conflict between the Meeteis and Kukis on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2023 in Manipur has turned India's northeast region into one of the volatile geopolitical hotspots involving displacement, illegal immigration and cross-border illicit trafficking of drugs and small arms.

## The Way Forward

The way forward would involve looking beyond 'counter-politics'. The available option left for effective application of humanitarian law is to obligate the legitimate governments, conflicting parties, state actors or non-state actors who are involved in the conflicts under a uniform global regime. All the parties to the armed conflicts need to come forward and oblige themselves to be bound by both unwritten and written humanitarian laws. In a way, the treaty laws cover many aspects of war and armed conflict including the protection of civilian lives and properties. The challenge, however, is that such protocols apply only to the state parties ratifying the norms. The actual regulation of the conduct of hostilities and treatment of persons including civilians, especially in the internal armed conflict situation is found to be more detailed in the customary laws than that of the treaty laws. It is also evident from a thorough grasp of the Chainarol and the tribal customary combat rules that there is an invaluable element of the humanitarian code of warfare which is akin to the modern warfare laws.

As far as the non-state parties are concerned, a few non-state actors from Manipur have come forward and declared unilaterally their commitments to uphold the Geneva Conventions of 1949. It is learnt that the People's Liberation Army (PLA), one of the outlawed armed groups operating in Manipur since the late 1970s, has agreed to abide by the common Article 3 to the Four Geneva Conventions of 1949. Another armed organization namely the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) or the Government of People's Republic of Nagaland (GPRN), one of the largest outfits operating in India's northeastern borderlands, claims that the 'Indo-Naga war' qualifies as an armed conflict under the terms of the Geneva Conventions (GPRN 2001, 4). The organization made a declaration to abide by the principles of the Geneva Conventions. The ongoing armed violence, including ethnic conflicts in India's northeastern region, particularly in Manipur has exacted a heavy humanitarian concern. Breach of humanitarian laws normally may take place not merely because of the inadequacy of its rules, but it may also occur because of unwillingness to respect the rules, insufficient means to enforce the rules because of the peculiar situation and circumstances, or even due to the lack of awareness on the part of stakeholders including the public leaders and general public.

## Conclusion

Prolonging violence comes with extensive ramifications on human rights. Month long blockade of national highways in Manipur and the killing of civilians in the name of ethnicity have induced insecurity and safety of civilians and their prospects of peaceful co-existence and advancements. The parties involved need to abide by the customary and international humanitarian ethos. The universality of customary laws as practiced in ancient times in Manipur can provide a ray of hope. Such norms of humanitarian codes applied and followed by the ancestors, undoubtedly bear a close resemblance to the contemporary international humanitarian law. It is also a fact that the principles of proportionality, distinction between the civilians and combatants and act of showing mercy to the fallen enemy warrior, among others, were some of the sacrosanct norms which were considered to be a part of indigenous life and culture. It shows that ancient laws of warfare have even exerted a much more natural pull than contemporary international humanitarian law. Realizing the significance of both the old and new humanitarian norms, whoever is involved in the conflicts should not turn a blind eye to the indiscriminate torture and killing of persons that amounts to transgression into the prescribed humanitarian limits. When armed violence and conflict destroy homes, devastate lives, shatter families and make people displaced in their own home land, dissemination of humanitarian norms with the relative values of human rights, more particularly to the warring parties is imperative, and understanding of their rich legacy of traditional humanitarian codes, which are gifted by their ancestors, needs to be revisited and re-materialized for the sake of humanity, peace, unity and integrity.

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*Commentary*

# Illicit Drug Trade and its Impact in Manipur

7

R.K. Nimai

Illicit drug trade in Manipur has a long history. But the recent trends have been much more significant in terms of volume. In the 1980s, drugs were brought from Myanmar and sold elsewhere with trickle-down effect in Manipur leading to youth taking to drugs. The main drugs dealt are methamphetamine and heroin. Till the first decade of the present century, the plantation of poppy and extraction of opium was limited. During the 1980s, in the hills, there were small poppy plantations meant to provide the need for local opium smokers. By 1995 or so, the acreage had increased in a few pockets in the hills and by 2017, and onwards it has reached its peak with almost all hill districts involved while in the valley there are reports of plantation in Bishnupur District. One reason why poppy plantation in valley is not common is that there is hardly any land where it can be planted surreptitiously.

In 2009, an assessment was conducted by this writer on the volume of trade through Moreh, it was found that the total volume was about Rs. 1500 crore per annum, with only about Rs. 40 crore coming from formal trade, about Rs. 300 crore from informal trade and the remaining from illegal trade. Of the total, drug contributed about Rs. 900 crore, while the remaining came from gold and plant and animal materials.

During the 1970s till 1990s, there were a few drug lords in Myanmar, who control the drug business. Some of the well known names are Khun Sha, Olive Yang, and Mr Han. On pressure from the Myanmar Government most of them came to an understanding with the Government sometime in 1996 and lived in Yangon though despite American pressure none were extradited to USA unlike some of the drug lords of Latin America. Subsequently, the Golden Crescent overtook the Golden Triangle in heroin production. Myanmar Government

made serious efforts to control poppy cultivation and alternative crops were tried with support from various governments like Japan, South Korea, and USA with high quality coffee, and monk fruit being the preferred crop. With the efforts to curb poppy plantation in Myanmar, as the market value rises, alternative areas to grow poppy were searched and NE India was found to be the nearest alternative. In the meantime, the drug trade was taken over by the ethnic armed groups to finance their activities and no drug lord could come up. Among the NE states, though there are plantations the acreage could not increase as per the demand due to various reasons including discouragement by some of the armed militants and the society, except in Manipur where some armed groups are ready to take the responsibility.

After the United States entered Afghanistan, it made serious efforts to curb poppy plantation through carrot and stick policy though spraying of herbicides were never resorted to. This had some impact with the price of the heroin shooting up from the street price in Mumbai in March 2016 at Rs. 29 lakh per kg to Rs. 98 lakh in 2017 and by 2019 it rose to Rs. 1.50 crore. With such increase in the prices, the attraction of poppy cultivation becomes all the more and by 2015, poppy plantation have become rampant with the acreage slowly increasing. Though Ukhrul District was the major growing area till it gained more popular in the Kuki dominated areas that by 2020 about 20% are in Naga dominated area, the rest being in the former. This percentage change to 90% in Kuki dominated area in 2022-23 season indicating an effort from the Naga community to curb cultivation of poppy.

Among the drugs which are traded from across the border, methamphetamine continues to be the most popular. 'World is Yours' or simply WY tablet is a combination of methamphetamine and caffeine and is very popular in SE Asia. It was known as Ya Ba (mad drug) and formerly as Ya Ma (Horse drug) and still formerly as Ya Khayan (Hard working drug) as it was fed to horses which perform strenuous works. In Manipur, it is known as Y (wai), Angangba (Red), Katha, Prithivi, Maru and WY. The destination of this illicit drug going through Manipur includes Bangladesh where it is known as Baba, Guti, Laal, Khawon, Lopyy and Bichi where it was fed to labourers doing hard labour. From a major seizure of WY tablets in 2019 by the police valued

at about Rs. 400 crores in the international market, including the arrest of a Myanmar national, it is clear that Manipur is a major route for this illicit drug. This seizure indicate the volume of the trade of this drug as generally only about 10% of the illegal contraband are seized by the security agencies.

But the main concern is the trafficking of heroin and the increasing growing of poppy and the local manufacture of heroin from opium. In reply to an unstarred question on 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2023, the Chief Minister of Manipur replied on the floor of the House that 11 categories of illicit drugs were seized the quantity being drug wise—Heroin powder (74.037 kg in 2022/ 11.978 kg in 2003), Brown sugar (499.960 kg/35.404 kg), Opium (495.364kg/49.447kg), WY tablets which has a number of stimulants the main being caffeine and crystal meth (346.184kg/65.934kg), Ganja (928.735kg/107.88kg), ICE crystal/l methamphetamine (9.117kg/nil), N10 tablets (151/1191), SP capsules (34.191kg/200g), Pseudoephedrine (118kg/33kg), Poppy seeds (23kg/2.935kg) and Cough syrups (39,952 bottles/410 bottles). Among these opium and ganja are mainly produced within the state while heroin are either manufactured locally or brought from across the border. The rest are all smuggled from across the border. As the border are not patrolled and loosely guarded, it is easy to cross the border. Drives are conducted on a regular basis to seize illicit contrabands but the seizures are limited as illicit drugs which originated from Manipur were seized in neighbouring states like Nagaland, Assam and Meghalaya. All security agencies were empowered under the NDPS Act to seized illicit drugs and make arrest.

In the same reply, it was also informed that the number of cases registered is 500 in 2022 and 120 in 2023, persons arrested (625/99), in judicial custody (401/73), on bail (224/26) and in fact during 2022 and 2023 a more serious and concerted efforts were made by the state machineries. From 2018 till the time of replying, 217 have been convicted in 636 cases. But those convicted persons were mules or carriers and no kingpins have been convicted due to poor investigation. The conviction rate is still poor with many authorised to seize and make arrest under NDPS Act not very familiar with the processes involved in seizures. Cases of 1986 vintage is still continuing as there were notices of warrants for two cases of 1986 and one of 1990.

Poppy is a Rabi Crop and the work for its cultivation starts sometime in September with the spraying of glyphosate, a systemic herbicide. After the weeds withers, urea and poppy seeds were broadcasts and when the poppy plants started growing, it is thinned and weeded and then a dose of urea applied. By the month of January, flowers start appearing and after the pods are formed, incisions were made from where the opium are collected. The harvest continues for some time.

Most of the cultivators are not the real owner of the opium harvested and these were taken over by cartels which financed the planting and harvesting operations. One kg of opium is reportedly traded at about Rs. 1.00 lakh per kg. By 2018 or so, makeshift labs started converting opium into heroin as it not only increases the value but also reduces the ease of transport as 25 kg of opium can be converted into 1 kg of pure heroin hydrochloride and an investment of say about Rs. 30 lakhs for the raw materials can turn into a return of about Rs. 3.00 crore locally. Using what is known as the lime method, the opium is converted into heroin though two steps with one having three sub-steps. The method is simple and uses easily available chemicals which are difficult to trace or monitor and uses only decantation and filtration. The first step converts opium into morphine base. In the first sub-step of the second step, the morphine is converted into brown heroin base (heroin No. 1). This is converted into white heroin base (heroin No. 2) in the second sub-step. In the third sub-step, it is converted into heroin hydrochloride (heroin No. 4). For peddling, the drug is mixed with inert material like glucose for mainlining and for smoking it is mixed with chalk, zinc oxide *etc.*, and this is called brown sugar (heroin No. 3). The detection and destruction of quite a few makeshift labs increases the concern and the value of the products increases sharply.

In a reply to another Assembly question on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2023, the Chief Minister stated that till date a total of 18,500.6 acres of poppy plantation have been destroyed. From 01 to 17 January 2023, the total area of poppy plantation destroyed was 777 acres. This acreage figure is only for those detected and destroyed and there are even claims that the acreage is about 1,25,000 acres which is an area much higher than the area under cultivation under Khun Sa. Another concern is the expansion of the Golden Triangle

towards the west into India. All the states bordering Myanmar have poppy fields though the acreage in Manipur is the largest. Even assuming that about 75 thousand acre are under cultivation and assuming that the average production is about 10 kg of opium per acre (the yield varies from 5-6 kg to even 25 kg depending on the soil, culture, variety, etc.) the total yield will be about 7.5 lakh kg. Using makeshift labs, when converted to heroin the total annual production will be about 30 thousand kg or 30 MT as 25 kg of raw opium yields about 1 kg of heroin hydrochloride. The value of which will be around Rs. 210,000 crore in the international market and about half in the local market. The trade is however much lower as all opium is not converted into heroin but traded directly as opium and it is reported to sell at Rs. 1 lakh per kg. Thus a conservative estimate of the trade will be about Rs. 70,000 lakh crore per annum.

One major shortfall is the inability to investigate properly to reach to the top echelon of the cartels or to convict those involved. One major reason is that the security agencies permitted to make arrest under the NDPS Act are not fully aware of the strict protocol for making such arrest. Further the inability to use colour test like the marquis Test, Mecke test or the Frochde reagents by the enforcement agencies make them to fail the type of drug apprehended at the time of arrest. These reagents can be easily prepared locally and the resistance to their use can only point to being soft to the cartels.

The first possible impact of illicit drug trade is the increased scope of buying off of law enforcing agencies and the political class. Those who are involved in illicit drug economy become cartels aspiring to join politics. The case of Manipur is evidently moving in to similar direction. These aspirants with their black money in politics may easily win elections too. The second possible impact is the militarisation of the drug operations with drug cartels maintaining private well equipped private armies. In Manipur, the drug cartels are mainly operated by the Kuki-Chin group at the ground level. The present ethnic tension in Manipur can also be read in conjunction with the increasing volume of illicit opium poppy cultivation amongst Kuki-Chin groups. However, the top echelons in the cartel is not confined to a single community. Once sufficient money is generated, the cartels can easily challenge an existing government and even grab power in their favour.

Coming back to the issue of illicit drug consumption pattern, once the raw materials and purified form are produced the trickle-down effect ensures that a fairly large number of the local population becomes addicted. This seems to be happening in Manipur. It is anticipated that with the fear of HIV/AIDS receding due to the ART, mainlining can become more popular despite all government and NGOs efforts. Another impact of opium poppy is on the environment as the cultivation is carried out for only a year and then shifted to a new site. The erosion of the top soil is there but trees normally start to grow in the following season. With poppy cultivation, it is continued year after year at least for three years or more. As a result, the top soil is washed away and in many places, the hard shale layer is exposed and the forest recovery has to come through succession which may take many years.

Another impact is the side effect of glyphosate as in Manipur there was an incident in 2021 where the deleterious effect of large scale spraying of glyphosate were detected in Tengnoupal District where about 6/7 villagers from Khunbi and Langol villages were admitted to the hospitals and were diagnosed to be suffering from peripheral neuropathy. This disease is not contagious and the development of it in a cluster, points to an unknown cause. They were treated and after recovery discharged but unfortunately two died despite the best of efforts of the attending doctors. On enquiry, it was discovered that there are many more cases in the two villages with mild symptoms that do not warrant hospitalisation. When the matter was investigated further, it was suspected to be due to glyphosate ingestion. Information received was that the hill slopes surrounding the villages were sprayed with glyphosate to control the weeds in preparation for sowing poppy. Unfortunately after a few unseasonal showers, the residues were brought down to the springs, the water of which was used for drinking purposes. There are scientific reports that glyphosate causes peripheral neuropathy despite claims to the contrary by Monsanto the manufacturer of Roundup, the best known brand of glyphosate. One positive impact of poppy plantation is the high daily wages, especially for those who are skilled in making the incision and collecting the opium, which is about twice the local wage. Illicit drug trade can change the entire spectrum of the society. However, the problems confronted by contemporary Manipur are largely related to illicit drug consumption and its increased trade. It calls for a concerted mitigation effort, and social and political revamp to do it.

*Review*

# "His Majesty's Headhunters: The Siege of Kohima that Shaped World History" | 8

Reviewed by Wangam Somorjit

## **His Majesty's Headhunters: The Siege of Kohima that Shaped World History**

By Mnhonlumo Kikon

Penguin Random House, India

Pages 193

Year of Publication 2023

### **'THE MAHARAJA AND HIS LONG-HAIRED WARRIORS': A CHAPTER REVIEW**

(Kohima-man): (From) far -off (in the) South water came flooding down  
(and) did take all in its centre.  
You Manipuris may be jealous

(Manipuri): I (am) not jealous (but) heaven (and) earth murmur.  
(Kohima-man): With elephants (and) horse (you) cut  
water (-canals) around your state.  
Even underneath an irremovable stone in the river, how  
deep-rooted it may be, water (will) percolate. If (you)  
had been wood, (you) would be rooted (long ago), (you  
have) turned into a stone laying on a hilltop (and) that  
one may be famous.

The song of the war between Manipuris and Kohima-people.<sup>1</sup>

The current review is a selective attempt because it is not a review of the entire book but a review of a chapter in the book. The select chapter is being reviewed for the pertinence it continues to have till date. The chapter sheds light on an epochal moment of two states whose destiny of being neighbours is geography permanent. The above quoted passage of the 'song of war' narrates the manner in which conflicts of past in between the Kohima people and the Manipuris by using descriptive metaphorical language. The first line 'water coming from the far-off South, flooding the centre and taking everything' symbolises an invasion. The Manipuris are addressed as if they might be envious and resentful. In the lyrics, the Manipuri denies of being jealous but claims that there was a disturbance or disquiet in heaven and earth. A relatively complete explanation of the above Southern Angami song documented in the book 'Lieder aus den Naga-Bergen (Assam)' by Kauffmann, Hans-Eberhard, and Marius Schneider is as follows,

about 1833, the Raja of Manipur fell with a strong army upon Kohima, burned the village and killed the majority of its inhabitants. In the little public garden of Kohima there is still a monolith put up by the Manipuris, showing the footprints of the victorious raja. When the Manipur-army approached, the Angamis of Kohima were not afraid thinking their enemies who had long hair to be women and their guns a kind of sticks to fight with... So proudly looking forward to get many heads they asked their women and children to save meanwhile every feather in the village to have enough signs of victory for every head. Instead of this, the Manipuris held a dreadful butchery amongst them and only a few had a narrow escape into the jungle... In the song the Kohima-singer ironically alludes to the Manipuri's far going away from their country (chaso = the country in the South of the Angamis) to attack peaceful people and to their superior equipment, for which reason the Angamis cannot be blamed to have been defeated by an enemy famous like a big stone on a hilltop...Heaven and earth murmurs' is a metaphor to symbolize the strength and pride of the Manipuris, who used elephants and horses for heavy transport-work when building fortifications.

The chapter, entitled *The Maharaja and His Long-Haired Warriors*, from the book *'His Majesty's Headhunters: The Siege of Kohima that Shaped World History'* written by Mmhonlumo Kikon and published by Penguin in 2023 explores into the historical account of Raja Gambhir Singh's conquest of the Angami Naga Hills, specifically focusing on the events surrounding the Kohima campaign. The narrative provides a detailed examination of the circumstances, motivations, and consequences of Gambhir Singh's military exploits in the Naga Hills. *'The Maharaja and His Long-Haired Warriors'* offers comprehensive exploration of a historical event, weaving together the personal ambitions of Raja Gambhir Singh, the geopolitical strategies of the time, and the enduring legacy of the conquest of the Naga Hills. The narrative, while occasionally unsettling, provides valuable insights into the complexities of colonial-era interactions and their lasting repercussions on the region. The chapter begins with a vivid description of a sculptured stone in Kohima, acknowledged as a commemoration of the Kohima campaign. The stone, initially revered by Manipuris as a divine symbol, has become vulnerable to soil erosion in the recent times. The narrative then unfolds the history of Kohima, transforming from a village with a stone pillar to a city on a hill top, now enveloped in clouds when schoolchildren fill the air with laughter. The stone pillar, originally erected by Raja Gambhir Singh in 1833, symbolizes his ambitions and perceived the strategic importance of the area from Manipur's viewpoint, more so after the Anglo-Burmese wars.

In discussing the erection of the Kohima inscription stone, it is relevant to refer to the detailed accounts found in the royal chronicle of Manipur, known as the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* notes,

... Sunday, the new moon day (20 January 1833 CE), Yisimee, Yichenmee, Likiphimee, and Upungkhokmee, these four clusters of villages came and presented four hundred cattle as their tributes... on the first day of the month Phairen (21 January 1833 CE), Khipungmee (Kohima) was scattered and seven people were captured alive in battle. Many Haos dies. They stayed one month in that village. Thursday, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Phairen (24 January), (people of) Upithonmee came and presented one hundred cattle as a tribute. The king's nephew Sanayaima Jaibir

Singh, the yuvaraj left Khipumee for Tekhao (Assam). Tuesday, the 8<sup>th</sup> (29 January), Khipumee came and presented one hundred cattle as tribute so that they might be allowed to enter their village. Wednesday, the 9<sup>th</sup> (30 January 1833 CE), two clusters of villages of Ngamei Khunou and Khunlen, and two clusters of villages of Ngakhunou Khunlen, these four villages came and presented four hundred cattle and one ivory tusk as their tribute. After this, they came and presented one hundred baskets of sesame seeds and made a request that they might pay their tributes with one hundred baskets each of sesame seeds. Thursday, the 25<sup>th</sup> (10 February 1833 CE), Shri Meetingu Chinglen Nongdren Khomba Maharaj (Gambhir Singh) had carvings made on Khunta and Namnga, these two stones, by the bank of the pool of water spring at Khipumee. On the Khutha stone the footprints were carved, and on the Namnga stone, the figures of Nongsa (leogryph) and mithun were also carved. (When the carving was completed) Shri Maharaja celebrated Nunghongba (the dedication of stones), with all the Hao villages, with a feast in which (the meat) of one buffalo, two goats and one hundred pigs were served. On that day, the villages of Meramechamee, Tonnoichamee, Pitthemee Khunou, Wutawasamee, Wahame, and Khisamee, these six clusters of Hao villages, presented nine hundred cattles as their tributes... 2 Thursday, (21 February) Shri Jaibir Singh the Jubraj returned from Tekhao. 13 Monday, (4 March 1933 CE) Meetingu Chinglen Nongtren Khompa Maharaj (Gambhir Singh) returned at the palace at Langthabal. <sup>2</sup>

The author then navigates through the complex geopolitical landscape of the time, highlighting Gambhir Singh's astuteness and bravery in aligning with the East India Company (EIC) to achieve his goals. The chapter outlines the intricate relationship between Manipur, the EIC, and Burma, shedding light on the power dynamics and strategic considerations that shaped Gambhir Singh's decisions. The narrative takes a darker turn as it explores the consequences of Gambhir Singh's conquest, revealing the harsh realities faced by the Angami Naga villages. The author touches on the brutal tactics employed during the Kohima campaign, including the use of firearms that struck fear into

the hearts of the Naga warriors. The chapter also hints at the potential cruelty within Gambhir Singh's forces, reflecting the tragic stories of valour and conquest in the region's history.

It could be argued that the depiction of pain and a dire situation is not limited to the Kohima incident alone. In Manipur, Gambhir Singh also expressed remorse to his ministers and subjects for the numerous wars he had waged in the efforts to rebuild Manipur after the Burmese genocide (1819-1826). The palace record titled 'Gambhir Singh Nongaba' (dated c. 1839) documents Gambhir Singh's words as follows,

my esteemed noblemen, who are involved in the administration of my kingdom, throughout my reign, we faced numerous challenging days repeatedly. I urge you not to harbour resentment for this. As the king, my aspiration is to rejuvenate Manipur. All the respected elders of our nation have endured hardships. The women who remained in their homes during the wars were diligently preparing rice, salt, and fish for war provisions, preventing them from engaging in their daily business. Consequently, a significant portion of my subject is struggling with scarcity in both food and clothing. Manipur now resembles a lifeless, barren tree. I implore you not to harbour anger toward me for these circumstances.

Gambhir Singh's ambitious expeditions, including the desire to expand his sway over the hills without interference, and 'his vision of the permanent conquest of the Naga hills', along with the subsequent cession of the Kabaw Valley to Burma, reveals the intricate negotiation and compromise that were made in the pursuit of geopolitical compulsions. The author, Mnhonlumo Kikon, provides a nuanced understanding of the political landscape, emphasising to re-narrate the dual roles played by Gambhir Singh—as a conqueror and as a collaborator. The chapter concludes by acknowledging the enduring impact of Gambhir Singh's conquest of Kohima and its 'subjects'-in the parlance of Manipur. The author hints at the long-lasting consequences as the captives

were integrated into Meitei society, yet the descendants of those 'captives' proving to be difficult to trace.

## **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> See Kauffmann, Hans-Eberhard, and Marius Schneider. 1960. "Lieder aus den Naga-Bergen (Assam)". Extrait d'*Ethnomusicologie* II (Colloques de Wégimont). Liège: Michiels.

<sup>2</sup> See Paratt, Saroj Nalini Arambam. 2009. *The Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur*, vol. 2, 2009, pp. 106-7. Common era date from Rajkumar Somorjit, *The Chronology of Meitei Monarchs* (Imphal, 2010), pp. 285-6.

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2. **Journal Article** – T: (Smith 1998, 639); R: Smith, John Maynard. 1998. The Origin of altruism. *Nature*, 393: 639–40.
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