



The contentious space of civil society: The case of United Committee Manipur (UCM) and United Naga Council (UNC)

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Abstract

Classical works of Civil Society conceptualize it as a space comprising voluntary associations, in relation to or against the state, where individuals develop/promote/advance/speak the language of liberal principles of rights and justice. Across the world, however, civil society becomes the space for curating and achieving diverse and often competing needs and aspirations of different ethnic communities. But the question is how the space of civil society comes in relation to the context of ethnicity and becomes an integral driving in the functioning of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). The paper examines the conflict-affected, multi-ethnic state of Manipur (in Northeastern India) where different ethnic groups form civil society organizations as a mechanism to react against the state. The study elaborates on the two major civil society organizations in Manipur: United Committee Manipur (UCM) and United Naga Council (UNC) in association with the context of formation of the organization and the Ethnic tension between the Meiteis and the Nagas. The study employs an interview method and an analysis of secondary resources available for the formation of the organization and the contentious nature between the Meitei and the Naga following the issue for the extension of cease-fire agreement between the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM) and the Government of India (GOI) in June 2001.

Keywords: Civil Society, Ethnic identity, Civil Society Organizations, Meitei, Naga

1. Introduction

In a multi-ethnic state, the presence of different needs and aspirations between different ethnicities are diversified and these diversified needs force different ethnicities to form civil society organizations with different goals which are often used as a mechanism to react against the state. It plays a crucial role in upholding the political interest of the ethnic community they represent. In this regard, the various civil societies that are present in Manipur are driven by the norms and values of Ethnicity. The absence of mutual trust among different ethnic groups leads to a “trust deficit” among the various groups. Such trust deficit is reflected in the activities of civil society organisations. And, ethnic groups use civil society as a tool to promote ethnic interests. Several incidents of ethnic tensions have risen in Manipur starting from the ethnic conflicts between Kuki and Naga in 1993, Kuki and Paite in 1997, and conflict between the Meitei and Kuki in 2023. The concern of analysis in this paper is the tension between Meitei and Naga following the issue for the extension of the cease-fire agreement in 2001 which was signed between the Government of India and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland- Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM)^[1] and the involvement of United Committee Manipur (UCM) and United Naga Council (UNC) in the related incident after the Agreement.

¹ National Socialist Council of Nagaland- Isak Muivah (NSCN- IM) is a faction of the underground insurgent group National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) which is based in the Nagaland State (India). It was split in 1988. The other faction is NSCN (K) or Khaplang group.

2. The Concept of Civil Society

Civil society is a very complex institution in modern a democratic society. It has an undeniable attachment to the state, economy and social relations prevailing in society. There is a plethora of understanding of civil society with different historical conjunctures and initially, it develops its understanding in response to the liberal-democratic tradition of Western philosophical thoughts which challenge the absolute power of the monarch. It is endowed with different definitions and meanings and over time changes them according to the historical and social conditions of the society per the understanding of many social thinkers varied through the historical timeline. At first, it is a site of human ties which work against the despotic nature and sovereignty of the monarch that entails the establishment of the modern democratic state and it is seen as a necessary element of the state but overtime civil society changes its meaning and to a form of associative life which is an autonomous sphere from the state power, to a space of political mobilisation and discourse which challenges the power of the state and enjoy certain rights provided by the state. Much of the genealogical work of civil society lies in the Western political philosophy given by Hobbes, Locke, Hegel, Marx, Gramsci and so on. Civil society in the West developed as a space to separate itself from the state, market or family and mediate into the individual rights to participate in the discursive reality through the bourgeoisie public sphere (Jurgen Habermas, 1962) or a site to create a social capital (Michael Walzer, 1991 and Robert Putnam, 2000).

3. The Context of Civil Society in India

The Western concept of civil society falls on the liberal concept of civil society which presupposes how individuals manifest and experience it at the expense of individual's moral challenges in life disvalues the idea of ascriptive group membership as it will freeze associations and provide less freedom to the individuals in group affiliation in concern with civil society (Rosenblum, 1994). However, it is different in the case of India where civil society becomes the site of mobilization for the groups' identity in the form of movements.

Non-western nation states contradict the logic of the Western desire for individual equality and liberties in the realm of civil society, as well as the explication of nation-states as a homogeneous category. And, given the society's heterogeneous and hierarchical nature, the presence of multiple organized groups and communities in India confining to family, kinship, caste, religion, or more or less a group's identity, and the movements and assertion of a group's identity, form the domain of civil society in India (Oomen, 2001).

Popular mobilization within Indian civil society was visible already during the colonial period, although the establishment of both the state and civil society in India differed from that of Western Europe (Khilnani and Kviraj, 2001). While the modern state develops together with the civil society in the West over a long span of years for a stronger and more efficient form of civil society, the civil

society in the non-western region develops through strong religious and traditional power structures which serves a mean to develop an alternate power structure in civil society (Ali, 2001). It is also viewed as an intermediate space constituted by the existence of primordial groups, traditional institutions such as religion and sect, caste and jati, language and dialect, and ethnicity, all of which have served in the articulation and expression of sectional/group interests (Jayaram, 2005, p. 26). Similarly, Berglund (2009) argues that associations in the third world may not adhere to the liberal tradition's paradigm, but they play an important role in mobilizing citizens against the oppressive nature of the state, and such associations are primarily perceived on the basis of race or ethnicity, because in third-world countries, the fight against prevalent injustices is frequently seen along racial or ethnic lines (p. 16).

David Gellner in his edited book on "*Ethnic Activism and Civil Society in South Asia (2018)*", argues that civil society is studied as a notion of the "third sector" but for this third sector to exist, there should be the first and the second sector which are the state or rather politics and the market and these spaces need to be demarcated. He (2009) conceptualized civil society in the case of South Asia as a form of or a kind of civic activism which is mostly in the form of "ethnonationalist" or "communal sort" and civic activism is a form of ethnic activism (p. 10).

Therefore, the conceptualization of civil society is explained based on different groups' identities that are concerned with nationalism, religious movements, environment movements, caste, ethnic groups, etc. in India. Moreover, in the functioning of civil society in the north-eastern region of India particularly in Manipur, there are an enormous number of civil society organizations which operate as a site for identity mobilization in the state. This paper will discuss the linkage between civil society and ethnicity in the issues dealt with by two of the major civil society organizations in Manipur which are regarded as an apex body.

4. United Committee Manipur (UCM) and its objective of "territorial integrity" in Manipur

The United Committee Manipur (UCM), is a people's organization and it is one of the most proactive Civil Society Organizations of Manipur. UCM is an apex umbrella organization constituted by various leading CSOs ^[2] of Manipur who are working selflessly to restore the Economic, Social, Cultural, Political and Emotional Integrity of the state. The formation of UCM was related with the cease fire agreement signed between NSCN and GOI for the inclusion of "without territorial limits" in the agreement. With the issue of the joint statement on June 14, 2001 by the representative of India K. Padmanabhaiah and Th. Muivah, the General Secretary of NSCN, a burst in the Imphal valley was sighted. There were sounds of explosions of tear gases, police firing bullet rounds, and loud noise of masses agitating against the MLAs of Manipur and those furious masses burned down the Assembly complex and offices. It was a huge roar that children essentializing those noises seemed worried, tensed and shocked by the wave it produced ^[3]. After the incident,

² The CSOs which constituted the apex body of UCM at the time of its formation are All Manipur Kanba Ima Lup (AMKIL), All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU), International Peace and Social Advancement IPSA, National Identity Protection Committee (NIPCO) and United Peoples' Front (UPF).

³ This is a collection of my memory of the 18th of June, 2001, I still remember the traumatic night filled with loud noises of blasts all over the Imphal city.

several deaths were lead to the loss of 16 previous lives. The reason which led to this mass “spontaneous”^[4] mobilization of the masses. The outcome was disastrous and the context of a five-point cease-fire agreement signed between the Government of India (GOI) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) on 14th June 2001 in Bangkok, Thailand was agreed upon on 25th July 1997 and released a statement on the same day by the Chairman of NSCN stating:

“For securing a peaceful political solution, discussion has been held between the Government of India and the NSCN leadership. It has been mutually decided to cease fire for a period of three (3) months with effect from 1st August 1997 and embark upon political level discussions”
(South Asian Terrorism Portal, July 25, 1997)

It was finalized on 12th December 1997 with Agreed Ground Rules valid till 31.07.2001 to make a proper effective and conducive environment for the peaceful and meaningful dialogue between the representative of India and NSCN. There was no statement from the Government of India (GOI) after and as the agreement was going to be expired, NSCN issued a statement on May 7, 2001, giving GOI only 14 days to have a meeting with them and review the ceasefire. The GOI and NSCN agreed upon a five-point cease-fire agreement and published a joint statement on June 14, 2001 for extension of the cease-fire.^[5] UCM was an organization consolidated for the movement against the addition of “without territorial limit” in the cease-fire agreement between NSCN-IM and GOI. After its consolidation, it is grounded as a CSO with Peace, Unity and Integrity (to protect and preserve the territorial integrity of Manipur)^[6] as its motto, to safeguard and protect the wholesome integrity of Manipur respecting one’s another distinctive cultural identities and unity among its ethnic communities.^[7]

UCM’s principal activity is to protect Manipur’s territorial integrity, and it focuses on Naga peace talks with the GOI. UCM believes that by establishing a deadline for the disputed Naga Peace Talks to sign the final deal, the state of Manipur must evaluate its position in relation to any settlement that may be achieved between the GOI and the NSCN Groups of NNPG and NSCN (IM). It is a call to the state’s elected representatives to take a firm stance at this critical juncture. Following that, UCM has been a vigilant guardian of Manipur’s territorial integrity, focusing on any incidences that threaten Manipur’s territorial boundary. UCM planned a big march in Imphal City on October 31, 2018, in response to the Framework Agreement between the GOI and the NSCN-IM. Another significant project of UCM is to explore border and fencing issues along the Indo-Myanmar border, particularly in the Kwatha region of Tengnoupal District. They have been inspecting the position of the border pillars between Manipur and Myanmar, and they have urged the government to rectify the border issues (Imphal Free Press, August 27, 2021).

⁴ Most of the office bearers of UCM that I have interviewed describe the June 18, 2001 incident as a spontaneous move of the citizens.

⁵ Manipur Fact File 2001: Against Cease Fire Extension, Compiled by All Manipur Teachers’ Association, 2001

⁶ Article 3, Constitution of UCM

⁷ Article 8, Constitution of UCM

5. United Naga Council (UNC) and its representation of Naga Identity

The United Naga Council (UNC) is the leading Naga group in Manipur, pushing for Naga unity. Naga integration includes specifically the removal of all arbitrary boundaries imposed by the governments of British-India, Burma, and India without the Naga people’s free and informed agreement.^[8] In view of this Naga integration UNC has been a forerunner in the state of Manipur in solidifying and mobilizing Naga people for their greater cause. With a motto “Forward with Unity”.^[9] The objective is the Unity of all Naga tribes and support for the Naga Integration Movement. To one of the prominent leaders of UNC, “There were many confrontations in Manipur in places like Tamenglong, Chandel, Senapati and Ukhrul districts over land, identity, history, and political rights among different ethnic groups in Manipur. Apart from the inter-ethnic confrontations, there were always threats from India and state forces. UNC is an organization to protect the Naga people from these confrontations and threats. The UNC has classified Anal, Chiru, Chothe, Kharam, Koireng, Lamkang, Mao, Maram, Maring, Monsang, Moyon, Poumai, Puimei, Tangkhul, Tarao, Khoibu, Aimol, Thangal, and Zeliangrong (which is now classified as Rongmei, Liangmei, and Zeme) as Naga identity tribes”.^[10] Similarly, another member of UNC, told that “Naga is a minority compared to Meitei, in order to voice out for Naga people and their aspirations, the formation of UNC is crucial”^[11] From the responses to the two interviews, we can sense that UNC was crystallised and formed in the early 1990s as a necessary civil society organization to protect the Naga identity and the tribes under the identity. Since then, UNC has been a vanguard for protecting the Naga identity and its integration of Naga areas.

UNC has been a forerunner in support of Indo-Naga peace talks without the territorial limits. In support of the Indo-Naga peace agreement “without the territorial limit”, the organization along with other Naga civil society organizations submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister stating:

“We, the undersigned Naga apex organizations in Manipur including The United Naga Council (UNC), Naga Women’s Union, Manipur (NWUM) and All Naga Students’ Association, Manipur (ANSAM) hail the extension of Indo-Naga Cease-fire for another year starting August 1, 2001, without any territorial limits. We also appreciate the political will of both parties to embark on a journey for bringing about a lasting political solution to the Indo-Naga issue” (South Asian Terrorism Portal, June 22, 2001).

Therefore, UNC represents the Naga tribes in Manipur and it is regarded as the apex body of the Nagas in Manipur. The activities of UNC have been the protection of Naga identity and support of the Naga integration movement.

⁸ White Paper on Naga Integration, Compiled by Naga Hoho, January 2022, p. 64

⁹ Cover Page of the constitution of UNC

¹⁰ Milan Shimray, Vice President of UNC, personal communication, October 20, 2020

¹¹ S. Kho John, personal communication, May 23, 2022

6. Discussion

The contentious politics between the Meitei and the Naga regarding the cease-fire agreement in 2001 created an incident of violence and uprisings in the Imphal valley which resulted in the loss of lives. The incident is still commemorated by United Committee Manipur (UCM) and All Manipur United Clubs Organizations (AMUCO) as the Great June Uprising, Unity Day every year on June 18th. In context to the commemoration of June 18, UCM has been demanding to declare it as a state holiday in 2005 but UNC was provoked by such demand and imposed a 52-day economic blockade on the national highways. And speaking of it, Joychandra Konthoujam, President of UCM raised this demand in the observation of June 18, 2021 and 2022. ^[12]

The remembrance and observation of a day important to a particular ethnic group often create a fault line between the communities in Manipur. Regarding this, Angomcha Bimol Akoijam writes "Manipur is a state with a fractured society and/or polity. And its fault lines are many. Even a day like 18 June carries that signature of those fault lines" (Morung Express, June 21, 2018). In continuation of the discussion, UNC was the main civil society organization which worked for the integration of the Naga people in all Naga inhabitant areas and was in full support of the extension of the cease fire agreement of 2001. However, the uprisings created a mass mobilization of the people inhabitants in the valley regions and formed UCM. We know from the nomenclature of the organization itself that UNC is an association for the Naga ethnic group but when we see, UCM, the members of UCM do not claim it to be a Meitei-based organization but rather they would engage in the inclusive and accommodative nature of the organization stating that UCM is open to all the citizens of Manipur irrespective of the ethnic communities. Such nature of UCM provides a critical space for possible inter-ethnic interface. ^[13] Although, it provides a critical space for an ethnic interface, to others it is Meitei-based and functions according to the Meitei interests. ^[14]

7. Conclusion: Contentious space of Civil Society on Ethnic parlance

The two organizations act as a vanguard of specific communities based on certain objectives. These organizations are a space for negotiation with the state on certain ethnically bounded issues. The basis of association in the organization is by default a particular ethnic identity. Although, UCM tries to build the pan Manipuri form of association claiming to provide an accommodative space; its working, functions or activities are very limited in the hill Districts of Manipur where civil society organizations based on tribal identity like the Naga are prevalent in nature. There is an undeniable relationship between civil society organizations in Manipur and ethnic identity. The ideology or the agenda set by the organizations is mainly for the protection of their ethnic community based on the primordial features or through ancestral blood. There is no room to deny the fact that there is a co-terminus relation between Ethnic identity and Civil society organizations and that the space of civil society is considerably affirming or producing the notion of ethnic identity.

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¹² Joychandra Konthoujam, personal communication, May 20, 2022

¹³ Noni Arambam, personal communication, April 20, 2022

¹⁴ Jangkhomang Guite, personal communication, April 21, 2022