

India's Act East Policy and Inter-Ethnic Conflicts in Indo-Myanmar Border Town, Moreh in Manipur

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Abstract: *The formulation and implementation of India's Look East Policy (Now Act East Policy) in the 1990s by the Government of India led to conflict and contestation between ethnicity-based militant organisations for domination and control of Moreh and its business activities, causing violent inter-ethnic conflicts. For instance, violent conflicts occurred between the Kuki-Naga, Kuki-Tamil, and Kuki-Meitei in the town (Moreh) in different periods, which not only resulted in the loss of lives and properties but also affected the proper functioning of border trade or India's (Look) Act East Policy. The frequent imposition of bandh, strikes, and economic blockades along the national highway as a sign of grievance reprisal have disrupted the smooth functioning of border trade between India and Myanmar or India's Act East. The author used primary and secondary sources, conducted the field survey from January to June 2019, and interviewed leaders of Civil Society Organisations and other relevant individuals for the studies. The data has been qualitatively analysed to understand the problems of India's Act East Policy due to the presence and operation of various ethnicity-based militant organisations in the border region. It also argues the importance of solving the militancy problems for the smooth functioning of India's (Look) Act East Policy.*

Keywords: Act East Policy, Conflict, Kukis, Meiteis, Moreh, Nagas

INTRODUCTION

Inter-ethnic conflicts have become a worldwide phenomenon. The term 'ethnicity' has become one of the most debated concepts in contemporary academic discourses in the social sciences discipline. After the end of the Cold War, ethnic mobilization has been used to attain political gain, economic equality, educational opportunity, civil rights, status, etc. According to Donald Horowitz (1985, pp. 41-54), all conflicts based on the ascriptive group such as identities, race, language, caste or tribe, and religion can be called 'ethnic'. To quote Paul Brass (1991, p. 10) 'Ethnicity is the subjective, symbolic or emblematic use by a group of people of any aspect of culture to create internal cohesion and differentiate themselves from other groups.' Even though it is difficult to unearth a universally acceptable definition of the term ethnic conceptually, it generally refers to a group of people with a distinctive racial, national, religious, linguistic, and cultural heritage. In a system of ethnic stratification in which one ethnic group is dominant over the other, some members from one ethnic group may attempt to move into the economic niches occupied by the rival ethnic groups and if they fail to do so, they are likely to protest against the system of ethnic stratification as a whole and attempt to mobilize the ethnic group. On the other hand, the privileged group may mobilize to defend its interest and may also use ethnic sentiments in doing so (Brass, 1991, p. 47). Such mobilization and counter-mobilization may lead to ethnic conflicts. Ethnic groups that use ethnicity to make demands in the political arena for alteration in their status, their economic well-being, their civil rights, or in their educational opportunities are engaged in a form of interest group politics which seeks to improve the well-being of group members as individuals and at later, a conflict situation tends to arise (Brass, 1991, pp. 19-20). In the campaign for the protection and promotion of ethnic identity, there are several problems, like ethnic demands, ethnic competition, etc., which cause a violent conflict between ethnic groups (Brass, 1991, pp. 84-90).

The term 'conflict' connotes a situation in which there are opposing ideas, opinions, feelings or wishes leading to contestation between two or more opposing ethnic groups. Therefore, conflict refers to a dispute between contending groups who identify themselves primarily based on their collective rights (Henderson, 1999, p. 72). The conflict between different ethnic groups may sometimes result in violence. Social scientists do not give a proper distinction or boundary between ethnic conflict and ethnic violence. The term 'violence' is generally conceptualized as a 'degree of conflict rather than as a form of conflict, or indeed as a form of social or political action in its own right' (Laitin, 1998, p. 425). Ethnic conflict in its extreme form is characterized by large-scale violence, widespread insurgency, and extensive civil war, causing death, decay, destruction, misery, and suffering (Rastogi, 1993, p. 6). A prolonged

continuation of such a situation may seriously weaken and disturb the social order, leading to its political-economic disintegration (Rastogi, 1993).

Manipur, one of the states in Northeast India, is inhabited by different ethnic communities, namely, Meiteis, Kukis, Nagas and Manipuri Muslims (Pangals), etc. Since, the attainment of Statehood, there have been many issues and demands raised by various communities for preserving their socio-economic and political interests which in turn led to the formation of different ethnicity-based militant organizations vying for a different level of autonomy, ranging from autonomous councils to redrawing of state boundaries to create new states (Haokip, 2013, p. 251). Moreh is the commercial capital of Manipur and India's Gateway to South and Southeast Asia. The town (Moreh) plays a crucial role in the India- Myanmar trade relationship and India's Look/ Act East Policy. Tamu (Myanmar) is located on the other side of Moreh, where a commercial point of Myanmar is also expanding. The north-eastern states of India in general and Manipur in particular have depended on various commodities imported from Myanmar through the border town of Moreh. For instance, the major import items through Moreh include electronic goods, blankets, shoes, clothes, cosmetics, decorative pieces, eatable items, etc. and the major exports are steel bars and rods, engineering goods, soybean meal, meat and meat products, cement, chemicals, etc. Smuggling of arms and ammunition, narcotics, and other contraband drugs from Myanmar (Burma) along the Highway has been taking place (Singh, 2009, p. 503). Due to its strategic location, there has been rivalry and competition between different ethnicity-based militant organizations (Naga, Kuki, and Meitei) to control trade and business lines, resulting in conflicts between different ethnic communities from the 1990s.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The functioning of border trade between India and Myanmar under India's Look East Policy (LEP hereafter) has been disturbed by the conflicts and contestations between different ethnicity-based militant organizations, resulting in violent interethnic conflicts, kidnapping of traders, bandhs, blockades, and strikes along the National Highway (NH-2). For instance, the contestation for domination and control of Moreh during the 1990s between the militant groups Kuki National Army (KNA hereafter) and National Socialist Council of Nagalim, Issak-Muivah (NSCN-IM hereafter) led to the Kuki-Naga violent conflict in the 1990s. Moreover, after the 2000s, the contestation continued between Meitei militant groups United National Liberation Front (UNLF hereafter) & Peoples Liberation Army (PLA hereafter), and KNA for its domination and control resulting in blockades, strikes, and bandhs along the Highway and the killing of civilians from both communities. In light of these, the paper discusses the interethnic conflicts in Moreh and argues that the contestations and operations of various ethnic militant groups are largely responsible for interethnic conflicts, which also directly affect the proper implementation of India's border trade or India's Act East Policy (AEP hereafter).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Lakhan Mehrotra (2012) in his article "India's Look East Policy: Its Origin and Development", analyzed the phases of the development of LEP, which is meant to connect India more firmly to South East Asia, East Asia and Asia Pacific region and build bridges to them through India's north-eastern states.

Thongkhohal Haokip (2015), in his article "India's Look East Policy: Prospects and Challenges for Northeast India", discusses the evolution and growth of the India Act East Policy. The article emphasizes the importance of shifting India's perspective due to the changing international scenario during the 1990s.

Munmun Majumdar (2020), in her article "India-Myanmar Border Fencing and India's Act East Policy", critically analysed the problems faced by the borderland communities due to Indo-Myanmar border fencing along the Manipur-Myanmar border. She also emphasises the impact of AEP on the socio-cultural and economic activities of the borderland communities. The article concluded by critically assessing the importance of the participation of borderland communities for the successful implementation of India's Look/Act East Policy.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on the data collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of Personal interviews of the leaders of CSOs, Press releases, Memorandum, leaflets, and other relevant documents of the civil society organizations (CSOs) of Moreh viz., Hill Tribal Council Moreh (HTC), Meitei Council Moreh (MCM), Tamil Sangam Moreh and Manipuri Muslim Council Moreh (MMCM), etc. The author conducted a field survey and interviewed leaders of CSOs from January to May 2019. The secondary sources consist of newspapers and articles from various academic journals. The data collected from both primary and secondary sources are qualitatively analysed to understand the causes of inter-ethnic conflicts in Moreh, which affect the smooth functioning of the Indo-Myanmar border trade or India's LEP/AEP.

A total of 16 leaders from these organizations were contacted, and 12 agreed to participate in in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted during a field survey from January to May 2019. The interviews were designed to gather insights into the causes and effects of inter-ethnic conflicts and their impact on the Indo-Myanmar border trade. The secondary sources consist of newspapers and articles from various academic journals related to the study.

The data collected from both primary and secondary sources were qualitatively analyzed to understand the complex dynamics of inter-ethnic conflicts in Moreh and their implications for the normal functioning of the Indo-Myanmar border trade and India's Look East Policy (LEP)/Act East Policy (AEP).

ETHNIC GROUPS IN MOREH

Moreh, a town on the Indo-Myanmar border, is located in the hilly district of Tengnoupal in the south-eastern part of Manipur. Since the 1990s, there has been an increase in the population for trading purposes. According to the 2011 Census, the population of the town is 16847 (8670 male & 8177 female), of which Schedule Tribe constituted 56.24 per cent, General constituted 43.51 per cent, and Schedule Caste constituted 0.24 per cent of the total population (Moreh Small Town City Population Census 2011-2025). It is a cosmopolitan town inhabited by different ethnic communities, viz., Kuki, Meitei, Tamil, Manipuri Muslim (Meitei Pangal), Nepali, Bihari, Marwari, Punjabi, Bengali, etc. The town is divided into nine (9) wards subdivided into many localities (Veng or leikais). Among the different ethnic communities, the schedule tribe (Kuki-Chin ethnic groups) constitutes the largest population, with 56.24 percent of the

total population. In comparison, the general caste constitutes 43.51 percent of the total population. The major ethnicity-based CSOs of the town are the Hill Tribal Council Moreh (HTC), Meitei Council Moreh (MCM), Manipuri Muslim Council Moreh (MMCM), Tamil Sangam Moreh, Gorkha Samaj Samiti, etc.

LOOK/ACT EAST POLICY, MILITANCY, AND INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN MOREH

The evolution of India's Look (Act) East Policy can be traced back to the changing international system in the early 1990s. India's articulation of its LEP, which emphasises the importance of the economic dimension, especially in its relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, has been greatly influenced by the end of the Cold War and the ensuing reforms in India's economic and foreign policies (Majumdar, 2020, p. 61). The Government of India under Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao formulated LEP to link India's landlocked north-eastern states with the ASEAN nations' economies. The policy focuses on the ASEAN and its member countries, particularly Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, and Myanmar (Burma) (India's Look East Policy, November 2010). The north-eastern states of India make up 8 percent of the nation's landmass and border five other nations: Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Nepal, along a total of 5400 kilometres. Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram in north-eastern India border the states of Kachin, Sagaing, and Chin in Myanmar along a lengthy land border. Manipur alone shares a 398 km long international boundary with Myanmar in the east. Therefore, Myanmar (Burma), being the only ASEAN country that offers a land bridge for India's north-eastern states to connect with ASEAN nations, became a crucial part of LEP, opening the door to economic prospects for north-eastern states for trade and investment with ASEAN countries (Majumdar, 2020).

The formal trade between India and Myanmar began after the signing of the trade agreement on 31 January 1994. This agreement states that border trade must go via the designated Land Custom Stations (LCS), which are Moreh in Manipur and Tamu in Myanmar, Zokhawthar in Mizoram and Rih in Myanmar, and any additional locations that may be made known by mutual agreement between the two nations (Haokip, 2015, p. 204). However, trade between India and Myanmar was first initiated in April 1995 through the Moreh LCS. The signing of the trade agreement between the two also resulted in the growth of formal border trade at Moreh (Manipur) and Namphalong (Myanmar). For example, the Namphalong Market near Moreh is available with a variety of goods from third-world countries like Korea, China, Thailand, and Southeast Asian countries that supply the chain of markets in India. The items sold in the Namphalong market include electronic goods, blankets, shoes, clothes, cosmetics, decorative pieces, eatable items, etc. These popular goods in Manipur are also sold at a beautiful and affordable price.

In 1997, Myanmar became a member of ASEAN, which has been followed by development in the India-Myanmar relationship in the area of bilateral trade, the opening of economies to South Asian countries, and national security measures. As a gesture of infrastructural investment and bilateral relationship, the Government of India has built the India-Myanmar Friendship Road (160 km) connecting Moreh and Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo in Myanmar's western

border with India (Subramanian, 2018). It also aimed at promoting cross-border trade between India and Myanmar, which is instrumental in contributing to the overall socio-economic development of the region. In 2014, after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced in public the upgrading of LEP to a more action-oriented Act East Policy (AEP) at the 12th ASEAN Summit in November 2014 in Myanmar (Sasi, 2014). However, cross-border trade at Moreh has suffered because of various social and political problems. Inter-Ethnic conflict fuelled by various ethnicity-based militant organisations, which leads to violent inter-ethnic conflicts, bandhs, economic blockades, and strikes along the National Highway, has affected the smooth functioning of the Border trade between India and Myanmar (Burma).

In the initial formulation of India's LEP in the 1990s, the contestation between KNA and NSCN-IM took place to capture or occupy Moreh and control trade and commerce, which caused a major setback to the progress of the border trade. The contestation and hostilities between them were also among the factors responsible for the KukiNaga violent conflicts in all the hill districts of Manipur, which had also spread to neighboring states (Nagaland and Assam) in the northeast. The conflict between them not only led to the loss of many lives and properties from both communities but also affected the trade relations between India and Myanmar.

In 1995, the continued rivalry between the NSCN-IM and KNA also resulted in a violent conflict between Kukis and Tamils in June 1995 (Personal Communication, February 10, 2019). On 2nd June 1995, the Kuki National Army (KNA) detained a boy (aged about 15 years) belonging to the Tamil Community, suspecting him to be the messenger of NSCN-IM in the jungle near their outpost (Camp). The incident led to tension between the Tamils and Kukis in the town. As a result, a mob belonging to the Tamil Community in Moreh attacked Chavangphai (Kuki Locality) on the evening of 6th June 1995, resulting in the killing of five civilian Kukis and the burning down of eleven houses of Chavangphai by the Tamils (Personal Communication, March 12, 2019). Meanwhile, the security forces of the town (Moreh) intervened to put the situation under control. The Assam Rifles (Raj Rifles Company), in their action to put the situation under control, fired upon the person(s) armed with daggers and sticks, which also led to the killing of 3 persons from the Tamil community (Personal Communication, February 5, 2019). The incident created not only insecurity and hatred between the Kukis and Tamils but also affected the daily socio-economic life of the people of various ethnic communities in Moreh. During the field visit, M. Jalaudin narrated that 'the violent conflicts between the two communities in the town led to the closure of the Indo-Myanmar international border, in addition to the total shutdown of markets and the Imphal-Moreh Highway, which led the public to face several hardships' (Personal Communication, March 7, 2019).

After NSCN-IM abandoned its operation and influence in the town, the contestation and conflict to control trade and commerce continued between the KNA and valley-based insurgent groups such as the UNLF and the PLA after the 2000s. The conflict of interests between them on the issue of controlling trade and commerce created an unfavorable atmosphere for peaceful coexistence between

different ethnic communities in the town. Various forms of conflict, ranging from ideological to violent conflict in Moreh, resulted in economic blockades, strikes, bandhs, and other forms of agitation, which directly affected the smooth functioning of India's Look/Act East policy. The rivalry and conflicts between them (UNLF & KNA) also caused violent conflict between Kukis and Meiteis on 9th June 2007, when the valley insurgent group UNLF entered the town from the territory of Myanmar and killed five civilian Kukis in different localities of Moreh. As a result, there was a violent confrontation between the Kukis and Meiteis in Moreh, which also led to the killing of six civilians from the Meitei community. The incident created not only hatred between the two ethnic groups (Kukis and Meiteis) but also fear psychosis among the traders and resulted in economic loss to the people (Personal Communication, February 05, 2019).

Moreover, there have been many events where insurgent groups kidnapped traders along the Moreh-Namphalong area in connection with ransom demands, which also sometimes led to the killing of the traders. For instance, on 20 February 2014, two Indian traders, Sanvendar Singh (30) from UP and Daljeet Singh (33) from Maharashtra, were kidnapped and killed in the jungles on the Indian side of the border with Myanmar after ten days, which sent shockwaves to the people. Due to the kidnapping and killing of the two traders, bandh and strikes in Moreh had taken place, which affected normal trade functioning between the two countries for weeks. Bandhs, Strikes, and Economic blockades along National highways have become a common form of advocating for the voice of the people. It is used as a mechanism of drawing the attention of the government by different ethnic groups or CSOs of Moreh. There were many events, economic blockades and bands imposed along the National Highway by different ethnic groups, which affected the normal functioning of the Indo-Myanmar border trade. For example, on 23 May 2017, a daylong general strike was imposed by civil society organisations as a protest against the killing of a woman at the Indo-Myanmar border village. The imposition of the strike caused inconvenience to traders as well as transporters, besides disrupting the daily activities of the people (Singh, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Inter-ethnic conflicts between different ethnic groups fueled by various ethnic militant groups have been taking place in the border town (Moreh) since the formulation and implementation of India's Look/Act East Policy in the 1990s. The presence and operation of various insurgent groups along the Indo-Myanmar border region have largely affected the progress of India's Look/Act East Policy. In addition, the conflicts and contestations between them to dominate the town and its business activities have led to violent conflicts between different ethnic groups in the town on several occasions. Economic blockades, Bandh, Strikes, and other forms of protest along the highway have been used as a tool to draw the attention of the government. It has largely affected the socio-economic activities of the people and the smooth functioning of bilateral trade between India and Myanmar. The NDA government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's initiative of rebranding India's Look East policy into the Act East Policy in 2014 to signify a more proactive and action-oriented approach towards the region, will not bear many fruits without solving the insurgency problems in the region. Indian government initiatives of Peace talks (Ceasefire) or

Suspension of Operation (SoO) with different ethnic militant groups (such as Naga and Kuki militant groups, etc.) operating in the region need to be concluded without further delay. The successful execution of India's AEP, which would promote economic growth in the region, also depends on the region's citizens' active participation. After all, proper implementation of the strategy would only be made possible by peaceful and amicable relations amongst the many ethnic populations in the region.

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