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## Challenges of Constructing India's National Identity in Manipur

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### ABSTRACT

One major challenge faced by the Indian state is the task of Nation-Building. Though it has made significant strides in political integration, India has still been struggling to build a shared national identity. This endeavour remains unsuccessful in some parts of the country, particularly in the North-eastern states like Manipur. This article explores the challenges inherent in the construction of India's national identity in Manipur. Factors like historical legacy of the merger agreement, nation-building approach, cultural gap between mainstream India and Manipur, and rise of ethnic nationalism(s) in Manipur pose formidable barriers to harnessing a shared national identity in Manipur.

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### Introduction

Throughout the span of more than 75 years following its independence in 1947, India has achieved notable progress across various sectors, particularly in the realms of economy, defence, and space exploration. As per the 2024 world GDP ranking, India stands as the fifth largest economy internationally.<sup>i</sup> The country secures the fourth rank, behind the USA, Russia, and China, in terms of military might, as stated by the Global Firepower (GFP) rankings.<sup>ii</sup> Following the successful touchdown



of Chandrayaan-3 on the lunar surface on 23rd August, 2023, India joined the exclusive group of nations that have achieved a successful lunar landing, becoming the first to do so at the South pole region.<sup>iii</sup> Moreover, India has established itself as a respected global position, emerging as a prominent leader and representative for the developing nations of the South.

Despite these remarkable accomplishments, the Indian state continues to encounter challenges in the establishment of a cohesive nation-state. According to Jayaprakash Narayan, "India was never a nation, nor is a nation today, nor can suddenly become one tomorrow. The process of integration will take time here as elsewhere."<sup>iv</sup> This assertion highlights the ongoing process of nation-state formation in India. The endeavours of Indian nationalist leaders in nation-building have not been entirely successful, particularly in regions such as the culturally heterogeneous Northeastern states like Manipur. While they successfully achieved the political amalgamation of these states into the Indian Union, the task of fostering a collective national identity has proven elusive. The crucial aspect of 'emotional integration' remains elusive. Therefore, this paper primarily explores the challenges that are inherently present in establishing a cohesive national identity of India within the northeastern state of Manipur.

### **Historical legacy of Merger Agreement**

Manipur existed as a sovereign kingdom with a long history before she got defeated at the hands of the mighty British in 1891. As soon as she regained her independence in 1947 with the ending of British colonial rule, Manipur framed a constitution of her own under the Manipur Constitution Act, 1947. Through this legislation, elections based on the principle of universal adult franchise were held across hills and valley of Manipur, leading to the establishment of a representative government in 1948, with Maharaja Bodhchandra serving as the constitutional ruler.<sup>v</sup> Consequently, Manipur transitioned into a constitutional monarchy, wherein the King held a symbolic position while the actual power resided with the elected assembly. Regrettably, before fully tasting the fruits of the envisioned democratic setting, Manipur got merged with the union of India in 1949 alongside many other princely states.

This merger of Manipur with the union of India in 1949 was viewed as a contentious episode in the annals of history. Many believed that the king of Manipur was made to sign the Merger Agreement under 'duress', and ergo, the modus operandi of the political integration was not a democratic one, but rather a coercive one. Akoijam (2001) argued that the king resisted the move to merge Manipur with the Indian union suggesting that he was only a constitutional head and he needed to consult with the elected members of the state assembly<sup>vi</sup>. Despite the king's opposition, through pressure and emotional manipulation and disregarding the authority of the elected assembly, the Merger Agreement was inked



between the king of Manipur and the government of India on 21<sup>st</sup> September, 1949, leading to Manipur's official integration into India on 15<sup>th</sup> October, 1949.<sup>vii</sup>

This significant event left an enduring impact on the psyche of every Manipuri, perceiving it as an unjust deceit perpetrated by the Indian government. This is why the 15<sup>th</sup> October is commemorated every year as 'Black Day' in Manipur. Denouncing the merger agreement and the alleged colonization of Manipur by the Indian state, a handful of hill-based and valley-based revolutionary organizations were established in Manipur. Their primary objective is to reclaim the lost sovereignty of Manipur.<sup>viii</sup> These revolutionary groups even boycott India's Republic Day, Independence Day celebrations and Hindi songs, cinemas and TV channels. Their intent is to counteract the process of cultural assimilation imposed by the Indian state. Given the existing circumstances, along with the prevalent discontent among Manipuris, harnessing a sense of Indianness among the people of Manipur will undoubtedly pose challenges.

### **Nation Building approach of national leaders towards Manipur**

The nation-building approach of the national leaders towards the Northeastern states in general and Manipur in particular is not worth appreciation. Because the nationalising approach towards Manipur is not founded on the idea of composite society and federal structures. Jawaharlal Nehru's renowned principle of 'Unity in Diversity' is not seen to be applied in Manipur. The national leaders and mainstream intellectuals tended to overlook ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity, and the distinct history of the state. They cannot see issues in the region from any other perspectives, except from the lens of 'security', due to Manipur's strategic location, considering its proximity to China and providing a gateway to Southeast Asia and East Asia.

Consequently, right from independence and Manipur's merger with India, the central leaders and policymakers proposed strategies to militarise the region. A battalion of Gurkha Rifles was dispatched to Imphal, before the official integration of Manipur was declared, to prevent any potential unrest from the populace of Manipur.<sup>ix</sup> As per a document released by United Committee Manipur in 2005, the state hosts over 44,320 personnel of the central security forces, indicating a ratio of one armed personnel for every 60 citizens in Manipur.<sup>x</sup> Again, Manipur University could possibly be the sole university in India with a military base situated within its premises. The rationale behind such substantial deployment of central armed forces in such a tiny state like Manipur remains unclear, unless it is part of a larger strategy to militarise the region.



Central leaders also perceive armed movements and conflicts in Manipur as outcomes of underdevelopment and economic backwardness.<sup>xi</sup> Consequently, they subscribe to Karl Deutsch's belief that modernisation, characterised by advancements in urbanisation, industrialisation, education, communication, transportation, and similar factors, would facilitate assimilation and thereby resolve the issue.<sup>xii</sup> Therefore, viewing the situation solely through the lenses of economic backwardness and security concerns, national leaders adopted a dual strategy—‘militarism’ and ‘developmentalism’—in their efforts to integrate Manipur into the national fold.<sup>xiii</sup> These central government policies, embedded within their nation-building agenda for the region, generated discontent among the Manipuri populace. Given that the people of Manipur do not subscribe to the Indian state's nation-building endeavours, constructing a shared national identity among them presents a significant challenge.

### **Cultural gap between mainland India and Manipur**

What is a fact, albeit many instrumentally abstain from stressing, is that the peoples of Northeast India in general and Manipur in particular, exhibit racial and cultural distinctions from the rest of India. It is not that racially and culturally different groups cannot come together to form a nation. Nonetheless, what is alarming here is the prevailing mistrust and suspicion between the Northeast India and the rest of the country. Since independence, Indian nationalist leaders have perceived this region as comprising homogenous Mongoloid tribes, racially and culturally different from the rest of Indian subcontinent, and display more affinity to China and Southeast Asia. Such perception is evident in Sardar Patel, the then Home Minister of India's infamous ‘Mongoloid alarm’, where he termed political claims of the indigenous ethno-nationalist groups in the region as ‘pro-Mongoloid prejudice’.<sup>xiv</sup> Thus, the inhabitants of the Northeastern region have been portrayed as threats to the security of the Indian state. As a result, the policy makers in India consistently view this region solely through the security-oriented lens, rather than as an integral part of the nation.

Though Article 15 of Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, peoples hailing from Northeast India encounter racial discrimination while visiting ‘mainland’ India. They are often misunderstood as foreigners from countries like China, Nepal, Thailand, Korea or Japan and are asked to produce passports. They are, indeed, treated as ‘lesser Indians’ or ‘second-class citizens’ rather than as equal citizens. No doubt, nationalist leaders promote ‘Unity in diversity’ concept in cultivating a shared national identity of India. According to Wouters and Subba (2013),



The idea of 'Indian Face' is plural and inclusive, embracing a variety of phenotypes such as Bengali, Maharashtrian, Gujarati, Tamil among many others. Despite this vast diversity in phenotypes, there is no confusion about their 'Indianness'. This courtesy is not extended to 'Mongoloid phenotypes', which are regularly misrecognised as belonging to foreigners.<sup>xv</sup>

Such racial and cultural distinction and exclusion of Mongoloid face from the national culture, is one big predicament faced by the people of Manipur. As a result, the people of this region feel neglected and alienated from mainland India. Since the people of Manipur are not emotionally integrated with India, the Indian leaders are facing challenges to develop a collective national identity in Manipur.

### **Ethnic nationalism(s) in Manipur**

Various ethnic groups in Northeast India assert themselves as 'distinct nations' and advocate for exclusive group rights, particularly the right to self-governance. In Manipur, the Nagas and the Kukis, two ethnic groups, are self-identified as distinct nations. Nevertheless, according to Meetei (2014), the challenge lies in the fact that the Nagas and Kukis are not composed of single distinct identities but are rather conglomerates containing various diverse ethnic communities within themselves.<sup>xvi</sup> Ergo, when attempts are made to portray as a unified entity, the leaders or larger community failed to gain the trust of smaller communities. As a result, internal rifts surface within the conglomerates, with smaller groups beginning to challenge the dominance of the other group(s) and constructing their own narrative of distinctive identity.<sup>xvii</sup> For instance, recent occurrences have seen numerous tribes, including the Hmars, Paites, Vaipeis, and Gangtes dissociating themselves from the Kuki conglomerate (even renouncing the name Kuki) in favour of asserting their unique ethnic identity.

Meetei (2017) further posited that the leaders of each conglomerate strive to maintain the newly formed ethnic nation by enlarging ethnic boundaries, seeking exclusive territories, and portraying external groups as 'others'.<sup>xviii</sup> These assertions add layers of complexity to the landscape of identity politics in Manipur. The assertions and demands for separate territories exacerbate inter-community animosity and tensions among the diverse groups residing in the state. Furthermore, such claims offend the sentiments of the Meities, who consistently advocate for the 'territorial integrity' of Manipur, emphasizing that Manipur as a whole, with its diverse ethnic makeup, represents a distinct nation. The ultimate repercussion of these actions is the escalation of identity assertion among various ethnic groups in Manipur. This escalation of identity assertion poses a serious challenge to the nation-building efforts of the Indian government, thus hindering the establishment of a unified national identity for India.



## Conclusion

This article demonstrates that historical legacy of the Merger Agreement, nation-building strategy of national leaders, cultural divide between mainland India and Manipur, and the rise of ethnic nationalism(s) in Manipur, present several obstacles hindering the formation of a unified national identity in India. Despite these impediments, there are potential avenues for fostering a collective sense of Indianness in Manipur. Primarily, the Indian government must reassure the inhabitants of Northeast India, including Manipur, that embracing a national identity will not erode their unique identity, culture, and heritage. Therefore, India's nation-building strategy should embrace the diverse culture of the region and guarantee the safeguarding of indigenous ethnic groups within the state to prevent them from feeling marginalized and alienated from mainstream Indian society.

The cultural diversity of Northeast can be demonstrated to be reflected in the national identity and culture of India through the facilitation of cultural exchanges between mainland Indians and Northeastern people. For instance, the festival of Holi, which originates from mainland India, is observed in certain regions of Northeast India. Similarly, the celebration of any of the festivals from Northeast India in various parts of the country, has the potential to evoke joy and pride among the people of Northeast India, thereby enhancing their receptiveness towards the national identity of India. Moreover, the government of India must leverage the ongoing peace negotiations with the armed groups that are active in the region. Furthermore, the significance of education, media, and community-based initiatives in advancing inclusivity and nurturing a shared sense of identity should not be underestimated. Rather than relying on military and coercive measures, the utilization of softer approaches like dialogue and discourse presents itself as the most viable course of action.

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