



**crisis states programme**

development research centre



Working Paper no.79

**EXPLAINING MANIPUR'S BREAKDOWN  
AND MANIPUR'S PEACE:  
THE STATE AND IDENTITIES IN  
NORTH EAST INDIA**

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February 2006

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**Crisis States Programme**  
**Working papers series no.1**

ISSN 1740-5807 (print)  
ISSN 1740-5815 (on-line)

Development  
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Studies Institute



## Crisis States Programme

### Explaining Manipur's Breakdown and Mizoram's Peace: the State and Identities in North East India

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#### Abstract

*Material from North East India provides clues to explain both state breakdown as well as its avoidance. They point to the particular historical trajectory of interaction of state-making leaders and other social forces, and the divergent authority structure that took shape, as underpinning this difference. In Manipur, where social forces retained their authority, the state's autonomy was compromised. This affected its capacity, including that to resolve group conflicts. Here powerful social forces politicized their narrow identities to capture state power, leading to competitive mobilisation and conflicts. State's poor capacity has facilitated frequent breakdown in Manipur. In Mizoram, where state-making leaders managed to incorporate other social forces within their authority structure, state autonomy was enhanced. This has helped enhance state capacity and its ability to resolve conflicts. Crucial to this dynamic in Mizoram was the role of state-making leaders inventing and mobilising an overarching and inclusive identity to counter entrenched social forces. This has helped with social cohesion.*

#### Introduction

North East India, comprising the 'seven sister' states,<sup>1</sup> has experienced sustained conflicts. This has mostly been along ethnic lines and has led to sustained violence and breakdown. Manipur's has been a particularly demonstrative example of this dynamic. In media and policy circles, it has often been considered an extreme case of breakdown, even by North-eastern standards.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Mizoram has been taken to be a peaceful state.<sup>3</sup> Commentators have attributed the violence in the North East region to identity politics. They have interpreted Mizoram's apparent peace as proof of the absence of identity politics there.<sup>4</sup> A closer look at politics in the state will quickly dispel this notion.<sup>5</sup> Much of the politics in Mizoram, like that in Manipur, centres on the question of identity. Political parties and public organisations in either state have used ethnic identities to mobilise support among their constituents. Yet ethnic mobilisation in the two states, indeed in the region, has not led to similar outcomes.

<sup>1</sup> Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.

<sup>2</sup> 'Violence on the rise in Northeast: Manipur the worst sufferer', Times of India (Guwahati) 5 June 2003, quoting Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report 2002-2003. The Ministry's Annual Report 2004-2005 demonstrates similar results ([www.mha.nic.in](http://www.mha.nic.in)). According to another report, "If the first two-odd months of year 2005 are any indication, the militancy-ridden state of Manipur appears to be moving into a more vicious cycle of violence" (Bibhu Prasad Routrey, South Asia Intelligence Review, Weekly Assessment and Review, 3:35 (14 March 2005).

<sup>3</sup> "Mizoram has tasted and savoured peace for seventeen years now. After two decades of insurgency and its related sufferings, peace has been sweet indeed" ('Brave New Phase of Mizoram', Telegraph (Guwahati), 22 August 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Neera Chandhoke, 'A State of One's Own: Secessionism and Federalism in India', Paper presented at Crisis States Programme Annual Workshop, London, August 2005.

<sup>5</sup> See Manorama Sharma & Apurba K Baruah, 'Mizoram at Crossroads: Democracy vs. Traditional Values', Crisis States Programme Annual Workshop, New Delhi, December 2004.

The difference in violence between the two states is particularly puzzling given the apparent commonalities between them. Both states are multi-ethnic in make-up, though admittedly Manipur more so. Both are composite states of the Indian union and thus exist in a similar context in the Indian federal set-up. Further the political economy of the Northeast region impacts on the two states in equal measure. Both states have long and porous international borders, and lie on the cross-border drugs and small arms trade routes that hook up to international markets. They are also in a similar economic situation, with a poor resource base, inadequate physical and social infrastructure and rising unemployment. So why has Mizoram not experienced the ethnic turmoil and breakdown that characterises politics in Manipur and most other states in the region?

In this paper I attempt to analyse the difference between Manipur and Mizoram to arrive at answers to these questions. Part of the answer may lie in the manner of political mobilisation and consequent elite contestations in the two states. But I would argue that the most significant explanation for the difference lies in the state and its relationship with society. The process of state making, the social forces that state-making leaders had to contend with, the strategies they employed to confront these forces, the outcome of these contests and their implications for the state's autonomy and its relationship with minority communities are dynamics that I consider crucial to understanding the difference. It is to the conditions that enhance or limit state power, the compulsions of political actors that led to processes fostering inclusive or fragmented identities and the resultant capacity of the state to behave autonomously or otherwise in response to community-based demands that I think we need to direct our attention to.

The paper begins with a brief survey of the literature on conflicts in Manipur and Mizoram, followed by a brief discussion of the conceptual tools I use and a synopsis of my argument. The body of the paper is divided into three parts. In the first, I look at the historical state-making experience of the two states, their contests with social forces and the outcome of these contests on authority structures. In the second, I explore why and how state-making leaders in the two states, in the years immediately before and after Independence, mobilised ethnic identities in divergent ways: inclusive and aggregating in one, partisan and fragmented in the other. In the third section I analyse the impact of divergent authority structures and varying modes of identity mobilisation on the state's capacity to govern and to incorporate minority demands and respond to the latter's grievances. Finally, I try to draw some empirical conclusions from the material.

### **Existing explanations**

Ethnic conflicts and violence in Northeast India have been explained using both primordial and instrumental lenses. Scholars, mostly from the region, have pointed to fundamental cultural differences between people in the region and those from 'mainland India'. This incompatibility has motivated them to question the 'unequal' and 'forced' integration of the Northeast region into the Indian 'mainstream'.<sup>6</sup> Historians like Sanajaoba trace the problem to the forced integration of Manipur into India and the subsequent development of master-subject relationship between the two, reinforced by a colonial pattern of political, economic and cultural dominance.<sup>7</sup> They argue that this seriously undermined the integrity of the state

<sup>6</sup> P. S. Datta, 'Roots of Insurgency', *Seminar* 366, Northeast Special Number (February 1990).

<sup>7</sup> N. Sanajaoba, *Manipur Past and Present*, New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1988. See also Lokendra Arambam, 'Language, Identities and Crisis in Manipur's Civilization', *Imphal Free Press*, Special edition: Selected Writings on Issues of Identity, 2003.

and led to frustrations that fed into ethnic conflicts. Others have tended to see things from an instrumental perspective. They have pointed to rapid modernisation as the explanation for the region's instability.<sup>8</sup> Some writers point to the unequal power structure and intra-community competition over resources to account for the region's many conflicts.<sup>9</sup> Others have emphasised the class bases of these conflicts, pointing to the clash between the 'new class' and the traditional elite.<sup>10</sup> Similar political outcomes in India generally have been explained by looking at the characteristics and the working of the state.<sup>11</sup> They attribute India's rising ethnic and community conflicts, including those in the North East region, to changes in political institutions and to choices of leaders.<sup>12</sup> Kohli asserts that institutional vacuum and intensification of democratic politics have together caused the political breakdown that one notices in the country. The shape these breakdowns take depends on how well central authority is institutionalised and how willing ruling groups are to share power and resources with mobilised groups.<sup>13</sup> Baruah resorts to similar historical institutionalism to explain the North East's "durable disorder". He argues that much of the pathology in the region is the outcome of the central state's weakness to monopolise security, its disembeddedness from society and its reliance on militarist tactics to respond to challenges posed by militias in the region. The central state's counter-insurgency policy in the region is accompanied by a tolerance for suspension of the rule of law, authoritarianism and large-scale leakages of development funds. This creates opportunities for insurgent dividends. Baruah claims that public policies promoting self-governance for particular communities contribute to the disorder. They encourage competitive mobilisation by other groups not so privileged, resulting in sustained conflicts.<sup>14</sup>

Cultural and instrumental analyses, deinstitutionalisation of polity, leadership options and the political economy of insurgency may explain the intensification (or decline) of community conflicts in India generally. However, they fail to satisfactorily explain variance in violence outcome between comparable cases, such as within North East India. Most parts of the region were subjected to rapid modernisation, but it did not have an equally unsettling impact. Mizoram shows this. Group conflicts over power and resources are common to most developing societies, as much in Manipur as in Mizoram. But if these were more serious in Manipur, why was this so? What lies behind this divergence? And how and why has Mizoram seemingly avoided such contestation? Further, deinstitutionalisation of the central polity should have affected both Manipur and Mizoram in similar ways. Central leaders have

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<sup>8</sup> See B. P. Singh, *The Problem of Change: A Study of North East India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987.

<sup>9</sup> U. A. Shimray, 'Socio-Political Unrest in the Region Called Northeast India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16 October 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Fernandez, 'Conflicts in NE India: A Historical Perspective', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 December 1999, pp.3579-3582; A. Bimol Akoijam, 'How History Repeats Itself?' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28 July 2001, pp.2807-2812.

<sup>11</sup> Kohli argues that this is because in India, the state occupies a dominant political space, controlling most resources and opportunities. Further, 'development' in India is a political process, with the state itself being accessible via this process. As a consequence the state becomes both the object and the arena of the continuing contests between social groups all of whom seek to control the state (Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Amrita Basu & Atul Kohli, *Can Democracies Accommodate Ethnic Nationalism? Community Conflicts and the State in India*, Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1998. pp.2-3.

<sup>13</sup> Atul Kohli, 'The Rise and Decline of Self Determination Movements in India', in Amrita Basu *et al.* (eds), *Can Democracies Accommodate Ethnic Nationalism? Community Conflicts and the State in India*, Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.7.

<sup>14</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp.3-27.

themselves shown equal flexibility (or intransigence) in dealing with mobilised groups and separatist insurgencies across the Northeast. Yet while Mizoram is on the verge of entering the twenty-first year of its post-Peace Accord era, peace has eluded Manipur for most of its post-colonial existence.

My own thoughts of Manipur are filled with memories of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation by contesting identity groups, of the state's complex ethnic dynamics and its never-ending violence. But what struck me most during my work there was the poor legitimacy of the state. Agencies of the state in Manipur are commonly criticised for their slothfulness, their insensitivity, and their inability to do any good. Though the state's minority tribal communities have more to complain about than its majority, criticism of how the state functions is universal. Protests, street marches and *bandhs* (forced closures) are daily occurrences. By contrast, the clearest insight that emerged from my fieldwork in Mizoram was the positive public perception of the state there. Discussions with academics, as well as journalists and human rights activists, reveal that the state is seen as being able to deliver and be accommodative to minority demands. It has a sense of 'legitimacy' and is less an object of criticism. But what could explain this difference? Why is the state apparently benign in Mizoram when dealing with public demands while it appears to be malignant in Manipur?

Empirical insights again provide useful directions here. One aspect of the seeming 'disorder' in Manipur I noticed was the ease with which different social organisations constantly challenge the authority of the state to order people's lives. While a variety of armed militant groups have thrown the ultimate challenge to the state, collecting 'loyalty taxes' and defining who will wear what clothes and what textbooks will be taught in schools, even 'civil society' organisations such as student and community groups constantly challenge the state and take upon themselves the role of rule-makers. The precariousness of the state in Manipur is stark. Mizoram's was a very distinct state-society dynamic. Here there was little of the sense of constant and competitive struggles over who will define rules or who will order people's lives. The state-society contest appeared muted, the general impression being one of state agencies and civil society organisations working in tandem, and avoiding breakdown. While realising the normative implications of this compact, the difference between patterns of state-society relations between the two states was marked. I believe it is by analysing this difference in state-society relations that we can understand the difference in conflict outcome in the two states.

### **Conceptual tools**

Central to discussions over state-society relations is the issue of state power: where it lies, how it is grounded, and what social forces shape it; and whether those forces constrain and compromise state power or augment and reinforce it. State power has a bearing on the state's autonomy and its capacity to govern. Equally, it impacts on the state's ability to manage conflicts. Understanding difference in state capacity and autonomy may thus benefit from exploring the nature of state power. Any analysis of state power itself needs to begin with an understanding of the historical emergence and crystallisation of the state and the various struggles that have happened between state-making leaders and their opponents over social control. State-making leaders face opposition from entrenched social forces who seek to provide alternative sources of authority. The outcome of these contests determines whether state-making leaders have been able to incorporate those social forces into the state's structure, or if they exist outside, continuing to act as alternative centres of power. These determine state power. Therefore it is important to explore state making historically.

Equally important is the need to understand the particular strategies that state-making leaders have employed to respond to social forces. In their struggle over authority, state-making leaders and social forces that confront them have frequently politicised ethnic identities to gain advantage. Political parties, community elites and public organisations have been the most active in these struggles over power and authority. But the basis and manner of identity mobilisation can be very different; it can be narrow, confined to the dominant community while excluding all others, or it can be inclusive, taking different communities along. The form of mobilisation would undoubtedly depend on cultural affinities, but also on leadership strategies and choice. Important is the effect that the particular form of mobilisation has upon inter-community dynamics as well as on the state's capacity to govern. Where mobilisation is inclusive and participatory, the state should be in a better position to respond to minority demands and take on board their concerns. Narrow identity mobilisation engenders counter mobilisation by excluded groups. It also limits the state's autonomy and its capacity to govern and uphold the rule of law, which in turn contributes to conflicts and violence. It is these dynamics around state and society in the two states that I address in this paper.

The paper sketches out the divergent historical trajectories of state making in the two states. It explores how in Manipur the state sought to establish its local authority through forging alliances with community specific political organizations (chiefs and tribal fora, for example) rather than by establishing direct rule throughout the territory. These alliances ultimately led to a weakened state structure and continued existence of exclusive political organisations of different communities. State-making leaders sought to capture state power by politicising the ethnicity of the dominant community. The state has sought to make up for its weaknesses by creating a 'legitimising core' in the Meitei identity. This has excluded and in turn alienated the minorities. Conflicts between different communities, where the state frequently acts as a partisan actor, have worsened in the 1990s, perhaps due to rising socio-economic challenges. In Mizoram there was an attempt by the state and political actors to incorporate competing social forces into a unified whole within the state. The state was able to enhance its strengths at the cost of exclusive social and political institutions. State-making leaders reinforced this strength by grounding state power in a unified and relatively inclusive identity that they devised and access to which was kept open to all who speak the Lushai language and share a Christian faith, but was itself an "exclusionary" identity since some minorities, like Buddhist Chakmas, were never seen as Mizos. The process of creating a Mizo identity has empowered the state to better respond to ethnic demands and has helped it manage conflicts. I elaborate this argument below using empirical evidence gleaned from ethnographic accounts, archival records, public and private documents, press reports and from interviews with numerous informants.

### **Struggles over authority: State-making in Manipur and Mizoram**

I begin by looking at the history of state making in the two states, to understand the conditions and processes that went into creating the sort of authority structure that we find in each. I explore historically the genesis of state power, and look at the struggles that took place between state-making leaders and traditional centres of authority in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times, to understand how state power is grounded. I also test whether social control is integrated in the state or if it is fragmented between the state and the many social forces that continue to be powerful and which constrain the state's authority.

### *Fragmentation of state power in Manipur*

Manipur's valley region has traditionally been home to many ethnic groups and clans, all at war with each other, jostling for supremacy. It was the Ningthouja clan led by Nongda Pakhangba that emerged victorious. They established their kingdom at Kangla in present day Imphal. The *maharaja* was the centre of authority, owning all land in the state, and allotting it to his subjects on payment of rent. There existed a reasonably developed land revenue system with officials at the central and local levels to supervise cultivation and collect rent. The state made demands on its subjects, and was able to force compliance. For instance every adult male was obliged to perform *lallup*, or free labour for the state, for ten days in every forty. Social and political consolidation in the Valley, leading to state formation and concentration of authority in the *maharaja* helped bring about stability and order. These post-colonial developments were generally limited to the Valley part of the state.<sup>15</sup>

Hill communities were divided into two main constellations: Nagas, inhabiting the north, east and the west of the Valley and Kukis dispersed in small settlements all around, but mostly in the south. There was little unity among these tribes. The village was the highest unit of political organisation among hill-dwellers. Each village itself was a collection of clans claiming a common descent.<sup>16</sup> Inter-village contacts were limited, most villages being usually at war with each other. The Naga village system was broadly democratic with village heads enjoying little hereditary authority or rights over land. There usually was a consultative council of village elders to govern the village and resolve disputes. Each village had its own 'sovereign' chief, there being no central authority to which villages owed allegiance.<sup>17</sup> Land belonged to the village settler (*nampou*) who was usually not the village head (*khulakpa*). But the *nampou* was not a landowner in the traditional sense of the word. He received only a token rent from tillers. Village headmen and council members were men of influence but not necessarily the wealthiest people.

The Kuki system, in contrast, was centralised with Kuki chiefs (*ningthou*) being head of the village and owner of all its land. *Ningthous* were also entirely supported by their subject villagers for their day-to-day requirements. Villagers usually cultivated the chief's fields, giving him "a share of the game and presents during marriage or child birth".<sup>18</sup> Kuki chiefship was strictly hereditary. But common to both the Naga and Kuki system was the autonomy of village institutions. There was no overarching authority. Even the Manipuri Maharaja's control over the hill chiefs was shifting and informal.<sup>19</sup>

The British annexed Manipur in 1891 and soon initiated administrative changes, most significantly in land revenue and judicial systems. Reformed land revenue administration led to permanent settlement of agricultural land, involving the issuance of land documents to tillers and payment of revenue in cash by them to the state. Taxes on homestead lands were also introduced. In the judicial realm, special courts were abolished and the system of courts was streamlined. Legal codes that the British had introduced in the rest of the country were introduced in Manipur as well.<sup>20</sup> All these changes consolidated the colonial hold on the state. In 1907, the authority of the *maharaja* was restored. He was put at the head of the newly

<sup>15</sup> See T. C. Hodson, *The Meitheis*, London: Macmillan, 1908.

<sup>16</sup> Hodson (1908), p.555.

<sup>17</sup> Hodson (1908), p.120.

<sup>18</sup> R. Brown's account of the Kuki village system, quoted in N. Sanajaoba (2003), p.144.

<sup>19</sup> *Report of the Chief Minister's Social Policy Advisory Committee, Manipur 1995-1997*, Imphal: Government of Manipur, 1997, pp.34-35.

<sup>20</sup> Indian Penal Code (1860), Criminal Procedure Code (1898).

constituted State *Durbar* made up of six Manipuri members with an English officer as its Vice President.<sup>21</sup> But as elsewhere in colonial India, veto power remained with the British Political Agent, while the state ruler held a subordinate position. An outcome of this arrangement was competition between the two centres of state authority, the Political Agent and the Maharaja. This would adversely affect stability.

These colonial interventionist measures were confined to the Valley and did not extend to the vast surrounding forested hill tracts. These were generally unattended, being left to the Political Agent and Vice President of the state *durbar* to conduct periodic expeditions in order to keep peace. The state made no effort to incorporate the hills into the state-wide judicial or land-revenue system or to encourage hill communities to be represented in the newly-established state-level governing institutions. Subsequent measures to enhance the state's presence in the Hills also fell short of penetrating far enough to establish effective control through centralised .<sup>22</sup> Each village was left to its autonomous self-containment, guided and governed by its own sets of customary laws and codes. The state kept its formal presence in the Hills thin and relied on pre-existing centres of power to do its bidding. It authorised local chieftains to maintain order in their jurisdiction and to collect taxes from their subjects, allowing a small part of this to be retained by the chief.

What were the consequences of these policies? In the Hills, the state's reliance on local chieftains and its allocation to them of authority to tax and police the populace prevented the state from consolidating its own authority and control. The policy helped to amply reinforce the authority of the chiefs and other traditional local centres of power. Throughout the colonial period, village chiefs and headmen remained in positions of strength in Manipur. Though the state had successfully contained them when they rose in rebellion, its reluctance to either replace or fully incorporate these power centres meant that the state was always dependent upon them. In fact, traditional symbols and authority were further consolidated in colonial times, as the state relied on these centres of traditional authority as its agents and front-men to penetrate society and gain the legitimacy it needed to be able to rule.

Such duality could be seen in the Valley, too. Though the colonial state had the means to rule on its own, it chose to do so through the Manipuri Maharaja. Yet the ultimate political authority rested with the Political Agent. This anomaly placed the Maharaja at a disadvantage, with little political control. Singh has demonstrated how the Maharaja sought to respond to this challenge by enhancing his social authority as compensation.<sup>23</sup> This he attempted by actively taking up religious reform and revival.<sup>24</sup> As a consequence, the state's authority remained limited. People saw the state as being foreign and as a usurper. It was also seen as being unsympathetic to local interests and promoting a divergent world view. The economic impact of colonial rule on the lives of the people added to the disquiet. These dynamics facilitated a state-society break. Beginning in the early twentieth century, there was a series of popular movements in Manipur against colonial policies.<sup>25</sup> The state, by following different policies for the Hills and the Valley, also created and sustained many fresh divides between the two. This further compromised the state's social control over the populace.

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<sup>21</sup> For a survey of administrative changes in this period see 'The Administration of the State of Manipur from 13-9-1891 to 15-5-1907', Manipur State Archives File (Manipur SA) # R-1/S-C, 317- Political.

<sup>22</sup> Rules for the Administration of Hills 1919, Government of Manipur

<sup>23</sup> N. Lokendra Singh, *The Unquiet Valley: Society, Economy and Politics in Manipur (1891-1950)*, New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1998, p.44.

<sup>24</sup> State-led religious zeal proved detrimental to inter-community relations in the state, especially as exclusive-caste Hindu symbols began to be reinforced, disadvantaging non-Hindu tribal communities.

<sup>25</sup> The Nupi Lan Movement of 1902-04 and the uprising of 1931, both led by women, were significant.



In sum, it can be said that though the colonial state in Manipur had ample opportunity to draw hill communities into reforms taking place in the rest of the state and to establish centralised political and administrative institutions, it chose to behave in ways that strengthened localised institutions and village autonomy. Chiefs and councils relied on customary codes and traditional authority to emphasise their social control. This promoted narrow identities and divisions. Old rewards, sanctions and myths remained more or less intact and could not be replaced with state-wide common reward structures. Similar dynamics in the Valley promoted state-society cleavages. Thus the early phase of state making in Manipur, during the colonial period, saw the fragmentation of authority structure into individual centres, each defined by narrow local identities. This would have profound consequences for state making in the post-colonial period.

Political authority in the state was restored to the Maharaja in 1947. The Instrument of Accession and the Standstill Agreement that the Maharaja signed with the central government resulted in Manipur, a 'princely state', being given political autonomy within the Indian dominion. In the meantime, popular pressure for constitutional reforms had pushed the Manipuri ruler to agree to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. In 1948, elections were held to the newly established state assembly on the basis of full adult suffrage, a first in the country. However, in 1949, political developments in India and in Manipur's own neighbourhood overtook the state. The preoccupation of the national leadership with nation building, their fears of a rising communist wave in the east from Burma and lobbying by a section of Manipuri political leaders for integration of the state within India, resulted in Manipur's 'merger' with the Indian Union in 1949.<sup>26</sup> From a princely state with a constitutional monarchy and a legislature elected on the basis of adult franchise, Manipur was made a 'part c' state of the Indian union, to be administered by the Centre, without a popular government. Chandhoke demonstrates how the merger agreement fundamentally changed the nature of politics in the state.<sup>27</sup> While much of the frustration and anger over the event could be a case of history being reread to conform to the present, the significance of the agreement in distancing state institutions from society cannot be overemphasised.

Relegation of Manipur to 'part c' status was a setback. Progress toward political development proved slow. The Manipur Advisory Council was the first post-merger deliberative body, set up in 1952, with members nominated by the government. The Territorial Council followed this in 1957. In 1963, Manipur was made a Union Territory, with top executive authority still with the unelected Chief Commissioner. Manipur was not made a state in its own right until 1972, with an elected legislature and a government fully accountable to Manipuri society. Twenty-three years between 'merger' and 'statehood' caused a severe break between state and society. With little grounding in society, the centrally administered state began to be seen as 'foreign' and exclusive. The state bureaucracy acquired the image of being arrogant and not in touch with popular aspirations.

Post-Independence state making in the Hills was equally problematic, with the central state seeking to enhance its limited bureaucratic presence. But as in colonial times, the state chose to depend for most of its administrative expansion on the old power structure of local chiefs and their advisors. In 1956, it enacted the Village Authority in Hill Areas Act (1956) and set up village authorities in every village. Though these were elected bodies, it was unelected

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<sup>26</sup> With the Merger Agreement, the ruler ceded the power to govern the state to the Government of India.

<sup>27</sup> Chandhoke (2005), p.18.

village headmen who led them.<sup>28</sup> Village authorities were given extensive administrative and judicial powers. Soon the ambit of their authority was expanded to include power to implement and monitor development programmes in the village. But elections to village bodies soon took on more 'traditional' forms with each clan nominating a member to the council, similar to the practice that existed in the past.

The Village Authority Act and subsequent developments created a parallel power structure in the village.<sup>29</sup> Though this act made a start in integrating customary courts into the official system, its successes were modest. The old system of village courts continued, and is community-specific, emphasising the salience of tribal institutions and their specific identity. Intra-community competitions over authority and resources have led to the legal system itself being turned into a contested arena. Increasingly, more vocal claimants to community resources and symbols, such as apex tribal organisations and armed groups, have been trying to dominate this space.<sup>30</sup> A similar take-over by 'powerful elements' has taken place in the land-holding system. Land reforms introduced in the state in 1960 were confined to the valley areas.<sup>31</sup> The Hills, which account for 70 per cent of the state's area, are excluded from its purview. Tribal leaders are concerned about possible alienation of tribal lands to non-locals. Perhaps tribal leaders, mostly people with landed interests, are equally concerned about losing their traditional land rights.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, land laws in hill areas are still governed by tribal customs and practices. These exist outside the state's control and have not even been codified.

A combination of factors has thus helped sustain and consolidate the authority of traditional social forces in Manipur's Hills. It was no wonder the state's initiative to abolish the system of village chieftainship failed miserably, despite an act to that effect having been passed in 1968 in the State Assembly. Evidently the state's political bureaucracy had not been able to muster adequate authority to confront entrenched interests. Failure to abolish chieftaincies meant links with the traditional past were not severed; and by putting the hereditary chiefs at the top of the elected village authorities, their traditional authority was enhanced. Having been incorporated in the administrative structure of the state, and also being the channel through which development funds flow, yet lacking in accountability, Village Authorities in the Hills have become sites of contestation for control between different social forces. Their appeal has been on identity lines. This has impacted not only on elections to village authorities, but also the larger character of tribal politics, which has become predominantly identity-based.

New supra-village social bodies have emerged that are seeking to enhance their authority by playing institutional roles. For instance, in 1988 the Tangkhul Naga Long (TNL) compiled the *shiyān tanza*, or code of customary law, of the Tangkhuls and set up its court as a forum where intra- and inter-village disputes could be resolved based on customary laws and practices. This was posed as an alternative to the official courts. Today, most cases of disputes in villages in Ukhrul district are referred from the village councils to the TNL court, and not

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<sup>28</sup> Village Authority (in Hill Areas) Act, 1956. Government of Manipur

<sup>29</sup> Interview, K. C. Bruno, member Tamenglong Khunjabo Village Authority (Tamenglong Khunjabo, 6 November 2004).

<sup>30</sup> In 2005 it was reported that customary courts and NSCN(IM), the armed militant group, imposed a heavy penalty on a girl accused of petty theft in Ukhrul district ('NPMHR rejects verdict of Ato Longphang', *The Sangai Express*, 21 September 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms (MLR & LR) Act 1960, Government of Manipur.

<sup>32</sup> It is Kuki chiefs who most vehemently opposed extension of MLR&LR Act to the hills. Today opposition to extension has become a symbol of tribal protest.

the courts set up by the government.<sup>33</sup> Similarly the Zeliangrong Union (ZU) has taken the Zeliangrong community's common customary code for its judicial activities. It has set up its own court to which disputes are referred by the village *pei* (council) for adjudication. Newly acquired judicial authority helps these organisations to play a leading role in mobilising their constituency and enhancing social control. Social forces have maintained their entrenched position in the valley part of the state too. The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms (MLR&LR) Act was unable to do away with the large number of intermediaries in the state's landholding system. The Act is seen as being less definitive on issues such as land-ownership ceilings and redistribution.<sup>34</sup>

The state was thus weak and in its early state-making phase was unable to provide rewards and sanctions to the populace. The existence of traditional centres of power and their growing salience in this phase prevented the state from consolidating its authority. Traditional centres of power themselves were structured around specific identities. In the early post-colonial phase, they also saw the state as being 'non-Manipuri', distant and insensitive to local interests. To consolidate their position, they began strengthening community-based organisations, which implied mobilisation along ethnic lines. Instruments available to them were myths and symbols and identity politics. The multiplicity of autonomous centres of power meant that there would be multiple and consequent conflictual mobilisation. Poor state authority existing alongside multiple rule-makers has thus led to poor and fragmented social control in Manipur.

### *State consolidation in Mizoram*

In Mizoram, hilly topography and shifting cultivation technology prevented the development of settled societies and concomitant state formation of the kind seen in Manipur's valley region. But like Manipur's hill areas, villages in Mizoram were autonomous, isolated and constantly at war with one another. However there did exist, among the ruling Sailo clan, a sense of hierarchy of chiefs, even if they were independent of each other.<sup>35</sup> This, combined with inter-clan feuds and flows of goods leading to the concentration of wealth in the Sailo clan of the Lushai sub-tribe, enabled the development of some sort of supra-local authority.<sup>36</sup> Even though each village remained an autonomous unit and chiefs frequently clashed over dominance, it was the Sailo chiefs who by the early nineteenth century had gained control of the area.<sup>37</sup>

The Lushai polity was composed of *Hanmchawm*, the 'commoners', governed by a chief of the Sailo clan who was aided by his officials. Commoners could rise to important positions in the chief's administration, but could never become chiefs themselves.<sup>38</sup> Sailo chiefs were despotic and were supported totally by tribute from commoners. They owned all land in the village. Commoners, who were made up of a large number of subsidiary clans and families, did not have much by way of individual rights. The burden on them was heavy. Chiefs could order capital punishment; seize food stores and properties of their villagers; order villagers to provide free labour; and demand payments. There were, however, limits to their powers over

<sup>33</sup> R. R. Shimray, *Origin and the Culture of Nagas*, New Delhi: Pimphepei Shimray, 1985, pp.185-186.

<sup>34</sup> J. N. Das, *A Study of the Land System of Manipur*, Guwahati: Law Research Institute, 1989, pp.139-140.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Reid, *History of Frontier Areas Bordering Assam (1883-1941)*, London: Eastern Publishing House, 1942, p.4.

<sup>36</sup> R. Lehman, *The Structure of Chin Society*. Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1963 pp.27-28.

<sup>37</sup> A. G. McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis*, London: Luzac & Co., 1949, pp.35-37.

<sup>38</sup> McCall (1949), p.96.

the their subjects. The latter could migrate to another village if the rule of the chief became difficult to bear. Chiefs depended on the *Zawlbuak*, the young men's barracks, to provide security to the village from external threats and to enforce rules of discipline within. They also promoted *Tlawmnghaina*, the code of community obligation, which implied a sense of public service. Chiefs also supported the development of their *duhlian* dialect among their subjects.<sup>39</sup>

The Chin-Lushai Expedition of 1889-90 led to the conquest and incorporation of the Lushai Hills into British India. This was followed by administrative changes required by the state to maintain peace and to extract revenue. By 1898, the whole of the Lushai Hills had been consolidated into a single Lushai Hill District with its borders clearly marked out. Chiefs were forbidden from raiding each other. As in other areas, the state sought to ride piggyback on pre-existing authority structures to penetrate society and acquire the legitimacy it needed to rule. The strong presence of Sailo chiefs in the hills provided the colonial state with that opportunity.<sup>40</sup> In doing so the state upheld the authority of the chiefs.<sup>41</sup> Chiefs were made responsible for tax collection and for maintaining peace within their jurisdiction. The guiding principles of the state remained clear: not to interfere in the internal matters of the people and their chiefs; to uphold the authority of the chiefs; and to rule through them, while holding them responsible for to provide effective administration. The attempt was to impose as few (legal) enactments as possible, and to rely on customary codes and practices.<sup>42</sup> However, it is significant that the colonial state in the Lushai Hills worked in a manner that, while bringing the chiefs on board and upholding their authority, helped consolidate its own position at the cost of the chiefs'. In this sense the state behaved in ways very different from how it was behaving around the same time in Manipur.

First, the state consolidated its hold territorially. While the region was divided into two districts immediately after conquest, they were later brought together into a single Lushai Hills district, with a Superintendent based in Aizawl as the centre of political and administrative authority. Lushai chiefs were an integral part of the administration, being given the responsibility for governing their villages. In 1901 the system was strengthened with the introduction of the 'circle system'. The district was divided into sixteen circles, each with an interpreter to act as a liaison between the chiefs and the superintendent. In 1906 the first rules for the administration of the Lushai Hills were introduced.<sup>43</sup> These rules significantly constrained the authority that chiefs had traditionally enjoyed, removing many powers they had previously enjoyed, such as ordering capital punishment, confiscating property of their subjects and taxing traders.<sup>44</sup> Chiefs were brought under the supervision of the Superintendent of the district, who could regulate and even punish them. The chiefs' judicial authority was also curtailed. While they still sat in judgement over petty cases, appeals against which now rested with the Superintendent, criminal cases, especially heinous crimes, were removed from the purview of chiefs altogether. Henceforth chiefs would act only as the eyes and ears of the Superintendent in matters relating to more serious crimes. Further, in 1927 all customary laws

<sup>39</sup> For a survey of these see McCall (1949), pp.96-98.

<sup>40</sup> "I have noted with astonishment the blind submission rendered to Lushai rajas by their dependents, and considered that this is a factor that cannot be ignored in any future arrangements that may be made for the administration of these hills" (Reid, 1942, p.27).

<sup>41</sup> "[U]nless the authority of the chiefs is maintained it will be practically impossible to run the district except at a very great expense and with a very much larger staff than at present" (McCall, 1949, p.202).

<sup>42</sup> Reid (1942), p.56.

<sup>43</sup> Rules for the Regulation of the Procedure of Officers Appointed to Administer Justice in the Lushai Hills, Government of Assam, 1906.

<sup>44</sup> Chin Hills Regulation, Government of Assam 1896.

prevalent in the district were compiled.<sup>45</sup> This provided uniformity in the administration of justice and thus made the task of the Superintendent's supervision over the motley tribes easier. It also consolidated the incorporation of village chiefs into the administrative set up headed by the Superintendent.

Perhaps the strongest measure that undercut the authority of the chiefs was the taking away by the colonial state of proprietary rights that chiefs had traditionally enjoyed over land. Under the 1901 'land settlement' system introduced in the district, each chief was issued a lease over his domain for life. Within the assigned territory, chiefs could move about, as they liked, as long as they paid revenue and observed government orders. While 'settlement' stabilised village boundaries, it implicitly meant that all land belonged to the state. The independence that the Lushai chiefs had enjoyed so far was abolished and they were made instruments of the colonial state administration. It also meant that chiefs could be removed and also be created. The state soon began to issue rights over tracts of land to men it considered useful for its purpose.<sup>46</sup> Thus in ways very different from how the colonial state behaved in Manipur, in Mizoram it consistently worked to incorporate traditional centres of authority within its structure, while all the time undermining the latter's authority. This strengthened the state even as it compromised the locus of social forces that could have proved inimical to its interests.

Independence saw the Lushai Hills being retained as a part of Assam state, but with special features. Constitution makers created a special administrative arrangement for the North East region, particularly its tribal areas, as a measure for tribal self-rule. These Autonomous District Councils (ADC) were elected bodies and were empowered with substantive legislative, executive and judicial authority.<sup>47</sup> First elections to the Lushai Hills District Council (LHDC) were held in 1948. The Mizo Union, a political party with anti-chief sentiments, won a majority of votes. One of the first measures that the MU-dominated Lushai ADC took was to pass the Lushai Hills (Abolition of Chief-ship) Regulation, in 1952, claiming that the "institution of chief-ship with its unlimited autocratic possibilities is a misfit with democracy and as standing in the way of the well-being of the district".<sup>48</sup> In 1954, the Government of Assam under pressure from the LHDC acquired the rights of Lushai chiefs.<sup>49</sup> This act was to have a profound effect on the authority structure in the state. It changed fundamentally the basis of land and power relations.

If there was any doubt at all who the owner of land was in the Lushai Hills during colonial times, the 1954 acquisition of rights of chief-ship removed it all in one quick stroke. While the British had asserted the state's primacy, Lushai chiefs continued to enjoy rights over land in perpetuity. This they could sublet to tenants, and by virtue of state protection the chiefs had upheld their special privileges and arbitrary rights that came at the expense of the commoners.

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<sup>45</sup> E. Parry, *Lushai Custom: A Monograph on Lushai Customs and Ceremonies*, Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, 1927.

<sup>46</sup> While at the time of settlement in 1901 there were an estimated 60 chiefs in the Lushai hills, by 1948 there were about 400 of them (McCall, 1948, p.245).

<sup>47</sup> The task of devising special administrative arrangements for tribal communities in North East India was given to the Sub-Committee for Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas in the Constituent Assembly, otherwise called the Bordoloi Sub-Committee. Tribal areas had remained 'Excluded' and 'Partially Excluded' in Government of India Act of 1935, keeping them outside the ambit of elected state ministries. They had been administered directly by the Assam Governor.

<sup>48</sup> LHDC memo to Union Home Minister dated 22-12-1953). Mizoram State Archives File ( Mizoram SA) # 135-1 (general).

<sup>49</sup> Assam Lushai Hills District (Acquisition of Chiefs' Rights) Act 1954. Government of Assam.

Abolition of chief-ship in 1952 meant that land became the property of the state and chiefs' privileges no longer existed. Notably, and unlike other land reform regulations in the country, chief-ship abolition in Mizoram did not mean that ownership automatically passed on to tenants under the former chiefs. All allotments given by the chiefs were also cancelled. Tenants had to seek fresh allotments from the LADC.<sup>50</sup> The act also led to the burden of village administration shifting from chiefs and their councillors to elected Village Councils (VC).<sup>51</sup> VCs are today responsible for day-to-day village administration. They collect land revenue and taxes, distribute *jhum* (swidden) land and ensure that government regulations are complied with.

Chief-ship abolition also led to changes in the legal framework of the state. There are two functioning legal systems. One exists under the Autonomous District Council (ADC) and the other under the Deputy Commissioner, the executive head of the district.<sup>52</sup> The former is a three-tier system of courts, at the village, intermediate and ADC level, with jurisdiction over minor cases.<sup>53</sup> These courts, which use Mizo *Hnam Dam* (customary code) besides the Indian Penal Code (IPC), are open, fast and cheap. A measure of their legitimacy is that not too many appeals against their judgement have been made.<sup>54</sup> Courts under the Deputy Commissioner try cases outside the powers of the ADC courts.<sup>55</sup> Despite the dual legal system in practice in the state, and the use of customary codes, what is noteworthy here is that both legal systems exist within the formal legal framework of the state. They have the state's sanction and are integrated within it. Significantly it is the Guwahati High Court that has revisionary jurisdiction over both systems, thus incorporating them fully within a unified institutional framework of the state.

The impact of these consolidating moves has been significant. Abolition of chief-ship, consolidation of the administrative and legal framework under the state, and bringing tenants directly in contact with it, has helped consolidate the state's authority. This has enhanced the state's social control while weakening drastically any challenges to its authority from social forces. The state's enhanced autonomy enabled Mizoram to be the only hill state in North East India to have attempted successful reforms in land ownership and distribution. This has led, among other things, to written laws, definition of tenant rights and propriety protection by issue of land certificates.<sup>56</sup> It also led to regulations promoting equity in land management.<sup>57</sup> As will be seen in the next section, changes in power relations in the Lushai Hills in the early years of state formation brought significant political rewards for the commoner-dominated Mizo Union party (MU), which won dominant positions in the ADC and State Assembly elections in the Lushai Hills for a long time. Together, changes in land relations and electoral ascendance of the commoners led to a complete shift in the power structure in the Lushai Hills. The Sailos, who had been the dominant factor until 1954, would not re-emerge in Mizoram politics until the 1970s.

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<sup>50</sup> For a discussion on the land system of the state see J. N. Das, *A Study of the Land System of Mizoram*, Guwahati: Law Research Institute, 1986.

<sup>51</sup> The Lushai Hills District (Village Council) Act 1953, Government of Mizoram.

<sup>52</sup> In the new post-Independence dispensation, the Deputy Commissioner took the position of the erstwhile Superintendent of Lushai Hills.

<sup>53</sup> Established under the Lushai Hills District Council (Administration of Justice) Rules 1953.

<sup>54</sup> H. C. Thanhranga, *Administration of Justice in Mizoram*, Aizawl: PC Chuauhrangi, 1994, pp.9- 11.

<sup>55</sup> They were established under the Lushai Hills Administration of Justice Rules 1937.

<sup>56</sup> Das (1986), p.219.

<sup>57</sup> Important were Lushai Hills District (House Site) Act 1953, Mizo District (Land Revenue) Act 1956, Mizo District (Agricultural Land) Act 1963, Mizo District (Transfer of Land) act 1963 and The Lushai Hills District (Revenue Assessment) Regulation 1953

So what does the experience with state making in the two cases demonstrate? In Manipur, the hill-valley divide in pre-colonial times was exacerbated by colonial policies that encouraged institutional bifurcation. Traditional centres of authority managed to retain their independence. Post-colonial legislative measures encouraged institutional multiplicity and consolidated the hold of traditional centres of power. This came at a cost to the authority of the state, which found its autonomy greatly limited. Weakly centralised state structure and strong, multiple traditional centres of power underpinned a series of conflicts between state-making leaders and their traditional counterparts, but also among traditional authorities themselves, who were each posing a challenge to the state. The latter mobilised their specific identities to garner support and capture power. These dynamics led to an overall diminution of state authority, while state power has itself fractured among different social forces, each mobilising its own identity.

In Mizoram, the colonial state leveraged Sailo domination of the polity to strengthen its hold and consolidate its political power. This process implied a gradual weakening of the political authority of the chiefs, with an adverse impact on their social power. The commoner-dominated state-making leaders in the state's formative years consolidated state control by undertaking legal, property and administrative reforms. This further undermined the hold of traditional centres of power. They invested in, and promoted, centralised and inclusive institutions whose control rested with the state. State-making leaders also countered the divisive tendencies of traditional centres of authority by constructing an integrated Mizo identity. They sought to ground state power in this inclusive identity.

### **Elite strategies and identity mobilisation**

In this section I explore the particular strategies used by state-making elites to incorporate social forces, and the impact the choice of strategy had for politics and inter-community relations in the state. I begin by looking at the role of dominant political elites in Manipur in mobilising Metei identity to capture power and authority, and also look at how chiefs and ethnic associations among tribal/hill communities responded to Metei mobilisation by politicising their individual identities. In Mizoram I explore how the chiefs-commoners cleavage that had emerged in the years before independence led to the rise of a state-making class that found itself in intense struggle for authority with entrenched social forces. I look at the opportunities that this class found in the new democratic dispensation and how it devised and successfully politicised an inclusive Mizo identity to counter challenges to state-making efforts by the chiefs. The vehicle and arena of mobilisation in both cases have been political parties and community-based groups. I therefore explore how key political actors and social organisations have contributed to the dynamic in the two states, narrow and conflictual in one and inclusive and aggregating in the other.

### ***A hundred identities! Competitive mobilisations in Manipur***

In Manipur, state-making leaders used Metei identity to capture power. This was primarily on account of the sense of alienation building up against the central administration, which began to be seen as 'foreign' and imposing. The divide acquired a Metei-foreigner dimension. Meteis, being the dominant community and having a long tradition of self-rule, motivated state-making leaders to sharpen their Metei identity. But use of Metei identity to fashion the state in its shape also meant that the mobilisation process would exclude other communities in the state, all of which had maintained their coherence due to the enduring traditional authority structures. They in turn began to mobilise to counter the possibility of a 'Metei state'. The result was cycles of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation, which eventually turned

conflictual. This process was led by political parties, but also by social and community organisations. We need to look at this process historically.

Political awakening in the valley began with a clutch of small and incipient parties making demands on the Maharaja for political rights, in part inspired by the Congress-led independence movement in colonial India. The Maharaja sought to respond to this challenge by trying to co-opt these voices. He promoted the Nikhil Manipuri Hindu Mahasabha (NMHM), a politico-cultural organisation, as a tool for this mobilisation. The new intelligentsia of the state, educated in Hindu traditions and practices, formed its core. But the Maharaja's controlled-mobilisation experiment found itself being challenged by radical leaders like Hijam Erabot. Though NMHM was made to assume a less sectarian title and agenda, its composition remained restrictive.<sup>58</sup> In 1946, Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha (NMM) and other minor parties coalesced into the Manipur State Congress, which was to dominate politics in the state in the early post merger phase. The composition and outlook of the State Congress remained on the whole narrow, there being little representation from tribal hill communities. In the Hills, it was the chiefs' conclaves and ethnic associations that brought political awakening. Social exclusion of tribal communities in the early years of the twentieth century had led to their welcoming Christian missionaries in their midst. The latter brought education and a new worldview.<sup>59</sup> In the early years of post-colonial state making, Manipur's tribal communities saw an opportunity to demand political dispensations of their own, separate from the valley-led one. They saw demands for tribal states in neighbouring states as encouraging signs for their project. Significantly, the Manipur State Constitution enacted by the Maharaja in 1948 did attempt to take tribal concerns and their aspirations seriously. It put in place a system of representation for tribal communities not only in the elected house but also in the cabinet.<sup>60</sup> However, the state's merger in 1949 and its being given a 'part c' status put an end to that experiment. Over the next decade, a combination of factors led to the rise of identity politics as the dominant political trend in Manipur.

By the time of elections to the newly established Advisory Council in 1952, rising political aspirations among different groups engendered a number of ethnic political parties. The dominant and purportedly secular party – the Manipur State Congress – was itself weak, partly due to its derivative character and also on account of the institutional characteristics of the party in the Centre.<sup>61</sup> The Congress was therefore unable to dominate politics in these turbulent days. It was ethnic parties that began to fill the gap, with their narrow and sectarian messages. Election results in 1952 demonstrated the strength of identity politics, when Congress could win only 10 of the 30 seats. Independent candidates, and those representing ethnic parties, won 17. Economic factors played a part in helping to establish the salience of ethnic politics. Over a number of decades a Meitei middle class had been growing. However, their economic aspirations were thwarted by the presence of a large number of non-locals holding government jobs and controlling trade and commerce. Lack of access to opportunities led this section, made up mostly of educated youth, to politicise their identity and mobilise support for a Meitei state-building project. The Pan Manipuri Youth League (PMYL), the first of such groups in the Valley, emerged in the early 1960s. The state Congress Party's institutional weaknesses were to prove useful to PMYL and the sentiments it represented, when a breakaway faction of the Congress formed the Manipur Peoples' Party (MPP) in

<sup>58</sup> It was renamed Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha (NMM) and sought to speak for all communities.

<sup>59</sup> Laldena, *British Policy towards Manipur 1891-1919*, Imphal: Directorate of Welfare of Tribals, Government of Manipur, 1984, p.41.

<sup>60</sup> Manipur State Constitution Act 1948. Manipur State Archives.

<sup>61</sup> For detailed discussion on reasons for this weakness, see Chandhoke (2005), p.23.



1969. It began demanding ‘Manipur for Manipuris’. In the Hills, it was traditional authorities that were behind the formation of ethnic parties. These developments gave a jump-start to ethnic politics in the state.

A survey of elections in the early years of Manipur’s political history demonstrates the evolving crisis. Political parties frequently employed ethnic appeals to mobilise their constituencies. MPP and other parties raised the issues of maintaining integrity of the state’s borders, advancement of the Manipuri language and script and allowing Meteis to acquire property in the hills. Naga Integration Committee, a hill-based party, demanded integration of all Naga areas of Manipur with Nagaland state.<sup>62</sup> State election results show how these messages were connecting with the electorate (see Table 1).<sup>63</sup>

**Table 1: (Party-wise position in state assembly, Manipur)**

	Total seats	Congress	Other National	Regional	Ethnic	Independent
1967	30	16	5	-	-	9
1972	60	17	9	15	-	19
1974	60	13	8	20	14	5
1980	60	13	22	4	2	19
1984	60	30	5	3	1	21
1990	60	24	18	9	3	-
1995	60	22	12	21	2	3
2000	60	11	14	34	-	1
2002	60	20	12	28	-	-

Source: Election Commission of India (<http://www.eci.gov.in/ElectionResults/>)

While the Congress party has mostly been the dominant one in the state assembly and has formed the government on most occasions, the most interesting aspect about elections results in Manipur has been the fragmented mandate given to political leaders by the people and the presence of ‘independent candidates’ and those representing parties with narrow constituencies. Independent candidates have been a big force, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. They have been prime targets for parties seeking to form the government, but which lacked a clear majority. Many of these candidates came from hill constituencies, though the valley too had its fair share. Independent candidates perhaps represent local/community interests or those unmediated by state-wide political parties. This is confirmed by the shift, from the 1990s, in the number of independent candidates in the state assembly with a parallel increase in the position of regional and ethnic parties. Kuki National Assembly (KNA), Manipur Hills Union (MHU) and Naga National Party (NNP), all hill-based organisations, have had some modest successes in mobilizing their constituencies, limited on account of the small size of constituencies they catered to. On the other hand it was the the Manipur Peoples’ Party (MPP) in the 1990s followed by the Manipur State Congress Party (MSCP) that gained advantages at the cost of national parties. While these parties sought to appeal to all constituencies, and even managed a small presence in the hills, their outlook was essentially valley-based. All these tendencies fed into government instability and social conflicts.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Party manifestos, Indian National Congress (INC), MPP, Ireipok Lasihem quoted in R P Singh, *Electoral Politics in Manipur*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 1981.

<sup>63</sup> From 1952 to 1967, elections were held for the state Territorial Council. In 1972, a Manipur Assembly was set up with 60 members.

<sup>64</sup> Since 1972, when Manipur became a state, there have been 18 changes of government. 1990s, the decade with the worst ethnic violence in the state – Naga-Kuki, Meitei-Muslim and Kuki-Paite clashes – witnessed frequent change of the party in power.

The increasing politicisation of ethnicity in the state has been reflected in the policies and agenda of all political parties. Today they all incorporate agendas and promises that are identity-based in nature.<sup>65</sup>

Mobilisation of identity by political parties has been paralleled by the growth of, and increasing space occupied by, ethnic associations and community groups. Student and women's groups as well as tribal organisations have been particularly active here. *Meira Paibi*, a Meitei women's network, has a long tradition of activism going back to early twentieth century colonial times. Similar women's groups are active in the hills. Youth and student organisations like the All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU), All Naga Students' Association Manipur (ANSAM), All Tribal Students Union Manipur (ATSUM) and the Zomi Student's Federation (ZSF), as well as the Kuki Students' Organisation (KSO), play a leading role in campaigning for their community's political demands. Tribal associations such as the Tangkhul Naga Long (TKL), Zeliangrong Union (ZU), Kuki Inpi Manipur (KIM) and Paite National Congress (PNC) even enjoy legal authority among their communities. The authority these organisations occupy is an outcome of the state's inability to incorporate these social forces in its state structure, thus leaving them with a large social role within their communities.

Particularistic organisations have gained the upper hand in social control at the cost of state organisations, something they have retained to this day. Today many 'parallel authorities', reflecting these non-state forces, have risen to take up issues of public concerns. These organisations pose a serious threat to the authority of state organisations and institutions. They seek to police social life, administer rough and ready justice, provide a sense of security to their ethnic group, and act as watchdogs against corrupt politicians and officials and voice protest over violations of human rights by government forces.<sup>66</sup> Populist actions by these groups and poor capacity of state agencies have led to large sections of people actively seeking intervention of these 'parallel authorities' for solutions to their problems. Vernacular dailies often carry 'appeals' to 'concerned authorities' to look into public issues, arbitration of personal disputes and dispensation of justice. The multiplicity of 'authorities', and the alliances that political parties have forged with them, facilitates conflicting mobilisation. This is mostly to capture resources and benefits controlled by the state. The state's own weaknesses and its poor claim over authority have prevented its power from being fully grounded. As will be seen in the next section, its own actions have contributed to the cycle of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation.

### ***Reinventing the 'Mizo': Inclusive mobilisation in the Lushia Hills***

In Mizoram, we have shown how events in the post-colonial phase of state making consolidated the power of the state. Along with the gradual diminution of the authority of the chiefs in the Lushai hills, the commoners rose as a powerful social and political force. This was an outcome of the unique history of the state. Christian missionaries had brought into the Lushai Hills not only their faith, but also education. But missionaries were not very welcome

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<sup>65</sup> The Congress party won the 2002 Assembly elections promising to protect the territorial integrity of the state (Congress Manifesto, 2002 Elections). The Federal Party of Manipur, the principal opposition in the current Assembly, in a similar appeal to identity sentiments, promised 'to secure for this united ancient state, a rightful and dignified place in the Republic of India' (The Federal Agenda: 2002, Federal Party of Manipur, Imphal)

<sup>66</sup> For instance the Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL), an armed militant organisation, and student bodies such as All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU) and Manipur Students' Federation (MSF) have ostensibly tried to rid the education system of its ills. They have often used the threat of violence to meet their objectives ('Bullet in leg over cheating', *The Telegraph* (Kolkatta), 26 November 2004.

in the eyes of the chiefs who were upholders of tradition. Missionaries were popular with the commoners, however, who saw salvation in the new opportunities that the former were providing. The commoners readily took to modern education, a commodity that was soon to become a passport to jobs and opportunities. It was the commoners who were best positioned to take advantage of this opportunity.<sup>67</sup> The chiefs - commoners cleavage also had an ethnic aspect to it. Chiefs were Lushais, mostly of the Sailo clan, while the commoners were non-Lushai. Led by Hmars and Raltes, they also included Kuki, Paite and Simte clans. Hmars were mostly in trade and commerce and in salaried government employment, while Raltes made up the bulk of the church bureaucracy, a formidable force in the then Lushai hills. Commoners also enjoyed wider support in and outside the Lushai Hills, something that was to prove useful for identity mobilisation in the post-colonial democratic dispensation.

Improvement in social and economic status and a realisation of their advantages in the new democratic dispensation led to commoners demanding a place for themselves in the political future of the state. They opposed moves by the departing colonial state to uphold the chiefs' dominance over the political future of the Lushai Hills. The following moves of the commoners' leadership are not very clear. But based on documentary evidence and interviews with leaders still alive, one can piece together the sequence of events that led them to 'reinvent' the Mizo identity as a way to contest the chiefs' monopoly. In 1946, non-Lushai leaders came together to form the Mizo Commoners' Union (MCU). The significance of the name was important. Rather than Hmar or Ralte, they used the title Mizo. Amongst the Kukis-Chin family, 'Mizo' has long signified the general population of the hills, being derived from the phrase 'mi-zo', meaning 'man of the hills', and was meant to have little ethnic significance.<sup>68</sup> This was against the official designation of the people living in these hills as Lushais, an ethnic category. Hence technically, there were a lot more people living in the Lushai Hills who were categorised as Lushai but who were not so ethnically. The MCU's choice of 'Mizo', a neutral non-ethnic appellation, was instantly acceptable to those who did not wish to belong to the Lushai category.<sup>69</sup> Using 'Mizo' also helped to forge commonness among non-Lushai elements and scale-up the MCU's support base, something that was important for the organisation, as Hmar or Raltes categories themselves would have been too weak to contest Lushai monopoly.<sup>70</sup>

But the leaders of the MCU went beyond just providing a forum for anti-Lushai activity. To secure political leadership of the Lushai hills, the party underlined the inclusiveness of the Mizo identity. In 1947 MCU renamed itself Mizo Union (MU), thereby claiming to speak for

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<sup>67</sup> For a survey of these dynamics see McCall (1949), pp.203-207.

<sup>68</sup> J. Shakespeare, *The Lushai Kuki Clans*, London: Macmillan & Co., 1912, p.xiv.

<sup>69</sup> In the 1951 census, for example, many Raltes and Renthlai, though they spoke the Lushai duhlian dialect refused to enter themselves as Lushai. B. B. Goswami, *The Mizo Unrest: A Study of Politicization of Culture*, Jaipur: Alakh, 1979, p.23.

<sup>70</sup> This was actually a case of *reinventing*, but to give the name a different meaning so as to serve a particular purpose. It was not as if 'Mizo' was a totally new name. Tribes inhabiting the region have been known by different names to outsiders: in pre-colonial times, they were all called 'Kuki', a Bengali word for hillman. On British advent (first contacts began with confrontation with and eventual subjugation of the dominant Sailo chiefs, who belonged to the Lusei clan), the name Lushai (a derivative of the word Lusei) began to be used. This gained currency after the area was organized administratively as the Lushai Hills district. However, another name that was also occasionally used was Mizo. Some colonial accounts felt Lushais call themselves Mizao / Mizau (McCabe in Foreign Department, External Part A Prog. Dec 1892, no 43.) This was akin to the word 'Zo' often mispronounced as 'Yo', by which people have been known to refer to themselves (GA Grierson, Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. III Pt. III: 2). Yet in 1930 there were as many as 15 categories under which the population of the district was being listed; Lushai, Poi, Lakher, Hmar, Ralte, Renthlai, Khinagte, Thadou, et al, but not Mizo. (Military Report of 1930 (Vol III:201) quoted in BB Goswami 1978 : 22).

all Mizos, not only commoners.<sup>71</sup> Among its renewed objectives were to “unify and integrate all Mizo people”, “to normalise relations between chiefs and the commoners”, “to act as a representative of the Mizo people” and “to popularise the Mizo language”.<sup>72</sup> To enhance its social base, the party’s constitution listed 41 sub-tribes as those belonging to the Mizo category. Many belong to areas outside the Lushai hills, in Manipur, Tripura, Chittagong Hill Tracts and Burma.

**Table 2: Tribe/Language populations**

Tribe /Year	1901	1951	1961
Hmar	10,411	-	3,118
Lai/Pawi	15,038	8,548	4,587
Lushai	36,322	159,297	-
Mara/Lakher	Na	6,350	8,790
Mizo	-	-	213,061
Paite	2,870	3,468	-
Ralte	13,827	-	-

Source: Rev Liangkha (1947): *Mizo Chanchin –II*, Aizawl : 20; B Poonte (1965): *Zoram Thlirna*, Aizawl: 20; Goswami (1979): 18, quoted in Central YMA (1988): *Our Land and Identity*. CYMA No 29, 40-41 Aizawl and Census of India 1951, Language Tables for Assam.

Interestingly, at the core of the Mizo construct was the Duhlian language, a dialect that belonged to Sailo chiefs. Probably what motivated the leadership to use a Lushai symbol in an attempt to contest Lushai power was the place of Duhlian in the lives of people. It was this language that was the common thread between people from disparate cultural backgrounds who inhabited the Lushai hills, and even beyond. Re-emphasising their commonness was central to the MCU’s attempt to forge a common identity. One of the first tasks the MU-dominated LHDC took up was renaming the Lushai hills as Mizo Hills.<sup>73</sup> Earlier, in 1951, the Census Commission under the MU’s influence had recognised Mizo as a tribal category in Assam, facilitating the MU’s drive to consolidate the Mizo identity. By 1961 the Mizo identity was a *fait accompli*.

These were moves that would prove useful for the MU in its bid for power in the new post-Independence democratic set-up. With its broad political appeal and a large commoners’ constituency, the party was the overall gainer in the political contests. In the first elections held in the district in 1947, the MU won all but two seats to the Advisory Council. In 1952, it swept the polls to the Assam State Assembly, winning all three seats from the district. It also swept the polls to the newly constituted Lushai Hills District Council (LHDC) and the village councils. It would continue to do so to varying degrees in the elections to follow: 13 out of 22 seats in 1957, 16 out of 22 in 1962 and 9 out of 22 in 1970.<sup>74</sup> Elections to VCs since 1952 have invariably seen the election of people who traditionally belonged to non-Lushai sections. The MU and its non-Lushai constituency also reaped dividends at the local level with the party dominating a majority of village councils in the 1950s and 60s. The MU won a majority in all 381 village councils in 1952 and 1957, in 280 out of 381 councils in 1960, 228 out of

<sup>71</sup> This discussion is based on secondary sources and interviews with R. Vanlawma, founder member of MCU and MU (Aizawl, 11 July 2004).

<sup>72</sup> Mizo Union Constitution, Mizoram SA.

<sup>73</sup> The Lushai Federation opposed the act, claiming that the district had been the land of the Lushais, and that “they resented being subdued by some other tribes living amongst them”, who had “cunningly introduced the word ‘Mizo’, which had no distinctive existence” (Mizoram SA # 95-66 (General)).

<sup>74</sup> Mizoram SA # 106-37 (General) and 196-7 (General).

411 in 1963 and in 66 out of 158 councils in 1971.<sup>75</sup> Successive political parties have played up this integrative message, and have reaped its political gains. Regional parties emphasizing their Mizo credentials have on the whole performed better at the polls than national parties.

**Table 3: Party performances in elections (post-1986)**

Party/year	'87	'89	'93	'98	'03
MNF	-	14	14	21	21
Congress	13	23	16	6	12
PC	3	1	-	-	-
Other	-	-	-	12	7
Independent	24	2	10	1	-
Total	40	40	40	40	40

Source: Chief Electoral Officer, Mizoram

(MNF: Mizo National Front, PC: People's Conference, Others: Parties such as Zomi National Party–ZNP)

This meant a near-total break with the past. The shift changed the power structure in the Lushai Hills, leading to the rise of the hitherto disadvantaged sections as the dominant element in modern Mizoram. But by keeping the doors to the Mizo identity open to all sections, state-making leaders were able to broaden their social base and appeal by letting traditional elites in as well, to participate in Mizo social engineering. Much of the Mizo success with stability has been an outcome of this mechanism. It has also meant the incorporation of the social forces in the state's ruling structure, thus grounding state power firmly in 'Mizo' society, with the vehicle for this consolidation being a united Mizo identity. Social organisations have helped state-making leaders and dominant political parties in this task, by helping to consolidate the state-society compact and provide stability.

The role of the Presbyterian Church and Young Mizo Association (YMA), a quasi-church youth organisation, is significant here. As in other parts of North East region, Christian missionaries were brought into the Lushai Hills by the colonial state to help with social change and as an adjunct to colonial objectives. But unlike elsewhere, colonial administrators in the Lushai Hills depended to a greater extent on the energies of mission workers for a variety of tasks, most notably to educate its people. Missionaries ended up playing a defining role in the social life of the people and in the making of Lushai society.<sup>76</sup> The Lushai churches' principal vehicle for social change is the YMA, established to uphold *tlawngmainai*, or the code of social discipline. YMA was envisioned as a substitute for *zualbawks*, the erstwhile institution of youth dormitories that had helped Lushai chiefs maintain social control and stability in their village.<sup>77</sup>

Key areas of focus for the YMA and churches have been preserving the common Mizo identity and upholding order.<sup>78</sup> The YMA has focused on promoting "the best in Mizo culture". In recent times, it has sought to do this through "re-emphasising Christianity, sowing seeds of nationalism, searching out and preserving (Mizo) territory and having good political

<sup>75</sup> Mizoram SA # 157-12 (general) as well as personal records of Bonthanga Poonte, ex-state social welfare officer, quoted in C. Nunthara, *Mizoram: Society and Polity*, New Delhi: Indus, 1996, p.77.

<sup>76</sup> McCall (1949), pp.207-212.

<sup>77</sup> McCall, one of the last colonial administrators in the district, was one of those who felt Christian missionaries had worked to compromise the hold of Lushai chiefs and their traditions. According to him, "the changes they (missions) have wrought, have been spectacular, ...necessarily involving attack after attack on tradition" and that had given "a final blow to the authority of chiefs in Lushai society." (McCall, 1949:199).

<sup>78</sup> Lalruatkima, 'Preserving National Identity', YMA General Conference, Khawzawl, 2002, (Vawi 57-na); and Lal Chungnuna, 'Self Reliance', Central YMA General Conference, Thenzawl, 2003 (Vawi 58 – NA).

leaders”.<sup>79</sup> Its close relationship with the state is underlined by the fact that the constitution of the YMA declares, “government is our government”. Government departments have closely involved the YMA in implementation of their development programmes.<sup>80</sup> For its part, the dominant Presbyterian Church has been actively seeking to promote order in society and encourage ‘ethical politics’. It regularly issues directions to candidates and to voters for peaceful conduct of elections.<sup>81</sup> It also organises political education seminars and political awareness campaigns besides the usual clutch of social interventions.<sup>82</sup>

The Presbyterian Church and the YMA are key institutions of Mizo society. Their organisational strength and reach make them powerful instruments of social control. Both are structured as centralised bureaucracies. 98% of the state’s population is Christian. The Presbyterian Church, the dominant one in the state, has an apex Synod controlling individual churches down to the village level in a tightly organised network. The YMA network is equally extensive and organised. The Central YMA (CYMA) that sits at the apex in Aizawl tightly controls around seven hundred branches in Mizoram and beyond, organised at village and regional levels.<sup>83</sup> The YMA claims that every Mizo youth in the state and outside is a member of the organisation. In effect each member of the Mizo community is bound into the Church-YMA framework. The organisational strengths of these bodies also means they have sizeable budgets, financed by individual and public contributions.

**Table 4: Annual Budget of key Social Organisations (Rs. ‘000)**

	2002-2003	2003-2004
Presbyterian Synod	353,786	386,682
Central YMA	9,207	9,501

Source: Mizoram Presbyterian Synod Annual Reports  
Central YMA Annual Reports

The centralised nature of these organisations, and their large budgets, means they are able to manage their entire organisation right down to the individual village level and demand compliance with their programmes and directions. Adding to integrative capacity of these social organisations is cross-membership among them as well as that with agencies of the state.<sup>84</sup> The president of the Central YMA, Lianzala, is a middle-level civil servant in the state government’s health department. Similarly the administrative head of the department tasked with essential supplies, is also the head of the local branch of the YMA besides being a senior member of the Church. In fact a majority of the YMA’s key office bearers are government employees. Most of them also happen to be senior church members. Since the churches and the YMA between them make up the core of civil society in Mizoram, this bonding helps preempt many state-society conflicts.<sup>85</sup> It is no wonder that the issues the YMA and Church have

<sup>79</sup> Central YMA General conference, Khawzawl, 22-24 October 2002, (Vawi 57-na).

<sup>80</sup> Recent partnerships have been in provision of essential services and in implementation of development projects. Central YMA is a key actor in state government’s Intodelha (self-sufficiency) Project launched in the 90s, and in its recently started land allotment programme to the poor. *Newslink*, Aizawl, May 23, 2003.

<sup>81</sup> Synod Executive Committee meeting with new MLAs of the Assembly (17-2-1994); Mizoram Synod Social Front Occasional Bulletin # 2. March 1994

<sup>82</sup> Synod Bu (Annual Report), Vawi 76-na (2000), 77-na (2001), 78-na (2002). Aizawl: Mizoram Presbyterian Synod.

<sup>83</sup> YMA Report 2004. Aizawl: Central YMA.

<sup>84</sup> This could perhaps be the result of colonial state-missionaries alliances in education and other social fields (McCall (1949), pp.203-205).

<sup>85</sup> Interview, Thanhawla, Secretary to the Government of Mizoram (Aizawl, 2 July 2004).

usually emphasised are peace and order; unity and a common Mizo identity; good ‘Christian behaviour’; and social and political responsibility.

State-society relations in Mizoram are thus significantly different from those in Manipur. Firstly, state-making leaders politicised the common Mizo identity to thwart challenges from traditional and particularistic centres of authority. Mizo identity was so packaged as to include all elements of Mizo society, including those that challenged the construct. Construction of the Mizo ethnic category and its politicisation was thus central to the state-making exercise. Political advantages associated with this social engineering helped institutionalise the Mizo construct. Contributing to this integrative process was the history of patterns of close relationships between the state and the principal social organisations in the Lushai Hills. In more recent times, the state has leveraged the strengths of these social organisations to re-emphasise the inclusive Mizoness of society and uphold order and stability in the state.

### **State Autonomy and Capacity**

What has been the overall impact of state-society dynamics on contemporary politics in Manipur and Mizoram? How have divergent modes of politicisation of identity in the two states had an impact on the respective state’s ability to govern and to respond to community demands? How has it affected their capacity to manage community conflicts? And crucially, how have the particular historical experiences of the two states with identity mobilisation affected inter-community relations among them? It is these questions that I address in this final section to understand the conditions that create violence in one and enable relative peace in another. I begin by exploring whether, and to what extent, the state in Manipur is accessible to its minority communities. As tests for accessibility I take access to public office, the state’s allocation and transfer of resources and its readiness to share power with minority communities. I then explore how minorities have responded to their poor accessibility to the state (or otherwise) and the impact this has had on politics in the state. I conduct a similar test for Mizoram, exploring what aids minorities’ access to resources and power, and the implications of this accessibility for social cohesion and state legitimacy.

### ***Manipur’s ‘limited’ state***

Metei mobilisation by the state’s dominant state-making leaders has had consequences for the large non-Metei population. They have complained about state institutions being partisan. Tribal organisations believe they have been excluded and that the state government has not been fair in distribution of resources to their areas. The poor condition of educational and health services, adverse economic conditions and poor infrastructure in these areas have often been the source of tribal complaints and their consequent anti-state mobilisation. Often these complaints have resonated with findings of the government itself.<sup>86</sup> Tribal communities in Manipur have often complained of their poor representation in state government jobs and of the paucity of personnel and poor functioning of public offices in the hills. While it is mandatory to have at least 31 per cent tribal employees in all government departments,<sup>87</sup> few departments have been able to meet this target, sometimes due to a shortage of adequately qualified candidates, but mostly on account of a lack of political and bureaucratic

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<sup>86</sup> Statistical Tables of Manipur: Department of Economics and Statistics, Government of Manipur, 2004.

<sup>87</sup> This is against the all-India reservation of 7.5%, based on proportionate composition of ‘tribal’ communities at the national level. According to the 1971 census, tribal communities make up 31% of Manipur’s population. See Manipur SA # G-FA/12/54, R/18-5, 352 on this debate in the Parliament.

commitment.<sup>88</sup> There is also a very skewed manning of government offices between the hills and the valley districts. Tribal groups have often complained of abundance of staff in Imphal and other valley districts, while government establishments in hill districts are perpetually short of them.<sup>89</sup>

Aggravating the situation is the perception among tribal communities of poor investment in hill areas, poor implementation of development programmes and absence of basic infrastructure. The Hills make up some 9/10<sup>ths</sup> of the total area of the state. Tribal communities, who exclusively inhabit them, constitute 37 per cent of the state's total population. A survey of budget allocations for hill districts in fiscal 2004-05 throws up some interesting figures: only 26 per cent of the total budget of the Education Department was allocated for the five hill districts. It wasn't any better in other departments: 25 per cent of the Health department's budget and 22 per cent of the budget of the Public Works Department's (PWD), the agency responsible for roads and other works. In the other key departments of social welfare and agriculture, the allocation was 14 per cent and 12 per cent respectively.<sup>90</sup> A similar imbalance characterizes credit to the Hills as a proportion of total credit to the state: 21.4 per cent in 2003 and only 7.8 per cent in 2002.<sup>91</sup> The outcome of low levels of investment in the Hills has been along predictable lines. Four out of five hill districts figure at the bottom of the heap on the human development index.<sup>92</sup> These districts also have a larger proportion of the poor than their valley counterparts.<sup>93</sup>

Tribal organisations see most of these problems arising out of the state government's concentrating political powers in Metei hands and their reluctance to share power with other communities. Although administrative powers have been devolved to local bodies in valley districts, complaints have been voiced about how there has been a gradual disempowerment of elected local bodies in the hills. Elections to local bodies in valley districts have been conducted regularly, while their charter of administrative authority and their resource base has been expanded.<sup>94</sup> There has been little of that in the hills. Elections to ADCs set up in 1973, under the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act 1971, have not been held since 1990.<sup>95</sup> The state government has since directly controlled them. Village Authorities, set up under provisions of Manipur Village Authorities (in the Hill Areas) Act 1956, have similarly remained a damp squib. Set up on the lines of traditional village councils, they have little powers to implement development projects and are generally sidelined by the bureaucratic machinery. Elections to them have been irregular and they have mostly been captured by

<sup>88</sup> In a Public Interest Litigation filed in Guwahati High Court by H. Nengsong, on behalf of Manipur Tribal Employees Association (MTEA), it was claimed there were only 20.3% Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the Medical department, 8.5% in Education, 21.8% in Police and 16% in the Manipur Secretariat.

<sup>89</sup> Memorandum submitted by Movement for Tribal People's Rights, Manipur (MTPRM) to state Chief Minister, Imphal, 1 March 2003.

<sup>90</sup> Finance Department, Government of Manipur, 2004.

<sup>91</sup> Minutes of the State Level Bankers' Coordination Committee Meetings, Union Bank of India, Manipur Regional Office, Imphal: Various issues.

<sup>92</sup> Department of Economics and Statistics, Government of Manipur, Human Development Series 2003.

<sup>93</sup> 19.33 % in Imphal, 26.24 % in Bishnupur and 24.39 % in Thoubal, all valley districts. For the hills: 40 % in Churachandpur, 44.4 % in Ukhrul, 42 % in Chandel, 51.3 % in Senapati and 54.5 % in Tamenglong (Estimates of the Proportion of Poor in Manipur: NSS 55<sup>th</sup> Round, 1999-2000).

<sup>94</sup> 'Cabinet Clears Devolution of Powers to Panchayati Raj', *The Imphal Free Press*, 20 September 2005.

<sup>95</sup> ADCs in Manipur were established under the 5<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the constitution, unlike those in Mizoram (and other Northeast states) under the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule. While the latter have extensive legislative, executive and judicial powers and secure sources of finance, 5<sup>th</sup> Schedule ADCs have little autonomy. Manipur's tribal leaders have been demanding conversion of their ADCs to 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule status and have, since 1990, been boycotting ADC elections to press their demands.



powerful local elites. Governance in the hills has in effect, seen a movement towards greater disempowerment. It has reverted to direct administration under state bureaucracy. Line departments, which so far have worked through their district offices, are increasingly becoming centralised with almost all development schemes being formulated and implemented from the state capital. Inadequate access to jobs, poor functioning of state institutions in the hills and reluctance of the state to share power with local communities in hill districts have fed into mounting tribal alienation. Moved by their apparent neglect, tribal leaders and organisations have frequently resorted to protests and strikes.

The state government's response to these grievances has been less than robust. It has mostly dithered, tried to buy time and sought short-term compromises. Much of this inertia could be the result of pressures on the state from Metei civil society groups. Metei associations have been vocal in opposing tribal demands. Citing existing legislation that benefits tribal communities, these associations question the need for additional safeguards. Metei groups have been resentful of reservations for tribal communities in jobs within the central public sector, claiming that opportunities for educated Metei youth are limited. They have also demanded that existing land laws in the state under the MLR&LR Act 1960 be extended to Hills areas, to relieve some of the pressure on land in the Valley. They argue that while there are large tracts of unutilised land in Hill districts, cultivable land in the Valley is scarce.<sup>96</sup> Metei groups have also opposed tribal demands for conversion of ADCs to 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule status, citing dangers to Manipur's 'territorial integrity' due to possible creation of 'states within state'.<sup>97</sup> Mainstream political leaders have tended to go along with these interpretations, reaffirming Metei fears.<sup>98</sup> The state's perceived inaction on tribal grievances and Metei civil society's opposition to their demands have led to tribal alienation. Of late, tribal organisations have increasingly begun raising demands for division of the state and separate administrative units for themselves. With rising socio-economic challenges, the cycle of conflicts has become unending.

A telling consequence of the playing-out of contests has been the highly conflictual nature of politics in Manipur. Politics in the state have moved to the streets. Strikes, *bandhs* (public closures), road blockades and protests by citizen's groups are common. There were 34 *bandhs* in 2001 and 38 in 2002, leading to an average of two months of working days lost each year on account of them.<sup>99</sup> The state's poor autonomy means it is constantly hemmed in by social forces each pursuing its limited interests. Frustration with the state's inability to govern is so pronounced that a local paper noting "There is no indication of any rule of law in the state" and that "nobody respects the law", was forced to ask, "who exactly is running the state?"<sup>100</sup> Paralysis of the state, its weakness and poor authority, have undermined the state's role as the framework for resolving inter-community conflicts. With little direction from the state, public organisations have had a field day, mobilising support along particularistic lines. These have

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<sup>96</sup> Both measures stem from constitutional provisions that seek to neutralise structural disadvantages faced by tribal communities in the country. The first seeks to provide tribals access to public employment, while the second aims to prevent alienation of tribal land to outsiders. Yet the fact of restricted opportunities for non-tribal youth in the state and rising pressure on Valley land is indisputable.

<sup>97</sup> *Sangai Express* (Imphal), 31 October 2002.

<sup>98</sup> R. K. Ranbir, Ex-Chief Minister, recently warned of loss of territorial integrity of the state if 6<sup>th</sup> schedule demand was conceded (*The Imphal Free Press*, 2 November 2002).

<sup>99</sup> According to the state Finance Department, losses due to *bandhs* in a single year amount to about Rs 32.18 billion in a year, more than double the annual Plan resource that Manipur receives from the Centre. While *bandhs* do not much affect the salaried class, labourers, daily wage earners and those engaged in the farming sector are hit hard (*Sangai Express* (Imphal), 29 September 2005).

<sup>100</sup> 'No Difference', Editorial *The Imphal Free Press*, 24 June 1998.

spawned sustained and multiplying conflicts. Inter-community mobilisation in this situation tends to quickly degenerate into violence. The enduring picture is one of a weak state, with little autonomy, hemmed in by powerful social forces. The state's actions feed into patterns of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation in the political arena. With the state controlling most resources, contestations for a share of these continues incessantly, leading to frequent breakdown.

### **Accommodation in Mizoram**

State-making leaders in Mizoram ensured that mobilisation around Mizo identity was inclusive. This, and the need to maintain the Mizo edifice, ensures that the state is sensitive to minority concerns and takes them on board. Different social groups within the Mizo constellation have better representation in the agencies of the state government. Hmars and Raltes, due to their advancement in education and commerce and Lushais due to their political power are evenly represented in state government structures. It is true that minority communities such as Maras and Lai, as well as Chakmas, do not find proportionate representation in state bureaucracy.<sup>101</sup> Yet the presence of separate ADCs for these communities, under 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule provisions, ensures they get a relatively fair share of resources and political power.<sup>102</sup> Chakma ADC employs 996 persons, all Chakmas; Lai ADC, 1648 persons; and Mara ADC, 1580 persons of their particular group, an average of 3% of each community's population.<sup>103</sup> Mizoram is also one of the few states in the region where minority communities effectively control resources and their way of life. Among other things, elected ADCs have significant control over how land, forests and other natural resources in their jurisdiction are utilised, what laws are followed to order social life and what language is used in local schools.

Undoubtedly, ADCs in Mizoram came about not due to any proactive policies of state government but because of central interventions. Yet the fact that the three have been functioning, and have the full support of the state government, speaks of the government's attitude.<sup>104</sup> It will be fruitful here to examine the state's response to political demands by sections of Hmar and Bru communities. The Singlung Hills Development Council (SHDC), an outcome of negotiations between the rebel Hmar People's Convention (HPC) and the state government, tries to replicate the ADC example for the Hmar community, albeit on a less grand scale. While SHDC may have its weak spots (fund transfers are not statutory, there is little in the scheme for control over land and resources as well over cultural aspects of the Hmar community), its very presence, and the readiness of the state government to think in terms of autonomy for those with grievances, has helped moderate their sense of being wronged.<sup>105</sup> The Mizoram government's agreeing to a similar arrangement for Bru group recently was the basis for the Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF) agreeing to give up their violent activities.<sup>106</sup> Significantly, in both instances, it was not the central government that

<sup>101</sup> Making up a poor 0.7% of Mizoram State Secretariat's strength (Memorandum of the United Lai Chakma Mara Union Territory (ULCM UT) Demand Committee to the Prime Minister, 2000, p.9).

<sup>102</sup> This is despite the alleged poor representation of minority communities in state government services. (ULCM UT Demand Committee memo to the PM, 2000).

<sup>103</sup> State government with total staff strength of 42,883 employs some 4.5 % of the population.

<sup>104</sup> There have been calls by Mizo public organisations and sometimes by political parties, for the abolition of Chakma ADC. Mizos believe the Assam government foisted it on them, without there being a case for it. Yet all political parties have, from time to time, forged political alliances with Chakma leaders and have facilitated Chakma ADC's functioning. No such calls have been made for Mara and Lai ADCs.

<sup>105</sup> Memorandum of Settlement between Government of Mizoram and HPC, Aizawl (27 July 1994).

<sup>106</sup> BNLF and Mizoram Government signed a Memorandum of Understanding on 26 April 2005, *South Asia Intelligence Review*, 3:42 (2 May 2005).

was leading talks with militants, but the state government. ADCs and the SHDC have ensured that development investment in minority areas is less iniquitous. ADCs act as channels for much of the developmental interventions of the state in remote pockets inhabited by minority tribes. Statutory transfers from the state to the ADCs means that these regions, and more importantly the elite tied to them, get substantial resources over which they have direct control.

**Table 5 Transfers to ADCs in Mizoram**

ADC	Population (2001)	Villages	9 <sup>th</sup> Plan outlay (97-02) in million Rs.	10 <sup>th</sup> Plan outlay (02-07) in million Rs.	Non plan transfers from state (00-05) in million Rs.
Lai	51,878	83	290.5	393.3	706.0
Mara	50,188	60	249.8	343.2	635.5
Chakma	32,807	69	172.4	244.7	335.3

Source: Draft 10<sup>th</sup> 5-year plan (2002-2007), Government of Mizoram and Mizoram Government's Memorandum to Tenth Finance Commission, Feb 2004.)

Representation of different communities, including minorities, in the administrative and political structures of the state, and with the state enabling minorities to exercise control over local resources and their way of life, has helped bind elites from minority communities in patterns of mutual relationships with the state structure. Political parties have contributed to this process. The Congress party, when it was in power in the 1990s, and the ruling Mizo National Front in more recent times, have often forged political alliances with elites from minority communities. This has been a win-win exercise. While this has helped bring minority viewpoints onto the state agenda, mainstream Mizo parties have managed to obtain a toehold in minority constituencies. Congress in Mizoram has traditionally enjoyed a special place among Chakmas and Maras, and has consistently opposed demands for dissolution of these ADCs.<sup>107</sup> The MNF, which on many occasions was the party moving the resolutions for dissolution of Chakma ADC, recently welcomed a large number of Chakma leaders into its fold.<sup>108</sup> It has slowly been making inroads in Chakma ADC and now heads the coalition in power there. Until recently, the MNF had an alliance with the lone Mara Democratic Front (MDF) representative in the state assembly, a move that helped the party safeguard its majority in the state assembly. In the past, MNF had established a political alliance with HPC promising to support Hmar autonomy demands in return for electoral support.<sup>109</sup> The recent break-through in Mizo-Bru talks is also being seen as an outcome of similar political deals between the ruling-Mizo National Front (MNF) and the Bru leaders.<sup>110</sup> Elite alliances have worked to help integrate minorities into the Mizo body politic.

Perhaps what motivates political parties to be accommodative is the overpowering legacy of the Mizo Union, which had turned political alliance-making into a basic tenet of its policy. We saw earlier how MU in its state-making phase chose to reach out to communities to gain

<sup>107</sup> Records of debates in Mizoram State Assembly: Secretariat, Mizoram Legislative Assembly, Aizawl.

<sup>108</sup> *Newslink* (Aizawl) reported induction of many Chakmas and Brus into the party, noting, "this is in sharp contrast to MNF's anti-Chakma ADC attitude in the past, when they were seated in the opposition benches" (27 May 2003).

<sup>109</sup> MNF-Hmar Volunteer Welfare Association Agreement dated February 17, 1998. Personal papers of Hmingchungna, past President, HPC, Aizawl.

<sup>110</sup> BNLF and Mizoram Government signed a Memorandum of Understanding on 26 April 2005 (*South Asia Intelligence Review*, 3:42 (2 May 2005)).

the upper hand in electoral politics rather than to 'divide and rule'. Perhaps an equally important incentive for political parties in Mizoram today is the need to project the state as the model for peace in the Northeast. Mizo leaders take immense pride in their state's peaceful climate and have often offered themselves for services to neighbouring states as well as the central government to broker peace with insurgent groups in the region.<sup>111</sup> Perhaps they also realise that the only way they can maintain peace in their state and retain their pride of place in the region is by being accommodating to those who could upset the applecart.<sup>112</sup>

Adding to the dynamic is the fact that the state in Mizoram enjoys greater legitimacy and a good public image. This could be on account of the state's high degree of social control and the state-society compact. Analysts see absence of enduring violence as an outcome of the people's faith in the government's capacity for fair play:

It is probably because the state functions in a just manner, transparently and is effective that has prevented the slide down. People have still not lost faith in the state's capacity to govern. Frustration, ...has not become inconsolable.<sup>113</sup>

The state's capability is evident from the way public projects and programmes have been implemented. An example is the implementation of the Public Distribution System (PDS), a national food security programme, for which Mizoram has received wide acclaim.<sup>114</sup> Crucial to the success of the programme has been involvement of civil society organisations like the YMA in implementation and monitoring. Wide public participation and sharing of information has helped prevent mismanagement and leakages, so common to implementation of PDS in other Indian states.<sup>115</sup> A similar state-society partnership in promoting primary education has helped the state attain enviable levels of literacy. Serchip district recently created history by recording 100 % enrolment. The state has added other feathers to its cap. Recently, it claimed to be the first e-governance state in the North East and the first to introduce the Right to Information Act, an act likely to improve the quality of governance.<sup>116</sup> Its capability and effectiveness have helped the state retain its legitimacy in society. Thus in marked contrast to state-society dynamics in Manipur, social organisations in Mizoram, tied as they are to the state, have helped enhance the state's capability and resultant legitimacy. This has prevented state-society contestation and has reinforced the positive inter-community dynamics in the state.

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<sup>111</sup> 'Centre asks Zoramthanga ...to talk to NSCN (IM)', *Times of India* (Guwahati), 13 July 2004.

<sup>112</sup> It has been argued by Baruah that protective discrimination regimes, especially those seeking connection of group entitlements to collective goods (such as ADCs for specific communities), have exacerbated ethnic contestations in the North East (Baruah, 2005, p.11). This has found favour with other commentators (Chandoke, 2005, p.25). While there may be a grain of truth in the contention, the crucial point is that protective discrimination regimes are not new to Indian policymaking; their legacy can be traced to colonial times. Hence it may be a bit late in the day to reverse their impact. Further, as demonstrated by the comparison of the state's response to autonomy/decentralisation demands in Manipur and Mizoram, a policy favouring accommodation is better suited to maintaining peace than otherwise. Moreover, as again demonstrated by the two cases, demands for protective regimes become intense when groups begin to feel excluded. Demands for 'homeland' by Manipur's minorities could be a case of playing out of competitive identity mobilisation. But underpinning these demands is the exclusion of minority communities from the power structure.

<sup>113</sup> Interview, Vanlalchuanna, Political analyst (Aizawl, 25 June 2004).

<sup>114</sup> 'Successful BPL scheme', *North East Tribune* (Aizawl), 19 June 2005.

<sup>115</sup> Based on discussion with R. Thanhawla, Secretary FCS Government of Mizoram (Aizawl, 2 July 2004).

<sup>116</sup> *North East Tribune* (Guwahati), 11 & 28 September 2005.

In Manipur, the state-making leaders' politicising of Meitei identity excluded minority communities and caused their alienation. This severely reduced the state's legitimacy in the latter's eyes. The state's autonomy has also been constrained due to the poor authority it has been able to garner historically. This has affected the state's capacity to manage and resolve conflicts. Social organisations that have leveraged traditional centres of authority have mobilised against each other in an attempt to wrest resources and benefits and authority. The result has been a cycle of conflicts. In Mizoram, state-making leaders politicised Mizo identity for the same purpose. But they imagined Mizo identity in inclusive terms and kept it open to all communities, thus enhancing their legitimacy. The process of state-making itself consolidated the state's hold over power at the cost of traditional centres of authority, thus enhancing state's autonomy. The close working relationship between key social organisations and the state institutions in Mizoram has further helped this process of consolidation. This has helped resolve conflicts and maintain peace.

### **Conclusion**

I began this paper by arguing that divergence in violent outcomes between Manipur and Mizoram can be explained best by looking at the processes of state-making in the two states and the contrasting ways in which state-making leaders and those who were opposing them mobilised their constituencies to capture power in the early years of state-making. This had implications for the state's capacity to govern, and specifically its readiness to respond to group aspirations. Where the state has been responsive and inclusive, it has avoided cycles of conflict and violence. On the other hand, the state's reluctance to respond to minority aspirations provides the material for sustained violence and breakdown. What are the lessons that we can derive from this analysis?

Firstly, the authority of the state depends on where state power lies. In the state-making period, state elites and key social forces have been engaged in long drawn out struggles over control. Where state elites succeeded in incorporating social forces into state structures, their authority has been augmented, while that of competing social forces has declined. Where social forces were not incorporated, or where the state sought to ride piggyback on pre-existing centres of authority, state power was compromised. The role of the colonial state was significant in this process in both Manipur and Mizoram. What is remarkable is that the colonial administration was employing two very different strategies in its attempt to rule tracts of adjoining territory. In Mizoram, even though the conquest had been designed initially to prevent Lushai chiefs from raiding the plains areas in Bengal, the colonial state was taking a more proactive role and interest. Through ruling by proxy with the help of chiefs, the state sought to get closer to the people and ground itself in Lushai society.

In Manipur, the state remained a distant lord. Its presence in the hills was marginal. Pre-existing institutions and power centres among tribal communities continued to rule with only small adjustments. In the valley, the state was at best an overseer of proceedings. This was partly due to the presence of a developed polity that the colonial state encountered in the state in the form of the Meitei kingship. Cultural considerations may also have prevented the state from attempting to ground itself in Hinduized Meitei society. In Mizoram, the state actively used Christian missionaries as agents of social change among hitherto animist tribes. Missionary activity helped enhance the state's legitimacy in society. The colonial state was therefore better integrated in Lushai hills than it was in the Manipur kingdom. The result of this integration was a consolidated state-making exercise.

Secondly, the colonial legacy has implications for strategies used by the elite in their post-colonial state-making efforts. Literature abounds on how ruling coalitions have used a variety of tools for this purpose: from electoral incorporation, to state patronage and programmatic reforms, to developing organisational capacity to govern or simply by repression.<sup>117</sup> Where does the Northeast example fit in this context? Are there other strategies that ruling coalitions in Manipur and Mizoram have used for their state-making objectives? Political parties and other elites have frequently politicised ethnic identities in the region in their struggles over power and authority. Ethnic mobilisation, therefore, may be serving objectives that electoral incorporation or land reforms may have served elsewhere. However, empirical material proves that ethnic mobilisation can be a double-edged sword: it can reinforce the state and enhance its overall capacity and legitimacy in society; but it can also diminish its strengths, compromise its legitimacy and further fragment society. That outcome will depend on whether identity construction and mobilisation is inclusive and aggregative, or partisan and exclusionary. The manner of identity mobilisation thus has serious consequences for inter-community relations and violence.

Thirdly, the state's role in managing the aspirations of minority communities plays a big part in how those communities mobilise. Where the state is seen as being accessible to minorities, chances are these communities will have a stake in upholding the system. Administrative arrangements enabling self-governance for minority tribes in Mizoram has meant that elite and even more restive elements from these communities have been incorporated into the state's political system, thus taking their attention away from the need to mobilise for a share of power. Similar patterns of relationships between elites among minorities and mainstream political parties have also been forged as an outcome of the political process. These relationships have helped reduce intercommunity tensions in Mizoram. Manipur's heightened contestations could be the outcome of perceptions among minorities that the state was reluctant to share power and resources with them.

Lastly, a common strategy used by state elites to enhance state authority has been to develop their organisational capacity. This has usually implied working through political and state institutions. Material from Mizoram demonstrates that beyond state organisations, it is social organisations that elites have fostered to help enhance the state's capability. The YMA and the Church have had established patterns of relationship with the state in Mizoram. The strength of these organisations has been used by state elites to reinforce the state's capacity. This state-society bonding, largely an outcome of the historical process, has helped prevent fragmentation in politics. It has fostered stability and order. In Manipur, the state-society break and fragmentation of social forces themselves has led to a rising spiral of competitive mobilisation between different social organisations and the state. Resultant poor state autonomy has led to social forces constraining the state from behaving in ways that could be seen by all groups as fair and objective.

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<sup>117</sup> Deborah Yashar, *Demanding Democracy: Reform and Reaction in Costa Rica and Guatemala (1870s-1950s)*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, pp.215-229.

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### Research Objectives

- 1 We will assess how constellations of power at local, national and global levels drive processes of institutional change, collapse and reconstruction and in doing so will challenge simplistic paradigms about the beneficial effects of economic and political liberalisation.
- 2 We will examine the effects of international interventions promoting democratic reform, human rights and market competition on the 'conflict management capacity' and production and distributional systems of existing polities.
- 3 We will analyse how communities have responded to crisis, and the incentives and moral frameworks that have led either toward violent or non-violent outcomes.
- 4 We will examine what kinds of formal and informal institutional arrangements poor communities have constructed to deal with economic survival and local order.



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