

Manipur & Tripura

Manipur and Tripura are often bracketed together and most people who are not familiar with the geography and terrain of the North East would tend to think that they are contiguous territories. Before we come to the peculiar and particular issues which affect them both, let us first look at what is common to them. The fates of the two states have been intertwined from 1947 – both the rulers had sent a common representative to the Constituent Assembly, Girja Shankar Guha, both signed the Instrument of Accession in 1947, and both merged their states to the Indian Union in 1949, were initially placed under Chief Commissioners, narrowly missed integration with Assam, and became Union Territories in 1956. Both received statehood in 1972 but this did not mark an end to ethnic insurgencies, extremist ideologies and clashes. Both states also shared the common cadre for the All India services from 1972 -2014, and there have been no territorial alterations to these states post -1947.

Let us however step back two centuries. Tripura accepted the protection of the British in 1809, while Manipur accepted the subsidiary alliance in 1824. Both were salute states, with Tripura's status being a notch higher - it had a thirteen gun salute as compared to eleven guns for Manipur. However post-Independence, large parts of Tripura territory went to East Pakistan, but there was a major movement of Bengali Hindus to the state thereby reducing the ethnic tribal population to a minority, with all its violent ramifications. It may also be mentioned that during the Raj, the superintendence of Manipur was with the Governor of Assam, while for Tripura it was with the Governor of Bengal. The Ruling family and the elite in both the states were heavily influenced by Bengali language, art, culture and religious mores, but to a substantial tribal population, this was a sign of cultural imposition.

In the immediate aftermath of Independence, the entire Assam province was in turmoil. Even though the Sixth Schedule was applied, *mutatis mutandis* to the Excluded and Partially Excluded areas under the GoI Act of 1935, – the Autonomous councils started on a rather inauspicious note

- while the Nagas rejected it outright, Assam was most reluctant to give up any powers. When Manipur and Tripura became Union Territories, the dominant ethnic groups were also reluctant to share power /cede territory /autonomy to others. In the case of Manipur, the Meities were dominant in the Imphal valley, but the hills were controlled by the Kukis and the Nagas –both in longstanding and violent conflict with each other. The Kukis and Nagas had their distinct systems of land management and governance. While Naga lands were held by the community, Kukis were oriented towards a hereditary chiefship. As if this was not enough, the ethno-religious group of Meitei Muslims, called Pangals or Pangams was also engaged in violent assertions of identity. Manipur was one state where every ethnic group had its own militia, and at some point of time had engaged in internecine warfare with each other, as well as with security forces. The groups splintered and proliferated, both on ideological and personality factors, but in general, the Meitei insurgents sought independence from India, Kukis wanted a separate state and Nagas wished to merge with Greater Nagaland or Nagalim, which was in sharp conflict with Meitei insistence on the territorial integrity of their state. After decades of internecine warfare, there is now a sense of fatigue and understanding that all groups will have to make working adjustments. Besides there is also a sense of a North East and Manipuri identity, and the expectations of catching up with the rest of the country.

This column must acknowledge that Manipur was also home to Rani Gaidinilu who led the resistance movement of the Heraka cult in the 1930s among the Zeliangrong tribes: Kabui, Puimeis, Zemi and Liangmeis against the British, as well as against the missionaries, whom she felt were destroying their traditional belief systems. Arrested at the tender age of seventeen, she was released after 1947, and was opposed to Phizo's struggle for Naga independence. She received the Tamra Patra for freedom fighters in 1972, and the Padma Bhushan in 1982, but is now a forgotten figure as many of her own kinsmen are now Christians, and the movement for the revival Heraka is now liminal. Another hero from Manipur, whose contribution to the determination of India's borders is unparalleled is Major Ralengnao (Bob) Khathing who, had led the contingent of Assam Rifles to Tawang in 1952, directed that the Lamas refrain from sending their ritual tribute to Lhasa – thereby making it

possible for Dalai Lama to make it the first halt on his 1959 escape to India. He was also the Deputy Commissioner of Mokukchung when the Naga conventions were held in 1956 and 1959 to renounce violence and accept statehood within the Indian Union. He rose to be the Chief Secretary of Assam, and later became our Ambassador to Burma, as Myanmar was then known. He was also accorded the honour of the Padma Shri in 1957!