



Political Ecology Of Poppy Cultivation In Myanmar And Its Impact On Ethnic Relations In Manipur.

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Abstract

Political ecology is one of the important concepts in studying and contextualising environmental issues. The key references used in the paper explain the spatial relationships of a national and international web of drug production and trafficking. The paper is an attempt to trace the human and environmental interface in a context which leads to conflicts between two mutually co-existing ethnic groups, say the Meiteis and Kukis in the recent past. The paper also tries to understand the cause of the outbreak of the May 3rd 2023 violence between the two communities while raising several issues like what fuelled the outbreak of the violence; are there invisible factors and hands that gain from the conflict? The conflict needs to be examined from a wider lens as it apparently involves forces which are extraneous. For instance, the political instability in Myanmar, long infatuated insurgency movement, large-scale drug trafficking, difficult terrain, unman long porous border, FRM and its spill over to Manipur have played significant role in escalating Manipur conundrum. The moot question, however, is whether the conflict has significantly affected the political economic profile of the region, and Manipur state. Hill-Valley as hyphenated space seems to be becoming a ground for further division and identity politics.

Keywords: ASTUM, FMR, Golden Pentagon, Political Ecology and Drugs

I. Background

Manipur, a north-eastern state in India, is again plagued by the ghost of ethnic tension. Unrest has been simmering in the state for long. Since the beginning of 2023, for several reasons, politics took a different turn. On May 3, the 'Tribal Solidarity March' organized by the All-Tribal Students' Union of Manipur (ATSUM), took a violent turn as fight broke out in several sites (Deka, 2023) in the Kuki dominated areas of Churachandpur town of Manipur state. One of the key aspects of Manipur conundrum is the political economy of opium poppy. Despite having many factors, the political ecology of poppy growing in Myanmar is intimately related to this disturbance. Following the military takeover in Myanmar in February 2021, poppy plantation witnessed exponential growth in Chin State of Myanmar, which is just about 60 kilometres from the border town of Moreh, Manipur.

Poppy cultivation had a notable rise in 2022, as reported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), reversing the prior downward trend observed from 2014 to 2020 (Achom, 2023). Manipur, sharing nearly 400 km border with Myanmar, has been adversely affected by the rise in poppy production, resulting in drug trafficking and associated ethnic strife. In response to the escalating drug crisis, the Manipur

government initiated a 'war on drugs' in 2017, concentrating specifically on eradicating poppy production. Despite these measures, the problem persists, exacerbating inter-communal tensions. The Chief Minister's Office has presented data illustrating the widespread impact of drugs on the state's youth and has consistently attributed the drug issue to 'immigrants' from Myanmar (Goswami, 2023). The long-standing concurrence of the Meitei and Kuki communities had been intruded by multiple causes, such as the illegal immigration and forests land encroachment for poppy cultivation, leading to the recent conflict. The state's strong anti-drug enterprise punctuates the issues of resource competition and ethnical indigeneity, which are central to the socio-political complications of the conflict (Singh & Keshot, 2024). Dragged ethical pressures, political incuriosity, and the covert backing of insurrectionary groups have all aggravated the deteriorating law and order situation in Manipur. The violence appears to have been boosted by unlimited poppy cultivation and demographic changes evidently eased by the passable border with Myanmar. Moreover, the inhospitable terrain and an underdeveloped border region provided an ideal avenue for the insurgents, non-state actors, and drug and weapon traffickers to operate with impunity on either side of the Manipur–Myanmar border and spread their network (Majumdar, 2020). The central government has sent in emergency forces to quell the violence, but the situation is still unstable and is affecting neighbouring states like Mizoram, Assam, and Nagaland (Ahuja, 2023). The route extends beyond Manipur, surpassing the Golden Triangle to form a further comprehensive conveyance corridor called the Golden Pentagon, which encompasses Vietnam-Cambodia and Nagaland -Manipur in Northeast India (Neihisial, 2022).

II. Revisiting the Political Historicity

Manipur situated in Northeast India, has experienced ethnic violence since May 3, 2023, causing the displacement of over 60,000 individuals and more than 230 fatalities due to conflicts between Meitei and Kuki. The state is home to several ethnic groups, including the Meiteis, Nagas, and Chin-Kuki-Mizos, each with distinct cultural and religious identities. The Meiteis are predominantly Hindus residing in the Imphal valley, while the Nagas and Kukis, who are mainly Christians, inhabit the surrounding hilly region. The historical tensions and politics of marginalisation have significantly contributed to the persistent ethnic stress in Manipur. The hill areas constitute 92% of the state's geographical area and 8 percent of land areas are occupied by the Meiteis. This uneven distribution of land resources has fuelled longstanding insecurities and grievances among the communities particularly from the perspective of the Meiteis/Meiteis.

The responses of the central government and the state have further aggravated the ethnic tension. Communities have become indeed more distrustful and uneasy as a result of the central government's reimposition of the Disturbed Area designation under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in six state police stations (Economic Times, May 09, 2024). This action is perceived as an insufficient measure that overlooks the fundamental political issues and grievances, particularly considering the historical opposition to AFSPA in Manipur and other Northeastern areas. These actions have intensified the atmosphere of mistrust and contributed to the region's persistent ethnic conflicts, rather than fostering communication and reconciliation.

III. Socio-Economic Conditions in Manipur

The socioeconomic landscape of Manipur is profoundly intertwined with the cultivation of poppies and the resultant drug trade, with the recent surge in these activities exerting a considerable influence on the region's stability and developmental trajectory. Manipur Remote Sensing Applications Centre (MARSAC) has documented a significant reduction of 60% in opium poppy cultivation over three years, from 2021 to 2024. The statistic underscores the efficacy of the state's "War on Drugs" initiative. In its ongoing efforts to combat the illicit drug trade, the state government has been detaining certain individuals suspected of involvement. Leaders of the villages, responsible for overseeing the extensive poppy fields in the highlands, have likewise been apprehended (Sadokpam, 2023). Notwithstanding this accomplishment, several challenges continue to impact the socio-economic landscape of Manipur. The cultivation of poppy in the upland regions of Manipur has become prevalent due to its suitability, the challenges posed by law enforcement and administrative oversight, and its profitability. This practice attracts farmers who face limited development opportunities and endure severe poverty, while the state's capacity to exert control over natural resources diminishes (Bhattacharyya, 2023). These communities' resort to illicit poppy cultivation as a

survival strategy, prompted by the absence of local employment opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, and pervasive poverty (Singh, 2021). The proximity of Manipur to Myanmar, a region characterized by significant poppy cultivation that has enabled cross-border drug trafficking, renders the interplay between the state's poppy farming and the drug trade particularly intricate (Achom, 2023). The complexities surrounding poppy production in Manipur exacerbate ethnic tensions. The state has experienced violent conflicts and discontent among various communities, largely attributable to economic disparities and the complexities associated with the drug trade. The interplay between state and non-state actors in the drug trade poses a significant threat to the political and economic stability of Manipur, further undermining the region's social cohesion and security. State officials and non-profit organizations are diligently striving to eradicate poppy cultivation and provide the affected communities with alternative economic options to mitigate this issue.

IV. Resource Competition and Demographic Changes

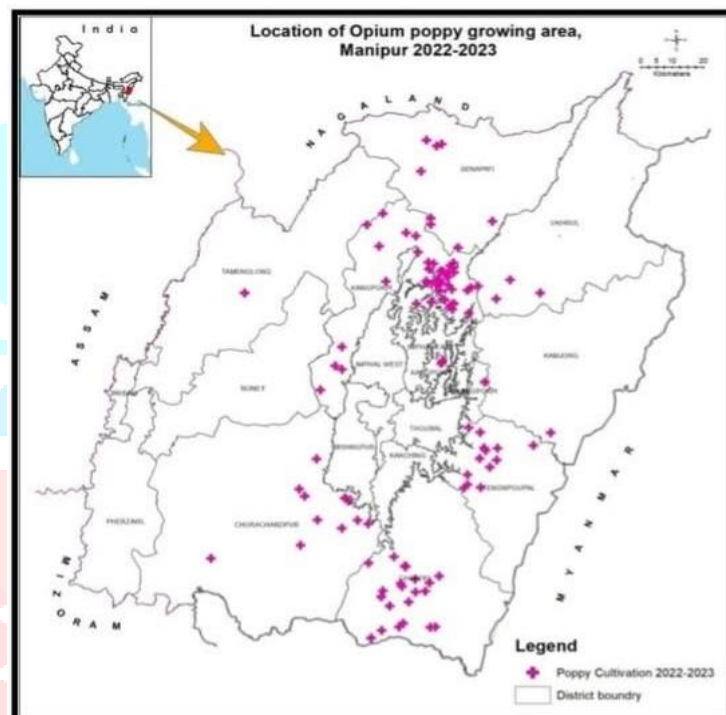
The impact of Myanmar's poppy cultivation on ethnic violence in Manipur is evident. The clash of narratives over resource exploitation and demographic changes is another moot point that has ignited the Meitei and Kuki tension. The alleged presence of migrants from Myanmar is a primary catalyst for the interethnic violence in the five hill districts of Manipur. Kuki organizations regard these individuals as 'victims of the civil war in Myanmar,' whilst the state administration and Meitei groups classify them as "illegal migrants" due to inadequate identification, posing a security threat. The disparity in their perceptions—as threats or victims—generates tension and causes potential to increase uprisings in the mountainous regions in the future.

The cultivation of poppy plants in Myanmar has reportedly affected the dynamics of resource competition and demographic concerns amongst the Kukis, Nagas and Meiteis. Poppy cultivation has been a difficult matter in Manipur, particularly after the announcement of a 'war on drugs' in 2017. The government has been concentrating on illegal poppy production, along with an increase in illegal immigration from Myanmar, exacerbating tensions in the region. The Manipur Government emphasised the ill effects of drugs on the youth, disclosing that around 140,000 youths in the state are impacted by substance misuse. The continuous anti-narcotics initiative has exacerbated tensions between the Meitei and Kuki communities, as the enforcement frequently leads to eviction operations and the eradication of poppy fields, primarily impacting Kuki-dominant regions. The socio-economic framework of Manipur is characterized by a pronounced hill-valley dichotomy, with the Kuki and Naga communities inhabiting in around 92% of the state's geographical expanse. This imbalance has historically exacerbated complaints and insecurity among communities, resulting in frequent conflicts over resources and territory (Roy, 2023). The persistent ethnic violence has been exacerbated by the socio-political consequences of poppy farming and the ensuing government initiatives against it. The violence that erupted on May 3, 2023 has caused more than 230 fatalities, displaced over 60,000 individuals, and incinerated several residences and places of worship (Nepram & Schuchert, 2023). The cultural and geographic barrier, together with rivalry for land resources caused by the dynamics of poppy production, perpetuates tensions between the Meitei and Kuki people (Rathor, 2023).

V. Poppy Cultivation and Political Instability

The political ecology of the social, economic, and political upheaval following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar has significantly impacted the agricultural sector, particularly through the proliferation of poppy cultivation. The military coup resulted in widespread instability, weakening conventional farming practices and compelling numerous farmers in isolated and hilly areas to engage in poppy production for survival (Luong, 2024). Further, infighting amongst the drug cartels in Myanmar also influences smaller cartels, forcing at least three of them to relocate their drug refineries to the borders with India's Northeast and China's Yunnan province (Bhaumik, 2005). This shift towards poppy farming was further exacerbated by the collapse of the country's economy and the increase in violent conflicts between the junta and anti-coup rebels, which paralyzed economic activities, and further forced them to migrate to the neighbouring Indian states, especially Manipur and Mizoram. The reduction of opium cultivation in Afghanistan, due to the Taliban's stringent ban on poppy cultivation in 2022, resulted in a substantial deficit in the worldwide opium supply.

The void was promptly occupied by Myanmar, where the expanse of territory designated for opium poppy cultivation increased substantially. According to a United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report, the cultivation area increased by 18% year on year, from 40,100 to 47,000 hectares, and the potential yield surged to its highest level since 2001, with a nearly 90% increase compared to the previous year, reaching 790 tonnes. The economic incentives for farmers have increased significantly, as opium poppy cultivation has become notably more profitable, thereby supporting the liberation movement in Myanmar. The average price of opium poppy flowers rose to approximately \$355 per kilogram, leading to a 75% increase in farmers' earnings compared to previous levels. The notable growth of Myanmar's opium economy highlights the substantial influence of political instability and economic difficulties on the revival of poppy cultivation in the area (Martin, 2023). The resurgence of poppy farming in Myanmar, driven by its intensive production methods, has intensified socio-political challenges and contributed to environmental degradation. The financial benefits of poppy farming have led to a shift among farmers away from traditional crops, altering regional agricultural patterns and exacerbating an already unstable situation.



Source: Manipur State Remote Sensing Agency

VI. The Free Movement Regime

The Free Movement Regime (FMR) initiated by the central government in 2018 as part of the Act East Policy is a special arrangement that exists along the India-Myanmar border. Tribes living along the border are allowed to cross the border 16 kilometres without a visa according to the FMR. Although the FMR has assisted the tribes in preserving their long-standing relationships, the security establishment is now concerned about it. Another FMR provision that permits tribal people to carry a headload has also been abused to smuggle drugs, weapons, and other contraband, and illegal migration without proper identification has led to an increase in poppy cultivation in remote unman forest tracts and unlawful settlement along the Manipur border (Baker, 2023). Besides, drug lords or drug mafias instigate the locals who wish to earn easy money and thereafter use them to carry out illegal activities across the borders (Oinam, 2022). The cultural identity that unites individuals from different countries. This, therefore, turns into a motivating element for the rebel organizations operating in India. The influx of drugs into India from Myanmar has significantly increased since the takeover. Drug seizures, especially of synthetic narcotics, have occurred on several occasions. Because uncontrol extensive forests and mountains make it easier to travel around, Manipur and Mizoram face more risks of drug trafficking and illegal migration. Amid ongoing conflict in Myanmar, substantial amounts of drugs have been seized from both state and non-state actors (Vijayan, 2023).

VII. Need for Regional and International Collaboration

Since the 1950s, Manipur and the northeastern part of India have been beset by ongoing separatist insurgencies and recurring ethnic clashes. Security issues still exist despite notable progress in recent years, especially those related to illicit drug trafficking from the Golden Triangle, a major global hub for the manufacturing of opiates and methamphetamine (Hazarika, 2024). The Manipur government responded to these issues by declaring a "war on drugs" in March 2017. This program includes actions including locking up drug dealers, setting up a fast-track court to try defendants, and enlisting the Indian Army and Assam Rifles to help eradicate poppy farming. To lessen reliance on poppy production, the government has also been aggressively rehabilitating and urging poppy farmers to transition to other crops like avocado and lemon grass (Gupta, 2018). Regional initiatives have concentrated on dealing with the issues of cross-border drug trafficking exacerbated by the local poppy industry. The complexity of the problems is heightened by reports indicating the collaboration between Nigerian cartels and drug syndicates. Notwithstanding the severe consequences of drug use in Northeast India, these cooperative initiatives provide a multifaceted strategy for addressing the drug problem (Nag, 2024). Government of India needs strong steps to control and eradicate the intertwined problem in collaboration with regional and international cooperation (Menon, 2023)

VIII. International Policies and Interventions

The UN has adopted various initiatives and regulations to address the issue of poppy cultivation in Myanmar. The cultivation area increased by 33% to 40,100 hectares, while potential production rose by 88% to 790 metric tons, as reported in the Myanmar Opium Survey 2022. Following a modest growth in the 2021 season, this considerable increase suggests that Myanmar's opium economy has experienced a significant expansion. The greatest significant increases in cultivation were recorded in Shan State (39%), followed by Chin and Kayah states (14% and 11%, respectively). The 3% increase in Kachin State was relatively moderate (Choudhury, 2024). The average projected opium production also increased by 19.8% to 41% kg/ha, the most since the UNODC started counting in 2002. More advanced farming methods and improved fertilizer supply are the causes of this production increase. The complicated political ecology of the cultivation of poppy in Myanmar is told by both original and transnational regulations, as substantiated by these trends. The unintended consequence of sweets to dwindle opium products is the modification of ethnical conflicts, particularly in regions similar to Manipur. Original pressures and conflicts may be aggravated by the opium frugality's growth as different ethnical groups contend for control of the profitable trade, farther complicating the socio-political terrain.

IX. International Interventions and Their Consequences on Ethnic Conflicts in Manipur

International interventions have significantly impacted the political ecology of poppy cultivation in Myanmar. Following the military takeover in February 2021, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) recorded a significant rise in opium poppy cultivation. The 2022 opium survey carried out by the UNODC reported a 33 per cent increase in poppy cultivation relative to the prior season, estimating 40,000 hectares under cultivation and a potential yield of 790 metric tonnes of opium (Doyle, 2023). The report defines the increase as a consequence of economic, security, and governance disruptions resulting from the military coup, which has constrained options for farmers in conflict-affected northern Shan and border states (UNODC, 2022).

International donors' attempts to encourage farmers to transition to less profitable crops, such as green tea, have encountered considerable obstacles. Opium poppies remain Myanmar's highest-earning crop, bringing in nine to fifteen times more money per hectare than rice. The transition to other livelihoods is made more difficult by the fact that opium poppies thrive on poor soil and little water on high slopes, while other crops cannot. The increase in poppy production has unexpectedly influenced ethnic tensions, particularly in Manipur. The ongoing ethnic violence has been intensified by the growing focus on opium cultivation, leading to heightened tensions and conflicts regarding resources and territory. Poppy cultivation remains a significant element in the region's political and economic dynamics, influencing the broader context of ethnic tensions as it becomes increasingly advanced and productive. The responsibility for the drug mafia and its continued operation is secondary to the fact that the production and trade of illegal drugs in Manipur are

exacerbating the conflict. Political elites are reportedly making significant profits from this trade, so they have no interest in getting involved in the conflict because it would take attention away from the drug trade, which they want to continue (Leth, 2023)

Conclusion

Political instability in Myanmar, insurgency movements, increases poppy cultivation area, drug trafficking, flow of illegal arms and ammunition and terrain issues are helping in the intensification of the ethnic conflict in Manipur. The state's 2017 determination to address the drug issue has not alleviated ongoing tensions. The unchecked cultivation of poppies and demographic shifts, intensified by the porous border with Myanmar, only worsens the situation. The Meitei and Kuki communities in Manipur experience interethnic violence as a result of the migration of individuals from Myanmar. The military takeover in 2021 increased poppy cultivation, compelling isolated farmers to engage in farming activities. The military takeover in Myanmar resulted in heightened opium production and a rise in migration.

Manipur has witnessed ethnic conflicts since the 1980s and has experienced separatist insurgencies since the 1950s. Despite advancements, security concerns remain, especially regarding illegal drug trafficking originating from the Golden Triangle. In 2017, the government of Manipur initiated a "war on drugs" campaign, promoting the transition of poppy cultivators to alternative crops. Regional and international cooperation is essential for addressing these issues. The Free Movement Regime (FMR) between India and Myanmar has been exploited for the smuggling of drugs, weapons, and contraband, resulting in heightened poppy cultivation and unauthorized settlements along the Manipur border. The production and trade of illegal drugs in Manipur are exacerbating the conflict, with unidentified entities benefiting from this trade. There is an urgent need for addressing poppy production in Manipur, necessitates the development of economically viable alternatives for farmers, which should be incorporated into the state's broader developmental initiatives. Addressing the root causes of poverty and underdevelopment is essential to overcoming the socio-economic challenges associated with poppy cultivation and the narcotics trade. Yet the need for improving the security situation in India's northeast and Myanmar has been there since the colonial period and does not alone explain the recent upturn in cooperation. Here, arises the need for holistic approaches to the proper sharing of resources especially natural resources among the different ethnic communities will take a long time to come for a peaceful and harmonious co-existence.

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