

Unfinished State-Making Project in Northeast India: The Cases of Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland

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Abstract: This work explores the unfinished state-making processes in Northeast India, with primary focus on the three most insurgency affected states of Northeast India- Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland. Although these states have formally integrated into the Indian Union, these states continue to witness contested claims over identity and territory. The demands for Greater Mizoram, Greater Nagaland, and the return of Kabaw Valley (Myanmar) to Manipur reflect ongoing dissatisfaction with existing political boundaries, which divided ethnic inhabitants in the three states bordering Myanmar. Recent political assertions by two Members of Parliament from the state of Manipur and Mizoram have reignited the debates, the debate over territorial connections between these states and Myanmar. This debate has produced a new agenda in the Indo-Myanmar relations. The current work argues that state-making in these regions remains incomplete, and remain much alive in the socio-political consciousness of the people. The paper highlights persistent tensions encompassing the three North-eastern states of Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland over the question of national boundary, ethnic identity, and historical grievances.

Keywords: State-making, Northeast India, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Myanmar, Territorial claims

Introduction

Jayanta Madhab once remarked that even after the creation of seven states to satisfy the ethnic aspirations of the local people, Northeast India continues to remain in turmoil. Demands for further balkanisation persist, which, if realised, could lead to the creation of extremely small and potentially unviable states. Although this was a general observation made nearly a quarter of a century ago, it still holds true today. The prevailing consensus is that politics in Northeast India revolves largely around identity and territory (homeland). Issues of identity are deeply embedded in the developmental trajectory of these states. One key factor closely tied to these identity issues, as I infer, is the process of state-making, which I would describe as an unfinished agenda.

In this context, it must be recalled that the vacuum left by the colonial withdrawal from the Northeast gave rise to a proliferation of identity-based socio-political aspirations, particularly in the erstwhile hill districts of Assam and in the states of Manipur and Tripura. Between 1946 and 1949, the annexation of these

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territories (including the frontier tracts) was considered a matter of urgency—much as it had been during colonial rule, when the British sought to tighten control over the hill tribes and princely states. The colonial administration introduced numerous mechanisms to facilitate political and administrative control—such as the zamindari system, district commissioners, political regency, the Inner Line Permit, and classifications like “Excluded” and “Partially Excluded” areas. In addition, they introduced Roman script in some regions and demarcated international boundaries between British India and Burma (Myanmar). One such boundary, known as the Pemberton Line (1834), later renamed the Pemberton-Johnstone-Maxwell Line, permanently separated parts of what are now the Indian Northeast from Burma. This boundary, which was revised as many as eight times (in 1837, 1881, 1885, 1894, 1896, 1901, 1902, and 1922), spans 1,643 kilometres from the India-Myanmar-China tri-junction in the north to the India-Bangladesh-Myanmar tri-junction in the south. This line had significant and lasting consequences for Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland:

- a) The transfer of the Kabaw Valley to Myanmar in 1834 impacted Manipur;
- b) The incomplete delineation of the Patkai Hills led to the division of Naga-inhabited areas between India and Myanmar;
- c) The formal recognition of the Chin Hills as part of Burma in 1894 affected the region now known as Mizoram.

It is essential to note that this boundary created a permanent scar on these Indian states, affecting not only geographical territories but also leading to the division of ethnically contiguous communities into two separate nations—India and Myanmar. For the Indian Union, the integration of princely states between 1947 and 1949 nearly completed the process of state formation, driven by linguistic and regional factors. However, for Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland, the adoption of the Pemberton Line as a permanent boundary—combined with India’s own state-making efforts—deepened existing wounds, unsettling the socio-political consciousness of the region’s people.

State-making in terms of territorial inclusion or exclusion is the exclusive domain of the Indian Parliament. Yet recent political developments involving two Members of Parliament—from Manipur and Mizoram—have brought the unfinished nature of this project back to the forefront. These lawmakers have rekindled unresolved issues stemming from the British colonial exit and subsequent nation-building efforts.

In the first instance, K. Vanlalvena, an MP from Mizoram representing the Mizo National Front, visited Myanmar’s Chin State and advocated for its integration with India—calling for a unification of the Chin-Kuki-Zo ethnic groups under a Greater Mizoram. His appeal to the Chinland Council and the Chin National Front Army received full backing from the Chief Minister of Mizoram, Mr. Lalduhoma. That both the

Governor and the Assam Rifles were aware of the visit suggests a tacit acknowledgment of efforts to correct earlier territorial and identity-related grievances.

In the second instance, Maharaj Leishemba Sanajaoba, an MP from Manipur, cited historical blunders in the merger of Manipur with India and demanded the return of the Kabaw Valley (now part of Myanmar's Sagaing Division). In a parliamentary speech, he argued that the 3rd March 1953 agreement transferring the Kabaw Valley to Myanmar was made without the consent of the people or government of Manipur. He also claimed this transfer violated the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), resulting in the loss of approximately 22,210 square kilometers of Manipur's territory along with compensation owed. While his claims may hold limited legal weight, they strongly reflect deep-rooted discontent with historical decisions.

Similarly, the demand for Greater Nagalim, encompassing parts of Myanmar (Upper Sagaing Division and the Naga Self-Administered Zone) and the ongoing Indo-Naga peace talks involving the NSCN have added another layer of complexity. A symbolic example is the house of the village chief in Longwa, which straddles the international border, flying both Indian and Myanmar flags. The inauguration of the chief's house by the Governor of Nagaland (India) further accentuates the unsettled status of state-making in the region. The concept of Nagalim extends across the Patkai Ranges—covering Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and the Sagaing Division and Kachin State of Myanmar.

These developments raise critical questions: What went wrong with the state-making project in these three states? Are the claims made by their representatives legitimate? Myanmar, currently embroiled in civil war and lacking effective control over its frontier areas, is hardly in a position to enforce its territorial claims. Will the Indian government risk international fallout to reconfigure borders—potentially affecting its relationships with Myanmar in trade, energy, and defence?

Discussion

Historically, the areas in question—except the princely state of Manipur—formed part of the larger Frontier Tracts. Their eastern boundary runs along the hill ranges separating India from Myanmar. These hills have long been zones of interaction, but also of conflict, raids, and political fragmentation. Under British rule, these were designated as "Tracts"—a term reflecting their perceived inaccessibility for administrative governance. The Northeast Frontier Tract, for instance, encompassed Sadiya, Lakhimpur, and Dibrugarh tracts, later subdivided into Eastern, Southern, Northern, and Western divisions.



During the Constituent Assembly Debates, the Bordoloi Sub-Committee recommended the inclusion of these areas within Assam, opposing their exclusion from the Indian Union. The then Chief Minister of Assam argued this was necessary to prevent disintegration of both the region and its tribal communities. However, the failure of the Naga-Akbar Hydari Agreement to fully integrate the Nagas—along with the collapse of the NNC’s Federal Government—led to a separatist movement in the Naga Hills. Hill district leaders later met in Shillong and resolved to seek a separate Hill state. Although no unanimous decision was reached, the All-Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) remained steadfast in its demand. The Sixteen-Point Agreement between the Government of India and the NNC eventually led to the creation of Nagaland in 1963. Yet, factions opposed to the agreement continued to demand sovereignty, and later, a Greater Nagalim, culminating in the Indo-Naga Framework Agreement of 2015.

The Naga demand for self-determination dates back to August 14, 1947, when the NNC declared independence. Despite the formal statehood granted to Nagaland, the ongoing peace talks with NSCN-IM and NNPG have reignited the debate on cross-border Naga integration. Nagaland’s statehood inspired similar movements in Meghalaya, Manipur, and Tripura, all of which gained full statehood in 1972. Mizoram, initially content within the Indian Union, was transformed by the Mautam famine, leading to the creation of the Mizo National Famine Front and eventually the MNF. With foreign backing, the MNF waged an armed struggle for sovereignty before signing the Mizo Accord, which led to Mizoram’s statehood in 1986.

The transfer of Manipur’s Kabaw Valley to Myanmar continues to be viewed as a betrayal. The valley holds both strategic and cultural importance, serving as a symbol of Manipur’s historical and ethnic presence in Myanmar. While MP Sanajaoba’s remarks may not carry legal authority, they resonate deeply with the people of the state. Similarly, efforts to integrate Mizoram with Myanmar’s Chin State—backed by MP Lalduhoma and involving agreements with Chin rebel groups—highlight the enduring cross-border ethnic bonds that question the finality of the state-making process in the region.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it must be reiterated that Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland share vast, porous, and largely unmarked boundaries with Myanmar. The geopolitical and strategic significance of these borderlands, along with their shared ethnic identities, has challenged the legitimacy and finality of India’s state-making project. While New Delhi may consider the process complete, for the people of these states, it remains an unfinished task—a legacy of colonial-era “divide and rule” policies. The scars of arbitrary boundaries and political exclusions continue to shape the region’s quest for justice, recognition, and integration.

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