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Explorations in state-society relations**

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Understanding the breakdown in North East India: Explorations in state-society relations
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1. Introduction

Northeastern India – a compact region made up of seven sub-national states¹- has historically seen high levels of violence, stemming mostly from ethnic and separatist conflicts. It was among the first of the regions, to demonstrate, on the attainment of Independence, signs of severe political crisis in the form of nationalist movements. This has translated into a string of armed separatist movements and inter-group ethnic conflicts that have become the enduring feature of its politics. Separatist rebellions broke out first in Naga Hills district of erstwhile Assam State, to be followed by similar armed movement in the Lushai Hills district of that State. Soon secessionism overtook Assam proper and in Tripura and Manipur. Of late Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh have joined the list of States that are characterised as unstable and violent. Despite the attempts of both the state and society, many of these violent movements have continued to this day with serious implications for the welfare of citizens (Table 1). Besides separatist violence, inter-group ethnic clashes have been frequent and have taken a heavy toll of life and property.² Ethnic violence exists alongside inter-ethnic contestations, over resources and opportunities, in which the state finds itself pulled in different directions, with little ability to provide solutions. As a result, politics in the region has moved to the streets and protests, ‘public curfews’ and blockades by public organisations, many with active support of armed groups, have become commonplace (Sandham, 2004).

There has been much engagement in both the policy and the academic communities in India with the ‘crisis’ in the North East. The central government has responded to the ‘ethnic’ challenge through a variety of means: use of force against rebel groups; accommodation of aspirations of different communities through changes in institutional arrangements; and by transferring large resources for the economic uplift of the region. Along the way various peace agreements have been negotiated between Central and State governments and rebels groups to bring the armed movements to a close. But as is evident, peace continues to elude much of the region, at serious costs to local societies and to its citizens, with some serious impact on the character of the Indian state.

This paper is concerned with understanding why it has been so difficult to attain peace and stability in Northeast India. It is organised in the following manner: in the next section I review what is the staple manner of engaging with the problem in the literature – the issue of ethnicity - and argue why this ‘grievance’ reading of North East India’s crisis is an incomplete one. I then propose what I consider a more plausible argument to explain the phenomenon, grounded in my historical comparative work on politics and state-

¹ Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura – with a total population of 38 million.

² Some prominent ones being the Naga-Kuki (1992-96) and the Kuki-Paite (1997-99) clashes in Manipur; Hmar-Dimasa violence in Assam (2003); Tribal–non tribal violence in Tripura (1979-1980 and subsequently) and the ongoing inter-tribal conflicts in Nagaland.

society relations in the region and lay out the empirical evidence to back up my claim. I conclude the essay by drawing out some empirical lessons on my central theme of state-making and institutional capability and what they might imply for reforms in the context of Northeast India.

2. North East's collapse: Identity wars or crises of legitimacy?

Most accounts of the instability in the North East have used the grievance narrative. Highlighting the cultural differences between people in the region and those from 'mainland India', these accounts point to the domineering tendencies of the Central state. (Parrat, 2005:1) Scholars have questioned the 'unequal' and 'forced' integration of the Northeast region into the Indian 'mainstream' (Datta:1992) and the subsequent development of master-subject relationship between the two. (Sanajaoba:1988) Behind that reading is the awareness of the cultural differences between the Indian 'mainland' and the collective entity called the North East and region's significantly higher levels of ethnic and linguistic fractionalisation compared to the rest of India.³

Building on this is another body of work, this time taking an institutional turn that seeks to explain North East's enduring instability and violence.⁴ An earlier version of this thesis had claimed that it was the weakening of modern political institutions to deal with local religious, linguistic, caste and regional concerns that led to sectional contestations resulting in the spiral of community conflicts and violence in India generally and in the Northeast. (Weiner: 1989). The shape these breakdowns take, it was argued, depended on how well Central authority was institutionalised and how willing ruling groups were to share power and resources with mobilised groups. (Kohli, 1998:7) It has recently been argued in the context of the North East, that it is the poor performance of political institutions in India, particularly the violation of the federal principle by the Central state, and the emergence of the patterns of 'cosmetic federalism' - the national state's centralising tendencies and its overriding power to cut up sub-national territories - that explains why rebellions have occurred so frequently in the region (Baruah:2005; Chandhoke:2005).

The institutional argument has been deployed to opposite ends as well. Some commentators have pointed to the ability of the Indian political system to manage group conflicts by a mix of accommodation and recognition through the use of 'asymmetric' or 'multi-level' federalism to argue that it is this institutional 'exceptionalism' that has been so crucial to mitigating intra-state conflicts and in the end to holding the Indian state together. (Mahajan: 2005:310) Curiously, ethnic violence and secessionist contestations in the North East exist alongside the many experiments with self-rule and political

³ The North East makes up a mere 4 % of India's population. Yet it accounts for 58 of the 114 languages and 100 of the 600 tribes listed by the Census of India. (Census of India, 2001)

⁴ Admittedly the literature on the region is catholic. Some, using the instrumental perspective have pointed to rapid modernization as the explanation for the region's instability and its secessionist violence. (Singh: 1987) Others have pointed to the unequal power structure and intra-community competition over resources, to account for the region's many conflicts. (Shimray : 2004) Some have also emphasized the class bases of these conflicts, pointing to the clash between the 'new class' and the traditional elite. (Fernandez: 1999; Akoijam : 2001)

autonomy for the region's peripheral communities. Indeed some scholars have gone on to argue that, contrary to conventional wisdom, public policies promoting self-governance for particular communities in the region may actually be contributing to the problem as these practices encourage competitive mobilisation by other groups not so privileged, resulting in mutual contestations that fuel intensification of conflicts and violence. (Baruah, 2005:3-27; also Chandhoke, 2005: 25).

Ethnic grievances, deinstitutionalisation of the Central polity, 'cosmetic' federalism, and 'ethnic mapping' may explain intensification (or decline) of group conflicts in India, generally. But eventually all such explanations must contend with the empirical reality – the significant variance in ethnic and secessionist violence between comparable cases *within* Northeast India. While it is true that the homogenising tendencies of national leaders and the feeling in the Northeast of having been forcibly integrated into the Indian nation-state is an emotion that greatly animates much of the debate and contestations in the region, grievances that are powerful narratives around which separatist national sentiments have been mobilised and that have been crucial to the onset and sustenance of violence. Yet considering these grievances to be the causal factors behind the violence and breakdown may be misplaced. Even though the ethnicity-based grievance discourse is an important part of the story of crisis of Northeast India, it remains an incomplete story primarily because it fails to explain the variance in levels of separatist contestations and violence within the region. Similarly the institutional weaknesses of the Indian state should have had adverse impact on all units of the North East in equal measure. Central leaders have themselves shown equal flexibility (or intransigence) in dealing with mobilised groups and rebel organisations from the region. Yet the outcome has not been even. If the instability in the region is really the outcome of the grievance inducing influence of the external agent – in this case the national state – this variance is inexplicable. A quick review of the phenomenon is instructive. In the absence of historical data, we need to rely on those that are recent (Table 1).

As is evident, of the seven states, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura have shown the greatest propensity to separatist and ethnic violence. On the whole, though violence has shown a tendency to abate in the region as a whole, in Manipur violence levels continues to remain very high. That State has also been known for its frequent and bloody ethnic clashes and breakdown of governmental authority. The other State that stands out is Mizoram. Secessionist violence has largely been absent in that State for the past two decades. Inter-group contestations also appear to be better managed and so are demands that society makes on the system.

What lessons are there to be had from the avoidance of collapse and violent contestations in Mizoram? The few accounts of Mizoram that there are, have interpreted its apparent peace as proof of the absence of identity politics there. (Chandhoke, 2005). A closer reading of politics in Mizoram will quickly dispel this notion. (Sharma et al., 2004). Much of the politics in Mizoram, like that in the rest of the North East and in Manipur, is around the question of identity and nationalism. Political parties and public organisations everywhere have used ethnic identity to mobilise support among their constituents. Yet political mobilisation in the two settings has not led to similar outcomes. In the literature,

the restoration of peace in Mizoram has been attributed to the role, either of the Central government – the readiness of national leaders to accommodate demands of the rebel Mizo National Front (MNF) and its ‘economic largesse’ for socio-economic development of the State (Baruah, 2005: 71; Jafa, 2000); or to that of forces closer home – undisputed leadership within MNF ranks helping it clinch a peace deal and the ability of Mizo social organisations to demand and work for peace. (Chandhoke, 2005; Baruah, 2005: 71). Journalistic accounts as well as those by Mizo civil society credit the cohesiveness of Mizo society for the sustenance of peace there.

Surely, showering ‘economic largesse’ has been a staple response of the Centre to the violent challenges it faces in the North East and has not been confined to Mizoram. Integrative capabilities of national leaders have also not proved very helpful for peace in provinces like Manipur or Nagaland that have a long ‘Congress tradition’. But if crucial to restoring peace in Mizoram were really issues of a united rebel ranks, a cohesive society and the proactive role of social organisations (all factors internal to the Mizo society); questions that we need to focus on, and which may provide clues to understanding the drivers of violence in the rest of the region are: what explains the cohesiveness of Mizo society? How was it achieved? And what accounts for the synergy between political leaders and social organisations in the State to work for peace? Contrariwise, we need to explore why society in Manipur is so fragmented and why state leaders there find themselves so unable to connect with social groups?

Comparative insights on violence in the North East suggest therefore that it might be helpful to reassess the conflicts in the region – from seeing them simply as the rebellions of the marginalised, to exploring issues around power in societies and the inability of the state to provide a legitimate basis of authority, resulting in multiple contestations fueling violence. If we take the state to represent a particular balance of power that emerges from conflicts between different forces in society, then in situations of late late development, that balance may be still forming, with serious implications for welfare and security for citizens. It may be that the crisis of the North East is about this ‘conflicts of authority’, conflicts that are underway and which translate into different claimants to authority, representing the different social forces - of which those identifying with the state are one - vying with each other over power in society. The unstable social basis of the state and the competition it faces from non-state actors results in compromising the autonomy and the ability of the state to act to govern society and provide security both for itself and citizens.

The key explanatory variable in this reading of conflicts is state capability – i.e. whether state leaders have the authority (and the legitimacy) to act as the central force in society determining social, political and economic interactions or if they are hindered in this task by rival social forces. It is evident that the collapse in the North East is much more than just about ethnic and secessionist violence. It is really about the poor effectiveness of state agencies to perform their basic functions: monopolise legitimate power, protect citizens and influence social and economic behaviour. These failures create a situation where as Zartman notes in a different context , “organisation, participation, security and allocation fall into the hands of those who will fight for it – warlords and gang leaders,

often using the ethnic principle as a source of identity and control.....” (1995:8). Thus ethnic contestations might really be the symptoms, not so much the cause of the crises.

But seeing state capability and legitimacy as emanating from the links that state leaders forge with specific social groups implies that any understanding of the effectiveness of the state must be grounded in historical analysis, to explore how different social groups have, over the long run, struggled with each other over power and authority – a process called ‘state formation’ . Successful states have emerged where state leaders have built inclusive political organisations and mobilised collective identities in a drive to tie different sections of the population to the state. This also implies that it is states leaders who have sought to make themselves the sole provider of rules and sustenance in society, as opposed to their non-state rivals, who typically base their legitimacy on local resources, symbols and organisations. This reading implies that the evolution of state-wide (in the sense of territory) political legitimacy is the outcome of the two-way relationship between state-construction and society formation, resulting on the one hand in the statewide expansion of bureaucratic apparatuses and on the other, to the construction of a cohesive society throughout the state’s territory.⁵

This state-society reading of politics, focusing on authority and power is eminently relevant to Northeast India. While political legitimacy may be a concern in India as a whole and in developing societies generally, in the case of the Northeast India, it is particularly problematic. The region, with its late colonisation; delayed and varying shades of state-making (‘settled’ areas existing alongside ‘excluded’ and ‘partially excluded’ ones) and the absence of an inclusive nationalistic movement that in the rest of India was able, to a great extent, to mobilise the many local societies to an inclusive nationalistic project, provides a useful laboratory to analyse dynamics around the exercise of authority and power and the interplay of the state and society in determining political outcomes.

With the conceptual tool identified, I can now present my argument to explain the variance in violence and disorder between Mizoram and Manipur. It was divergent colonial and post colonial state formation policies and state leaders’ political strategies to mobilise popular opinion in the two cases that led, on the one hand, to the evolution of a cohesive society and its positive impact on the consolidation of the state’s authority in Mizoram, and on the other, to the fragmentation of society and the contested and weak authority of state agencies and in Manipur. These impact on the effectiveness of state agencies in the two settings to perform their basic security and development functions and the authority of their leaders to structure institutional arrangements, manage group contestations and avoid collapse. In the rest of the essay I present my evidence derived from comparative analysis of the political history of Manipur as against Mizoram based on archival research; survey of published documents and press clippings; interviews with a variety of actors and interpretations from secondary sources.

⁵ For similar state-society and institutional explanations of state building and institutional capability see Migdal (1988) and (2001), Kohli (2004) and Hesselbein et al. (2006).

3. Colonial state making and the crystallisation of authority structure

Pre-colonial political institutions in Manipur and Mizoram differed sharply. The Manipur case was one of extreme duality - a centralised state in the central Valley region and village-based autonomous authorities in the surrounding Hills. The two existed side by side, under a variety of arrangements: subordination, mutual assistance and in most cases just coexistence. (Johnstone, 1971:81; Reid, 1942:87; Government of Manipur, 1997: 34-35) Early state formation and primitive capital accumulation in the Valley had also led to an integrated society (around the Meitei language) structured broadly along class lines between the ruling class and the ruled. In the Hills, with legitimacy fragmented, little signs of state formation, society was still largely localised as well as undifferentiated. On the whole, there was little sign of a single political or civil space emerging in Manipur. In Mizoram, though society was largely localised, some degree of social integration, along with differentiation on class lines, between the Chiefs – mostly of the Sailo clan of the Lushai sub-tribe - and the Commoners – made up pretty much of the rest of the populace, made up of sub-tribes as Hmars, Raltes, Renthlais, Paites. - was beginning to take shape. Although individual village Chiefs remained largely autonomous of each other, they had established a network of loose alliances, with relations among them ordered in a hierarchical fashion (Reid, 1978:4), thus signaling the beginnings of a statewide polity. The key institutional difference between Manipur and Mizoram remained the absence in the latter of the sharp duality that characterized the polity in the former.

It was upon this initial condition of the divergent institutional terrain that the colonial state began its state-making exercise, a dynamic that would have profound implications for the future politics of the two States. Colonial practices in the two settings represented both continuities and discontinuities with pre-existing arrangements. In Northeast India, as elsewhere, the colonial state was extractive and authoritarian. But the extractive potential of the Hill tracts of Northeast India was limited. Perhaps this was the reason why these territories had attracted little attention from colonial administrators to begin with. When they did, it was more to act as buffers against powers hostile to colonial interests, such as the Burmese. Sometimes the objective was to pacify and settle the ‘wild tracts’ to prevent those controlling them acting as threats to colonial interests in adjoining plains districts.

Manipur’s geographical isolation and the limited potential for economic extraction it presented meant that there was a weak case for the kingdom to be annexed and incorporated into the colony. Yet the British needed to maintain a presence and control over this powerful kingdom on the frontiers of colonial India. (Dun, 1886: 52). After all Manipur had historically acted as both a bridge to and a balance of power against the powerful Burmese. After the British defeat of the Burmese, a political agency was established in 1835, to maintain friendly relations with the kingdom and prevent the frequent skirmishes between Manipur and Burma. Internal squabbles in the ruling family and threats they posed to colonial interests, led to the formal annexation of the Manipuri Kingdom in 1891. With colonial control restated and potential threats eliminated, the State was, in 1907, once again restored to its pre-1891 status, although by now effective

political power had passed on to the British Political Agent. Annexation was followed by administrative changes, most significantly in land revenue and judicial systems. These measures led to permanent and stable settlement of agricultural land, a stable manner of taxation, and the setting up of an elaborate administrative system and judicial courts to enforce new laws. Constitutional changes also meant that the state ruler - the *Raja* - now headed the Manipur State Durbar (MSD), and was bound by its decisions.⁶

The vast Hills had little extractive or strategic value and were not much bothered with – colonial administrators relied on the Manipuri king to keep the village Chiefs subdued. Post 1891 reforms in administration were confined to the Valley. Though the Hills would be marked out and included in the Manipur State boundary, little was done to penetrate them even administratively. Only now there were occasional shows of force in the form of annual punitive and tax collection expeditions. No efforts would be made to incorporate the Hills into the state-wide judicial or land revenue systems or to encourage hill communities to be represented in state-level governing institutions that were being set up.⁷ A separate office was set up for the Hill tracts, with a small band of paid staff, based in the state capital.⁸ Villages were left to remain in autonomous self-containment, guided and governed by its own sets of customary codes and practices. The rebellion of the Kuki Chiefs against colonial policies in 1917⁹ led to moves for their subjugation. This was followed by some attempts to penetrate the Hills administratively and to engage more directly with communities there. But these too fell short of establishing direct links with society that was possible through centralised institutions.¹⁰

What were the implications of these practices? The pre-colonial institutional duality in Manipur was reinforced with the establishment of separate administrative systems for the Valley and the Hills. The state, by following different policies for the two sustained and created many fresh divides between Hill and Valley communities, thus preventing the possibility of the development of a common civic space. This would have serious implications for social cohesion in Manipur and eventually for the legitimacy of the state among people. Exacerbating the influence of these measures on the authority structure in the State was the manner in which colonial agents administered Manipur through an extreme form of indirect rule.

In the Hills, for many years, there was little presence of the state. Administrators relied on pre-existing centres of power - local Chieftains – that they authorised to police territories, maintain order and collect taxes. This reliance on local authorities prevented the state from consolidating its own authority and control in society while it helped to reinforce the authority that the Chiefs already enjoyed. In the Valley, the British had already established a political alliance with the ruling dynasty. But Chiefs and Rajas representing ‘traditional authorities’, depended for their power base on narrow and community specific resources and symbols – rise of exclusionary caste Hindu practices in the Valley and consolidation of tribal customary practices in the Hills. The strengthening

⁶ 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, Imphal.

⁷ Such as the quasi-representative Manipur State Durbar.

⁸ ‘Scheme for Administration of the Hill Territories (1902)’, Manipur State Archives, Imphal

⁹ For an account, see Parrat (2005:42-44)

¹⁰ ‘Rules for the Administration of Hills (1919)’. Manipur State Archives, Imphal.

of traditional power centres during the colonial rule also meant that the strengthening, and in some cases, the birth of new community-specific organisations. They would, in the context of a fragmented society, further constrain future attempts to create in Manipur a strong political (and symbolic) centre.

The case of Mizoram was in sharp contrast. Here colonial agents, though apparently going along with what had existed before, ended up making drastic changes in the authority of past rulers. While administrators continued to rule the territory on the cheap through the Chiefs, it was the greater colonial economic interest (mostly for the safety of the lucrative tea gardens bordering on the Lushai Hills in Assam and Bengal which the Lushai Chiefs had been posing a threat to and which, it was argued, required a forward policy to break up and disintegrate the communities to make the Chiefs submit¹¹) mixed with the activist role of Christian missionaries and individual administrators that made this rule more direct than it was in the case of Manipur. This enabled a better penetration of the state in local society, with implications for state power and social cohesion.

Following the incorporation of the Lushai tracts in British India in 1891, a slew of state building measures were introduced, all designed to maintain order in the territory and limit the ability of the Chiefs to create further trouble outside. By 1896 the Hills were consolidated into a single administrative district, with its borders clearly marked out. (Reid, 1978: 21-22). Colonial agents used the pre-existing structure of the Sailo confederacy to penetrate society. Chiefs' powers were upheld, they were made responsible for collection of taxes and for maintaining peace within their jurisdiction. And the customary codes and practices they followed were not interfered with. (Reid, 1978: 56). But the compulsion to maintain order in a tract that had posed such strong challenge to colonial economic interests meant that rather than leaving the Chiefs to do their own bidding, colonial administrators ensured that the former were decisively subjugated and were brought squarely within the overall power structure of the state. Introduction of the 'Circle system' in 1901 ensured that Lushai-Sailo chiefs were made integral to the colonial administrative structure, with the British Superintendent at the apex and Lushai interpreters in each of the sixteen circles, as go-betweens. This centralised structure was further strengthened in 1937. Other measures contributed to eroding the autonomy and the control that the Chiefs had enjoyed.¹² They had been forbidden from raiding each other's villages. (Reid, 1978: 45) Many powers they had traditionally enjoyed, such as ordering capital punishment, confiscating property, taxing traders and deciding criminal cases were taken away. And in 1928, all customary laws prevalent in the district were compiled and brought out in the form of a monograph to help colonial agents to administer justice. (Parry: 1928). This codification provided uniformity in the administration of justice, and made the task of Superintendent's supervision over the different sub-tribes (and their Chiefs) even easier.

¹¹ For a summary of the economic determinants of the annexation of the Lushai Hills, see Nag (2002:45-49)

¹² Rules for the Regulation of the Procedure of Officers Appointed to Administer Justice in the Lushai Hills (1906), Mizoram State Archives, Aizawl.

Perhaps the measure that most severely undercut the Chiefs' authority was the taking away of the proprietary rights that they had traditionally enjoyed over land. Under the 1901 'land settlement' system, Chiefs were issued life-long leases over land that they had possessed, signalling a fundamental change in the land holding system in the district. Land settlement stabilized village boundaries and contributed to preventing inter-village disputes. But more importantly, it also meant that it was the colonial state and not the village Chief who was now the owner of all land in the district. This also meant that existing Chiefs could be removed and new ones created.¹³ Thus, in ways very different from those in which the colonial state behaved in Manipur, in the Lushai Hills it worked assiduously to incorporate traditional centres of authority within its structures.

Contributing to trends weakening the hold of the Chiefs in the Lushai Hills was the role of Christian missionaries. Missionaries, who had arrived in the district on the coat tails of the colonial state, were to be the main instrument of modernity. They were thus poised to oppose the continuation of traditional codes and practices on which much of the authority of the Chiefs had rested. Principally, it was the missionaries' role in introducing and popularising education among the local populace that was to have a significant influence on changing social relations. They had the long-term impact on transforming Lushai society and power relations within, by creating the conditions for the birth a new social force – made up principally of the non-Lushai Commoners. (McCall, 1949: 199) It was this new class that would challenge the authority of the Chiefs and stake claim to making the new state on the eve of Independence.

In Mizoram, then, state formation involved fewer compromises and accommodations with traditional authorities. The practices of colonial rule in the Lushai Hills and the forces it engendered led to the weakening of the authority of local centres of power and the consolidation of a strong political centre. That the state was able to establish direct contact with all those it sought to rule had the effect, among others, of the downward penetration of state power leading, in concert with other factors, to the strengthening of the hands of the state and to the transformation of Mizo society. In this respect the British colonial practice in the Lushai Hills was a marked departure from its staple practice of indirect rule.

4. Competitive identity mobilisation and fragmentation of state power in Manipur

The end of colonial rule and its replacement by a representative democracy sparked off intense struggles in both Manipur and Mizoram, between the different social forces, for control of the state. The instruments and strategies that the leaders employed in those struggles depended on the repertoire of interests, institutions and symbols that they had access to. The shape that these contests took and their outcome, determined to a great extent both, the nature of the state that emerged and its effectiveness in regulating social interactions.

¹³ While at the time of the Settlement in 1901, there were an estimated 60 Chiefs in the district, by 1948 that number had risen to about 400. (McCall, 1949: 245).

In Manipur Valley, the struggle was three-way: between the rulers and the ruled in the Valley and that with the many tribal communities in the Hills. The contests between the nobility and the ruled in the Valley led to the former investing in community specific organisations to protect their power and position in the post-colonial majoritarian dispensation.¹⁴ For the ruled - making up both the new class of the educated as well as the rural peasantry fighting for a share of state power - creation of inclusive state-wide organisations including with Hill based groups and mobilising broad based support, was a better bet.¹⁵ Subsequent political contestations led to the realignment of social forces with the landed aristocracy and the new (and increasingly landed) educated elite coming together to counter the threat of a rural upheaval.¹⁶ The eventual victory of the former strengthened narrow identity mobilisation by the dominant elite and sealed the fate for mass based and inclusionary political organisation that could have had an all-Manipur appeal, connecting different sections in the Valley, but also the Valley to communities in the Hills. An elitist formation, the Manipur State Congress (MSC), with its limited appeal and narrow agenda, gained the upper hand in political contestations and went on to act as the state making party. This had serious consequences for the legitimacy and the authority of the state. MSC's ascendance helped the social forces tied in with the party - the combine of landholders and the urban elite - to maintain their entrenched position in Manipur, resulting in frustrating future attempts at programmatic reforms that could have expanded the social base of the state.¹⁷ (Table 2)

Another fall-out of the victory of the landed elites in Manipur was their inability to organise politics inclusively so as to bring all communities, within the Valley as well as those in the Hills into the state structure. State building in Manipur's divided house would have required investing in inclusive organisations, build bridges across communities and create a political centre. But MSC was not up to the task. Despite espousing secular agendas, the party's social base was limited to the Valley.¹⁸ That state power vested in an exclusivist Metei elite severely reduced the state's legitimacy in the eyes of the Hill-based tribal population. Subsequent mobilisation by Metei state leaders to create a society based on their limited identity – in part to enable them to capture political power away from central forces then in command in the State - meant further alienation of the minority tribal communities in the State. Alongside, and as a counter to Metei mobilization, tribal groups invested further resources in community-specific political organisations to garner support for community specific administrative dispensations. The resultant inter-group contests over power, resources and symbols between Hill and Valley groups and that amongst the Hill groups themselves, using the ethnic principle further drilled in identity attachments among all sections and created

¹⁴ These were the Nikhil Manipuri Hindu Mahasabha (NMHM) that later metamorphosed into the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha and finally into the Manipur State Congress. The Praja Shanti party, formed by the ruling nobility, was another such formation.

¹⁵ Led by Hijam Irabot, this section sought to break out of the narrow confines of Metei / elite political organisation by trying to forge alliances with the masses and the non-Meteis in the Hills.

¹⁶ For this discussion see Singh (1998:199, 202-203)

¹⁷ The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms (MLR&LR) Act introduced in 1960 to reform property rights was unable to do away with intermediaries in landholding system, a significant failure, considering the large number of such landlords in Manipur. (Das, 1989: 139-140).

¹⁸ In the first few elections, MSC fielded only very few candidate in Hill constituencies (Singh, 1981:25)

conditions for multiple ethnic contestations. This had severe consequences for the state's already fragmented social structure.

Religious differences between the Meteis and the tribals may have facilitated some of this division – although absence of religious difference among the tribals themselves, most being Christian did not prevent similar chasms developing among the state's tribal communities themselves. There were extraneous factors as well that may have contributed to sustaining the differences, indeed to this atomising trend, a prime candidate being the external constraints on the construction and mobilisation of a pan-Manipuri identity. These came mostly in the form of the fluid territorial borders of the State¹⁹ and the fluid manner of categorisation of its population.²⁰ The mutability of the state's borders since after Independence; the possibility that non-Metei groups could join their kinsfolk in neighbouring States; and the open-ended manner of categorisation of the State's tribal population, have meant that in Manipur community groups have greater incentive for separateness, than to accommodate differences and move in the direction of some sort of a stable multiethnic society. The crucial point here is the control that an external agency - the Central state – enjoys in determining state boundaries and official categorization of social groups, preventing an internal evolution of plurality and conflict management. This has had severe consequences for the stability of society. The fact that Manipur was ruled directly by the Centre as a part C state - without any legitimate basis of local authority – for well over two decades until 1972, contributed to energizing the differences. In this situation, political leaders representing different social groups in the State had to talk to each other through Central administrators. This external basis of state making may have helped prevent the birth of some sort of bi-national accommodation and compromised the growth of a pan-Manipur identity and civil space. It also caused a severe break between the state and society around it, further compromising the legitimacy and social control of state leaders. With little grounding in society, the centrally administered bureaucratic apparatus was seen as 'foreign', and unaccountable.²¹

Post colonial state making in the Hills contributed to this trend of the weakening of the hands of the state and the parallel drilling in of particularistic tendencies. The power and social control that traditional authorities and community specific organisations continued to wield in the Hills meant that state leaders eager to expand the regulatory and developmental role of the state in hitherto 'unadministered' and 'excluded' areas had to rely on and establish alliances with those local authorities. This further compromised moves towards consolidation of a political centre in Manipur. An example of this being the Village Authority in Hill Areas Act (1956) that led to village councils controlled by clan bosses acquiring formal political power and control over the vast development resources of the state. This has unwittingly created parallel power structures, with the

¹⁹ Central government has mooted at various times since Independence, reorganisation of Manipur's borders. While these moves have been popular with tribal groups, Meteis have opposed these strongly.

²⁰ Up until 1951, the tribal communities in the state had been categorised in official censuses into three categories – Any Naga , Any Kuki and Any Lushai. People had to fit themselves within this framework. Pressure from smaller tribes pushing for recognition led to the Centrally appointed Backward Classes Commission recommending in 1951 my more categories, so that today there are 33 official tribal categories in the state.

²¹ For an account see Parrat (2005:125)

authority of the state resting alongside and mostly being compromised by the more powerful authority of Chiefs and tribal associations. Having been incorporated in the formal administrative structure, and also being the channel through which development funds flow, yet lacking in accountability, Village Authorities have become sites of contestation for control between different sections. Increasingly, more vocal claimants to the community's resources and symbols, such as apex tribal organisations and armed groups have been trying to dominate this space.²² They have taken recourse to community specific appeals. This has impacted not only on elections to Village Authorities but also the general character of tribal politics, which have become predominantly identity-based and exclusivist. And with the powerful sections having consolidated their control, attempts at programmatic reforms such as to reform property rights through introducing progressive land laws have been easily thwarted. It was no wonder also that the State's attempt to introduce MLR&LR²³ in the Hills and abolish the system of village chiefships failed miserably, despite legislations having been passed to this effect in 1968. In effect, the Hills accounting for 70 per cent of Manipur's land area are excluded from the purview of formal land laws. They are still governed by tribal customs and practices that are neither codified nor, in most cases, equitable. Exclusion of formal laws means that the authority of the state in these areas remains largely tenuous.

The larger consequence of these state-society dynamics in Manipur has been that the state and forces that identify with it - political parties and bureaucracies - have little legitimacy and therefore the capacity to aggregate and represent public demands and channel resources. It is rather community specific groups and ethnic associations that have enjoyed legitimacy and space. Weak centralising tendencies feed into exclusivist community-based mobilisations, resulting in fragmentation and political instability. It was then, the limited and unstable social base of the state and state agencies' failures to address basic needs of people and to create opportunities that in the past led to those outside the ruling coalition - represented by organisations such as the Pan Manipuri Youth League and the many 'independent' candidates, as well as tribal associations in the Hills - to seek to mobilise people's sense of frustrations by politicising ethnic differences to be able to capture power. Politicisation of ethnic differences and their use to mobilise support have continued to the present, with serious implications for political stability and order. (Table 3)

The largely external basis of state formation in Manipur - leading among other things, to its being based precariously on an unstable coalition - means that state agencies enjoy little embeddedness in society. Their attempts at maintaining autonomy from the still powerful non-state actors that derive legitimacy from rival social forces, is also severely tested. This engenders continuing conflicts between state and non-state actors over legitimacy and control. In effect state leaders find themselves constantly hemmed in by opposing social forces in discharge of their key functions of security and welfare. The resultant paralysis of the state and ensuing institutional weaknesses result in undermining the state's role as the framework for resolving inter-group conflicts and providing collective goods.

²² *The Sangai Express*, September 21, 2005.

²³ Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms (MLR & LR) Act 1960, Government of Manipur.

The ability of state agencies to enforce laws, tax citizens and maintain transparency and accountability is also poor. The poor preparedness of Manipur's law enforcement agencies and courts to tackle crime can be gauged from data provided by the National Crime Records Bureau. (2005: 204 – 212; 2005: 216-217) This is also reflected in the high incidence of violence in Manipur (Table 1) that question the ability of the state to provide security to its citizens.²⁴ The State also continues to be perceived as having serious problems with ensuring transparency and accountability and checking corruption is public life.²⁵ Equally poor is the ability of the state to govern its economy. The State continues to be at the bottom of the heap among other Northeastern states in being able to manage finances, extract revenue and raise income levels of citizens.²⁶ (Table 4) State leaders have also failed to create opportunities for the youth, fuelling further frustration.²⁷

Underlining these failures of the state, indeed exacerbating them, is the significant disparity in economic and social well being attainments between the State's core valley/urban and peripheral hilly/rural areas. Hills/tribal leaders have often complained about state institutions being partisan and unfair in distribution of resources to them. These complaints have centred on provision of entitlements such as education and health, paucity of physical infrastructure, availability of economic opportunities available to communities there, and their general access to power.²⁸ Often these complaints have resonated with findings of the agencies of the government. (Government of Manipur, 2003b). Attempts to resolve these problems have been dashed because of the hardening of attitudes caused by competitive contestations.²⁹ But behind much of this developmental skewedness in Manipur is the poor capability of state agencies and the

²⁴ In 2005, Manipur was deemed the most violent State in the country. (Routray : 2006)

²⁵ 'Handing over a state on the platter' *The Pioneer*, New Delhi: 6 December 2000

²⁶ In 1993-94 Manipur's per capita income was Rs. 6804, which was 78% of the all India figure at Rs. 8769. In 1997-98, this figure continued to remain low at Rs.10,456, compared to Mizoram's Rs. 12,817 and Rs. 14,436 for all-India. (Census of India 2001) By 1998-99, state per capita income had dipped to 65 % of the national figure. (Lahiri : 2002)

²⁷ While there has been a considerable increase in literacy levels, opportunities have been slow in coming. . As against employment creation of 4.0 % for Mizoram in 1993-94, that in Manipur grew only by 2.0 %. (Census of India, 2001). Today there are over 4,00,000 unemployed youth in the State, with more than fourth having some form of higher qualification (Government of Manipur : 2003a)

²⁸ Hill districts make up some 9/10th of the total area of the state. Tribal communities, who exclusively inhabit them, constitute 37 per cent of the state's total population. While reservation policy has fixed tribal representation in public sector in Manipur at 31 % (compared to their population proportion of 37 %) their actual share in public sector is much lower: 20.3 % in Medical department, 8.5 % in Education department, 21.80 % in the state Police, and 16 % in the Secretariat Service. (Nengsong, 1995). This imbalance is exacerbated by skewed allocation of budgetary resources for the province's tribal districts: 26 % in the Education Department, 25 % in Health, 22 % in Public works department 14 % in Social Welfare, 12 % in Agriculture. (Government of Manipur, 2004).²⁸ Investment by commercial banks in the province shows a similar imbalance: proportion of credit to hill districts as a proportion of credit to the province as a whole was 21.4 % in 2003 and only 7.8 % in 2002. (Union Bank of India, Various issues). The outcome of low levels of investment in Hill districts has been along predictable lines, with low HDI figures and a higher proportion of the poor in the Hills than in the Valley districts. (Table 6)

²⁹ While Meitei leaders are opposed to tribal demands for greater autonomy through empowering local governance structures such as the Autonomous District Councils, on grounds that tribal groups already enjoy substantial affirmative action support; tribal leaders have walled up against moves to extend formal property rights in the Hills (a move that might create overall growth), because they see in these moves Meitei designs at control over 'tribal' resources.

inability of its leaders to remain autonomous from powerful social forces among the majority community and reach out meaningfully to minority groups. State leaders' failure to provide satisfactory responses to tribal demands, by prioritizing and pursuing inclusive policies, have contributed to upholding the deep divide in society. Rising socio-economic challenges over the past decades exacerbate these inter-group conflicts that in a situation where institutionalized means of conflict management are weak, tend quickly to degenerate into violence.

Poor ability of the state to enforce laws and provide entitlements equally to all feed into its poor legitimacy its poor success with pursuing socio-economic programmes. They also add to political instability in Manipur, further politicising ethnic differences and leading to intensification of conflicts. Since the late 1980s there has been greater political instability in Manipur - ten changes of ministries in eighteen years, when there should have been just four. During this period there have also been two spells of direct Central rule (called President's Rule). Political instability creates opportunities for non-state forces, many specialising in violence, to acquire legitimacy. The 1990s, with its frequent change of government was also the decade when the worst ethnic violence occurred in Manipur – the Naga-Kuki (1992-96), Meitei-Muslim (1993) and Kuki-Paite (1997-99) clashes. (Parrat: 2005) These spirals of violence create grounds for continuing alienation of communities and sustenance of secessionist violence.

In conclusion we can say that there is absence in Manipur of a social contract between the state and its citizens. By keeping itself marginalised in people's lives (by excluding itself from much of the Hills) and by performing poorly in arenas that it controls, state leaders have undermined the state's legitimacy in the eyes of those they seeks to govern. With little direction from the state, non-state actors - all with particularistic agendas - have occupied the high ground, mobilising support along identity lines. These have spawned conflicts that multiply.

5. Inclusionary Mizo mobilisation and the consolidation of authority

In Mizoram, colonial rule and the working of Christian missionaries had led to the rise of the Commoners and the diminution of the authority of the Chiefs. Onset of representative democracy and the opportunity it created, motivated leaders among the Commoners to establish and invest in central political organisations and build coalitions and alliances to create broad-based support base in an attempt to capture power.³⁰ Commoners were helped in this task by the strategic advantage they enjoyed, on account of their numerical strength - in Lushai Hills, but also in adjoining territories in Manipur, Assam and Tripura. This created further incentives for inclusive political organisation by the Commoners. On the other hand, Chiefs associations stood for safeguarding the powers and authorities they already enjoyed. They invested resources into organisations that could safeguard those

³⁰ The chief vehicle for this mobilisation was the Mizo Union (MU) party that claimed to represent all inhabitants of the Hills and work for the economic uplift of all particularly the mass of the Commoners.

interests – with narrow appeal and agenda.³¹ Contests between the two social forces over state power resulted in the victory of the Commoners and the marginalisation of the Chiefs. With the victorious state making leaders having been so closely (and in terms of agenda, narrowly) allied to the Commoners, the resultant state structure enjoyed significant authority and purposive power to make policies and implement them. The MU-led Mizo District Council then ruling the Lushai / Mizo Hills district, was as a result, able to make some far-reaching programmatic reforms that changed the political landscape of the district and strengthened the hands of those tied in with the state. Abolition of chiefship, consolidation of the administrative and legal framework and bringing of land tenants directly in contact with the state and regulations promoting equity in management of land all helped bring state institutions centre-stage in the lives of majority of the people.³² These measures further enhanced the downward reach of the state and the consolidation of its authority. This allowed considerable autonomy for the state from social pressures that could contest its hold, further drilling in state effectiveness.

Strengthening of the hands of the state was itself helped by the Commoner's (and hence MU's) role in integrating ethnically diverse groups in the district into the Mizo fold and anchoring their identity with that of the new state. The success of MU's actions to construct and mobilise an inclusive Mizo identity was as much an outcome of pre-existing affinities between the different ethnic groups in the Lushai Hills, as it was the urge among the Commoner leadership, for the construction of a pan - Mizo society to be able to base their legitimacy on and acquire state power. MU's inclusionary practices included the invention of the term 'Mizo' to stand for all those who inhabited the Lushai Hills (and even beyond)³³, keeping the doors of this identity open to all (including to the Lushai Chiefs who the Commoners were contesting); replacing the many categorisation of the population of the district in official record with one overarching Mizo category; the use of the *duhlian* language – patronised by the Lushai chiefs - as the basis of that commonness; and finally, portraying Mizo mobilisation as a moral contest between the suffering Commoner masses and the exploitative Chiefs. The success of this inclusive strategy led to a complete shift in the power structure in the Lushai Hills. Lushais, who had dominated political and social life up until 1954, were sidelined. It was the non-Lushai Commoners - the Hmars, Raltes and Renthlais - that now began to dominate state power. (Table 8) This strategy had positive spin offs for the strength of the new Mizo state that was born out of the Chiefs-Commoners contest. That the state was so closely allied to this newly mobilised section meant that the Mizo state had better purposive power.

But purposive power is not the same as regime stability. The complete exclusion by the MU of the erstwhile Chiefs from the power structure arguably amounted to a precarious

³¹ Chiefs were represented by the United Mizo Freedom Organisation (UMFO), that later morphed into the Mizo National Front. Both stood for protecting the interests of the Chiefs and had separatist tendencies.

³² Refer to Assam Lushai Hills District (Acquisition of Chiefs' Rights) Act 1954. (Mizoram State Archives, Aizawl) and the Lushai Hills District (Village Council) Act 1953 (Mizoram State Archives, Aizawl). For a survey of reforms in property rights and the system of justice, see Das (1987) & (1990)

³³ MU claimed to represent some 41 sub-tribes living in Lushai Hills district and adjoining areas of Manipur, Assam and Tripura states and in Burma and Bangladesh (Bhattacharya, 1998:268-280)

social base of the state. Economic and political crises of the late 1950s³⁴ worked with this institutional weakness to precipitate a breakdown resulting in the armed revolt by the Mizo National Front (MNF) representing the section that was allied to the dispossessed Chiefs. While the source of much of the resentment of the Chiefs was the politics of the then leadership of the MU, external opportunities created for this section the opening to re-establish claim to a share in state power. The MNF rebellion, with its ostentatious opposition to Assamese and Central controls, was thus a useful vehicle for this political purpose.

The Mizo Accord that eventually brought the rebellion to a close in 1986 was based on and led to setting up of a coalition government with the top political power going to Laldenga, the MNF chief and several other ministerial ranks going to senior leaders of what until then had been an armed anti-state organisation. This return to the power structure of the erstwhile Chiefs perhaps helped create a stable ruling coalition and fundamentally reordered the social base of state power in Mizoram. MU's anti-Chiefs mobilisation and policies had brought the Commoners, particularly the Hmars and Raltes, centre-stage to dominate political power, while excluding the Lushais and their followers. The MNF movement, led and manned by the Lushais and those close to the section (Goswami, 1978: 79), as well as changes within Mizo society itself, led to Lushais returning to participate in politics in the state. (Nunthara, 1996:79, 175-176) This may have led to consolidation of the state's authority and to its better grounding in Mizo society, thereby affecting the future stability of the state.

Crucial for this shift was the fundamental change that had taken place in Mizo society itself and that further contributed to its stability. The twenty years of insurgency and the large-scale dislocation it caused on account of Village Regrouping (Nunthara, 1981) created the grounds for further reordering Mizo social structure, promoting the inclusionary trends set in motion by MU's pan-Mizo mobilisation. MNF's mobilisation of Mizo identity contributed to these trends. In the pre-1956 phase, Mizo society had been divided along the Chiefs-Commoners line, a divide that had helped create the Lushai-Non Lushai fissure, useful to the MU. Abolition of Chiefship had removed the economic basis of the divide. Structural changes brought in by the MU (such as, in the form of land reforms) consolidated these gains in such a way as to have the effect of promoting a civic basis of participation in the Mizo state. The MNF movement sought to, and in some measure succeeded in reinforcing this Mizo inclusivity – but this time by excluding those it considered outside of the Mizo construct. It found success in this manner of mobilisation by directing the Mizo identity debate at forces outside Mizoram – the perceived attitude of national and state leaders towards Mizo self interest, including economic; and the role of the Army in dislocating local communities and in adding to people's sense of sufferings. (Nunthara 1996: 218) The shared sufferings of the Mizo people, and the MNF's highlighting those, helped cement some of the intra-Mizo cracks

³⁴ There had been increasing ethnicisation of politics in Assam in the 1950s, putting off many tribal groups in the State. Tribal alienation was accentuated in the Lushai Hills during the famines of 1959. Mizos commonly felt that the state administration was not responsive to their sense of disquiet. There were other sources as well, of the Mizo sense of alienation – economic hardships and lack of opportunities.

(between the Lushais and the rest) through mobilisations that emphasised the Mizo – non-Mizo faultline.

Greater participation of Lushais in the power structure, post-1986; the cementing of the pan-Mizo construct and its being made the core of the Mizo state had the effect of making state power better grounded in a broader Mizo society envisaged as having the elements of both Lushais and non-Lushais. This grounding may have provided state leaders in Mizoram with cohesive power that in conjunction with an integrated social structure helped create the internal demand for restoration of peace and contributes to the State's continuing stability. Today, the state and civil society's persistent efforts to maintain this pan-Mizo edifice, sometimes at the cost of excluding non-Mizos, may be seen as the anxiety of the ruling elites there to sustain that social base of power and maintain order.³⁵

In a comparative sense then, the internal basis of power (and state making) in Mizoram has helped with the task of forming a cohesive Mizo state and society. With political power drilled in at an early stage in the popularly elected Lushai Hills ADC, contending groups had to negotiate and look for accommodation within, rather than look outward, engage in brinkmanship and seek separate recognition by appealing to external forces. This has also forced state leaders to be responsive to minority demands and take their anxieties on board. State leaders and agencies in Mizoram have, it turns out, been able to devise power sharing solutions and forge coalitions with groups and communities that feel marginalised – continuation of the inclusive trends set in motion by the MU. This has kept contestations and separatist demands contained, something that leaders in Manipur find so difficult to achieve. The State's key political organisations - MU, Mizoram People's Conference (MPC) and MNF – have, on account of their better institutional strengths – through their better basis of legitimacy - played central roles in managing conflicts. They have also successfully represented and channeled social demands; provided solutions to those demands and have been better at providing access to all. These have contributed to the greater stability of politics in Mizoram and to political contestations generally, being managed through institutional means, helping the State avoid violence and breakdown. (Table 9)

That the basis of this two-way state formation dynamic is largely inclusive - involving building political organizations that have pan-Mizo constituencies and mobilizing collective identities that again use pan-Mizo appeals – means that the resultant legitimacy of the state is widespread, enabling it to be at once embedded in society and be autonomous from contending social forces. In effect the state in Mizoram continues to maintain its centrality in the lives of people. This has resulted in the limitations on the part of non-state actors representing competing social forces, to implant themselves as rival providers of political goods. Those forces have either been marginalised or have been co-opted into the state structure, a dynamic that has enabled the cooperative

³⁵ In 1997, a large number of Brus fled the State for neighbouring Tripura, alleging violence by Mizo social organisations, the Young Mizo Association (YMA) and Mizo Zirlai Pawl. These bodies have also targeted other non-Mizo communities, particularly immigrants from Myanmar (in 2003) and from Assam (in 2004).

working of state elites with those in society rather than any competition between them, further helping with institutional capability.³⁶

Demonstrating the better centrality and the strength of the state in Mizoram is its capacity to provide entitlements, such as social services, food security and livelihoods - and provide justice, enforce laws, maintain tolerable levels of order and manage inter-group contestations. An example of the state's better ability to provide entitlements is in the implementation of the Public Distribution System (PDS), a national food security programme, for which Mizoram has received wide acclaim.³⁷ Crucial to the effectiveness of the PDS in Mizoram is the extensive involvement of elected local bodies and social organisations in the management and monitoring of the programme. Similar institutional capacities of state agencies along with their ability to forge partnerships and co-opt non-state actors and leverage the latter's strengths has enabled Mizoram to stake a claim to being the first e-governance State in North East India and the first to introduce the Right to Information Act, an instrument likely to further improve quality of governance.³⁸ The administrative implications of Mizoram's state-society bond is best showcased in the field of education, enabling Mizoram to be the second most literate State in the country.³⁹ The effects of such partnerships along with the ability of state leaders to commit to and pursue development goals are evident also in Mizoram's evident success in the wider entitlements arena (Table 5). Mizo leaders have also shown some, although tentative, successes with better management of finances and better ability to extract revenue, vis a vis other States in the region.⁴⁰ Such success is also demonstrated in the ability of state agencies to dispense justice (Thanhranga, 1994: 9 & Government of India, 2000: 307) and provide security.⁴¹ These capabilities contribute to the low crime rate and lesser violence in Mizoram today, definitively an anomaly in North East India.

But it is probably in providing access to minority groups and in managing inter-group contestations that this autonomy of state actors from constraining social pressures is most evident. State elites have managed to work out deals with those espousing minority demands despite a noticeable rise in exclusivist mobilization by Mizo public

³⁶ This is particularly demonstrated in the close bonds between state actors and leaders of powerful Mizo civil society groups – the YMA and the Presbyterian Church. It appears that the social base that leaders of the state and civil society are drawn from may be the same. This, of course, poses both opportunities as well as concerns for democratic governance. For a contrarian view, see Sharma et al (2004).

³⁷ 'BPL (Below Poverty Line) scheme successful'. *Northeast Tribune*. Guwahati : 19 June 2005.

³⁸ *North East Tribune*, Guwahati : 11 September 2005 and 28 September 2005.

³⁹ It was the colonial state's active involvement, in the form of grants and scholarships and other liberal doses of incentives to get people to take to education and the partnership that administrators established with Christian church organisations that helped Mizoram achieve remarkable success with literacy. These partnerships have continued to the present. See Hluna (1986) and McCall (1949:199-200) on these.

⁴⁰ Between 1993-96 and 2000-2003, the buoyancy in average Own Tax Revenue (OTR to GSDP) for Mizoram was to a factor of 1.60 (compared to 0.98 for Nagaland and 0.84 for Manipur). (Government of India, 2005b:44)

⁴¹ A measure is the high charge-sheet rate of crime (cases where the Police were able to press for charges against those accused, reflecting the ability of law and order agencies to perform their investigating and enforcement function), which translates into high success with convictions by the law courts. (National Crime Records Bureau: 2005, 216-217).

organizations (mostly against the Chakmas and Brus but also against non-Mizo immigrants).⁴² A feature of this inclusive politics is the presence of Autonomous District Councils (ADC), providing access to Pawi, Lakher and Chakma communities to resources, power and cultural symbols. On the whole ADCs have been successful in facilitating the administrative and political representation of the peripheral communities in the power structure.⁴³ State elites have in recent times responded in similar fashion to demands by the other minorities, for self-governing arrangements for themselves, such as that by the separatist sections of the Hmars and by the Brus.⁴⁴ Despite the weaknesses of these measures, the fact that state leaders have been ready to negotiate with out groups and provide them a measure of access, means that, at a general level, there is a realisation among minorities that the State belongs, not only to the core Mizos, but to all and that they have a stake in its continuance. This has shored up the capability of the state, cushioning it from crisis and may be preventing the breakdown that is common to the rest of Northeastern India. It must be emphasized however that while constructing and mobilising an inclusive Mizo identity as the basis of a cohesive society and broadening the social basis of the state by enabling all Mizos equal access to it, may have helped state leaders to plug into society and enhance their social control, the future viability of this project – in the face of rising socio-economic challenges - will depend in part on the endurance of the hitherto inclusive Mizo institutions as well as on the ability of state leaders to create opportunities equally for all, not only for the core Mizo but also the many peripheral non-Mizo groups.

e. Conclusion: Enhancing capability through building state-society bonds

This state-society account of political order and breakdown in Northeast India is one that goes beyond the usual treatment of politics in the region as ‘identity wars’, and provides a more plausible explanation for the drivers of the many conflicts in the region. Arguments based on primordial understanding of identities that see the violence being an outcome of basic differences may be simplistic and ill informed. There are, evidently, systemic reasons for why the violence in some cases has continued to rage while in others, it has largely been contained, despite other similarities and differences. It is clear that the spiral of ethnic and secessionist violence in Manipur, is not be so much about inherent differences between its social groups as about the absence there of an effective (institutional and cultural) medium to regulate relationships and moderate contestations. Likewise, the absence of violence in Mizoram is not so much the outcome of the absence of the identity politics there or the absence of ethnic differences, but mainly because society in that State has arrangements in place to mitigate inter group contestations and

⁴² In 1997, a large number of Brus fled the State for neighbouring Tripura, alleging violence by Mizo social organisations such as the YMA and Mizo Zirlai Pawl. These organisations have also been known to target other non-Mizo communities, particularly immigrants from Myanmar (in 2003) and from Assam (in 2004).

⁴³ Mizoram’s record in empowering local bodies has been equally impressive. Village Councils, since their inception in 1956, have worked as effective institutions of local governance. Elections have been held to them regularly. They have also channeled large doses of development resources.

⁴⁴ The outcome has been the Singlung Hills Development Council (SHDC) for Hmars and talks of similar arrangements for the Brus. See ‘Memorandum of Settlement’ between Government of Mizoram and HPC (Aizawl : 27 July 1994)

promote accommodation. Seen this way, violence and breakdown becomes a dimension of state failure, i.e., of the poor capability of state leaders to manage contestations and provide order on the basis of some sort of a social contract between the rulers and the ruled.

Beyond providing innovative ways to engage with conflicts in Northeast India and in transition societies generally, a comparison of state-society relations in Manipur and Mizoram is also relevant to the larger discussion of state capability and its impact on the provision of collective goods – welfare and security. Agencies of the state in Mizoram appear to enjoy widespread institutional capability allowing them to act as the central force in society planning and executing policies and enforcing rules (something that state leaders in Manipur can only hope to acquire). As has been demonstrated, this has been the result of the unique history of the State and which has involved internal contests and accommodations among different social forces over authority and social control. The key dynamic here and one that seems to have had the greatest impact, is Mizoram's unique colonial state making experience. Unlike the general pattern of 'indirect rule' common to the rest of the region and indeed to much of the developing world, Colonial administrators in Mizoram forged something like a 'direct rule' with agents of the state positioned at the apex of the administrative structure that contained local strongmen – the Chiefs – as its integral parts. Colonial state presence was also established deep inside the Lushai territory from early on, helping supplant the authority of traditional authorities. The evidently activist role of the colonial state in the Lushai Hills allowed the state to penetrate society, something that has resulted, in the final analysis, in state leaders being able to acquire a statewide basis of authority.⁴⁵

But colonial rule in Mizoram went beyond just establishing statewide administrative structures. There was a deliberate attempt, by some administrators at least, to bring about socio-economic changes including popularizing education and ushering in modernity. Quite unwittingly, these interventions together led to the birth of new social class that found itself in contest with the past ruler makers over authority and social control. The ability of this section to build and invest in centralized political organisations and undertake institutional reforms while constructing and mobilizing an inclusive Mizo identity helped them acquire widespread legitimacy. The eventually successful bid by traditional interests to reclaim authority and the social dislocation that the ensuing war (the MNF insurgency) caused, helped further transform Mizo society by reinforcing its cohesiveness. The resultant cohesive state is at once embedded in society while it is autonomous from hindering social pressures. Thus contributing to the unique Mizo state

⁴⁵ The question that remains to be answered however is, why was the state behaving in this manner? It may well be that the colonial state was serving its strategic interests. Annexation of the Lushai Hills, it appears, was motivated by the need to prevent the frequent raids by Lushai chiefs on the lucrative tea gardens that were coming up in Cachar and Sylhet plains adjoining Lushai tracts. Reid (1978: 9). Economic interests were evidently so significant as to call for a forward policy in the Hills, to break up and disintegrate local communities so as to make the Chiefs submit totally. (Mackenzie, 1989:5) 'Direct rule' and the many interventions it entailed was perhaps an attempt to achieve this end, and which ended in significantly transforming Mizo society. On the other hand, the colonial state saw little comparable strategic interests in Manipur.

formation experience has been the creation of a grand narrative around the Mizo identity that helped state elites acquire legitimacy and enhance their social control, allowing them to act decisively to govern society and manage conflicts. In sum, state making in Mizoram was accompanied by internal contests and accommodations that resulted on the one hand in a legitimate basis of authority and on the other in a cohesive social structure. It is this two-way process of construction of a cohesive state and the mobilisation of an inclusive society, one enabling the other, that underpins Mizoram's success with political order.

In Manipur, state making involved mostly the external shaping of geographical boundaries and institutional structures. State boundaries were imposed by the colonial state, there being little pre-colonial basis of a Manipur-wide polity that included both the inhabitants of the Valley and the many communities in the Hills. The post-colonial Central state is putting this fragility to further test. Manipur's institutional structures - inter regional and inter group relations - were also determined by external forces - the colonial state and now the Central government as well as actors in the neighbouring States of Nagaland and Mizoram. And in the absence of any pan-Manipur nationalist movement to fuse the different sections of society to each other and to the state, there was little headway made towards consolidating state authority. The absence of the internal basis of the evolution of state power in Manipur has severely undermined the its legitimacy and institutional capability.

Although admittedly an extreme case, Manipur represents the state making experience of most developing societies. Because it was largely externally shaped, the structures of the state sit uncomfortably over Manipur's 'web-like' society.⁴⁶ The absence of internal evolution of power means that society has not been integrated - around either ethnic or civic nationalism. Rather the social structure in Manipur remains highly fragmented, made up of localised groups. A fragmented social structure means the predominance of primary identities and multiplicity of social organisations - clans, tribes, religious and ethnic groups - each autonomous of the other and with their own set of beliefs and rules. These organisations continue to demand obedience from people and prevent state leaders from establishing themselves as the central force in society to govern the details of people's lives. This hinders the capability of the state in Manipur to provide collective goods. There is another way in which the fragmented social structure in Manipur could have a bearing on its capability. A fragmented social structure means that groups are ever in conflict with each other, over power and resources, with the state being the focus of much of this contestation. There is, then, little incentive for localized groups in this situation to demand accountability and efficient services from state agencies. They have little time left from mutual contestations or from petitioning the state for greater share of the rents. This also explains why, despite the existence of a vibrant public space (although fragmented), and what looks like an extreme case of a neo-patrimonialism in governmental functioning in Manipur, there is little concerted push for governance reforms there. Demand for these changes, since they are made on narrow and community lines, are never so strong that the neo-patrimonial state cannot deal with them, which it

⁴⁶ This phrase is borrowed from Migdal (1988: 39).

does usually by sharing rents. On the other hand, a cohesive society in Mizoram has been better at demanding and receiving public accountability.

What lessons are there then for reforms? Clearly it is not enough to tinker with institutional designs, create further administrative units or work for an elite-based consociational solution to the cycle of conflicts and collapse in Northeast India. At the heart of the matter is the absence of a legitimate basis of authority in much of the region. It is essential therefore to work to shore up the authority of public agencies there and build up their capability to provide collective goods equally to all. For societies in Northeast India, to be able to enhance their institutional capability, one way out could be by expanding the scope of the functions of the state. This will entail building strong state agencies such as political parties and bureaucracies - whose members equate their interest with state power – to provide services, mobilize resources and organize public support for state policies. In effect, the centrality of the state in cases of early stages of states-in-the-making, such as Manipur's, needs to be asserted. However this exercise will be a non-starter if enhancing state authority is not accompanied by adherence by state agencies to democratic political institutions, i.e. formal and informal constraints such as accountability, transparency and the restraint of corruption, embodied in the concept of 'rule of law'. (North, 1991:97). In other words, unless the state is seen to be legitimate in the eyes of those it governs, its strength, and therefore its authority, will ever remain contested. This presents the classic chicken and egg scenario, with little direction to break out of the impasse.

A way out could be to take up the task of 'state building'⁴⁷ in the North East by attempting, alongside, to build cohesive societies. If a central problem of the region is that societies are not organised in cohesive groups that could demand and work for peace and accountable public institutions, then at least as much effort should go into building cohesion in society, as into enhancing the state's legitimate authority and invigorating local economy to create growth. Cohesiveness itself can be achieved best by creating conditions for inclusive political organisation.⁴⁸ Underpinning the exceptional success of the Mizo story was the inclusive manner of organising politics - through establishing and investing in political organisations that had inclusive agendas, appeals and social bases. It is clear that the resultant cohesion of Mizo society did not come about on its own. Cohesion there, as elsewhere, has been the product of deliberate construction. The key determinant here was that of the human agency making deliberate political choices to engender cohesion, in a drive toward social control. These insights from Mizoram provide openings for other societies in Northeast India, fragmented and unable to pull themselves out of crises as they may be, to move towards inclusionary political organisation. Northeast India's unique development experience may be the outcome of its historical processes. But the building blocks of those are political choices. It is here that

⁴⁷ Understood broadly as building the *legitimate* authority of state agencies to enable them to plan and execute policies and to enforce laws cleanly and transparently (Fukuyama, 2004:7). It would also imply the weakening of incentives that promote institutions competing with the state's authority.

⁴⁸ Other possible measures could include civil society based initiatives to promote inclusivity; better bridge-building exercises across communities by state agencies; and reforms in educational policy to promote inclusivity and multiculturalism.

the lead-in to institutional change lies. This means that Manipur and similar societies need not be locked in vicious cycles of violent contestations and poor development. The integrative role of political organisations and policies and practices of political leaders, then, could be the key to breaking the path dependence of the North East.

Tables

Table 1: Insurgency violence in North East India

Provinces: Year:	Arunachal Pradesh	Assam	Manipur	Meghalaya	Mizoram	Nagaland	Tripura	Total
2002	32	559	239	66	-	90	386	1372
2003	39	401	205	79	1	86	296	1107
2004	43	315	212	47	4	97	164	882
2005	NA	242	331	29	-	40	73	715
2006	NA	158	261	24	2	84	59	588
Population (millions)	1.1	26.6	2.2	2.3	0.9	2.0	3.2	38.3

Source: Government of India (2005a) and Institute of Conflict Management (2006). Figures for 2006 are as of 3 December 2006. These include rebels, security forces and civilians killed in secessionist and ethnic violence.

Table 2: Territorial Council / Assembly elections, Manipur (1952-1967)

	Congress	Socialist	Ethnic Parties	Independent Candidates	Total
1952	10	3	16	1	
1957	12	11	-	7	30
1962	15	5	-	10	30
1967	16	5	-	9	30

Source: Tabulated by the author from Singh (1981: 26-43)

Table 3: Party-wise position in Manipur State Assembly (1972-2002)

	Total seats	Congress	Other National	Regional	Ethnic	Independent Candidates
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/>)

Table 4 Macro-economic indicators, Northeast India (1997-2004)

	Growth Rate (% GDP) (1997-2002)	Per capita NSDP (Rs.) (04-05)	Own Tax – GSDP (1990s)	% Own Rev. to Total Rev. (03-04)
AP	4.4	14,771	0.66	11.0
Assam	2.1	11,034	3.58	39.0
Manipur	6.4	11,410	1.46	08.3
Meghalaya	6.2	15,070	3.23	22.0
Mizoram	NA	19,696	0.56	07.0
Nagaland	2.6	18,911	1.30	06.0
Tripura	7.4	17,459	1.94	18.0
All India	5.3	17,822	5.30*	

Source: Government of India (2000), Government of India (2001),
Government of India (2004) & Government of India (2005c). * Average for all states, as % of GDP

Table 5 Some social indicators for North East India

	Literacy 2001	Infant Mortality Rate (1991)	Sex ratio (2001)	% of Poor (1999-2000)	Per capita Income Rs./year (2001-2002)	HDI rankings (1991)
A. Pradesh	54.74	91	901	33.47	17,978	29
Assam	64.28	92	932	36.09	10,951	26
Manipur	68.87	28	978	28.54	13,213	9
Meghalaya	63.31	80	975	33.87	14,510	24
Mizoram	88.49	53	938	19.47	-	7
Nagaland	67.11	51	909	32.67	11,119	11
Tripura	73.66	82	950	34.44	-	22
All India	65.20	77	933	26.10	17,978	

Source: Government of India (2001), Government of India (2006: 4-5)

Table 6 Inter-district disparities, Manipur

	HDI	HDI rank	% of poor
Hills			
Chandel	0.5154	6	42.0
Churachandpur	0.5676	4	40.0
Senapati	0.4602	8	51.3
Tamenglong	0.5120	7	54.5
Ukhul	0.5800	3	44.4
Valley			
Bishnupur	0.6390	2	26.24
Imphal ⁴⁹	0.6455	1	19.33
Thoubal	0.5559	5	24.39

Sources: Government of Manipur (2003b) &
NSS 55th Round (1999-2000)

⁴⁹ For the sake of the statistical study the two districts of Imphal (East) and Imphal (West) have been taken as a single Imphal district.

Table 7: Tribal classification and population, Mizoram

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: Lalthangliana (1998) &
Census of India 1951, 1961.

Table 8: Mizo District Council elections, Mizoram (1952-1970)

Party	1952	1957	1962
MU	17	13	16
UMFO	1	7	-
Congress	-	-	-
PLTU		2	2
Other	-		4
Total	18	22	22

Source: Tabulated by author from Nunthara (1996:131-137)

Table 9: Party wise position Mizoram assembly elections (1987-2003)

Party/Year	'87	'89	'93	'98	'03
MNF	-	14	14	23	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: Government of Mizoram (2004a) &
Government of Mizoram (2004b)

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