

Indo-Naga Peace Parleys and the Kukis: A Plea for an Inclusive Approach

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As the Indo-Naga peace process nears its finality, the longstanding competing territorial and identity claims between Nagas and Kukis in India's northeastern state of Manipur remain unabated, with no earnest efforts to reconcile the two groups. The Kukis have a foreboding that the future Naga Peace Accord will be imposed on them as a *fait accompli*. Given the high stakes on both sides, New Delhi's quest for durable peace in the region cannot afford to focus only on the Nagas—as though the concerns of the already beleaguered Kukis, or any other stakeholder, are dispensable at the altar of the Naga peace talks. Instead, New Delhi must display willingness, sensitivity, and finesse to consider how both groups' legitimate concerns could be assuaged and reconciled.

Keywords Hills, identity, Kuki, Land, Manipur, Naga, Peace Accords

Introduction

In 2015, the Government of India (GoI) and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim–Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM) signed the Naga Framework Agreement (NFA) as a step toward resolution of the Naga insurgency—one of South Asia's longest running insurgency movements. The NFA is touted to be a blueprint for the future Naga Peace Accord (NPA). Ever since the signing of the NFA, protagonists of the Indo-Naga peace process and pundits have widely proclaimed the NFA to be a recipe for heralding a new era of peace in the Naga Hills and, by extension, northeast India. This sanguinity apparently emanates from a tunnel vision that sees the resolution of the Naga insurgency as central to the resolution of all other related problems in the region. But in all fairness, such a sanguine view is sustainable only if the future NPA bears the imprimatur of not only the Nagas but also of non-Naga stakeholders in the region—particularly the Kukis who, given their shared spatial abode with Nagas in the hills of Manipur, are most likely to be affected by the impending NPA. It is by paying attention to this facet

of the scene that one can credibly appraise what the future NPA has in store for peace in the region.

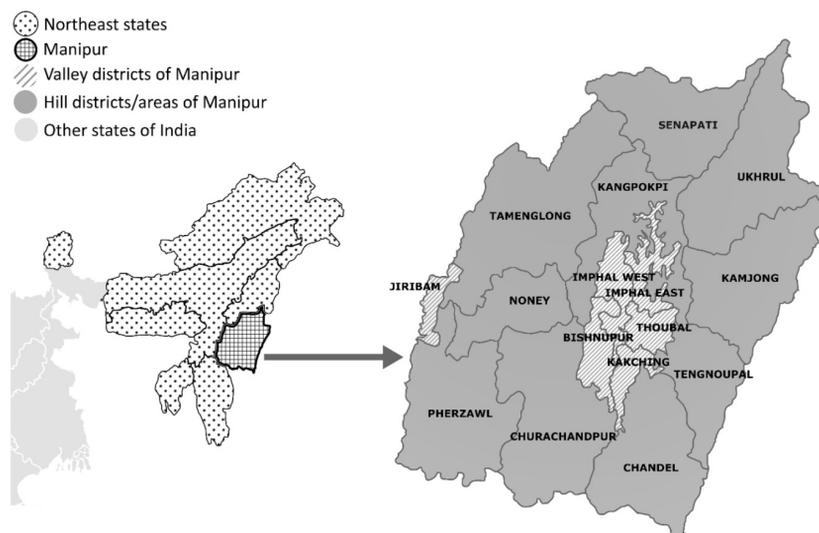
This article examines the competing claims between Nagas and Kukis over land and identity to shed light on the intractability of their disputes and how the future NPA could have implications for the Kukis and for peace in the region. The study is important not only for understanding the intractability of conflict between the two estranged groups but also for conflict prevention and crafting a durable peace deal. The article is organized into eight sections, including this introduction. The second section explores the socio-political landscape of Manipur, unravelling the complex ethno-territorial politics in the state. This is followed by a discussion on the nature of the peace processes in northeast India. The fourth section focuses on the current status of the ongoing Indo-Naga peace talks, teasing out the likely contours of the future NPA in the wake of the substantial progress the talks have made. The fifth section examines at length the landscape of the conflicts between the Kukis and Nagas, with particular attention on their competing territorial, indigeneity, and identity claims. The sixth section briefly discusses the past futile efforts to bring about reconciliation between the two ethnic groups. The seventh section considers the potential implications of the NPA for the Kukis and the need for a nuanced and balanced solution. The last section concludes the study with some final thoughts and remarks.

Manipur: The Contextual Background

Understanding the fractured relations between the Kukis and Nagas requires a brief discussion of the contemporary ethno-territorial politics immanent to the state of Manipur—one of the eight northeastern states of India. Manipur became a princely state under the colonial British rule and subsequently merged into the Indian union in 1949. The state shares a 308-kilometer border with Myanmar to its south and east. Imphal is the state's capital city. It has a geographical area of 22,327 square kilometers, having two distinct physical features: the Imphal valley (about 10 percent of the state's total geographical area) and hills (90 percent of the state's total geographical area). The state is divided into sixteen administrative divisions/districts. The six districts located in the valley regions are: Imphal West, Imphal East, Bishnupur, Thoubal, Kakching, and Jiribam. The remaining ten districts—Chandel, Senapati, Churachandpur, Ukhrul, Tamenglong, Tengnoupal, Kangpokpi, Pherzawl, Kamjong, and Noney—are in the hills (Figure 1).

The three main traditional ethnic groups of the state are the Meiteis, Kukis, and Nagas. The Meiteis predominantly inhabit the valley districts while the hills that surround the valley are primarily inhabited by thirty-four officially recognized tribal groups—constitutionally termed as Scheduled Tribes that fall under the rubric of either Kuki or Naga. The three ethnic groups of the state speak

Figure 1. Political Map of Manipur



Source: Author's compilation and presentation.

Tibeto-Burman group of languages. As per the 2011 Census of India, the state has a population of about 2.8 million. The Meiteis, with a population of about 1.5 million (about 53 percent of the state's total population), constitute the state's dominant ethnic group. Their language *Meiteilon* is the lingua-franca of the state. They predominantly follow the synthesis of Hinduism and *Sanamahism*, a pre-Hindu traditional faith of the Meiteis. The tribals, numbering about 1.1 million, account for about 39 percent of the state's total population and are predominantly Christians—a legacy of colonialism.

Historically, the Imphal valley was under monarchy while the political system of the Kukis and Nagas revolved around their traditional chieftainship system. The two political systems saw their continuity under the colonial system of dual administration: the Meitei king was recognized as having authority within the valley, while the hill areas were left to the authority of the tribal chiefs (Johnstone 1896; Reid 1942). In post-colonial Manipur, this system of dual administration got reconfigured in the form of various institutional and legal safeguards accorded to tribals. The Manipur (Hill Areas) District Councils Act (MHADCA), 1971 and Article 371(C) are the two main legal provisions that provide a measure of autonomy or self-governance to tribals. The MHADCA provides for establishment of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in the hill districts while Article 371(C) provides for Hill Areas Committee (HAC), a body that comprised of all elected tribal members of the State legislature. The HAC is invested with the right to "consider and pass resolution" on any matter (legislation or executive actions) affecting the hill areas, save money bills. Further,

the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act, 1960, which regulates land use in the state, is made applicable only in the valley areas and the hill areas are exempted from its purview. Section 158 of the Act clearly prohibits transfer of tribal land to non-tribals.

A marked feature of the social reality of Manipur is the glaring development disparity between the valley and the hills—or put differently, between the Meiteis and the tribals. This is most evident in the various facets of development: reservation policy, access to healthcare, education, employment, and asymmetry of power, among others. Though the tribals constitute about 39 percent of the state's total population, the allocated reservation share for them is 31 percent, which is further marked by tardy implementation and poor outcomes. This has resulted in their abysmal underrepresentation in various departments of the Government of Manipur (GoM). For instance, out of the total 80,000 employees of the GoM, there are 13,900 tribal employees (17.4 percent)—a shortfall of about 10,900 employees if calculated on the basis of the currently stipulated 31 percent reservation for tribals. This imbalance in employment is further mirrored by the share of the hill districts in the budgetary allocations for various departments of the GoM: education (26 percent); health (25 percent); public works department (22 percent); social welfare (14 percent); and agriculture (12 percent) (GoM 2014). This development disparity is best captured by the composite score and rank of districts in Manipur with regard to their relative performance across the fifteen Sustainable Development Goals—which includes, *inter alia*, no poverty, good health and well-being, quality of education, and infrastructure. As evident in the Table 1, all districts in the Imphal valley have higher ranks than the tribal dominated hill districts.

This development disparity between hills and valley has been a site of contestations between the Meiteis and the tribals. The tribals attribute their relative lack of development (*vis-à-vis* the Meiteis) to the asymmetry in power relations between them and the routine subversions of the various institutional and legal safeguards for the tribals. Out of the total sixty seats in the Manipur Legislative Assembly, the Meiteis have forty seats while the tribals or the hill districts have twenty seats. The various institutional and legal safeguards for tribals, as teased out previously, have over the years been rendered ineffective via periodical amendments or outright subversions. They are commonly frowned upon by the Meiteis as a barrier to hill-valley integration or even threatening the integrity of the state itself. This majoritarian integrationist approach, which generally dictates state policy, evokes strong resistance from the tribals. They deem the various protective legal provisions for tribals as a minimum prerequisite, or even insufficient, to accommodate their needs for political autonomy and to safeguard their rights. Indeed, they have a longstanding demand that the ADCs in the hills be upgraded under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution.

Aside from the conflicts along the hill-valley binary, conflicts in Manipur

Table 1. Composite Score and Rank of Districts in Manipur

Sr. No.	District	Hill or Valley District	State Rank	Northeast Rank	Score
1	Imphal West	Valley	1	13	72.13
2	Imphal East	Valley	2	21	70.87
3	Bishnupur	Valley	3	26	69.27
4	Thoubal	Valley	4	29	68.93
5	Chandel	Hill	5	44	67.47
6	Senapati	Hill	6	51	66.93
7	Churachandpur	Hill	7	55	66.53
8	Ukhrul	Hill	8	63	65.27
9	Tamenglong	Hill	9	65	64.93

Note: The information for the seven districts (Jiribam, Kakching, Tengnoupal, Kangpokpi, Pherzawl, Kamjong, and Noney), which were created in 2016, is clubbed together with the then existing districts (Imphal East, Thoubal, Chandel, Senapati, Churachandpur, Ukhrul and Tamenglong) from which they were respectively carved out.

Source: Author's compilation from NITI Aayog (2021).

have also manifested along ethnic lines. The Meiteis, Nagas, and Kuki have their own armed ethnonationalist movements with demands ranging from secession to greater political autonomy. The Meiteis' demand focuses on restoring the pre-colonial independent status of Manipur. The Naga movement, which originally aimed at secession, has now watered down to the demand for integration of Naga inhabited areas of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur with present day Nagaland state—christened as *Nagalim*. The demand of the Kukis is centred on having a separate statehood within the Indian union, termed as *Zale'n-gam*. These discordant political demands have pitted the three different groups against each other. The Meiteis deem the political demands of the Kukis and Nagas as threats to the territorial integrity of Manipur. Further, the territory that the Kukis and Nagas claim as their ancestral homeland is also deemed by the Meiteis as falling “within the feudal notion of erstwhile kingdom of Manipur” (Phanjoubam 2019).

The Kuki and Naga nationalist discourse vis-à-vis the Meiteis is however marked by their claimed separateness from the valley. Historically, they argue, the hills constituted a separate political entity in relation to the valley and it was only the merger of Manipur into the Indian union that placed the hill areas within the state (Hassan 2008). Further, the overlapping ethno-territorial demands of the Kukis and Nagas have also engendered fractured relations between the two tribal ethnic groups. Thus, broadly, conflicts in the state unfold over two main axes: between the tribals and the non-tribal Meiteis and the inter-tribal feud between the Kukis and Nagas.

Peace Processes in Northeast India

Broadly, the GoI's policies and counter-insurgency strategies have been marked by a medley of coercive, development and political measures. The key assumption at the heart of this multi-pronged approach is that conflicts in the region have complex and multiple causes—social, economic, and political. This approach has come under severe censure from several quarters. In particular, the “excessive reliance” on coercive measures to resolve the troubles in the region is deemed counter-productive, to be easing gross human rights violations, and antithetical to modern democracy (Fernandes 2004; Human Rights Watch 2008). Even the development agenda is considered to be underpinned by national security imperatives—engendering a “very narrow development agenda” that has little or no tangible benefits for the people (McDuie-Ra 2008, 188). Further, as Lacina (2009) notes, the huge economic largesse that has been routinely showered upon the region is largely ineffectual in the face of, *inter alia*, pervasive corruption, political patronage, and immunity for local social and political elites. As a matter of policy, however, there is a fairly broad convergence of opinion (both in academic and policy circles) that the GoI has to address the region's insurgency problem via deeper political and economic engagement (Baruah 2007; Das et al. 2015; Fernandes 2004; Ministry of Development of Northeastern Region 2007). Even within the security establishment, the need for the political resolution of insurgency is widely recognized. To an extent, this has been the driving force behind the GoI's interest in peace negotiations.

Accordingly, the GoI has initiated political negotiations with several ethnonationalist groups in the region, which culminated in the signing of various peace accords (Table 2). Several of these accords paved the way for the creation of either territorial or non-territorial autonomy arrangements. Only two accords, the Sixteen Point Agreement (1960) and the Mizo Accord (1986), led to the creation of full-fledged states—Nagaland and Mizoram, respectively. Further, under Article 371(A) and 371(G) of India's constitution the two states, respectively, are endowed with overriding powers on matters pertaining to, *inter alia*, social and religious practices, customary laws, and control over land and resources (Hannum 1996). The rest of the accords provided for intra-state autonomy arrangements in the form of autonomous councils, which involved no redrawing of states' political boundaries. Three of these autonomous councils—Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Councils (TTAADC), Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC)—are under the Sixth Schedule while the rest are outside the purview of this schedule. With the creation of BTC (2003), the Bodos became the first and only plain tribe thus far to be granted autonomous councils under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule.

These peace accords and their provisions, as teased out in Table 2,

Table 2. Peace Accords and Creation of Administrative Units in Northeast India

Date	Accord	Parties to the Accord	Unit Created
1960	Sixteen-Point Agreement	Government of India and Naga Peoples' Convention	Created the State of Nagaland
1986	Memorandum of Understanding	Government of India and Mizo National Front	Created the State of Mizoram
1988	Memorandum of Understanding	Government of India and Tripura National Volunteers	Reorganization of Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Councils (TTAADC) promised
1988	Darjeeling Hill Accord	Gorkhaland National Liberation Front, Government of West Bengal and Government of India	Darjeeling Gorkha Council
1993	Memorandum of Settlement	All Bodo Students Union and Assam State government	Bodoland Autonomous Council
1993	Agartala Agreement	Tripura State Government and All-Tripura Tribal Force	Renewed Commitment to reorganizing TTAADC
1994	Memorandum of Settlement	Mizoram State Government and Hmar Peoples' Convention	Sinlung Hills Development Council
1995	Memoranda of Settlement	Assam State Government and representatives of community organizations of the Rabhas, Karbis, Tiwas, and Mishings	Karbi Anglong District Council became Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council; Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council, Tiwa Autonomous Council, and Mishing Autonomous Council, which were not territorial, were established.
2003	Bodoland Territorial Council Agreement	Government of India, Assam, State Government, and Bodo Liberation Tigers	Bodoland Territorial Council

Source: Rajagopalan (2008, 43).

underscore that two main types of political autonomy arrangements (under the larger framework of asymmetrical federalism) are used for addressing the various self-determination claims in the northeast. First, provincial states, endowed with certain special asymmetric provisions, were created, usually based on the locally dominant tribal ethnicity. Nagaland and Mizoram, for instance, were created in response to the violent uprisings of the Nagas and Mizos, respectively. In a way, on a broader canvas, this is in tune with the ethnolinguistic principle that informed the creation of new states in India as per the States Reorganization Act, 1956. Second, autonomy arrangements within the provincial states in the form of autonomous councils or territorial councils are granted largely to accommodate

intra-state ethnic diversity. These autonomous councils are established either under the Sixth Schedule or under specific state legislation. The former have more legislative, executive, and judicial powers than the latter (Chaube 2009). The level of autonomy that a tribal group gets is, by and large, a function of the relative strength or weakness of their self-determination claims.

Autonomy as a device for conflict resolution in the northeast has produced mixed results. There are cases where its use has defused tensions and facilitated peace—exemplified by the Mizo Accord (1986) that ended the Mizo insurgency in Mizoram. However, there are also instances where its use has elicited concerns consistent with the view of autonomy as counter-productive, fostering ethnic mobilizations, and as a catalyst of conflict (Cornell 2002; Dorff 1994; Sanders 1991). The creation of several new states or autonomous councils has not led to durable peace in the region. Many groups in the region continue to demand ethnically defined autonomy for themselves. Even groups that have already enjoyed varying levels of ethnically-defined autonomy are demanding more autonomy or territorial expansion. The resuscitation of the demand for Bodoland state after the granting of BTC in 2003 and the lingering Naga integration demand after the creation of Nagaland in 1960, among others, are cases in point.

Understandably, many have questioned the efficacy of ethnically-defined autonomy as a device for conflict resolution in northeast India. The view is that autonomy, whatever its original cogent motives, has now become a well-intentioned policy gone rouge, perpetuating ethnic divisiveness and conflicts. It is casted as anti-egalitarian, eroding the ideals of liberal democracy and universal citizenship (Van Schendel 2011). Some have also understandably suggested that “ethnicity as a policy basis” should be jettisoned altogether (Bhaumik 2007, 36). Proponents of autonomy, however, continue to see it as a vehicle for accommodating ethno-linguistic diversities and the coexistence of multiple-modes of belonging, and for counterweighting national majorities, among others.

While this is not an occasion to deeply engage with this debate, it should suffice to note here that ethnically-defined autonomy per se may not be the problem. Rather, the problem could lie with inadequate autonomy, the way it has been negotiated, designed, or executed, among others. Indeed, most of the “reasonably stable” multinational democracies are states that manage their internal divisions via asymmetric federalism (e.g., Canada and Switzerland) (Stepan 1999). Further, a prescription for ethnicity-blind policy toward the northeast may be conceptually appealing but is fraught with impracticalities since ethnicity is acutely embedded in the body politics of the region—or, for that matter, in the Indian state’s *modus operandi* for resolving conflicts in the region. It would also be far-fetched to expect the ethnic groups of the region to think solely in terms of citizenship and brush aside their distinctive ethnic identities. Ethnic mobilization has been, and will remain, a challenge in the region for the foreseeable future.

Peace processes, therefore, need to take these underlying realities into account and work toward devising ways to accommodate multiple, and often competing, ethnic aspirations immanent in the region. A key way is to turn the searchlight not just onto the peace accords and their provisions (e.g., prescription for autonomy), but also on how the conflicting parties arrive at mutual agreements to ink the accords. The path to peace accords (e.g., inclusiveness or exclusiveness of peace talks) “is often more important than the accord itself” (Rajagopalan 2008, 12). An inclusive peace process involves all stakeholders, addresses the core issues undergirding conflicts, and focuses on long term solutions, among others. By serving as the platform to craft arrangements that would bear the imprimatur of all stakeholders, an inclusive peace process begets good accords.

Peace processes in northeast India have by and large woefully displayed traits of an exclusive peace process. An “exclusive peace process” keeps out (by design or happenstance) one or more parties who have been divided or in conflict, and in doing so precludes “them from bringing their grievances to the negotiating table” (Blaydes and De Maio 2010, 8). It mostly involves a narrow set of actors, leaves out stakeholders of different hues, and focuses on attaining immediate outcomes—that is, to put an immediate end to conflicts or to “keep the conflicts from exploding into serious and violent outbursts” (Das 2009, 246). It simply functions as a device to manage conflicts and not for resolving conflicts. In other words, it is not so much about finding an amicable solution as it is about ascertaining the “climb-down position” of the insurgent groups. Upon ascertaining the climb-down position, the state enters into peace parleys to impose an accord (Rupesinghe 2001). This renders peace talks an “extension of war—a war ‘continued through other means’” (Das 2009, 247). Peace accords that emerged out of this framework are, therefore, found wanting vis-à-vis bringing durable peace in the region. As Rajagopalan (2008, 13) observes:

Pre-accord talks [in the northeast India] have not been inclusive. Provisions agreed upon with one group have patently conflicted with the grievances of another; and accords either have dealt with conflict issues in a manner that cannot be implemented or they have not dealt with them at all. Finally, in six decades, no responsive and accountable political infrastructure has been created for conflict resolution, or even for governance.

These have been illustrated by the various peace processes or accords in the region. Among others, consider the cases of the Sixteen Point Agreement (1960), Shillong Accord (1986), and the more recent Bodo Accord (2003). First, the Sixteen Point Agreement (1960), which created Nagaland, was signed with the Naga Peoples’ Convention while the Naga National Council (NNC) was sidelined. The disgruntled NNC continued the movement for Naga independence.

Second, the Shillong Accord, which obligated the NNC cadres to surrender and unconditionally accept the Indian constitution (Bhaumik 2007) led to the emergence of the National Sovereign Council of Nagaland (NSCN). The NSCN considered the Shillong Accord to be a “sell-out” and continued the Naga movement. Finally, the Bodo Accord, which created the BTC, was signed with the Bodo Liberation Tigers without taking the non-Bodo stakeholders, who constitute the demographic majority in the proposed BTC areas, into confidence (Mahanta 2013). This has engendered the rising assertions of the non-Bodos and the resultant conflicts with the Bodos. The common thread running through all these peace accords was the lack of inclusiveness or consensus, which rendered the accords the bases for further discord and conflict in the region. Thus, it is with this hindsight that the subject at hand (i.e., the implications of the future NPA for the Kukis) is explored.

Current Status of the Indo-Naga Peace Talks

Indo-Naga peace talks began way back in 1997. After a long period of arduous work on both sides, the GoI and the NSCN-IM signed the NFA in 2015. The key contours of the NFA, kept under wraps for a long time, were brought to light in the report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs (PSCOHA) that was tabled in the Parliament on July 19, 2018. Revealing the contours of the NFA, the GoI, through its interlocutor RN Ravi, briefed the PSCOHA that the NFA was signed after reaching an “understanding” with the NSCN-IM to find a “settlement within Indian federation, with a special status” (PSCOHA 2018, 18), a status that was left for further negotiation. On the vexed issue of Nagas’ demand for territorial integration of present-day Nagaland state with other Naga-inhabited areas falling under other neighboring states of northeast India, he told the PSCOHA that the GoI had reached a “common understanding” with the Nagas that “boundaries of the States will not be touched.” Further, he informed that a special arrangement like Article 371A,¹ “with some local variation,” would be explored for the Nagas outside Nagaland (ibid., 18-19).

In sync with the PSCOHA’s report, subsequent information that emanated from the ongoing Naga peace process has affirmed that secession or territorial integration is no longer on the agenda of the talks. There are also credible claims that New Delhi and the NSCN-IM have reached an agreement for creations of Naga Territorial Councils (NTCs) for administration of “Naga areas” outside Nagaland and a *Pan-Naga Hoho*, i.e., a supra-state body that would oversee the cultural aspects of Nagas living in Assam, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh.

These institutional arrangements are envisaged to be elected bodies, comprising of representatives from Naga tribes, and to be endowed with legislative, executive, budgetary, and negotiating powers under a specially enacted

“Naga Law which will be incorporated in the Indian Constitution” (Bhushan 2017). Also, all land and resources in Naga areas are said to be owned and controlled by the Nagas. Lending veracity to these claims, a statement from the NSCN-IM in early 2020 tacitly affirmed that such arrangements were indeed envisaged for the Nagas outside Nagaland.²

However, to date, the much anticipated NPA remains elusive. What delays the signing of the NPA is said to be the failure of the GoI and the NSCN-IM leadership to arrive at a mutually acceptable agreement on the two issues of a separate Naga flag and a *Yehzabo* (separate Naga constitution). The GoI is agreeable to the two demands under certain conditions: Naga flag for cultural purposes only and the incorporation of a “mutually acceptable part of the Naga constitution in the Constitution of India” (Karmakar 2022). The implied corollary is that the GoI is averse to the idea of a Naga flag or constitution that symbolizes a separate Naga nationhood. In April 2022, the newly appointed GoI interlocuter, AK Mishra, conveyed to the NSCN-IM leadership that the GoI would not accept the demands for a separate Naga flag and constitution (Chakrabarti 2022).

However, the NSCN-IM is adamant on their demands. In its “Emergency National Assembly” held in May 2022, the NSCN-IM resolved to “uphold and protect Naga unique history and Naga national principle at any cost” and stand by their demands for separate Naga flag and constitution. An NSCN-IM leader was quoted as saying, “How can we forfeit Naga national flag and Naga constitution in the name of Naga political solution?” (Agarwala 2022). In what could be seen as having an attenuating effect on the NSCN-IM’s position, the Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs), a conglomerate of other Naga insurgent organizations based in Nagaland, do not see a separate Naga flag and constitution as a precondition for signing the final NPA. They maintain that the two demands can be democratically pursued post solution (*The Morung Express* 2019).

Against the backdrop of their obstinate positions, it remains to be seen how the GoI and the NSCN-IM might wriggle their way out of these two contentious issues. Nonetheless, by all accounts, both the GoI and NSCN-IM seem to have already worked out the finer points of the future NPA. With the GoI continuing to negotiate with the NSCN-IM leadership, it seems to be just a matter of time before both parties find a mutually acceptable agreement on the two contentious issues and the NPA is formally signed.

Unresolved Issues between Nagas and Kukis

Given their divergent ethno-political demands, the Kukis and Nagas have longstanding conflicts that center around, among other things, land and identity. During the 1990s, these lingering disputes drove the two ethnic groups into violent conflicts. Ever since, relations between the two groups remain volatile.

Given their history of violent conflicts and ongoing competing territorial and identity claims, any future Naga peace deal is bound to have repercussions for the Kukis. In particular, if the future NPA is to come in its current form, as teased out above, it would be tantamount to voiding the Kuki territorial and identity claims, a point discussed later. Undoubtedly, anticipating or drawing a possible scenario when the terms of the future NPA have not yet been officially announced can be dodgy. Yet, given the stakes involved, it is no less imperative. In the sections that follow, the deep-seated nature of the competing claims of the Kukis and Nagas over territory and identity are examined (with added attention to Kuki counterclaims) to set the context for drawing out the probable implications of the impending NPA for the Kukis.

Unresolved Territorial Claims

The Naga and Kuki homeland projects, *Nagalim* and *Zale'n-gam* respectively, run into collision course with each other. This stems from the fact that the two ethnic groups share the same territorial space in all the hill districts, thereby engendering overlapping territorial claims. It is a case wherein ethno-cultural boundaries do not neatly coincide with spatial boundaries. This can be gauged from the distribution of Kuki and Naga population in all the then total five hill districts of Manipur: Senapati, Tamenglong, Ukhrul, Churachandpur and Chandel. As illustrated in Table 3, which provides for the district wise distribution of both the tribes, the Nagas are mostly concentrated in the hill districts of Senapati (71.7%), Tamenglong (92.9%), and Ukhrul (94.4%) while the Kukis are mostly concentrated in Churachandpur district (98%). The two ethnic groups however constitute roughly the same proportion of population in Chandel district.

These competing territorial claims are largely a post-colonial phenomenon though the residues of colonial administration and spatial order constitute the

Table 3. Distribution of Kuki and Naga Ethnic Groups in Hill Districts of Manipur

Sr. No.	Name of Hill District	Nagas (in %)	Kukis (in %)
1	Senapati	71.71	28.29
2	Ukhrul	94.40	05.60
3	Tamenglong	92.95	07.05
4	Churachandpur	01.97	98.03
5	Chandel	51.60	48.40

Note: The information for the five new hill districts (Tengnoupal, Pherzawl, Kangpokpi, Noney, and Kamjong), which were created in 2016, is clubbed together with the then five existing hill districts (Chandel, Churachandpur, Senapati, Tamenglong, and Ukhrul) from which the new districts were respectively carved out.

Source: Author's compilation based on Census of India (2011).

premises for framing such territorial demands. As Baruah (2011, 9) says, the colonial spatial discourse that planted ethnic groups to their “supposed natural habitats” provided the framework for these conceptions of territorially-rooted identity. The NSCN-IM’s own definition of Nagalim territory, for instance, liberally draws from the description of Naga territory by J. H. Hutton, a colonial administrator, in his “Introduction” to J. P. Mill’s (1922) monograph on the *Lotha Nagas* (quoted in Baruah 2003, 323):

The area inhabited by the Naga tribes is bounded by the Hukawng Valley in the northeast, the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley in the northwest, Cachar in the southwest and the Chindwin River in the east. In the South, the Manipur Valley roughly marks the point of contact between the Nagas and the very much more closely interrelated group of Kuki tribes.

Like the Nagas, Kuki nationalists also tend to uncritically rely on the colonial definition of “Kuki territory” to buttress their current spatial claims and to contest Naga spatial claims. For instance, P. S. Haokip (2008), President of the Kuki National Organization (KNO), in his book, *Zale’n-gam: The Kuki Nation*, liberally quotes G. A. Grierson (1904, 1), a colonial administrator and linguist, to introduce the territory belonging to what the KNO calls *Zale’ngam*:

The territory inhabited by the Kuki tribes extends from the Naga Hills in the north down into the Sandoway District of Burma in the south; from Myittha River in the east, almost to the Bay of Bengal in the west. It is almost entirely filled up by hills and mountain ridges, separated by deep valleys...This vast mountainous region, from the Jaintia and Naga Hills in the north, is the home of the Kuki tribes. We find them, besides, in the valley of Manipur, and, in small settlements, in the Cachar Plains and Sylhet (Haokip 2008, 8).

He further notes, “Kuki chieftains reigned supreme in *Zale’n-gam*, the undivided ancestral lands, and their people lived in peace traversing its entire expanse like a grand eagle in flight” (ibid.).

However, upon juxtaposition, the overlapping as well as the arbitrary nature of colonial descriptions of Kuki and Naga territories becomes apparent. It foregrounds the incongruity between the actual distributions of populations and the colonizers’ faulty imagination of mutually exclusive ethnic territories. In neither of the aforementioned colonially constructed Naga and Kuki territory is there a mutually exclusive Naga or Kuki settlement. For instance, the Kuki settlement areas as mapped out by colonial officer John Shakespear (1912) in his book, *The Lushei Kuki Clans*, includes the present-day Senapati, Kangpokpi, Tamenglong, Noney, Ukhrul, and Kamjong districts of Manipur—spatial areas that are also overwhelmingly inhabited by the Nagas. This underscores the impracticality of assigning such shared territorial spaces to one group. This

notwithstanding, both Kuki and Naga ethnonationalists make instrumental use of colonial discourses of ethnicity and territory—without regard for the subtleties and variations on the ground—to buttress their respective territorial claims as well as to undermine each other's claims.

The Kukis attribute their contemporary territorial marginalization to their victimizations under colonialism and the Naga irredentist project. In the aftermath of the *Kuki Rising* (1917-1919), wherein the Kukis rose up in arms against the intruding colonial power, the colonial administration brought the entire hill areas of Manipur under its direct administrative control by dividing the territory into four sub-divisions mostly headquartered in Naga strongholds (Reid 1942, 85). These administrative measures achieved the twin objectives of curbing anti-colonial activities of the Kukis and ensuring their subjugation by the Nagas, particularly in the then Tamenglong and Ukhrul subdivisions (Gangte 1993). Further, ever since the hill areas of Manipur came under the theatre of Naga insurgency, the Kukis bore the brunt of tax payment coercion, selective elimination of prominent village chiefs, and eviction of villages primarily in Naga-dominated Ukhrul and Tamenglong districts (Tikoo 2000, 219). According to Kuki Innpi (the apex body of the Kukis), Kuki-Naga conflicts that flared up in the early 1990s had uprooted 360 Kuki villages and displaced thousands of inhabitants. Several of these erstwhile Kuki villages are now mostly appropriated by the Nagas. Against this backdrop, the Kukis have been demanding restitution of their territory which they argue was coercively taken from them.

Contested Indigeneity Claims

The competing territorial claim of the Kukis and Nagas is further convoluted by the injection of the indigeneity argument. Claimants of indigenous status accord themselves the first claim of resources or special status entitlement. These indigeneity politics are prominently pursued by the NSCN-IM or, for that matter, advocates of Naga nationalism. They ascribe the term “indigenes” or “first settlers” to themselves and deny its reciprocal application to the Kukis, ergo confuting any claims to Kuki self-determination. They pursue a narrative that caricatures the whole Kuki population as the quintessential “encroachers” or “outsiders” (Devi 2008, 207; Singh 2008). Certain colonial accounts, such as Hodson (1901) and Johnstone (1896), that portray a section of the Kukis as “colonial implants,” have been routinely cited to buttress their points. Kuki counterclaims center on assertions of their own indigeneity, particularly underlining their anti-colonial movements. First, the Kukis claim they are as much indigenous to their land as the Nagas are. Emergent Kuki-centric historiography underlines that the Kukis have settled in their present habitats long before the intrusion of colonial rule in the region (Haokip 2011; Lunminthang 2016). The historicity of their anti-colonial struggle (the Kuki Rising and their contributions to India's freedom movement during the Second World War led by the Indian National Army

[INA])³ is deemed as a veritable demonstration of their indigeneity, homegrown nationalism and attachment to their lands (Kuki Research Forum 2015).

Upon closer examination, one discerns that Nagas' exclusive indigeneity claim is overly monochromatic and reductive. It has not engaged with the wider historical literature that underscores the interconnectedness of the Meiteis, Kukis, and Nagas. Scores of weighty historians and anthropologists, for instance, refer to Kukis as among the earliest people known to have lived in pre-historic India (Majumdar and Bhattasali 1930, 6-7), as having "migrated to Manipur hills in the pre-historic times along with or after the Meitei advent in the Manipur Valley" (Kabui 1991, 24), and as ruling the roost in hills that surrounded the Imphal valley (Reid 1942). Anthropologist F. K. Lehman says, "Many of the Kukis fall more into the orbit of Manipuri than of Burman Civilisation" (Lehman 1980, 14-15).

To be sure, the colonial regime, adopting the classic divide and conquer strategy, had used a section of the Kukis as a buffer, first against the Burmese and, later, against the Nagas. Yet, it is also true that, at different points in history, the colonial regime used the Meiteis and Nagas for the same end. For instance, the colonial regime had used the Meiteis and Nagas as a buffer, first against Kuki raids in Cachar region and later to suppress the Kuki Rising (Ro 2007; Thomas 2016). This obviously engendered population flight from one area to another. Despite this, to attribute such population flight only to the Kukis would militate against a more nuanced reading of the history of the region. In all fairness, it can hardly be denied that both the Kukis and Nagas are indigenous in the sense of what Bêteille (1998, 190) says of tribes in India as having "acquired their shape and form in the land of their present existence." Though indeterminate in meaning, the concept "indigenous peoples" entails historical antiquity, victimizations under colonialism, historical injustice, and subjugation. On these benchmarks, the Kukis and Nagas could certainly be seen as indigenous peoples. However, indigeneity in the sense of "autochthonicity" has—for reasons such as the complex history of migration, usurpation, and acculturation—little value for resolving their competing claims. Rather, such exclusive indigeneity claims have only led to the further intractability of their conflicts.

Competing Identity Issues

Competing identity claims is also central to the fractured Kuki-Naga relations. Both "Kuki" and "Naga" are collective appellations that evolved during the 19th and 20th Centuries. They were adopted and popularized by the colonial administration for classifying the various hill tribes of the region for administrative convenience. As such, they are composite ethnic groups; it would be specious to look upon the two as comprising a single, readily identifiable ethnic group. They are exogenous terms and are not part of the indigenous vocabulary. However, these colonial classifications have now been internalized

in terms of constituting a collective identity around which political claims are articulated.

Going by their ethnological structures, the various Kuki tribes have affinity with each other—their consanguinity is most evident in their languages and cultures (Grierson 1904). The Naga tribes, on the contrary, are composed of disparate tribes marked by distinctive cultural practices and mutually unintelligible languages (Burling 2003). As such, Kuki identity exhibits a cultural orientation while Naga identity has a more political orientation. This renders possible for any group to join the Naga fold, whereas only groups that have cultural or linguistic affinities can be part of the Kuki fold. The political orientation of Naga identity is evident in its continuing process of formation and expansion (Baruah 2003; Nag 2012). For instance, the number of tribes under the Naga fold, as put out by the NSCN-IM from time to time, has risen from forty-three in 2002 to sixty-eight in 2008 (Singh 2021, 279). This Naga identity expansion is mainly through the incremental absorption of various smaller tribes—“whose language a linguist would, without hesitation, classify as *Kuki*” (Burling 2003, 188)—into the Naga fold to enhance their political profile. Gangumei Kabui, a Naga scholar, termed this process of Naga identity expansion as “Naga-isation” (quoted in Nag 2012, 188; hereafter Nagaization). The various old Kuki tribes that have already joined the Naga fold include, among others, the Anal, Chothe, Maring, Moyon, Lamkang, Purum and Aimol. They constitute what Kabui (1981) cogently termed as culturally Kuki, but politically Naga.

The Nagaization process is effectuated primarily through the method of coercion. In this method, smaller tribes would renounce their individual ethnic identities and embrace the Naga identity, or alternatively face threats of violence (Nag 2012, 190). This was most recently witnessed in the contentious admission of the Aimols in 2015 as one of the tribes under the United Naga Council (UNC), the apex body of the Naga tribes in Manipur (*Nagaland Post* 2015). Predictably, against this backdrop, anti-Nagaization consciousness has gained potency among the Kukis. They attribute their political decline to the evisceration of their identity in the milieu of the expanding Naga identity. Winning back their “lost ethnic kins” from the Naga fold is deemed essential for restoring the “past glory of Kuki identity” and for consolidation of their political movement. The Nagaization process—given its political, rather than cultural, orientation—is deemed as an act of usurpation, a cause of conflict, and, therefore, illegitimate. Criticizing the Nagaization of culturally distinct Kuki tribes, the Kuki Inpi (2018) notes:

The UNC’s agenda of Nagaisation of smaller tribes in Manipur, which is a threat not only to the identity of the tribes concerned but also the reputation of UNC which now resembles a conglomeration of any ABC tribes, devoid of any consideration whatsoever for their cultural and traditional affinities that qualifies for a common community when forcefully affiliating tribes under their fold. This highly

condemnable policy of assimilating the erstwhile Old Kuki tribes especially of Chandel District is the main reason that has for decades disturbed the otherwise peaceful Kuki region.

These Kuki contestations of Naga identity claims reflect the lived reality of the lingering unsettled identity issues between the two groups. In a context wherein ethnic identities are seen as having their territorial counterparts, Kuki contestations of Naga identity is central to reclaiming their lost territories. Similarly, Nagaization of smaller Kuki tribes is critical to the Naga political project of expanding their territorial claims. In fact, the inclusion of Chandel and Tengnoupal districts of Manipur in the *Nagalim* map is undergirded by the absorption of Anals and Marings (who predominantly live in these districts) into the Naga fold. Likewise, to the Kukis, winning back these “Nagaized Kuki” tribes to their fold is deemed to be critical to their territorial claim of the same two districts.

Half-baked Bid for Reconciliation

The apprehensions of the Kukis that the impending NPA would infringe upon their territorial and identity claims have majorly shaped the nature of their approach toward the Indo-Naga peace talks, and by extension, their view of the Indian state and their current political demands. The Kukis’ public stance on the Indo-Naga peace process is encapsulated in the series of memoranda submitted by their frontal organizations—notably, the Kuki Innpi, KNO, and the Kuki Movement for Human Rights (KMHR)—to the GoI. Salient demands in their memoranda include: (1) justice for the Kuki victims killed by the NSCN-IM; (2) restoration of land/villages lost by the Kukis during the ethnic conflicts; (3) concurrent settlement of the Kuki and Naga political issues; and (4) no settlement of the Naga political issue at the cost of the Kukis.⁴ They harbour no qualms about the GoI settling the political issue of the Nagas by giving whatever the latter want in the context of Nagaland, but they expect their voices to be heard in Manipur. In the words of a KNO spokesperson:

The Central government should settle the issue of the Kuki first or simultaneously and stop giving undue attention to the Naga militant for they are the perpetrators of ethnic conflicts. Although the content of the framework agreement is unknown, it is obvious that it intends to bring a solution to the Naga issues. But, in doing so, the Kuki territory should not be affected (quoted in Leivon 2018).

The Kukis’ position is that any peaceful resolution of their conflicts with the Nagas would be contingent upon the Nagas, specifically the NSCN-IM, tendering their apology for the crimes the latter had perpetrated against the Kukis by

performing Kuki customary rites, such as paying *luongman* (corpse price) and *tol-theh* (a ritual performed by a person who contravenes social norms). Positioning themselves as victims of NSCN-IM's "ethnic cleansing campaigns," they argue that it is a misnomer to frame such violent campaigns as "ethnic conflicts" (Kipgen 2018, 33). Naga frontal organizations have however decried Kukis' position as skewed and argued that both sides have been victims of the conflicts. They deprecate Kukis' position as a calumny fraught with the ulterior motive to derail the Indo-Naga peace process, resuscitate old wounds, and avow "defeat and frustration" (UNC 2018).

Here, the problem is not so much about their deep-rooted differences as it is about their failure to recognise the need, and to sincerely work, for reconciliation. Even the past efforts by KNO and the NSCN-IM, ostensibly to reconcile the Kukis and Nagas, appeared to be nothing more than a convoluted chess game wherein both parties sought to checkmate each other. The NSCN-IM's strategy, for instance, has been to make alliances with splintered Kuki-armed groups, co-opt them into supporting the Naga movement, and then tout such support as bearing the imprimatur of the Kuki community. The alliance between NSCN-IM and the Kuki Tribal Union (KTU), a splintered Kuki militant group, is a case in point. The KTU, though it has no mandate from the Kukis it claims to represent, has a publicly stated position that the Kukis and Nagas are brothers and that the political interests of the Kukis lay in supporting the Naga political movement (*Nagaland Post* 2018).

Similarly, the KNO and the NNPGs (a conglomerate of seven Nagaland-based political groups holding peace talks with the GoI) signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in January 2020 to resolve differences between Kukis and Nagas through periodical mutual consultations.⁵ However, the MoU sits uneasily with the conspicuous absence of the NSCN-IM in the frame. As such, the MoU, without prejudicing its potential whatsoever for firming Kuki-Naga relations in Nagaland, is unlikely to make any tangible difference in the context of Manipur. Until and unless the KNO and the NSCN-IM (the flagbearers of Kuki and Naga movements in Manipur) make sincere efforts to resolve their differences, reconciliation remains farfetched.

Naga Peace Talks and its Potential Implications for Kukis

As previously pointed out, competing territorial claims lie at the heart of the fissures and conflicts between Kukis and Nagas in Manipur. These claims are premised on the much-censured colonial spatial order, exclusive indigeneity claims, and identity expansionism. As such, the infirmities inherent in these premises are obvious. First, colonial portioning of Kuki or Naga territory is arbitrary; it is at odds with actual spatial distribution of the population. Second,

given the fact that the two estranged groups have historically forged their identity in the spatial areas they currently inhabit, the principle of temporal priority as a premise for staking the first claim over land and resources is unsustainable. Third, identity expansionism—which hinges on the notion that if a community changes its identity affiliation, their territories too would follow suit—only engenders interminable spatial claims. These explain how their competing claims remain trapped in quicksand where apparent solutions risk becoming another problem.

The institutional arrangements envisaged for the Nagas in Manipur (i.e., the NTCs and the Pan-Naga Hoho), as teased out previously, are fraught with implications for the Kukis and, by extension, for peace in the region. The NTCs, given their ethnically-defined character, implies the need for territorial delimitation. Yet, given the shared nature of the territorial spaces in the hills between the Kukis and Nagas, any delimitation of the boundary of the NTCs would be highly contentious. Further, though labelled as “non-territorial solution,” the Pan-Naga Hoho would anyhow have a territorial dimension as such privileges are to be enjoyed by the group within a given territorial jurisdiction. Going by their intended character, as examined previously, these institutional arrangements (NTCs and Pan-Naga Hoho) would be required to have an institutionally demarcated territorial remit and a clear identification of who the Nagas are. Such an exercise, if initiated, would be arduous and fraught with further implications as Naga identity claims is contested by the Kukis.

Though Naga nationalists tend to conceptualize Naga identity within the framework of “blood and soil,” its ever-expanding facet, as the Nagaization process demonstrates, reflects a fluid identity construction wherein groups change their ethnic affiliations or oscillate between different affiliations depending upon circumstances. Naga identity, as Longkumer (2010) notes, is a fuzzy construct wherein members are not obliged to cling onto it perpetually. This aspect of Naga identity gainsays the ethnonationalist projection of Naga identity as stable, fixed, and objectively ascertainable. This leads to the pertinent question: In the absence of any definitive answer on who the Nagas are, can “Naga areas” be objectively ascertained? The issue at stake is aptly problematized by Baruah (2003, 321):

Whether or not some people included in the Naga category should indeed be considered Nagas is in fact a highly contested matter. Since it is impossible to agree on who is a Naga and who is not, it has been difficult to decide what the Naga-inhabited areas are.

If the Naga territorial and identity claims are accepted at face value and become the basis for resolution of the Naga issue, it would amount to voiding Kuki territorial and identity claims.

The Kukis, who regard themselves as the biggest victims of the constructivist nature of Naga identity, have long viewed the absorption of several of their co-

ethnic groups into the Naga fold as artificial and illegitimate. Even sections within groups that have merged into the Naga fold have also raised doubts about the practicality of their Naga identity. For instance, citing their cultural affinity with the Kuki groups, the Marings argue that their absorption into the Naga fold would have “little practical bearing” (Saul 2005, 17-19). To be sure, one may reason self-identification is key to navigating the thickets surrounding Naga identity. But this too has grey areas, as reducing identity to self-definitions can obscure the structural asymmetries of power that regulate relations between ethnic groups. Marginalized groups may be denied the agency to speak in their own terms, and may be even relieved of their primordial identities. The coercive co-optation of the Aimols into the Naga fold, as noted previously, is an exemplar.

Consider also the broader ethical implications of conferring rights upon a group and denying the same to another—even though, say, both parties (Kukis and Nagas) live in the same territorial space and have similar aspirations. It is axiomatic that selective conferment of rights and privileges is implicitly a denial of rights for the ones who are excluded. Aside from the inversion of the principles of ethical state conduct, this would also raise a compelling question: Is it realistic to expect peace and camaraderie in a milieu wherein two contending groups are endowed with unequal group rights and privileges? Needless to say, any partisan state conduct, such as serving the interests of some to the detriment of others, would be a sure recipe for further discord and conflict.

Concluding Remarks

The longstanding disputes between the Kukis and Nagas in Manipur that center on land and identity remain unresolved to this day. The complicated nature of their disputes is such that they are not amenable to easy solutions. Pulling a thread to untangle one part of the solution would forthwith put strains on other parts of the problem. This notwithstanding, and even as the Indo-Naga peace talks is entering its final stage, no earnest efforts have thus far been put forth, either by the GoI or by the two groups, to reconcile their deep-seated differences. Instead, the two estranged groups continue to embroil themselves in conflicting claims. Meanwhile, the GoI, on its part, continues to over-determine the Naga factor in its approach to insurgency problems or, for that matter, peacebuilding in the northeast. There is no such talk or fair weighting of the sentiments of other ethnic entities, including the Kukis, who have equal concerns about their land and identity. In this milieu, the Kukis have a foreboding that the GoI would make their territorial claims a sacrificial lamb at the altar of the Naga peace process.

Given the shared nature of the territorial space between the Kukis and Nagas and their history of bloody conflicts, the Kukis evidently constitute one of the key non-Naga stakeholders in the Naga peace process. This being the case—and if the

broader northeast's unfavorable experience with the various peace accords, most of which became the bases for further conflicts, as alluded to previously, is any guide—any future Naga peace deal that sidelines the claims and concerns of the Kukis is bound to be counter-productive and fraught with dangers.

As stakes are high on both sides, the GoI, as an arbiter of conflicting interest groups, must engage in thoughtful mediation and facilitate mutual dialogue that nurtures egalitarian ethos, inclusive compromises, and shared ownership of peace process and its outcomes. On a more general note, the search for a durable peace in the northeast cannot ignore, but must contend with, the multiple claims, narratives, and realities immanent in the region. The Kukis and Nagas, on their part, need to draw salutary lessons from the futility of their past attempts to violently settle their disputes. They need to introspect on their own constructionisms and zero-sum demands and work toward reconciling their competing claims. To be sure, crafting a wholesome peace deal by aggregating diverse interests and conflicting demands is an arduous one. But it is also true that managing the fallouts of an unnuanced solution could be an even more arduous challenge.

Notes

1. Article 371A of India's constitution, an asymmetrical constitutional arrangement for Nagaland state, provides the legislature of Nagaland state the power to render infructuous any law made by the Indian Parliament pertaining to, inter alia, religious and customary practices, criminal justice administration, and land ownership.
2. The NSCN-IM's statement released on January 8, 2020, termed the Territorial Council to be created in "Naga areas" outside Nagaland as "Naga Regional Territorial Councils" (*The Morung Express* 2020). It is a different matter, though, that its own publicly articulated position on Nagalim remains steeped in a semantically-charged rhetoric that territorial integration (Greater Nagaland) is the inherent right of the Nagas.
3. For a detailed discussion of Kuki participation in the INA-led campaign against colonial rule, see Guite (2011).
4. For a compendium of memorandums submitted by frontal Kuki organizations to successive Central governments, see KMHR (2009).
5. As per the MoU, the KNO and NNPGs agreed to acknowledge and respect the history and identity of each other, guided by the spirit of harmonious co-existence (*The Sangai Express* 2020).

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