

# Conflict Situations and Children's Education in Manipur

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## Abstract

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*Manipur has been witnessing various forms of conflict for a long period of time and children have been the most vulnerable section to such situations. From the immediate to the long-term effects, children have been the victims of conflicts. The paper tries to understand how situations of conflict in Manipur have seriously impeded the development of children by denying them their basic right to education. It also suggests the possible measures towards ensuring this basic right even in times of conflict situations.*

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Education, as we all accept, plays a vital role in the overall development of a child. It gives shape and structure to children's lives and instills community values, promotes justice and respect for human rights and enhances peace, stability and interdependence. Realising the importance of education in children's lives, the Convention of the Rights of the Child adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on November 20, 1989, and ratified by India in 1992, *inter alia* ask the States to recognise the right of the child to education. With a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, the Convention recommends to make primary education compulsory and

available free to all, and also to take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of dropouts. It must be mentioned here that the Constitution of India had also placed the need for Universal Elementary Education in the Directive Principles of State Policy under Article 45 of the Constitution of India. It is, therefore, stipulated as an important duty/obligation of the State to follow it in implementing programmes and public policies. The Constitution (Eighty-sixth Amendment) Act 2002, has reinforced it by making it as a Fundamental Right by inserting Article 21 (A), stating that 'the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of 6

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to 14 years in such as the State may, by law, determine'. Making elementary education a Fundamental Right has meant that the denial of the right can be challenged in a court of law.

However, children's education becomes a serious casualty in situations of armed conflict and their basic right severely violated. While situations of conflict is a perennial phenomena and are occasionally manifested in visible forms of violence, the repercussions are nevertheless prolong which affects the well-being of the overall population in the affected zone. Children are one of the most vulnerable sections of the society; and conflict carries every potential of disturbing not only the normal growth but also affects the opportunity to develop their capabilities.

This paper tries to understand how situations of conflict in Manipur have seriously impeded the development of children by denying them their basic right to education. In Manipur, since the last few decades, various forms of conflict have taken place ranging from ethnic conflicts to conflicts between the state and the non-state actors. In fact, the State has a long record of conflicts. Violations of civil rights including the right to life have become daily routine. Studies on conflict in Manipur while addressing the issue of human rights violations, often misses the issues regarding deprivation of education, not necessarily induced by violent conflict per se but also by the ramification associated with the corollaries of conflict. The paper is an honest attempt to highlight the issue.

### **Effect of Conflicts on Children**

In this paper, the term conflict refers to situations of violent armed conflict. A conflict occurs when two or more parties believe they have incompatible objectives in power, resources, wealth, and status. In addition, significant factors that lead to conflict and absence of peace are numerous. The major impetus can range from ethnic and social divisions, failure of government institutions and so on.

Armed conflict in any form affects the everyday lives of the people and children are the most vulnerable section of the population. They are the primary victims of armed conflict; they get killed or hurt, made orphans, abducted, deprived of education and health care and left with deep emotional trauma. Children of this region are witnesses, survivors and direct victims of different forms of armed conflict. Many have seen the loss of many lives in the continuous armed conflicts. Children are not just getting caught in the crossfire but are also being targeted in many cases and are bearing the brunt of violence. The trauma caused to children who are rendered homeless, orphaned and destitute through the indiscriminate and senseless killing of their parents and relatives, has created a fear psychosis in their minds. These children are going up as disturbed individuals, many of them afflicted by depressive illness.

In every situation where violent conflicts occur, we always find two undercurrents— first, conflict manifested in its physical form, and secondly, derivatives of conflict (*bandhs*, curfews, economic blockades, strikes,

participation in protest movements, etc.), These derivatives of conflict linger on for a long period impeding the prevalence of a conducive educational environment in conflict situations. Education is disrupted and not progressive. In spite of the positive values engrained in education and schools as agents of positive change and development, the inability to function properly rendered by the conflicts neutralizes the positive elements inherent in education or the schools.

Among the most serious repercussions of conflicts on children is the deprivation of their basic education. During conflict, fear and disruption make it difficult to create an atmosphere conducive to learning, and the morale of both teachers and students is likely to be low. As conflict drags for months, economic and social conditions suffer and educational opportunities become more limited. Sometimes even when educational opportunities exist in the disturbed areas; parents are just reluctant to send their children to school. They are afraid that the children will not be safe while they are on their way to and from school. Overall, during conflict situations, not even schools are safe from attack and children lose the opportunities to learn and are denied the structure, stability and predictability they need to develop their potential. Ultimately, it can lead to a situation in which they lose their sense of trust and hope for the future.

Manipur is not innocent as far as conflicts are concerned. In Manipur, since the last five decades various forms of conflict has taken place ranging from ethnic conflicts to conflict between the

state and the non-state actors. Different forms of conflicts have been ravaging the state for a long time. Besides the long drawn armed conflicts induced by insurgency, there are also conflicts borne out of the ethnic feuds among various communities in the state. As stated above, these forms of conflicts severely impeded the normal growth of the children with their education being the most serious casualty. The disruption of education in the violence-torn states of the North East in general and Manipur has seriously affected the development of children. Undeniably, education is the most powerful tool for social change and development. When a child's education is affected, the whole life of the child is affected, and the recurring violences in the state have brought education to a grinding halt.

The problem of insurgency in the state has been the most serious threat to children. Growing up with violence all around them, many children are often caught in a precarious dilemma. According to Allan Court, India's representative for UNICEF who recently completed a study on the effect of insurgency on children:

*"They (children) are being forcibly recruited, coerced and induced to become insurgents. Manipulated by adults, children have been drawn into violence that they are too young to resist and with consequences they cannot imagine."*

A very common disturbing phenomenon in the State is that children often get recruited into different warring groups against the State forces. Once they are into these forces, there is little chance for these children to continue with their schooling. Instead, they

become engaged in the fights with the state forces. In Manipur, the toll of armed conflict on children has risen remarkably since early 90s. The Global Report on Child Soldier-2001 Asia-Pacific Conference reported that 28 children were arrested or injured and 10 children killed in Manipur in just five months between January and May 2000 ("Global Report on Child Soldier-2001" in *Children of Wars Newsletter*). Innocent children also get caught in the crossfire between the state forces and armed insurgents.

Besides, the State has also been witness to inter and intra-ethnic conflicts among various communities in the State. Children have to flee from their villages in times of an ethnic conflict among different communities. For example, during the infamous Naga-Kuki clash in 1992-95 and also in 1997-98 between the Thadou Kukis and Paite Zomis, there was huge exodus of population from their native villages. During these periods, there were cases of children dropping out of their schools while fleeing to their safety in other villages. As a result, many students have had to be transferred to safer school areas to prevent being assaulted by warring sections. Many children have had to discontinue their studies completely. Children in refugee camps are forced to abandon their studies and work for their livelihood. The disruption of education is very common when conflicts break out.

Armed conflict affects all aspects of child development – physical, mental and emotional. Such effects accumulate and interact with each other. In order to understand the impact of armed conflict on children, we should look at the related effects on women, families and

the community support systems that provide protection and a secure environment for development. Children's well-being is best ensured through family and community-based solutions that draw on local culture and an understanding of child development.

### **Education: Ensuring Children of their Right**

Ensuring children of their basic education during conflict situation is easier said than done. The State as well as the civil societies has an important role to play in ensuring the basic right to children. Efforts should be made to bring an end of the on-going imbroglio and pave way to an atmosphere conducive to learning and education for children. This also calls for all parties to the conflict to strive towards peace and harmony. Conflicts sometimes become unavoidable, but that should not hamper the educational atmosphere of the children. Even during the times of conflicts, efforts should be made to provide education because, education has a crucial preventive and rehabilitative part to play in fulfilling the needs and rights of children in conflict and post-conflict situations. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Children established that "children should enjoy the right to education so that there can be development of child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential, the development of respect for the child's parents, his/her cultural identity, language and values, national values of the country in which the child lives, preparation of the child for responsibilities life in a free

society and friendship among all people, national and religious groups". Education can and should also be part of all humanitarian responses – including those in a conflict situation. Early investments in education protects children from the most damaging aspects of conflict and play a significant role in building peace, restoring countries to a positive development path and breaking the cycle of violence.

In the light of the escalating trends of violence everywhere, the *National Curriculum Framework-2005* also recommends a space for peace education within the framework of national school curriculum document. The framework also stresses on education as a 'significant dimension of the long-term process of building up peace-tolerance, justice, intercultural understanding and civic responsibility'. However, it is critical of the education as is practiced today for it 'promotes forms of violence, both real and symbolic' and therefore, suggests the need to reorient education. Peace 'as a value cuts across all curricular areas and coincides with and complements the values emphasised therein'.

It is a common knowledge that education begins at home. One can learn and receive knowledge from parents, family member and even from an acquaintance. But in school, children get a formal education. As stated above, school acts as one of society's agents in socialising the child and in transmitting a common culture. Through socialisation as an educative process, the child learns to get along with others and to take the roles expected of him/her in view of his social position. School education brings contact with great ideas.

It is true that sometimes children might not listen to their parents but listen what the teacher says, thinking that educational guidance given by the teacher is more appropriate than the ones given by the parents. Here, educational practices inspired by Vygotsky's theory could be useful which includes reciprocal teaching – a method of teaching in which a teacher and students form a collaborative group and co-operative learning in which peers resolve differences of opinion and work toward common goals. Going to school can increase a child's chances of surviving conflict. Schools can equip children with the knowledge and skills they need to stay safe and healthy, and to survive conflict and cope up with its aftermath. Schools are vital in protecting children and supporting their emotional and social development by giving them comfort, security, and opportunity. The routine of school develops an environment in which children are allowed to be children. Teacher can recognise signs of stress in children as well as impart information and promote tolerance and respect for human rights.

### **Conclusion**

For societies affected by conflict, education is integral to building long-term peace and prosperity. Simply going to school each day can transform the lives of children living in conflict zones. Even in situation of armed conflict, it is important to carry out on educating children and young people, irrespective of the circumstances. Education promotes their psychosocial and physical well-being. Every individual should come

over to protect the educational rights of children. In such situations, what is pertinent is to reduce the frequency and intensity of conflict, keeping in mind the likely negative impact that is bound to occur amongst the children, ranging from optimal development of the capabilities and the stunted opportunities especially in the field of education. Children deserve the attention and protection of the national and international community.

Besides, all possible efforts should be made to maintain education system

during conflict. Child-friendly schools should also be developed with well-trained teachers in the areas of child development, child rights, conflict resolution and those who can give guidance and counselling. People should also be made aware of children's rights so that schools can become violence free, safe and secure. We can also encourage parents to take part in the child's education by involving in school activities. Civil societies should also play an important role in ensuring the children of their basic right.

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