

Sahridayata as a Pathway to Peace: Examining Its Implications in Conflict Resolution within the Context of the Ethnic Conflict in Manipur

Rupam Kr Das
nibirrup@gmail.com

[**Note:** A preliminary version of this article was presented as a paper at the International Seminar on Two Decades of the Sadharanikaran Model of Communication, organized by the Department of Languages and Mass Communication, Kathmandu University School of Arts (KUSOA), on 26 May, 2024.]

Abstract

This paper seeks to unravel the implications of Sahridayata-based interventions, including indigenous peace-making traditions, citizen-centric dialogues, and truth-telling initiatives that have been applied in Manipur for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Also, this scholarly endeavour aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of empathy-driven approaches in conflict resolution and pave the way for sustainable peace initiatives in Manipur and beyond.

Manipur, a northeastern state of India, recently witnessed unprecedented violence in the first week of May 2023 between the Meitei and the Kuki ethnic communities. When most of the news media reports pointed out the 3rd May incident in the Kuki-majority district of Churachandpur to be the root cause of the violence, an alternative forum advocated that it was the Meitei groups' act of blocking the roads in the Imphal East District.

Sahridayata acts as a powerful facilitator of understanding, empathy, and reconciliation that are necessary for successful conflict resolution. In the context of conflict resolution, it makes individuals

and parties related to one another by making them put themselves into other individuals or parties' shoes and understand their emotions. Sahridayata encourages individuals and parties involved in a conflict to create a comfortable and safe space for dialogue and communication. Sahridayata is also related to forgiveness and the ability to move on and heal after the end of the conflict. By fostering a culture of forgiveness and promoting reconciliation processes, Sahridayata contributes to building bridges and repairing fractured relationships.

Keywords: conflict resolution, ethnic conflict Manipur, reconciliation, sahridayata

Introduction

Manipur (India) has a population of around 2.7 million people who inhabit a vast area of 22,000 square kilometers. It lies between Myanmar to the east and southeast and Nagaland, Assam, and Mizoram in India, its neighboring countries. The state's position is such that it is the major gateway between the subcontinent, Myanmar, and Southeast Asia. Manipur is a diverse state with multiple ethnicities and religions, often considered a prototype of India. The Meitei ethnic group is mainly Vaishnavite Hindu, accounting for almost two-thirds of the state's population, with Christian tribes (the Nagas and Kukis being the largest) and Muslims making up the rest. (Buchanan, 2011). The population is disproportionately concentrated in the Imphal valley, which accounts for 10% of the state's total territory and is predominantly Meitei. The tribes primarily reside in the nearby highlands.

The ethnic conflict between the Meiteis and Kukis in Manipur is a result of the complex interaction of historical, social, and political issues. The Meiteis form the primary group in the Manipuri society, with a cultural legality that is unique to their territory. Previously, they lived in the Imphal valley, and they had a large influence on the socio-political life of Manipur. Although

the Kukis are distinguished by several subgroups—including the Thadou, the Paite, and the Hmar—they have one thing in common: an observed migration into and settlement of hill areas in Manipur and neighboring states.

In the research paper on "Armed Violence in Manipur and Human Rights" published in *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Jitendra Singh Oinam (2011) has enumerated three causes of violence in Manipur. While the first one is political, the second and the third are considered to be the types of the psychological factor. Oinam (2011) opines that manipulative structural violence at political level in Manipur means no democratic rights for the Manipuri people at grassroots level for several years. According to Oinam, Manipur was turned into a 'C' state, and a 'corrupt civilian bureaucracy' managed by Delhi took the reins.

Secondly, on Oinam's (2011) view, the focal factor relates to economic consequences. Out of the 29 states that comprise India, Manipur was an agriculturally based state that yielded more rice than the requirement of the state and the nation. Since the economy was centralised and rationed, it did not offer ample opportunities for families and their necessities. Jitendra Oinam Singh has been complaining that Manipur had become a haven for corrupt bureaucrats where the dreams of constructing a productive base for an economy were being thrown into the dustbin. Local actions were totally excluded; that means there could be no question of considering them.

The third cause of the conflict as identified by Oinam (2011) is social, associated with the movement of people after Manipur's integration into India. It clearly shows that people from other parts of the state migrated towards it in large numbers and the indigenous population felt threatened structurally by the large number of new immigrants from the mainland. They thought their culture and hence their identity were under threat from the Indo-Aryan people, and as a consequence of this, their oppressed culture was in the process of assimilation.

Along with separatist struggles by largely Meitei groups against the rule of India, other important issues are those involving the differences between the Meitei tribesmen, who mostly reside in the Imphal Valley and other tribes such as Kukis, Nagas, those who are mainly from the hilly regions. There is prolonged Meitei resentment against the Kukis, Nagas, and other tribal minorities for the special educational and employment privileges that these tribes accrued under India's affirmative action program. During the colonial period, Kuki's tribal tendencies toward land and resources and the imposition of the administrative policy of the land tenure system led to the conflict of land tenure between the Kukis in the hills and the Meiteis in the valley (Buchanan, 2011).

Following the independence of India, the inclusion of Manipur into the Indian Union and later on, in 1972, statehood was established, which gave birth to new challenges and new opportunities. Though the historical issues were not and the ethnic identity politics were still boiling, the divided societal groups alongside nationalists finally formed conflict and war.

During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the indigenous community's movement of identity in some parts of Meitei and Kuki emerged, and they fought for recognition, autonomy, and cultural preservation in the process. Such movements were usually linked to political needs and fought for more representation and rights. One of the attributes of collective consciousness is the creation of separate political identities by the tribes of the concerned region. What is more, they are able to put their early-existing identities together as a distinct cultural and political array or group, and they are in the process of adopting a new kind of assertion, which by nature helps to culturally adopt and accept the new ethos of political life. These tribes of the states are not the only ones who are engaged in a process of rediscovering their tribal consciousness through this new fine spirituality, but many of the larger, almost

largest, community-based tribes are changing tribal identity to an ethnic community identity (Oinam, 2003).

According to the assertion of the Meitei community, although Indian tribes with “Scheduled” status secured privileges in political structure, employment in government sectors, university entry, and grants-in-aid or scholarships in independent India, preference in most governmental facilities and processes. The said measures of positive discrimination are elaborately enshrined under the Indian Constitution. The following are some of the examples of constitutional implementation: The SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989; the PESA Act, 1996; and the FRA, 2006.

In this regard, the ethnic war between the Kuki and Meitei communities started on May 3, 2023, after a solidarity march rally was conducted by ATSUM across several districts of Manipur. This march was conducted after a recent order of the Manipur High Court; it fastens the process of the recommendation of the Scheduled Tribe status for the Meitei community by the state government (Mamo, 2023).

The tussle between Meiteis and Kukis erupted, and some of the casualties witnessed the worst possible cases, such as clashes, displacement, and human rights abuse. Elements like weapon dispersion, the intervention of external powers, and age-old disputes decrease the sight of peace. Subsequently, civic society oversees various peacebuilding activities, wherein the implications of Sahrdayata become evident.

Attaining Sahrdayata and Sadharanikaran Model of Communication (SMC) Based Intervention

The Sadharanikaran Model of Communication (SMC), which has been constructed and further developed by Dr. Nirmala Mani Adhikary, gives a detailed analysis of the whole process of communication from a Hindu perspective (Adhikary, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2014). This communication model relies on the phenomenon of Sahrdayata. This model holds more importance especially for

situations when there are conflicts in between, as they clearly show how in order to get over the clashed side one must communicate properly.

Sahridayata is a concept that has grabbed several scholars' attention in communication and conflict studies. As Adhikary (2014) explains, "The concept *Sahridayata* comes from the word *Sahridaya*. Whereas the former refers to a quality, characteristic, or the state of being or becoming; the latter names a person of that faculty. Thus, a *Sahridaya* is one who has attained *Sahridayata*" (p. 308). According to Adhikary,

Sahridayata, as a 'technical term' or the 'construct', represents wide range of relationship between communicating parties. In the broadest sense, *Sahridayas* are any such people who have capacity to send and receive messages. However, ideally, *Sahridayata* is the state of common orientation, commonality or oneness, and *sahridayas* are those who have attained the state. It is *Sahridayata* that makes communication for communion possible. (p. 313)

There are plenty of themes and values that are demonstrated within the philosophy of Sahridayata, which is the principal topic of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Upanishads*, and the ideas of great personalities such as Mahatma Gandhi and other famous thinkers. These lessons reveal that these moral values, such as feelings, empathy, and non-violence, are key to the well-being of a community, where the community of people should be the main value. Sahridayata is a device that helps people to rise above their own egocentric perspective and to feel what others are living through, which is the premise for empathy and sympathy.

To highlight empathy as a crucial element in conflict resolution, the appropriate approach would be to act empathically. Empathy is one of these things that makes it possible to resolve disputes, whether they are about feelings and opinions of the other

person or the person's feelings and needs. This multi-paradigm style of problem solution enhances communication, eliminates hostility, and provides for more compassion in situations. Sympathy is the next feeling of sadness, which includes the care and involvement of other people's lives. This is because emotion is used to make the conflict and the despair antecedent, and therefore, compassion has to be embraced.

In international peace initiatives such as talks, agreements, mediation procedures, and so on, Sahrdayata is exemplified in practice. Community reconciliation initiatives, interfaith discussions, and conflict resolution seminars showcase the best forms of empathy, active listening, and cooperative problem-solving in evaluation. Similar to the idea of Sahrdayata, which emphasizes the importance of oneness, differences are not permitted to sabotage the harmony of interpersonal relationships and foster the building of trust that leads to the establishment of enduring peace.

The conflict between Kuki and Meitei has its origin in ethnic, territorial, and socio-political dimensions. Due to the immense complications in these issues, essential and efficient cohesion has been hampered through misunderstandings between the given communities. Given the climate of intense extremism in contemporary norms, it is the principles of the Sadharanikaran Model that may help to negotiate and restore balance in the country.

Sahrdayata generally means the syncing of feeling or the empathetic understanding of the feeling of both the communicants. In brief, Sahrdayata, as a 'technical term' or the 'construct,' represents a wide range of relationships between communication parties. In the broadest sense, sahridayas are any such people who have the capacity to send and receive messages. However, ideally, Sahrdayata is the state of common orientation, commonality, or oneness, and sahridayas are those who have attained this state (Adhikary, 2010a, 2010b, 2014). If reference to the Kuki-Meitei conflict, Sahrdayata

means being able to heed the feelings as well as complaints of each other's stories instead of simply transacting business relationships.

According to Adhikary (2009), the SMC outlines a dynamic and cyclic model based on the idea of *preshaka* as the sending side and the *prapaka* on the receiving side. In enhancing two-way flow of information, emotions communicated by one party have to be encoded through *abhivyanjana* while the other party has to decode this message through *rasaswadana*. In the conflict, this involves providing special forums in which the Kukis and Meiteis have an opportunity to share what they feel and think freely and without threat.

In a conflict situation feedback loops are necessary between the transmitting and receiving entities so that both can provide their feedback. Again, the acceptance of constructive criticism is the key to helping both parties wake up from the competitive cloud that they are in and help diffuse and work for a change in the ways of both the Kuki and the Meitei. This is consistent with the SMC view where the 'mutual dynamics' lead to *Sahridayata*.

Intercommunity Dialogs

As a result of the crisis in Manipur, the Interfaith Forum was established on June 5, 2023, with heightened priorities on creating unity and starting dialogue processes at the grassroots level. This was followed by a grand palace rally on July 13. Approximately 500 people, representatives of various religious and ethnic groups, as well as people with spiritual orientations, are involved in the rally for dialogue and the return of humanity.

Thus, aspiring for the establishment of peace in the state, the Pangal community also resorted to native forms of managing crisis and unrest and held torch marches and human chains. The demonstration was held up at Bishnupur Keithel after passing through Tongjel Maril and Bishnupur Muslim Leikai. The Yairipok Singa Form, Yairipok Bamol Leikai Form, and Yairipok Kekru Form

people marched a torch as a part of a function organised by UMPCO Wangkhem Kendra, an umbrella formation of 20 local Pangal clubs. It asked Manipur to refrain from altering the map of the country and wondered why the prime minister had not said anything about the incident.

In fact, about the Meitei Pangal community, it was reported that they only extended aid in the form of edible and other necessary items to seven relief camp inmates on a relief basis bearing humanitarian consideration. On similar lines, the Ramakrishna Mission is perceived as being involved in peacebuilding since it has been noted to be providing food hampers and handwashing sets to affected people in various regions. Aside from the rallies and the peace movements, the community has been engaged in the build-up of peace through lives being saved as well.

To a certain extent there have been incidents as to where certain individuals have provided the needful, which might have prevented other individuals from facing their death irrespective of their religion.

The local people assisted the police in rescuing a kidnapped Kuki youth in Sekmain while the Meira Paibis of Yairipok Khoirom Mathak Leikai were in the process of rescuing a family consisting of four members who were taken hostage. In other news, a Meitei teacher, name unknown, helped 29 other students from being killed by carrying a 6-year-old Kuki boy on her back while tear gas shells and guns were shot.

Truth and Reconciliation

The Christian Forum Dimapur which by the way, is centred around the faith in Christ, tries to alleviate the crisis in Manipur which is conflict-prone at the moment, through integrated efforts of peace and relief. To support the work of the Kuki and Meitei on AMC and AGROEI, the Catholic Church was routed through 'Peace Channel,' a Catholic congregation of Clerical. Organizations responded to the

needs of the victims, old and new, in harmony by telling the story that everyone was together and that the nationality was not an issue anymore. The statement of purpose of the Christian Forum Dimapur also proposed that it should make contact with Meitei intellectuals as well as with interreligious groups in order to experience full safety for interaction of different groups within the community and in this way achieve harmony.

Indigenous Peace-making Initiatives

Peacebuilding involves confessions and forgiveness rituals so that the communities that have been merciless are able to recover again. In H Wajang village, central district of Chandel, state of Manipur, the people's expressions change after a series of inter-tribal fights since May 3 with striking evidence of cooperation and mutual trust. Since a white flag which is a symbol of reassurance, peace, and harmony that unites two worlds has been flown in the community, we can say that the two communities are in harmony.

Thus, the conflicts of the Meiteis and Kukis resulted in grief feelings and contradictory thoughts on the interaction between different communities, but the white flag, which was symbolized in the H Wajang village, became the clue to the elimination of the difference and the integration of the feelings among people.

The devastation led to truth-telling, and the inhabitants in the village, whether Kukis or Meiteis, found a way to send a peaceful and reassuring message to the outside world, which was filled with hatred and violence, and refused to be pulled by feelings of hatred even in those moments. Through the debates, people on both sides voiced their anxieties and aspirations, which consequently led to the opening of a path towards reconciliation and living peacefully together. These meetings enabled the two sides once more to declare their ideals of lasting peace in the region in a solemn manner. The two guarantees from either side have been a source of comfort to the people, and they now believe their security will not be threatened again.

Women in Peacebuilding

The involvement of women from Manipur has been seen during the present confrontation between the Meitei and Kuki groups, being both as protectors of their tribes and as active combatants. In Manipur, the local women's groups, Meira Paibis, are actually civil rights agitators who were highly appreciated in the past for readily supporting organic progressive issues. Meira Paibis are an endowed part of Meitei society, and they have emerged and were brought into the international plane in 1977. At that time, they, holding torches, fought against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act and for the paramilitary forces to quit violating human rights (Editors' Guild of India, 2023).

These women, known as Meira Paibis, or torchbearers, are revered figures in Meitei society who have a history of advocating for justice and socio-political reforms. During the current conflict, they have taken on the role of vigilantes, patrolling the streets at night and guarding their villages during the day. They have also been accused of preventing the supply of essential items to Kuki areas and destroying documents that the police use to communicate with the hill districts.

However, some say that the Meira Paibis have exclusively been fighting for the Meitei community, and that their transition from protectors to instigators reflects the deep tensions in Manipur society. For example, some Meira Paibis have checked the vehicles of the armed forces to see if they are transporting Kuki people or relief material, and one Meira Paibi has even called herself a "foot soldier" sent by God to finish the "Kuki terrorists" (Sabir, 2023).

Speaking to the global 16 days of activism campaign against gender-based violence in Churachandpur, activist Mary Beth Sanate from the Kuki Zo community said that while the Meira Paibis and other tribal women are indeed taking sides, there is a difference between the two ways it is done. Khumujamba Leikai, a Meitei

neighborhood in Churachandpur, was attacked in May, and tribal women protested by forming a human chain around Meitei boys to prevent their exploitation by other tribal males (Sitlhou, 2024).

At the 5th Northeast Indigenous Women's Peace Congregation held on March 26, the participants, who included women from different communities of Northeast India, decided to apply several tradition-based conflict resolution reconciliation and peacebuilding methods practiced in different states of Northeast India. The NEIWIP and the MWGSN took the action by extending an invitation to other indigenous women's groups to be part of the peace congregation that claimed to promote gendered peace, non-violent conflict solutions, and the rights of self-stipulated indigenous nations of Northeast India (5th NE India Indigenous Women's Peace Congregation Adopts Ways for Conflict Resolution, 2024).

Conclusion

Although the methodology of Sahridayata seems quite attractive, its implementation is not always easy to accomplish. The cultural barriers, power imbalances, and resistance to empathy-based strategies are the main challenges that the idea of Sahridayata faces. Unlike the past research and practice, future research should focus on the discussed challenges. Also, a sense of empathy should be cultivated among the peacekeeping forces, and Sahridayata principles must be included in the institutional frameworks for the peacebuilding.

Through empathy and compassion, empathy, and understanding, the scholastic pathway gives the solid base to peace and processes reconciliation and working out problems collectively. This research paper reveals the theory behind, the practicality of, and the problems in Sahridayata for conflict resolution. The adaptation of Sahridayata ideals could make citizens capable, societies competent, and communities conducive to establishing a society that adores empathy, dialogue, and nonviolence.

[Mr. Rupam Kr Das is an Assistant Professor at the Dept. of Mass Communication, Assam Don Bosco University, India.]

References

- Adhikary, N. M. (2009). An introduction to sadharanikaran model of communication. *Bodhi: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 3(1), 69–91. <https://doi.org/10.3126/bodhi.v3i1.2814>
- Adhikary, N. M. (2010a). Sahrdayata in communication. *Bodhi: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 4(1), 150–160.
- Adhikary, N. M. (2010b). Sadharanikaran model of communication and conflict resolution. Paper presented at the *Third International Conference on Conflict Resolution and Peace*, February 3–4, New Delhi, India.
- Adhikary, N. M. (2014). *Theory and practice of communication–Bharata Muni*. Makhanlal Chaturvedi National University of Journalism and Communication.
- Buchanan, C. (2011). *Conflict resolution: Learning lessons from dialogue processes in India*. The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and the Delhi Policy Group. Retrieved from <http://www.hdcentre.org>
- Mamo, D. (2023, December 21). Understanding the complex conflict unfolding in Manipur. *IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs*. Retrieved from <https://www.iwgia.org/en/news/5329-understanding-complex-conflict-unfolding-manipur.html>
- Oinam, B. (2003). Patterns of ethnic conflict in the North-East: A study on Manipur. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4413594>
- Sabir, A. (2023, August 23). Defenders or agitators? Unravelling the role of women in Manipur’s ongoing conflict. *Firstpost*. Retrieved from <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/defenders-or-agitators-unravelling-the-role-of-women-in-manipurs-ongoing-conflict-13024892.html>

Bodhi: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 10(3)

Singh, O. J. (2011). Armed violence in Manipur and human rights.

The Indian Journal of Political Science, 72(4), 997–1006.

Sitlhou, M. (2024, January 5). When women became the main spectacle in Manipur's civil conflict. *Behan Box*. Retrieved from <https://behanbox.com/2023/12/28/when-women-became-the-main-spectacle-in-manipurs-civil-conflict/>

5th NE India Indigenous Women's Peace Congregation adopts ways for conflict resolution. (2024, April 2). *Imphal Free Press*. Retrieved from https://www.ifp.co.in/manipur/5th-ne-india-indigenous-womens-peace-congregation-adopts-ways-for-conflict-resolution#google_vignette