

At the crossroads of the Kachin conflict

Located in the Northern part of Burma (Myanmar), the Kachin state has been at an epicentre of conflict this can be said about most of the states in the region which have been perpetually stuck in the crossfire. Bordering China, India and the province of Sagaing, the rugged terrain is blessed with natural resources making it a contested space of control for the parties involved. The Kachins are of Indo-Tibetan origin and are pre-dominantly dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. Myanmar is a multi-ethnic country, and Kachin's are just one of many that have risen in arms against the state.

Characterizing the conflict

It would be wrong to characterize the conflict as something that is new or that just erupted in a frenzy. We are not talking about a riot, but the emergence of an insurgency on ethnic lines which never seems to have abated. The Kachin along with the Shan, Chins and other ethnic groups would sign the 'Panglong Agreement' in 1947 that would grant autonomy to these states in a federal structure replicating the Indian Union to some extent. However, the spirit of the agreement was never realized and this would ensue in a civil conflict that bleeds through Myanmar till this date. There was a relative time of peace with the 1994 ceasefire agreement, however, it didn't end the abuses and the KIA still had access to its vast stock of ammunition.

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the armed militia of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) slowly started to rearm and relaunch attacks in a quest for autonomy. The Burmese President, Thein Sein after his election in March 2011 pushed forward the importance of ending armed conflicts in the region and creating a peaceful Myanmar.

The never-ending conflict

Despite the promises of ending the conflict, the crisis would only exacerbate with the military gaining greater control. Operations both by the KIA and the junta have led to thousands getting displaced, forcing them to take shelter in already overcrowded camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). KIA, which has been eulogized as the 'harbinger of the Kachin people' cannot be given a clean chit, as there have been reports of it recruiting child soldiers through a system of 'national service'. This is a testament to how socio-economic factors push even children to the edge of conflict, and how vengeance for avenging lost parents or relatives functions as a push factor.

As the anti-government sentiment runs strong in the region, with the KIA rejecting the ceasefire agreement it is unlikely that the conflict would end anytime soon. The women have little agency when it comes to making a choice. While many gravitate towards joining the KIA force till the time they are married or remain in the IDP camps with little access to resources.

The Northeast India connection

The China chapter associated with the Naga insurgency would be opened by Thuengaling Muivah, the aide to Angami Zapu Phizo of the Naga National Council (NNC) who was also responsible for laying the connection with the Kachins. Muivah would play a critical role in establishing contacts with the KIA, and a new chapter would be opened in the region. A great long march would take Muivah and his men under the protection of the KIA, which came at a huge cost for reaching the Yunnan province of China.

With Indian intelligence tactics bearing fruit, the signing of the Shillong Accord in the November of 1975 saw many underground militias laying down their arms against the Indian state. However, Muivah who had by now separated from Phizo in 1980, would establish links again with the KIA for securing support and arms. Under the calm surface of the green valleys

and vast water bodies, the Meitei of Manipur would rise against the Vaishnavite cult in the region. This would ultimately culminate in the creation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Soon enough, it would suffer huge losses in clashes with the Indian Army which went on to launch a rampage to stem out insurgents from the region. In return for money, many of the insurgents who escaped were given shelter and training by the KIA. The KIA controlled areas became a safe haven for the insurgents from different groups in the region, and this allowed the KIA to fill its coffers to fund its guerilla operations against the Myanmar military.

Impact on civilians

Civilians are often stuck at the center of conflicts, and on most occasions are just innocent bystanders while the conflict pushes them into limbo. The Myanmar military has attacked villages, burnt down houses, perpetuated violence against women and has pillaged properties. An account given by a 40-year-old Kachin woman, states: "soldiers shot mortars into our village three times... So, we fled." Such incidents have forced the displacement of people and the region has been reeling under unimaginable levels of poverty.

The military has been known to threaten civilians and violently interrogate them for mining out information about the KIA. Forced portering and using people for detecting antipersonnel landmines have been rampant with growing cases of abduction. As the junta seizes power yet again in a coup, it is unlikely that these abuses would stop soon as lines of communication remain suspended.

In the KIO controlled regions, there have been efforts toward creating local support networks for mitigating the crisis. However, with scanty funding and now the suspension of aid being offered by international actors it is unlikely that the initiatives would stand the test of time. Years of military rule had already pushed the region into a perpetual conflict, and now with the military coming back to power, it is unlikely that any sense of stability would pave its way

back into the region. Many have even fled to China and India to take shelter, as displacement in the region grows at a frantic pace.

The impact on women

Well, as is consistent with all forms of conflict masculinist domination of narratives remains the order of the day. The notion of patriarchy seeps in through the discourses that are supposed to create a field of equals. In this case, as well, the impact of the conflict on Kachin women remains a contested space. We would be focusing on the violence and crimes being perpetrated in this case to keep it objective.

Amidst the longest-running civil conflict, there are by conservative estimates 150,000 living in the camps. It is the women who have suffered the most and remain vulnerable. There have been allegations of abuse, murder, rape and use of women as 'sex slaves' levelled against the military. The Kachin's Women Association (KWA) in Thailand, had recorded seventy-seven cases of such magnitude where seventy-three of them have been registered as 'rape'. The statistics need to be taken with a pinch of salt here, as the actual numbers would be much more. Children from seven years to senior citizens of 60+ have been subjected to such heinous crimes in the region, and this remains a recurring experience with no scope of justice. M. Seng who was a porter of the military narrates an experience wherein the soldiers had forced the women to stand naked in a line. He states:

" The soldiers touched [the women's] breasts, and they touched their necks very slowly... On October 19, the soldiers started sleeping with the women. At that place, on that night those two women had to sleep with all the officers. They all raped them. They put the women in the tent, and then forced them to go from tent to tent."

A consistent pattern has also been observed in the Shan state when it comes to sexual violence at least for the last three decades. The scale and the impunity with which such acts are

committed point to the increasing 'dehumanization' of the women, towards terrorizing the civilian population into submission.

In an incident, involving a 28-year-old woman by the name of Roi Ja who was captured along with her husband and father-in-law, while they were plucking corns from their field. The husband and father-in-law fled, but Roi Ja was taken to the hilltop base and kept with others, where she was sexually abused by the infantry soldiers. Despite numerous appeals, Roi Ja remains an elusive entity for her family who clings on to the hope that she is still alive somewhere. Forced disappearances and murders remain a regular crisis that the region has been facing. The case of Roi Ja is one of those rare ones, that received some coverage. The case against the military was dismissed by the court over lack of evidence. Well, the independence of the judiciary in a so-called democracy in Myanmar is questionable it seems, as the democratic government remained suspended in the vacuum between the military and the people they are supposed to serve.

The Myanmar National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), declared that they would not be investigating any crime that has taken place in the ethnic states. This further, is a push back to the humanitarian challenges that the region faces and starts a freefall into ensuing chaos that would come to characterize these states formed on ethnic lines. With no accountability, the military has essentially been given free rein in the region.

Is there a way out?

Seems like a rhetorical question, but it is unlikely the conflict would abate soon or for that matter, the military would admit to the humanitarian crimes it had committed in the region. The 'memory of violence' is 'intergenerational', the lust for revenge pushes many to join the KIA, lending support to the 'cycle of violence'. Would there be a change in the stand of KIO? It has already changed its stance to be given autonomy in the Kachin state, and be a part of a

genuine federal order. There are certain problems though here, as there are numerous Chinese investments in the region which is a part of the larger BRI (Belt & Road Initiative), wherein Myanmar is a crucial partner. Granting access to the KIO to such lucrative resources would push back Chinese investments, resulting in mammoth losses for the junta.

At the moment, the 'cycle of violence' would only exacerbate with time as the fragmented groups seek to come together for mounting a greater challenge to the military. The civilians caught in the crossfires of this never-ending conflict would continue inhabiting a world of fear, and stability remains a utopian dream. While the piece explored the dynamics of the Kachin conflict it has also become increasingly important to explore the conflicts that are shaping Myanmar through the intersections of gender and the digital world. Myanmar at the moment is going through a transition unlike any and it remains to be seen how conflicts like the one in Kachin would shape up, owing to the increasing fragility in the region.

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