

## Social Work Intervention in Resilience of Entrepreneurial Activity in Manipur, India

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### Abstract:

Social Work serves to enhance desirable social change, social justice and a common goal whereas the promotion of entrepreneurship is universally recognized to cope with social challenges – unemployment, poverty and related consequences. Manipur is a heterogenous society, having 33 officially recognized communities with their own ethnicity, language, culture and socio-political viewpoint. It is geographically looked into hilly and valley regions. The state has recently undergone a violent ethnic conflict between its two main communities – *Meiteis* and *Kukis* since May 3, 2023. Yet, it is not settled. Due to it, the state suffers in numerous ways – distressing the state's normalcy, transportation, day-to-day activities, internet connectivity and various economic activities. Since most of the existing entrepreneurs in the state were micro-based, the conflict distressed them badly in sustaining their businesses. Thus, scientifically investigating the impacts of the crisis on entrepreneurship and scrutinizing the role of SW in their rehabilitation was vital. The study was done with a qualitative approach and an interview method is used by constructing a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews were done in the month of September 2023. It found that most entrepreneurial or business units were socially and economically interrupted by protracted lockdowns, market closures, curfews, restricted transportation, extended internet shutdowns and violence. Not only business activities, the entrepreneurs lost most of their existing business networks and connections for several months. However, a few entrepreneurs tried to cope with the situation by discovering new stakeholders, business connections and the environment in the locality with their available resources. At the same time, many business units were prone to distress of permanent closure. As a part of the rehabilitation process, Social Work could intervene in mobilizing a unified and collaborative platform with several stakeholders. Familiarizing them with relevant financial literacy, available safety net and expansion of marketing platforms were among indispensable steps apart from common skill development and vocational training programs.

**Keywords:** Micro-entrepreneurship, unemployment, Manipur, conflict, SW intervention

### Introduction

Social Work as a profession serves to enhance societal well-being and helps acquire the fundamental or complex needs of individuals, organizations, communities and societies at large. Although it works with various types of populations, it primarily focuses on vulnerable, marginalized, oppressed and distressed populations. SW professionally facilitates desirable social change to achieve a common goal including community development and social justice. As every society changes over time, new forms of challenges and problems keep on existing, with which SW has to accordingly upgrade and act upon. Emphasizing

the socio-economic development for all, SW promotes to incubation of young and potential minds for innovation and creativity while still addressing the importance of social change, social justice and a common goal. The profession gradually needs to operate in the business or industrial world, which is outside of traditional SW practices. For it, a 'normative discipline of morality that undergoes the principles of advocacy and equity' must be established (Kurzman, 2000; p-160). Simultaneously, the promotion of entrepreneurship is globally accepted as one of the strategies to fight against socio-economic issues like poverty, unemployment and related issues, which are again major areas of SW intervention. Fostering and supporting entrepreneurship becomes a crucial matter to meet growing global market needs – encouraging both rural and urban innovation development. It not only acts as a measure to protect against these issues but also encourages young minds to invest in innovative ideas and find opportunities with available resources. Thus, SW's role in promoting entrepreneurship development would bring socio-economic well-being of individuals or communities, and educate them with ethical values, skills and principles for a collective goal. With this thought, this paper examines the ground reality of entrepreneurship in Manipur, which is badly affected by an ethnic conflict between two main communities – *Meiteis and Kukis*. The conflict was started on the 03<sup>rd</sup> of May, 2023. Yet, it continues in the neighbouring areas of the two communities and there is no concrete solution to the conflict. Earlier before the recent conflict, the state was often distressed by socio-political differences among communities leading to violence, ethnic conflicts, and social disruptions like bandhs, blockades, public curfews, etc. due to the state's geo-political and socio-cultural nature of multi-ethnicity, multi-lingual and multi-culture which is discussed in the section, background of the study. However, any form of socio-political anomy always impacts its social and economic affairs. (Lee et.al., 2023) Thus, it was assumed that the recent conflict between the two communities impacts the entrepreneurial development of the state. So, the study examined its impact on entrepreneurial units which were mostly micro-based, and how SW could intervene. According to the Government of Manipur, the investment in plant and machinery of a micro-enterprise in case of manufacturing or producing goods does not go beyond Rs. 25,00,000/- and that on equipment in case of providing or rendering services does not exceed Rs. 10,00,000/-.

### Review of literature

Not only in economic conveniences, entrepreneurship is also recognized as a measure to deliver normalcy by reducing the impacts of conflict and enhancing development in war-torn areas. Therefore, entrepreneurial programs including financial assistance, provision of equipment and various initiatives on skill development are sometimes used in the post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction process (Joseph et.al., 2023). Apart from general social work intervention including psychological support, and problem-solving in the resettlement and reintegration of affected populations, it could intervene at the community level to work with social capital and to foster development by accessing their available resources (Rather, 2022).

At the same time, the changes in the socio-political environment and increased complexity of societal issues gradually mandate SW to implement an innovative entrepreneurial approach for a long-term solution to the diverse vulnerable population. For this, SW needs to include social entrepreneurship in its education while committing to social change with critical thinking and identifying opportunities through entrepreneurial models (Nouman & Cnaan, 2022).

The inclusion of entrepreneurship in social work education could bring an interaction between social work ethics and entrepreneurial thinking – by integrating 'social service, business and public relation skills' (Bent-Goodley, 2002). Besides, there is an increased interest in entrepreneurship, especially social entrepreneurship among a few SW students. This needs an interprofessional collaborative educational

model (Archibald et.al., 2016). Therefore, there is an intertwined relation between social work and entrepreneurship development in a society. Besides, such intervention is more crucial in a conflict-prone area with a deep understanding of the pre-existing dynamics of social, ethnic, political and economic affairs.

### **Methodology and Background of the study**

The primary data for the study was collected from case studies on three business ventures in the Kakching District of Manipur. It was done in the month of September 2023 i.e. four months after the onset of the conflict. They were done with a Qualitative approach by using the interview method. The semi-structured interview guide was the tool used. The secondary data were also used, which were collected from relevant sources of literature so that comprehensive and coherent outcomes could be found.

Manipur is one of the northeastern states of India. Even though small in area (22,327 sq. km.), the state could be geographically divided into hilly and valley regions, where the latter lies right in the middle, surrounded by hilly regions. Kakching, the area of the study is one of five valley districts in the state. Manipur has a heterogeneous society with multiple numbers of ethnicities, cultures and languages. The state has 33 officially recognized ethnic communities which sometimes have differences in socio-political, historical, cultural and ethnic viewpoints. Besides, the state undergoes issues of insurgency and its ultimate results – for instance, disrupting normalcy or law and order of the state, conflicts, imposition of various counter-insurgency activities by the state, uncertainty among people, extortion, mental and emotional impacts, troubling continuation of various livelihood activities and violation of human rights by both state and non-state forces (Singh, 2015). At the same time, almost every community has their insurgent groups and their factions. These numerous groups have their own demands and goals including movements of separatism. Their agendas were not homogenous at all since the 1950s and 1960s when various insurgent movements started. Thus, these differences made more complex and complicated situations in the state. As a result, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the state faced an immense socio-political upheaval through various ways of terrorism and threats such as sudden disappearance, kidnaps, armed fighting, bomb blasts and ambushes. Such frightful activities and movements of separatism made mistrust, suspicion, disputes and violent conflicts among communities although there were a few cases of intermarriages and friendships among the people of the state. Armed conflicts between the state forces and the armed groups, among armed militant or insurgent groups, or ethnic communities occasionally happened. For instance, conflicts between Kukis and Nagas in 1993-1997; Kukis and Paite (1997-1998); and Meitei and Meitei Pangal (1993) could be mentioned as inter-ethnic violence. Extortion of money or demanding ransoms from the rich or government employees through terror acts were also very often (Oinam, 2003; Kipgen, 2011; Singh, 2015). At the same time, the Government of India levied many special Acts, such as the Armed Forces Special Power Acts (1958), the National Security Act, the Terrorist and Disruption Activities Act, and other related Acts from time to time to control the situation. Most of these special Acts were repealed although the very known Armed Forces Special Powers Acts (1958) remain in the state exempting the municipal areas. However, the implementation of AFSPA (1958) was very controversial due to several reports on alleged violations of human rights in both hilly and plain regions.

Due to the mentioned law-and-order situation, socio-political upheavals, and ethnic differences, the state frequently faced social anomalies like bandhs, blockades, strikes, and other calamities – affecting the day-to-day lives of the people as well as economic activities in the state. Moreover, costs and availability of daily essential goods, materials for economic activities and consequently their related services were frequently affected. These hindrances in the socio-economic activities of the state were further deepened by the high rate of unemployment among educated youths. Thus, the state continually

remained economically backward and its consequent issues of poverty – again distressing the health sector, socio-political affairs, security of the people, their livelihood system and so on. At the same time, problems of malfunction from social responsibilities among male members of society due to alcoholism, gambling and drug abuse were common across the communities. According to the Manipur State Policy on Psychoactive Substances (2019) published by the Government of Manipur, the state became one of the Indian states with a large number of people using psychoactive substances like alcohol, cannabis, opioids, sedatives and various inhalants since the 1980s. This social malfunction again led to issues of domestic violence, wife beating and other forms of crimes apart from economic stagnation and lack of infrastructure in the state. However, in the past two to three decades, there was a mass consciousness among people, especially among educated youths to find out their livelihood alternatives within the state. Besides, many youths who studied outside the state started searching for new innovative ideas and utilised the existing resources which are available in their localities (Loitongbam, 2019). At the same time, the central and state governments started fostering measures by lending financial assistance and providing vocational training to unemployed youths of the state. The state also started the famous 'StartUp Movement' under the flagship of the National Startup Campaign in 2018. Such a movement also encouraged many blooming ideas on entrepreneurship in the state. It influenced many educated youths to start their businesses instead of waiting for a government job whereas there was no possibility of employing every job seeker by the government. Thus, providing relevant training and assistance for promoting entrepreneurship are effective measures to combat unemployment and its consequences (Sorokhaibam & Thaimai, 2012). Besides, the implementation of a business idea/plan not only benefits the initiators but also gives jobs to others. However, entrepreneurs in the state never stop facing difficulties in continuing their businesses due to socio-political differences or armed conflicts. Recently, the state has been distressed by a violent conflict between two of its major communities, Meiteis and Kukis since May 3, 2023. Thus, entrepreneurs of the state which are predominant with micro-business unit holders were assumed to be affected by the conflict apart from their common challenges and risks.

### Findings

In Manipur, the primary sources of livelihood across all these communities were agriculture, its associated activities and cottage industries including crafts and looms. Agriculture and associated activities played a significant role in Manipur's economy. Most businesses in the state were micro-based, which were generally run and owned by individual entrepreneurs or a group. Adding to the common entrepreneurial challenges like loopholes in managing their businesses, limited capital sources and time-bound tasks, these entrepreneurs were frequently affected by the socio-political instability of the state i.e. violent clashes, blockades, and issues of law and order. Due to the current Meiteis-Kukis violent conflict, there were substantial negative impacts on businesses and various entrepreneurial ventures, consequently affecting the economy of the state.

Immediately after the onset of the conflict, most entrepreneurial units struggled to endure great financial pressures due to public curfew, withdrawal of all the transport systems, unlimited internet shutdown, and deterioration of the law and order of the state, which continued for several months. For both manufacturing and service-providing entrepreneurs, their supply and demand chains were disturbed. They completely shut down and stopped producing any product or service for more than a month. They almost stopped selling their products or services in both local and national markets for the initial two to three months, except essential items like packaged water, food and medicines. Some businesses also stopped exporting their products (fermented bamboo shoots, black rice, medicinal herbs, etc.) to international markets.

The impact of the conflict was worsened in agricultural-based business ventures because most of their products were periodic and time-bound. Due to the lack of proper storage systems for harvested crops, the entrepreneurs sold them at minimal prices in neighbouring localities. Also, they confronted difficulties for the next cultivation in availing good seeds, getting fertilizers in time and hiring workers. Many handloom-based businesses were similarly paralysed as their demand was decreased almost by 90%. So, they sometimes sold their products by losing their invested resources. Besides, the prices of weaving threads increased drastically.

During the time of normalcy, there is an exchange of crops between hills and valley i.e. hill crops (bamboo shoot, king chilli, ginger, turmeric, pineapple, etc.) are traded to meet the demands in valley areas whereas valley crops (rice, pulses, fish and other seasonal produce) are supplied the demands in hills. However, this chain of demand-supply was troubled by the recent conflict in the state. In the directly affected regions (mostly adjacent areas between hills and valleys), any economic or business activity including agricultural, horticultural, fishery, animal husbandry, sericulture, and practising cottage industries was withdrawn due to fear and insecurity of attacks by rival groups. However, most agricultural and allied activities largely rely on particular seasons vis-à-vis rainfall, weather, and temperature. Thus, the break in cultivating seasonal crops and their related activities would reduce the productivity and associated economic activities – affecting all sectors of the state and largely the whole region's economic system.

The Hindu, a daily newspaper (3 May 2024) reported 221 deaths, more than 50,000 people became internally displaced, and 46 persons from both communities were missing due to the conflict. Besides, the current violent conflict completely separated the two ethnic groups into their discrete zones where one could not enter the other for any reason. In both communities, some people successfully ran their businesses on the other side before the conflict but were entirely lost after its outbreak. Their houses and the entrepreneurial units were vandalised and burned down. They, along with their families, had to flee for their lives to safer places. Even after a year of violent conflict, they stayed as inmates in many relief camps. For them, the re-establishment of a new business or livelihood in a new place remained a nightmare.

Many entrepreneurs in the capital city, Imphal and other towns of the state hardly sold their products or services due to a lack of customers and a drastic decrease in demand. Thus, the conflict severely affected the livelihoods of those who were employed under entrepreneurial establishments as a primary occupation and ran their family. Besides, most entrepreneurs earned their main income from their respective business units. Thus, reduction or halt in business activities directly affected their livelihoods. In many cases, due to severe losses in businesses, entrepreneurs faced difficulties in maintaining daily expenses, paying rent, loans and other maintenance. Such a situation even led them to downsize the number of employees and reduce the possible minimum costs. Such conditions were worse if they had run their businesses with borrowed money or loans from different sources. Hence, there was a fear of permanent closure among many business establishments. In responding to such distressful business conditions, a few innovative entrepreneurs established networks with other fellow and new customers from nearby localities and started a new chain of business. With available resources, they tried their best to sustain their business. Such responses could be perceived as a positive social effect of the crisis. It empowered them to bring support among themselves and kept their businesses sustainable. Also, some entrepreneurs started looking for alternate income by opening tuition classes or delivering food.

Over the said impacts, the ongoing conflict interrupted public requirements – namely, the health care system including lack of medicines and availability of daily household materials. Due to a shortage of essential goods, there was an issue of exorbitant prices (especially in far-off villages in both hills and

valley regions). According to Singh (2024), the retail inflation on goods reached 11.63%. Therefore, it affected the daily activities, public consumption, livelihoods and socio-economic affairs of people including entrepreneurs. This interruption in the availability of goods affected the whole population of the state. Further, it complicated the already affected economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic – ultimately leading to an adverse impact on the socio-economy of every individual in Manipur.

As a part of security measures by the Government of Manipur, the internet was banned from the 03<sup>rd</sup> of May, 2023 to the 03<sup>rd</sup> of December, 2023 i.e. for more than seven months. It devastated the entire population including the entrepreneurial businesses of the state. Many entrepreneurs could not learn and update their knowledge from online platforms for more than seven months. Besides, transactions of money through online and e-marketing were also paralyzed. Therefore, this prolonged internet shutdown disproportionately affected those whose livelihood depends on the internet – such as online marketing businesses, work from home and even deliberation of job opportunities. In addition, gaps in depriving education, information, health care and entertainment industries during the internet shutdown would never be reversible.

### **Role of Social Work**

SW could play a significant role in response to this social anomaly of Manipur – in advocating, creating a socially inclusive environment, targeting the most vulnerable population, conducting awareness programs, mobilizing resources, encouraging coalitions among different stakeholders, conducting research and technical advancement. It could also work in rehabilitation and recovery-related tasks at larger levels through economic and community development in the state.

While gradually normalising the situation, the role of social work and its intervention in rehabilitating the affected people and helping to cope with trauma is very crucial. This social work intervention at the individual and familial level is as important as community-level intervention because the latter is necessary to consolidate social capital and available resources for rehabilitation and reconstruction of social equilibrium. At the same time, social workers also need to pay special attention to affected micro-entrepreneurial businesses. These micro-business units were mostly run by poor or financially weaker sections. They were generally impacted with ‘socio-economic and psychological distress’ due to losses of lives, properties and livelihoods (Rather, 2022).

In the current war situation in Manipur, non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, philanthropists and related governmental institutions together took part in the reconciliation process of the conflict-torn situation. However, there was a lack of serious concern about the impacts of conflict on the conflict-affected micro-business units. It might be due to many other humanitarian crises within the state and their necessary immediate responses. However, the researcher felt a serious requirement to do something for them too. It was because these micro-businesses were the main source of their livelihood. If they were not rescued in time, many more lives would again be in trouble or even die after the conflict ended. Instead of economic growth and development, the society might go backwards. Many related crimes like robbery, theft, kidnapping, etc. might be another nightmare if they continue with extreme poverty and unemployment in the future. Besides, Manipur was one of the Indian states which have a large number of educated unemployed youths (Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, 2018; Thiyam, 2007; Sorokhaibam & Thaimai, 2012; Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2015-16). So, it was already overburdened with problems of unemployment and its consequences. And if these existing entrepreneurial units were closed down permanently, the state would have another crisis of unemployment, poverty and related issues.

Also, Manipur had the same trend as the national reports (India) in terms of a large number of young productive population. So, this young population should be handled and managed in a proper rightful direction for the well-being of every individual as well as the development of the country.

### ***Immediate Possible Measures***

What Social Work could immediately respond to entrepreneurship in the current situation of the state? At the moment, Social Work could look into three broad areas of intervention. Firstly, advocacy within services is crucial. Using laws to empower affected populations, especially vulnerable and disadvantaged people is essential. It not only ensures the accessibility of required services for the people in need but also safeguards their dignity and justice. Secondly, the role of social work in policy making keeps related institutions and policymakers informed of the socio-economic condition of the people and proposes possible solutions for improvement of the situations. Thirdly, it emphasises the need for 'civic engagement and social capital' (Rather, 2022) in the process of reconstructing normalcy which was badly disrupted by the current violent conflict. Therefore, some of the immediate possible measures that social work could intervene within the current situation of the state are as follows:

- A collective effort and collaborative platforms for a public understanding of the socio-economic role of micro-entrepreneurship and its challenges are very important at the moment. Entrepreneurs and related stakeholders from all the communities of the state, including those directly affected by the conflict need to come together and formulate common goals through effective communication and cooperation. This could also vitalize the restoration of normalcy leading to peace and harmony in the state.
- Reinstallation of business and economic activities necessitates other services like transportation, market, financial banking, public institutions and related matters. Distressing any of these services negatively impacts each individual and the livelihood activities of every community. Therefore, interruption in public services does not have any positive impact, rather it disrupts the social normalcy and irreversible losses in various sectors, affecting the overall economy of the state. This needs to be publicly aware.
- Instead of shutting down the Internet connection, its accessibility could be limited by essential security and safety measures by the state. This way of monitoring could maintain both the economic as well as political affairs of the state in the future.
- Emphasizing the significance of entrepreneurship in society, skill development and vocational programs are necessarily familiar in every section of society. This initiation could be seen in the New Educational Policy (NEP) 2020, introducing it into the normal education system. However, everything depends on how effective its implementation is.
- Not only accessing economic opportunities, safety nets including insurance coverage and government security schemes for micro, small and medium business segments help entrepreneurs during the time of establishments or while managing risks and volatility. In India, the government's capital subsidy schemes and other programs – for example, the Credit Guarantee Fund Scheme for micro and small enterprises; The Small Industry Cluster Development Program Scheme; The Support for Entrepreneurial, Managerial Development of SMEs through Business Incubators; and schemes for weaker sections – are launched by the Ministry of MSME (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises). Besides, the Atal Pension Yojana, the Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY) and the Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY) are some of the existing social safety nets. Therefore, making aware and

ensuring proper accessibility to such services among targeted people are very crucial at the moment.

- While the law-and-order situation of the state is approaching normalcy, expansion of markets through different platforms like social media, online marketing, participation in intrastate and interstate fairs, and various other selling channels like traders, agents, etc. need to be considered.
- Programmes on capacity building and relevant financial literacy encompassing capital management such as maintaining income and expenses, managing cash flow, making budgets and enabling to make sound financial decisions for the business; marketing strategies; and the importance of income diversification should be widely sensitized among entrepreneurs. These could be done with available services from corresponding departments and financial institutions.

### **Conclusion**

As Manipur was frequently disturbed by conflicts, deteriorations of law and order, and many other social disequilibria, entrepreneurs especially micro-based business owners faced various kinds of challenges like temporary business closure, lack of resource availability including raw materials, labour, etc. Such miserable business condition was further complicated by dysfunctional transportation, market closures, lack of connectivity (both physically as well as digitally), insecurity and so on. Apart from these mentioned challenges, they had to face those usual problems of running business units – such as limited capital, unavailability of financial support, lack of skills in management, difficulty in maintaining business turnover, and ignorance of financial knowledge. Therefore, this overall situation demanded a more innovative, inclusive and consolidated problem-solving strategy for this micro-business venturing world in the state. In other words, beyond the individual business level, the current situation needed a broader community-based effort to bring a sustainable and profitable business environment with a fair and justified reason. The role of Social Work in reconstructing the socio-economic and political normalcy is crucial in the current situation of the state, specifically focusing on the vulnerable micro-entrepreneurs who suffered from extreme uncertainty in their business – affecting their livelihood and consequent conditions of social, political and economic insecurity. Moreover, these efforts and services should meet a social need i.e. enhancement of the struggling micro-entrepreneurs by encouraging ‘connectedness, equality and solidarity’ (Godwin et.al. 2022). As the economy plays a significant role in society, and entrepreneurship has become an integral part of economic upliftment and employment generation through organizing goods and services in terms of production, distribution and consumption, the study demonstrated that there was an immediate necessary role of Social Work in entrepreneurship development in conflict-affected Manipur.

### **Limitations**

Due to security reasons, the study is confined to the valley region. Also, it is limited to a qualitative approach whereas there is a scope for a quantitative approach to examine the significance, impacts, and relations among variants like entrepreneurs' personality, education, age, gender, perceived experiences, years of business establishment, financial system, and available support systems.

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