Development and Change
Published on behalf of the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague

Not-so-Freeway: A Relational Approach to Checkpoints and Conflict in Northeast India

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ABSTRACT

Along arterial roads in northeast India, bordering Myanmar, various armed groups and state actors collect 'taxes' at checkpoints. These checkpoints are sites of interaction where the power dynamics between armed groups, state officials and civilians are constantly negotiated, embedded in a larger network of social and political relationships. Based on over 100 interviews with armed groups, businesspeople, state actors and truck drivers, this article develops a figurational framework to throw light on the linkages between checkpoints, authorities and civilians in conflict zones. Drawing on Norbert Elias's work, the framework provides a structured yet flexible approach to investigate the interconnectedness of different levels of interdependent relationships — between actors at the checkpoint, along the road, and beyond. The article explores how, together, these figurations at different levels constitute a fluid political order, shaping processes of legitimization and violence. Going beyond providing an understanding of the politics of roads in northeast India, the framework can be used to better investigate power, conflict dynamics and political ordering across conflict zones.

INTRODUCTION

For more than 15 years, Ram[1] has been a truck driver along the highway that connects Dimapur (Nagaland) and Imphal (Manipur) in northeast India. After all this time, the road he travels remains riddled with literal and metaphorical bumps. Ram comes from Bihar in northern 'mainland' India — an outsider — and usually carries fish, *paan* (betel leaves), fruits and vegetables in a four-wheeled pick-up truck. Every time he goes down this route, he must pay taxes at checkpoints to at least four armed groups, with a possibility of encountering up to six more, over a stretch of just 200 km. In addition, he will come across an even larger number of state actors taking cuts and fees, almost all of which could be categorized as bribes.

1. All names used in the article are pseudonyms.

Development and Change 0(0): 1–29. DOI: 10.1111/dech.70058

During his time as a driver along this route, Ram has seen many changes: the roads have improved, the number of checkpoints and the number of groups who tax him have increased, the ways in which they charge have changed. For someone with his experience, the many times he is stopped and the various armed groups he encounters represent business as usual; payments are made mechanically, almost a habit at this point. Yet, he still feels a sense of unease. Despite having plied this road for so many years, there is little rapport between him and his taxers, the checkpoint operators. When I ask if he shares a friendly relationship with any of them, he replies, 'Those people are no one's friends'.[2] His unease stems, in no small part, from the fact that he was kidnapped in 2017. Along with two people from another vehicle, he was stopped by an armed group. The vehicles were left on the road. The men were taken into the jungle where they slept on leaf beds, with constant threats being made to their lives. 'We thought they would kill us', he remembers.[3] The kidnappers spoke directly to his boss, and after four or five days, on receipt of a ransom, Ram was released. While he is still not sure who kidnapped him, he rules out some armed groups with relative certainty.

A driver's safe passage through these various checkpoints is connected to the businessperson for whom he is carrying products, and whether that person has paid a particular set of yearly taxes to the armed groups, to be allowed to transport goods down this road. If these taxes have not been paid, the driver risks being kidnapped, the vehicle shot at, the products damaged, or the businessperson threatened. The various armed groups that have checkpoints along these routes — the blockers of roads, makers of demands, takers of taxes — do not view what they are doing as extortion. They explain their taxation through claims to statehood and entitlement over land, and therefore a right to control passage through it. Their relationships with the Indian state, formally ranging from ceasefires to open confrontation, and informally including elements of collusion and mutually beneficial turning of a blind eye, further complicate the situation. The relationships between different actors at different levels interweave to form political and social order in the region.

This article develops a figurational framework to investigate the linkages between checkpoints, authorities and civilians in conflict zones. By conceptualizing checkpoints as figurations, we can meaningfully move beyond constraints of the dichotomies of structure and agency; this processual approach can enable us to better understand interlocking relations between relevant actors on different levels. The article further investigates how changing figurations affect processes of legitimization of authorities and violence in conflict zones. Although the focus of this article is on northeast India, this novel figurational framework can be applied more widely as an

2. Interview, Ram, Manipur, January 2021.
3. Ibid.

approach to understand public authority, governance and conflict dynamics more broadly across conflict zones.

Ram's perception of armed groups as legitimate authorities or extortionist criminals is rooted in his interactions at individual checkpoints. The checkpoint operators and their conduct at the site of a checkpoint are influenced by the armed group they are a part of, while the relationship between armed groups and the state, in turn, shapes the armed group. The interweaving of all these composite units of interdependent relationships — checkpoint actors, armed groups, armed group–state relationships — is not unidirectional. What is happening at the checkpoint is not a cause of, or indeed an effect of, relationships at a different level. Rather, these different figurations link different levels within the highway taxation system, forming a fluid order. The figurational framework offers a structured yet flexible approach to investigate the interconnectedness of different levels of interdependent relationships. This includes relationships between different actors at the site of an individual checkpoint, along the road (between drivers and the various checkpoints), and beyond the road (the wider relationship between the state and an armed group).

This case study shows how a change at one level affects the overall legitimacy of different authorities, demonstrating how interconnected levels of figuration shape processes of legitimization. Increased predictability and a reduction in violence may emerge from this figurational interplay, as the article shows. The relationships between civilians and authorities, as well as between different authorities, are central to understanding governance and conflict dynamics across conflict zones. Roads make these interconnections visible, and the figurational framework provides a window through which to see how these different levels interact and the order that they collectively form. A figurational approach, therefore, not only helps us to understand the case of roads in northeast India, but also serves as an approach to analyse power, conflict dynamics and political ordering across conflict zones more widely.

This article is based on 100 interviews with businesspeople, truck drivers, armed groups, Indian security forces and police between 2020 and 2022, and also draws on selected earlier interviews conducted since 2016. Functions, as I understand them, are not substantive in nature, but rather attributes of relationships and therefore a matter of multiple perspectives (Elias, 1978: 126). Including various actors in different roles allowed for an exploration of what the functions of checkpoints were, and obtaining multiple data points made the study more comprehensive.

The rest of this article is divided into four parts. The first section sets out a relational theoretical framework, drawing on the work of Norbert Elias, and explores how, when applied to checkpoints, this approach contributes to our understanding of authority, governance and violence in conflict zones. The following section contextualizes the conflict in the case study area and summarizes the empirical findings, giving an overview of checkpoints,

how taxes are taken along the roads, and the patterns observed within these systems. The penultimate section then develops a figurational analytical framework at three levels: the roadblock, the road, and beyond. Finally, the last section shows how this figurational framework can help us understand processes of legitimization and violence in conflict zones.

A MULTI-LEVEL RELATIONAL APPROACH TO CONFLICT ZONES

Checkpoints as Figurations and the Politics of Passage

> From the interweaving of countless individual interests and intentions … something comes into being that was planned and intended by none of these individuals, yet has emerged nevertheless from their intentions and actions. (Elias, 1939/1994: 389)

A figuration is a conceptual tool developed by Norbert Elias that refers to a dynamic network of interdependent individuals or groups of people. It emphasizes that individuals are not isolated entities, but are interconnected in various ways, their interactions and interdependencies forming patterns that we may understand cumulatively as structure or society. A fluctuating balance of power is a structural characteristic of every figuration (Elias, 1978: 31), making power an attribute of relationships rather than an isolated object in a state of rest (ibid.: 116).

Checkpoints, as sites of interaction where the power dynamics between armed groups or state officials and civilians are constantly negotiated, epitomize interconnectedness, a core tenet of Elias's figurations. The interactions at checkpoints between civilians and authorities are not isolated events, but are embedded in a larger network of social, political and historical relationships, and are demonstrative of how power relations are both reciprocal and dynamic. Figurations thus serve as tools to loosen the constraints of viewing structure and agency, individuals and society as separate, focusing instead on the interconnectedness that bridges them.

Recent scholarship on 'chokepoints' (e.g. Carse et al., 2023; Chua and Bosworth, 2023) has valuably highlighted how strategic sites like checkpoints constrict flows of goods, people and power. These studies emphasize material bottlenecks, systemic vulnerabilities and the geopolitical leverage gained through control of narrow passages. While this work provides critical insights into the structural impacts of such nodes, the figurational framework offers a distinct analytical advantage by recentring processual negotiations of authority and multi-level interdependencies that shape (and are shaped by) checkpoint dynamics. The multi-level figurational interplay described through this article (individual checkpoint ↔ armed groups ↔ state relations), rather than focusing on strategic narrowings, reveals and makes explicit how this interplay creates processes of political ordering.

Conceptualizing checkpoints as figurations hence allows us not only to gain deeper insights into the complexities of power, control and social order

manifested in the everyday practices at checkpoints, but also to examine how the checkpoint as a figuration intertwines with the understanding of armed groups as figurations (Brenner, 2016; Schlichte, 2009), armed group–state relations as a figuration, and so on. It thus allows us to tap into different but highly interconnected levels of interaction through which the negotiation of order and authority in conflict zones can be understood.

While roads encapsulate the authority of the state, pushing the frontiers of state presence both territorially and symbolically (Scott, 1998; Wilson, 2004), armed group checkpoints and taxation turn these very roads into arenas where the authority of the state is constantly challenged and co-opted, whether as a form of revenue generation, or the assertion and exercise of control. The notion of 'politics of passage' which is at the centre of this special issue is defined as struggles over the terms of passage through checkpoints which simultaneously co-produce and reshape the authority of checkpoint operators and the terms of trade and mobility in areas of contested authority (see Schouten et al., this issue). By expanding the concept of figurations to sites of interaction and by analysing their relationships with other figurations at multiple levels, I am adding a figurational/relational approach to the politics of passage perspective to add to the debates around rebel governance and public authority in conflict zones. This novel framework, which can be applied beyond checkpoints and across conflict zones, offers a way to understand the interconnectedness of different levels of interdependent relationships and how, together, these form political order in conflict zones.

Governance, Power and Authority in Conflict Zones

A figurational framework contributes to our understanding of governance, power and authority in conflict zones, and specifically to the literatures on rebel governance, which looks at the relationships between armed groups and civilians, and on public authority, which looks at struggles for political control between different actors. Rebel governance literature (Arjona, 2016; Huang, 2016; Mampilly, 2011), and within it literature focusing on rebel taxation (Bandula-Irwin et al., 2024; Mampilly and Thakur, 2024; Revkin, 2020; Sabates-Wheeler and Verwimp, 2014), views the actions and motivations of rebel groups to be much like those of states, adopting tenets of security, administration, welfare and representation. Following this literature, an important question is how armed groups interact with civilian populations. Moving beyond the relatively rigid frameworks of 'logics' or 'strategies' and 'motivations' of armed groups to explain armed group governance, a figurational framework shows how armed groups, civilians and state actors are interdependent, each influencing and shaping the others' actions. While the empirical focus on checkpoints avoids the territorially bounded assumptions that underpin much of the rebel governance literature,

the interconnectedness through checkpoints as figurations highlights the fluid nature of authority in conflict zones, where the lines of governance are constantly being redrawn. Checkpoints as figurations can thus elucidate the multiplicity of interactions that sustain rebel governance structures, thereby advancing the literature by providing a nuanced understanding of how authority is both constructed and contested at these sites of interaction.

While rebel governance literature looks at the relationships between armed groups and civilians, scholarship on public authority in conflict zones looks at interactions between different authorities, including different levels of relationships, focusing on processes of co-existence, overlap, competition and cooperation between authorities in conflict zones, and the patterns and order that emerge (Baczko et al., 2018; Boege et al., 2009; Hoffman and Kirk, 2013; Lund, 2006; Raeymakers et al., 2008; Suykens, 2010). A figurational approach centred around checkpoints can deepen, expand and make more explicit the already implicit relational perspectives found across this strand of literature by emphasizing the dynamic and interconnected nature of social relations and authority structures, and by offering insights into the ongoing negotiation and contestation of power in these critical sites of governance (the checkpoint, the road and beyond). Furthermore, a figurational framework provides a way to bring together the two levels that rebel governance and public authority scholarship concern themselves with. By connecting the checkpoint as a figuration, the armed group as a figuration (Brenner, 2016; Schlichte, 2009), and the relationship between the state and armed groups as a figuration, different levels that are otherwise studied separately can be brought together in an analytically meaningful way. While adopting Schlichte's (2009) idea of an armed group as a figuration,[4] this analysis distinguishes itself by focusing not on the armed group's internal trajectories, but on how these multi-level figurations — including roadblocks, armed groups and state–armed group relationships — interconnect to form political order. Through the interconnection of these different levels, both the agency of the actors and the patterns of structures that come about through their ever-shifting power relations can be better understood. By focusing on interdependencies and reciprocal power relations at and beyond checkpoints, a figurational framework offers a way to explore and uncover the intertwined social forces that are operating at different levels in the checkpoint ecosystem — forces that develop their own momentum in negotiating social and political order, structuring authority and shaping everyday practices.

4. Schlichte (2009) focuses on how armed groups transform violence into legitimate domination across various contexts through the concept of figurations, focusing on the trajectories different armed groups take.

Developing a Figurational Analysis Framework

Drawing on Elias's concept of figurations and his 'game models' (1978), which demonstrate the relational character of power in a simplified way,[5] I develop a unique analytical framework to investigate the interconnectedness of different levels of interdependent relationships in conflict zones. This framework is meant as a tool to analyse complex social and political interactions in conflict zones, showing how each figuration is interconnected to others at different levels, and how this affects patterns of political order. This approach allows us to move beyond rigid dichotomies of structure and agency, or a fixation on any one level of analysis in isolation, instead focusing on the interconnectedness that bridges them and shapes processes of legitimization, violence and economic activity in conflict-affected areas.

This framework represents a valuable middle ground by integrating macro-level insights into political order with micro-level relational dynamics, without falling into the extremes of overly broad top-down models or excessively granular micro analyses. Unlike approaches that treat state and conflict actors as monolithic entities, the figurational perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness and mutual influence across different levels, capturing how local interactions at checkpoints are embedded within broader social and political networks. Conversely, it avoids the fragmentation of granular approaches that focus solely on individual negotiations or micro events by providing an analytical lens that links micro interactions to macro order formation through interdependent figurations. This balanced approach enables a nuanced understanding of how power, legitimacy and authority are negotiated and maintained across scales, making it particularly suited for complex conflict environments where multiple actors and levels of governance are intertwined.

The framework is organized at three levels: (1) at the roadblock, focusing on the institutional make-up of checkpoints and how this shapes interactions between checkpoint operators and civilians; (2) along the road, examining how the number of actors and checkpoints affects power dynamics and perceptions of legitimacy; and (3) beyond the road, analysing broader state–armed group relationships and how they influence checkpoint operations and overall conflict dynamics.[6] Viewing the checkpoint ecosystem through

5. These are very different from traditional game models, which focus on mathematical and strategic interactions between rational players. Elias's game models are described in more detail later in this section.
6. In reality, 'the state' is not a singular entity; there are differences between different levels of government (central, state/province and local government, for example) and various organs of the state (the military and the police, law enforcement and civil administration). While recognizing the Indian state's institutional heterogeneity, this analysis focuses on state–armed group relationships manifesting through formal ceasefires and informal collusions, which emerge as dominant patterns in checkpoint ecosystems. I have used the term 'the state' for analytical clarity.

a figurational lens allows us to conceptualize it as a complex, multi-level network of interdependencies. At each level — the roadblock, the road and beyond — we can identify distinct yet interconnected figurations. These figurations are not static structures but dynamic processes of interaction, where power balances are constantly negotiated and renegotiated. The checkpoint itself can be seen as a figuration where the power relations between checkpoint operators and civilians are in constant flux. As noted above, this figuration is connected to other, larger figurations, such as the armed group to which the operator belongs, and the broader state–armed group relationship. Each of these figurations influences and is influenced by the others, creating a web of interdependencies that shapes not just the highway ecosystem but overall conflict dynamics.

Elias's concept of game models provides a useful tool for understanding these multi-level figurations. At the roadblock level, we can conceptualize the interaction between a driver and a checkpoint operator as a two-person game, where the relative strength of each player shapes interactions. Moving to the road level, the game becomes more complex, with multiple players (various armed groups) and the driver. As the number of players increases, the power balance shifts, potentially weakening the position of individual armed groups or/and the driver. At the broadest level, beyond the road, we can envision a game between state and armed groups, where formal arrangements like ceasefires alter the rules and power balances. These games are not played independently at each level, but are connected to the others: the relative strength of the checkpoint operator is linked to the armed group he is a part of, for example. These interlocking games at different levels collectively shape the figurations and, by extension, the political order in the conflict zone. The game model approach highlights how changes at one level (e.g. a ceasefire agreement) alter power balances and interactions at all levels. Later sections of this article expand on how this framework would look in practice in the context of my case study.

MANIPUR'S CONFLICT LANDSCAPE

Context

Manipur is a small mountainous state in northeast India, bordering Myanmar, with a population of 3 million. The northeast has geographically and historically been tenuously connected to mainland India and, with different languages, ethnicities and widespread neglect from the central Indian state, has been a hotbed for resistance movements and armed violence since the 1950s (see Baruah, 2005; Kolås, 2017; Misra, 2014; Verghese, 2013). Manipur is divided both geographically and politically into the valley, home to the primarily Hindu Meiteis, and the hills, with different tribal, mostly

Christian, populations, creating one of the cleavages along which armed groups align themselves.[7] Various armed groups are aligned along different ethnic and tribal lines, fighting for secession from, or greater autonomy within, the Indian state. Despite these affiliations, for this analysis, the term 'armed group' prioritizes functional criteria — organizational structure, capacity for sustained violence, and autonomy from state institutions — rather than ethnic or ideological affiliations. Some groups are in active confrontation with the Indian state, and many others are in some sort of ceasefire or suspension of operations. Manipur sees overlapping forms of control.[8]

Parallel governance structures and co-option of Indian administrative structures by armed groups are seen in many parts of the state, especially with groups that are in ceasefires (see Thakur and Venugopal, 2018). The neighbouring state of Nagaland has its own set of armed groups, all fighting for Naga autonomy or statehood, the majority of whom have joined a form of ceasefire, bringing its own set of ceasefire political and economic orders (Kikon and McDuie-Ra, 2021; Waterman, 2021). A system of predatory accumulation and corrupt elites from both state and non-state groups is a standard feature of these political systems (see Baruah, 2020).

Manipur was an independent kingdom from 1100 until it became a British protectorate in the late 19th century, and part of India in 1949. Fighting for secession from the Indian state, Meitei insurgents claim that the merger was forced upon them. After armed conflict around the issue of Manipuri secession gained traction in the 1970s, Manipur was declared a 'disturbed area' in 1980, when the Indian government imposed the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958,[9] which gives the armed forces sweeping powers and is in force in many parts of Manipur as of today (as well as in other northeast Indian states, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh).

In the hills, there is a parallel situation with the Indo-Naga conflict, one of the longest-running internal ethnic secessionist movements in India. A cluster of hill tribes found in Manipur and other northeast Indian states, as well as in today's Myanmar, the Nagas have historically resisted incorporation into the Indian state ever since Indian independence in 1947. The growing power of Naga armed groups in the 1980s led to the other tribes in Manipur, primarily the Kukis, setting up their own armed units to check Naga influence. Currently, the largest Naga group is the NSCN-IM

7. This divide threatens to oversimplify the multi-ethnic nature of Manipur's inhabitants and flatten the differences and complexities of the numerous groups inhabiting both terrains (Yengkhom, 2015). Nevertheless, despite these substantial flaws, the hill–valley binary remains a powerful and politically charged framework in contemporary Manipur, shaping the contours of the current (since 2023) conflict.
8. For a discussion on armed group control, see Bahiss et al. (2022).
9. See The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958. Available at: www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/armed_forces_special_powers_act1958.pdf

(Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak Muivah), which has its stronghold in Manipur. It has been in a protracted ceasefire with the Indian state since 1997. The NSCN-IM aims to create a state of 'Nagalim' or 'Greater Nagaland' that includes the territory of the present Indian state of Nagaland, along with the neighbouring Naga-populated areas in India and Myanmar. The territorial claim to Nagalim is heavily contested by non-Naga groups (both the Meiteis and the Kukis) in Manipur. Table 1 provides an overview of the armed groups in the study area.

Many other Naga groups, splinters of the NSCN and groups that came before them, are also in different forms of ceasefires. Bargaining, signalling and negotiation around the formal and informal rules of these ceasefires shape ceasefire orders in Nagaland (Thakur and Venugopal, 2018; Waterman, 2021). Most Kuki groups are also in ceasefire agreements, or in what is called 'Suspension of Operations' arrangements (Sinha, 2017). In cases of protracted ceasefires, like that of the NSCN-IM, sophisticated parallel governance arrangements may emerge. For example, in Ukhrul in Manipur, where the group has its stronghold, NSCN-IM collects taxes, runs a parallel justice system, has its own police and security forces, and is able to co-opt different civil society bodies and government funds (Thakur and Venugopal, 2018). Separate from, yet related to, the independence- and autonomy-seeking movements of the Meitei, Naga and Kuki, armed struggles also take place along ethnic fault lines, generally over aspirations tied to land and its interconnectedness with identity across different communities.

Contestation thus arises from a historical legacy of marginalization and distinct identities, coupled with the presence of armed groups pursuing separatist or autonomy agendas. This is manifested in the establishment of parallel governance structures and the active assertion of control over key resources and spaces like highways, leading to overlapping authorities and a fluid political order in which the state's legitimacy and territorial control are constantly challenged by non-state actors.

The Roads in Manipur

In the absence of a railway line, Manipur is connected to other states in India, and to Myanmar, through three major highways (see Figure 1). These highways, vital for trade, are also deeply politicized spaces where infrastructure projects often exacerbate ethnic tensions. As Arora and Ziipao (2020) demonstrate, roads in Manipur simultaneously serve as arenas for asserting territorial control and for resisting state authority, where roads which are intended to advance integration also enable regulation and resource extraction by armed groups. Roads have consistently been, and continue to be, objects of dominance and spaces for conflict and regulation across time, augmenting a divide between groups and demonstrating how security and mobility are entangled, from the period of colonial surveillance

Table 1. Armed Groups in the Study Area

Group name	About	Status of Conflict
Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM)	**Naga Groups**: The Indo-Naga conflict is one of the longest-running ethnic secessionist movements in India. Naga movements have resisted incorporation into India since the time of decolonization in 1947. By the mid-1950s, this campaign had become increasingly militarized. After multiple talks, agreements, breakdowns in both, and increasing factionalization, the armed movement and claim for Naga autonomy and sovereignty continues today. The NSCN-IM is the biggest Naga group in terms of number of members (estimated 4,000–10,000); the NNPGs and ZUF are considerably smaller, estimated at a couple of hundred cadres each.	Ceasefire
Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs)		Ceasefire, but the groups that are part of the NNPGs are constantly changing
Zeliangrong United Front (ZUF)		Suspension of operations
Kuki National Organisation (KNO)	**Kuki Groups**: Most Kuki groups emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a response to growing Naga and Meitei dominance, as a way to protect their land and identity, both of which they saw as being threatened. Divided into more than a dozen groups, they are usually small in size (100-400 cadres per group) and are heavily influenced by clan loyalties. Most Kuki groups entered a suspension of operations agreement in 2008, and are engaged in a tripartite political dialogue with the Government of India and the Government of Manipur. Along with their kindred tribes of the Zomi group, Kuki armed groups are in one of the two umbrella organizations: Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and United Peoples Front (UPF).	Suspension of operations
Kuki National Front (KNF)		Split
Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA)		Suspension of operations
United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF)		Suspension of operations
The United National Liberation Front (UNLF)		Suspension of operations
People's Liberation Army (PLA)	**Meitei Groups**: Meitei armed groups are some of the most powerful in the valley regions of Manipur. The Meitei secessionist movements started in the 1960s, claiming that accession of the Kingdom of Manipur into India was involuntary and demanding a separate state. All the Meitei armed groups mentioned here fight for independence from India, espousing either socialist ideologies on ethnic identity or cultural preservation. There is not much reliable information on their cadre strength, but they appear to be growing in number from their estimated couple of hundred cadres per group.	Active Confrontation
Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL)		
People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK)		

Source: author's fieldwork

to the movements of contemporary state forces and underground groups (Medom, 2024).[10]

The movement of people and the transportation of essential goods is carried out via these highways. While buses and other passenger vehicles are also routinely stopped and taxed, the primary empirical focus of this article is on goods transport. Blockades on these roads have serious consequences for people within Manipur, choking access to essential commodities including groceries, petroleum, building materials and medicines, and driving up prices.[11] In May 2023, a year after fieldwork for this article was completed, a violent conflict broke out between the valley-based Meiteis and hill-based Kuki-Chin, changing the checkpoints and patterns of mobility and control — an important reminder that figurations of interdependent actors and groups, and the power relations between them, are constantly shifting, an indication of the processual nature of order.

Figure 1 shows the three main highways:

- Moreh–Imphal: part of Asian Highway 1, this road connects the border town of Moreh with Imphal, facilitating the import of food, electronics, cosmetics, timber, furniture and livestock from Myanmar.
- Jiribam–Imphal: part of NH-37, this road links Imphal to Jiribam, close to Assam, and hosts Manipur's first railway station. It is a key route for cement, iron, steel, vegetables and FMCGs (fast-moving consumer goods).
- Dimapur–Imphal: also part of Asian Highway 1, this road connects Dimapur, Nagaland's commercial hub, with Imphal. It is vital for transporting building materials and essential foods like dal, sugar, oil and vegetables.

Armed groups

The armed groups along the three roads can broadly be identified with Naga, Kuki and Meitei ethnic groups. While most of the groups fight for secession or greater autonomy, they mobilize along ethnic lines. In Nagaland, contestation is between the different factions of Naga armed groups. Figure 1 shows the different armed groups that have a presence along the three main highways, as of May 2022. The groups that have 'regular control' are those that drivers reported encountering more or less every time they went down these roads. Those shown in lighter grey ('occasional

10. This contemporary dynamic has deep historical roots; Dzuvichu (2013) shows how colonial road building in the Naga Hills, for example, was a crucial site for empire building, used for penetration, control, military surveillance and the extraction of labour and taxation.
11. See *The* Hindu (2017) for an example of the longest blockade in recent times.

Figure 1. Main Highways in Manipur, Showing Control by Armed Groups (as of May 2022)

Source: Thakur (2023: Figures 3.1, 3.2)

control') are groups that the drivers might encounter once in a while, but with no certainty as to when or where along the route.

Armed groups exercise varying degrees of territorial and social control. The NSCN-IM, for example, runs its parallel administration and collects various types of taxes in many parts of Manipur. These include household tax, service tax on Indian government employees and taxes on business contracts. In some areas, it also runs a parallel justice system and its own police and parallel security forces (Thakur and Venugopal, 2018). Other Naga groups have similar taxes, though less extensive, and other areas of influence, as do different Kuki groups. An 'area of influence' does not mean absolute territorial control, as the Indian state is present (to varying extents) in most places. Rather, it represents a range of possibilities: being the de facto or alternative authority for security and dispute resolution, being able to carry arms, being able to tax, to simply being the strongest or only armed group in that area.

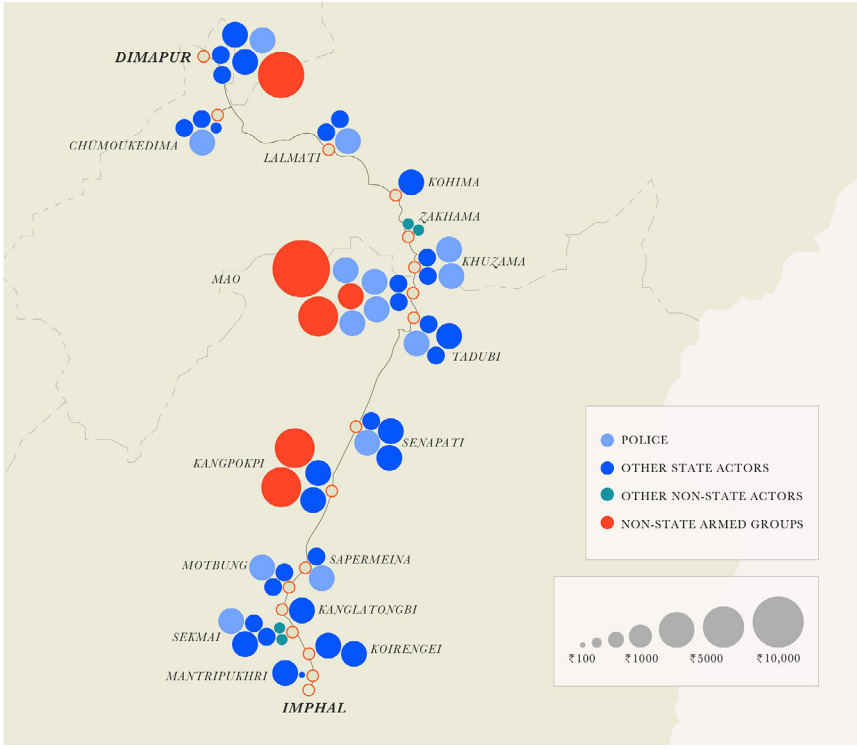
Informal Highway Taxation at Checkpoints

If we want to gain insight into the different relationships, power balances and figurations that form at and beyond the site of a checkpoint, it is imperative to understand the way that checkpoint taxes are taken, their amounts and regularity, their differences and similarities. This section therefore lays out some of the empirics: how much is taken, how, by whom, from whom? This overview sets the foundation for investigating checkpoints, armed groups and other groupings of interdependent actors through a figurational analytical framework, which is undertaken in the next section.

To begin with, the burden of taxes taken as part of the informal highway taxation system is substantial. Businesspeople interviewed for the study estimate that around 20 per cent of the value of their shipment is spent on informal taxes, mostly to armed groups, with a smaller amount taken by corrupt state actors. As an example, Figure 2 shows the journey taken by a shipment of cement along the Dimapur–Imphal road, including the different stops and amounts taken. In addition to these taxes taken along the road on every trip (entry tax and goods tax), other yearly taxes are taken from businesspeople transporting goods. A businessperson in Dimapur said that they paid up to INR 15 lakhs (around US$ 18,000) in different fixed yearly taxes to armed groups. The main taxes that the NSCN-IM charges a businessperson for a six-wheeled truck include annual vehicle tax, entry taxes per journey, and goods tax per journey per shipment.[12] These taxes have increased considerably since the ceasefire between the NSCN-IM and the Indian state in 1997, both in the types of tax collected and the amounts.

12. Interviews, businesspeople, Nagaland, February 2021 and March 2022.

Figure 2. Number of Informal Taxation Checkpoints and Amounts Collected

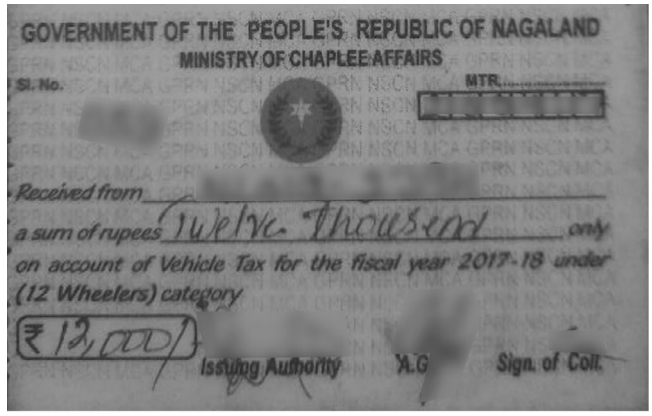


Note: 'other non-state actors' refers to traditional village or civil society authorities that are not directly connected to armed groups.
Source: author's fieldwork, based on accounts from two Dimapur-based businesspeople on where they are stopped while carrying cement along the route (Nagaland, March 2020).

As the following analytical sections will show, ceasefires change the balance of power in the figuration between the state and an armed group, as reflected in the increase in fees in the post-fighting period as compared to during active conflict. Many other groups in the region take similar taxes, though none are as bureaucratic or systematic as the NSCN-IM. Smaller groups, as well as groups that are still actively fighting the Indian state, have a reduced ability to collect such a large number of taxes in a regularized manner.

Within the figuration of armed group checkpoints, receipts are symbols of authority and compliance, reflecting social order. They embody dynamic interactions at the checkpoint, making visible the power relations and dependencies that structure this order. Specifically, receipts serve to highlight how everyday practices and symbols contribute to the maintenance and negotiation of power and social order. On all three routes, either physical receipts are given, or confirmation of payment at checkpoints is organized through text or WhatsApp messages, with the latter method

Figure 3. Example of an NSCN-IM Tax Receipt for Yearly Vehicle Tax



Note: the receipt is specific to this vehicle; it specifies that the vehicle comes under the 12-wheeler category
Source: author's fieldwork

gaining more popularity in recent times. Receipts from many of the groups are official-looking and state-like in their appearance, with stamps, logos and signing authorities (see Figure 3). The receipts also indicate a degree of mimicry between the different armed groups.[13]

When receipts like this are issued, it is imperative for drivers to treat them with care. For example, on the Dimapur–Imphal route, truck owner John was fined INR 2,000 (US$ 24) by an armed group for misplacing his receipt.[14] Along the same road, truck driver Soham was fined INR 5,000 (US$ 61) by the NSCN-IM in the absence of tax receipts.[15] In bleaker cases, two drivers along the Jiribam–Imphal road recounted fines of INR 2,000–4,500 (US$ 24–55) being imposed, water being poured on the cement they were carrying, and being beaten up if caught without a receipt.[16] Thus, possession of a receipt doesn't only symbolize recognition or acceptance of the group's authority, but also allows drivers to navigate the social landscape created by the checkpoint, providing them with a form of protection within that context.

Variations in taxes give glimpses into power relations in checkpoint figurations. Progressive taxes on larger trucks and valuable goods reflect how power and control are exercised through economic means within the figuration. Non-economic considerations, such as moral or ideological stances against taxing certain products, illustrate the social and cultural dimensions that shape these interactions. It is not only the armed groups, but the people who pay who shape the amount and practices of taxation. Significant

13. For more on mimetic borrowing in armed conflict, see Klem and Maunaguru (2017).
14. Interview, John, Manipur, October 2021.
15. Interview, Soham, Manipur, October 2021.
16. Interviews, truck drivers, Manipur, June 2021 and July 2021.

societal opposition and the formation of citizen groups protesting against 'unabated taxation' have played a role in reducing collected taxes (see, for example, Chakravarti, 2017), as have the formation of business unions (Thakur, 2023), where collective bargaining helps businesspeople negotiate more effectively with armed groups. These tax practices embody the complex negotiations of power, compliance and social norms, reinforcing and constantly reshaping order.

The number of armed group checkpoints along the routes, unsurprisingly, correlates with the amount of informal tax taken. Charges are between five and seven times higher on the Dimapur–Imphal route, which sees a presence of multiple armed groups, compared to the Jiribam–Imphal route with one major armed group.[17] As the following analytical sections will show, the number of actors along a road affects not only the amount of tax taken, but the wider figurations and power balances along roads. Across these different routes, there are variations in the tax being taken, based on truck size (with larger trucks being charged more on the road and in yearly taxes), goods carried (with high profit products being charged more), and non-economic logics (with certain groups not taxing drugs for ideological reasons, or not taxing medicines during COVID-19).[18]

ROADBLOCKS, ROADS AND BEYOND: A FIGURATIONAL ANALYSIS APPLIED

Using figurations as an analytical tool and drawing on Elias's 'game models' (1978), this section illustrates how a figurational analysis framework can be used to investigate the interconnectedness of different levels of interdependent relationships. While many factors, levels and figurations interlock in an informal highway taxation system, my analysis is organized at three levels to provide a clear, multi-layered understanding of the figurations and how power dynamics operate within and across these levels. While in no way a formal model, this framework serves as a tool for analysing and understanding complex social and political interactions in conflict zones. Further, while many different factors play a role in power balances at these levels, for the sake of analytical clarity, I have focused on one factor at each level: institutional make-up (at the checkpoint); number of actors (on the road); and state–armed group relationships (beyond the road). Based on empirical evidence, I show how each of the figurations is interconnected with other figurations, at different levels, and how this affects each of them as well as the patterns of structuring of political order.

17. The NSCN-IM is the major group on the Jiribam–Imphal route, although various smaller groups may sporadically take a cut.
18. Interview, Kuki armed group member, Manipur, February 2021.

Level 1. At the Roadblock: Institutional Make-up

Far from the image of an armed man shaking down truck drivers for whatever they can get, armed group highway taxation comprises regulated and often sophisticated systems of taxation that are interconnected with and form a part of wider institutions. While drivers gauge different checkpoint experiences based on who they interact with, these operators are part of an armed group. The figuration of the checkpoint is hence connected to armed groups as figurations (see Schlichte, 2009) and to the figuration of state–armed group relationships (around ceasefire, for example).

Different groups show different levels of systematization, charge different amounts and deploy varying levels of coercion. How much is charged and the basis for this might vary according to the products carried, size of trucks, ideological leanings, what is not taxed and so on. Certain armed groups charge the same amount on roads that they control entirely as they do on roads where they compete with others, showing a degree of regularization that is determined by more than maximizing profits. The trade-off between generating revenue and creating a presence that supports claims to statehood and legitimate authority appears to be important even in the context of highway taxation. More organized groups (in terms of regularity of collection and in terms of punishment for non-payment) provide more predictability for drivers and businesses.[19]

For example, most of the drivers we interviewed said they were charged the most by the NSCN-IM. Drivers also complained that they were fined, beaten, or had their goods damaged if they were unable to show a receipt. Despite this, the NSCN-IM was seen as a more favourable actor to engage with. This was, firstly, because it was predictable: even if it charged a higher amount than other groups, it seemed to do this in a regularized manner. Payments to NSCN-IM were hence more systematic than to other groups, who might take less, but would be more inconsistent. Secondly, NSCN-IM treated drivers (relatively) well compared to other groups on the roads. For example, over one-third of the drivers we interviewed specifically voiced their displeasure with or fear of Kuki groups. Some even drew comparisons without being asked, with one driver saying that when they encounter Kuki groups, they are, unlike Naga groups, 'not very friendly'.[20] Terms like 'horrid' and 'troublesome'[21] were used more often for some Kuki groups, even though they were encountered less frequently on average. When Ram was kidnapped and didn't know who had taken him, he felt sure it was not the NSCN-IM, showing that he drew a distinction between different behaviours

19. By 'predictability', I mean that businesses know what to expect when it comes to these groups and can therefore plan for the costs they are likely to incur.
20. Interview, driver, Manipur, June 2021.
21. Translations by research assistant.

from different groups along this road (although the bar seems low if a group being unlikely to kidnap you is the standard for good behaviour).

Two businessmen along the Imphal–Jiribam road, who dealt in vegetables and cement respectively, said they faced no problems at all from the armed group they encountered along the way.[22] Initially, we thought the response stemmed from fear, but they elaborated: they found the armed groups who are active along this route — in this case, the NSCN-IM — to be dependable actors. 'Reliability is there', explained one businessman. In case of an accident, he said they could be counted on as first responders, and if the vehicle broke down, to protect the shipment and help with the repairs. The cadres who take taxes along the way are usually there for long periods of time, and often come from the same communities. The two businesspeople kept reiterating that they could not depend on the police to protect their shipment in case of a breakdown, that the police could not be trusted, that they behaved badly, and that their actions could not be predicted.[23] Interestingly, the businessmen who had this positive view of the integrity of the NSCN-IM collection system were not Naga, but mainland Indians, demonstrating the importance of institutional make-up even beyond ethnic affiliations.

The predictability and systematization of the NSCN-IM, however, cannot be understood simply through the armed group as a figuration, their internal organization and orientation towards each other, but also through the fact that they have been in a ceasefire for over two and a half decades. 'Institutional make-up' as a factor affecting driver perceptions and power relations at the checkpoint can hence be understood to be interconnected with other figurations. Specifically, the interaction between a driver and a checkpoint operator (a figuration in itself) is shaped by the operator's affiliation with a larger armed group figuration. Furthermore, the armed group's institutional characteristics, and thus the checkpoint operations, are greatly influenced by its relationship with the state — whether it is engaged in a formal ceasefire, open confrontation, or other forms of interaction. This multi-level interdependency highlights how power, legitimacy and order are negotiated across different scales in conflict zones.

Level 2. Along the Road: The Number of Actors

The number of groups that are collecting taxes changes figurations along the road. In places where there is only one major armed group present, they are seen as an authority and even a service provider to certain businesspeople. In contrast, on roads where there are many armed groups, that same group is often seen as just one more extortive actor. Despite having the

22. Interviews, businessmen, Manipur, March 2022.
23. Ibid.

same institutional make-up and taking similar amounts in both spaces, the presence of other armed groups changes power dynamics. The fees taken along a road by an armed group can be perceived as legitimate taxation, or as being entirely predatory in nature, depending on the number of other actors present. To understand why this might be the case, we can use an example from Elias's game models (1978: 83). If, at the level of the road, we were to see each interaction between a driver and checkpoint operator as a separate 'game', in which power balances are expressed through relative strength of the players (checkpoint operator and driver/businessperson), the 'strength' of the driver might suffer as a result of an increase in the number of (in gamified language) 'opponents'. While at the level of the roadblock, various factors shaped the checkpoint figuration, at the level of the road, the number of actors changes the power balance of an individual driver or businessperson, on account of the number of operators or opponents they encounter. For any individual armed group, too, an increased number of other groups along the road affects their 'strength'. This might lead to them being seen as an extortive actor instead of a legitimate authority on roads where they are just one of many.

In just the first three months of 2021, businessman Kim had dealt with more than 10 incidents of kidnappings of drivers, hijackings of trucks, and shootings on his vehicles, along with a number of death threats.[24] He methodically documented these incidents in a notebook along with small news articles that were carried by the local newspapers. Even though he had family who were a part of the Naga armed movement, as a businessman, he saw the taxes charged by the armed groups as little more than extortion, claiming that they provided no services. Beyond his complaint that the groups do not use the money they take for any development purposes, he objects to the sheer number of groups that tax goods going through Dimapur. 'If it was one group, we would close our eyes and pay. But now it is eight groups'.[25] So, while some businesspeople along the Jiribam–Imphal road saw the NSCN-IM as preferable to the state actors, the same cannot be said of the group in Dimapur, where they are seen as just one of the eight groups that need to be paid off.

Level 3. Beyond the Road: State and Armed Groups

The relationships between state and armed groups form figurations whose power balances reshape the figuration as they move from open confrontation to ceasefires. For analytical clarity, it is important to note that 'the state' in this analysis refers to specific manifestations such as formal ceasefires

24. Kim was interviewed in 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022.
25. Interview, Kim, Nagaland, February 2019.

and informal collusion with armed groups. While recognizing the Indian state's inherent institutional heterogeneity, encompassing different levels of government and various organs, this approach prioritizes the dominant patterns of interaction that emerge in checkpoint ecosystems. In the case of open confrontation, the two parties also 'perform a function for each other, because the interdependence of human beings due to their hostility is no less a functional relationship than that due to their position as friends, allies, and specialists bonded to each other through the division of labour' (Elias, 1978: 77). Formal arrangements, like ceasefires and suspension of operations, change the power balance. Whilst in open confrontation with the Indian state, fighting (and hiding) hamper the ability of armed groups to collect taxes systematically, whereas the maintenance of a ceasefire leads to a degree of impunity for groups, allowing them to tax more systematically with fewer consequences and to increase profitability from rebel taxation. For example, the ceasefire has helped expand and entrench the taxation system of the NSCN-IM. As one senior official of the group put it, 'before we couldn't collect 100 per cent because disturbances and hindrances are there, now we can collect as per our law'.[26] For the Indian state, acting on this sort of taxation — which technically contravenes the ground rules of the ceasefire — could lead to a return to active fighting, a trade-off they usually, and pragmatically, choose not to make (Thakur, 2021).

The converse is also true. The valley-based groups, being in open confrontation with the Indian state, are unable to collect taxes as systematically, given their very different figuration with the state. According to businesspeople in Moreh, valley-based armed groups were at one time the biggest players in the game. However, their influence and their ability to tax have waned considerably since 2019, and as of 2022, they were taking nothing significant from the business community at all. Smaller groups that are not in any sort of arrangement with the Indian state similarly find it difficult to sustain tax collection, as they can be militarily overpowered and thwarted by the Indian state.[27]

Some armed groups appear to be joining a ceasefire or talks with the Indian state with the intention of making money. One businessperson described how a faction of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland, which had entered a ceasefire, immediately called him and asked how many trucks the business had.[28] Explaining that the group had now entered a ceasefire, he was told that it would be expecting regular payments henceforth. As the frustrated businessman explained, before the ceasefire, the group could not take anything or would have to hide and take what little

26. Interview, NSCN-IM official, Nagaland, February 2019.
27. In the most recent outbreak of fighting, starting in 2023, this has changed, with valley-based armed groups re-entering Manipur and collecting various fees.
28. Interview, Nagaland, March 2022.

they could. Entering a ceasefire was seen as a licence to tax. Hence, it changed the power balance not just between the armed group and the state but also at individual checkpoints and between businesspeople and the armed group.

More informally, state corruption can forge figurations of cooperation, with state officers turning a blind eye and occasionally colluding with armed groups. 'In front of the police also they [the armed groups] collect. The police say, "give it to them"', a businessman from Dimapur grumbled.[29] Complaints of the police taking no action on reports of kidnapping are also common. Kim gave an example from when his manager was kidnapped in 2019. He recognized the car as belonging to an armed group, complained to the police, and followed the car. Not only did the police not act on his complaint, they let the car with the kidnapped manager through, but stopped Kim from crossing the checkpoint. After being beaten, Kim's manager (who was also interviewed) was released on the payment of INR 3 lakh (around US$ 3,700).[30] The figuration of the interdependent relationship between state and armed groups, through formal ceasefires and informal shared incentives, is thus also connected with the checkpoint as a figuration and with the wider conflict order.

OUTCOMES OF INTERCONNECTED FIGURATIONS: LEGITIMIZATION AND VIOLENCE

Together, the figurations at different levels discussed in the previous section constitute a fluid political order — the patterns, rules, processes, ways, designs and habits that shape how political power and authority are organized, distributed and negotiated. In the words of Elias (1978: 107): 'Specific forms of integration and disintegration, patterns of order and disorder, kinds of connectedness, and types of structure and function are encountered which differ from those on all previous levels of integration and cannot be reduced by them, even though the forms found on all levels constitute ontogenetically a single, if subdivided, developmental continuum'. This section will show how different processes of legitimization and violence emerge out of these multi-level interconnected figurations.

29. Interview, businessman, Nagaland, February 2019.
30. Interviews, Nagaland, March 2020. It should be noted though that Kim's level of distress was not shared by all the businessmen we interviewed. Although many spoke of the costs and the threats they have to deal with, they tended not to push back against the system as much as Kim, preferring to negotiate with the armed groups to the point where the group posed no real risk, and the relationship was sufficiently established for the business to negotiate favourable rates.

Contested Legitimacy and Shifting Authority

> In the name of the nation they have squeezed so much that I cannot breathe. (Businessperson, Dimapur)[31]

The interlocking figurations described above shape processes of legitimization, with a change in a figuration at any level affecting the overall legitimacy of different authorities. For many businesspeople, increasing taxation in the absence of active fighting (through ceasefires and suspension of operations) has led to an erosion of the legitimacy of armed groups. Yet the continued presence of the groups through taxation means that they remain actors to be reckoned with. In certain places, such groups are seen as an authority that has more legitimacy than the state. Meanwhile, continued taxation by armed groups has a detrimental effect on state legitimacy.

James is a businessman from Dimapur and a Naga. Various groups come to him for payment of taxes in the name of nationhood, citing patriotic duty as justification for the taxes and cuts they would take. Expressing his frustration with them, he asked, 'I am trying to build our economy, you are killing our economy, who is the real patriot?'.[32] Yet the tax demands continued.

Speaking of the lack of services provided by the armed groups, and pointing out that they have not constructed any roads or improved business conditions, Kim concluded that: 'The amount of money they are taking is not converting into the revenue of the government'.[33] This wording is particularly noteworthy because Kim is referring here to both the Indian government and the Naga government, with neither doing anything constructive with the taxes they take. As he put it: 'They think they are running a parallel government [but] they know only how to take, not how to give'.[34] Taxation was seen differently by many of the interviewees during times of active conflict. As a member of a civil society organization said about the NSCN-IM: '[Before the ceasefire] it was a "loyalty tax". It was not an imposition. It is like, I am also willing to be a part of it [the movement], you are also. It was paying as a loyalty to your movement. They should give service tax in a way of donation. Now, the question of voluntary does not arise'.[35]

Despite the complaints about the armed groups not providing any kind of service, there remains a degree of loyalty that is separate from, albeit intertwined with, elements of fear and coercion. For example, an Assam Rifles officer told businesses that he would help their goods go through

31. Interview, businessperson, Nagaland, 2019.
32. Interview, James, Manipur, January 2020.
33. Interview, Kim, Nagaland, February 2019.
34. Ibid.
35. Interview, member of a civil society organization, Nagaland, February 2019.

their checkpoints on condition that they provided information on militant activity. The businesspeople (one of whom I interviewed) discussed among themselves how they could never sell out 'their own' people by reporting on fees taken by them.[36]

The routine nature of taxation speaks to a different kind of process of legitimization. For example, the receipts associated with taxation suggest a culture of documentation and a form of legitimacy stemming from bureaucracy. While the importance of written records in maintaining political and social order is usually associated with state bureaucracies and legal systems to establish rules and control, in the context of Manipur, it also applies to the armed groups. It is as important for a businessperson to register their vehicle with certain armed groups as it is for them to register it with the state transport association. Receipts thus serve as a symbol of an armed group's bureaucratic organization, tokens of continued compliance from those they tax. With state actors taking bribes without receipts, and armed groups issuing official-looking receipts, the lines between formal and informal, legitimate and illegitimate, state and non-state, get increasingly blurred through interactions at the checkpoints.

In a few cases, interviewees described the collection of taxes by armed groups as their right, as the legitimate authority in the land. For example, Ganga, a businessman dealing in grocery products in a town along the Jiribam–Imphal road, pays around 5 to 10 per cent of the value of his items to armed groups. He felt the taxes are justified as he is doing business 'in other people's land',[37] implying that he considers the NSCN-IM to be the legitimate authority to collect tax on behalf of the people of this land.

In many cases, armed groups were seen as preferable to the police. More often than not, state governance such as the police is blamed for responding to the burden of armed group taxation by adding their own fees, in the form of bribes. At the very least, the police often turn a blind eye to informal taxation by armed groups, and in some cases, as in Dimapur, are reputed to cooperate with the armed groups. A member of the police force candidly admitted that 'civilians love the UGs[38] more than the police'.[39] Speaking of his experience along the Jiribam–Imphal road, he said that the police are not given an opportunity to exercise their full authority, as the locals in some towns along this route support the NSCN-IM. At the same time, he agreed that the public cannot be blamed, as the armed group's cadre posted there is often local, and there is a certain dependency on them for security and justice. Hence, in his opinion, they are often seen by the local

36. Interview, member of security forces, Manipur, January 2020; group discussion, Nagaland March 2020.
37. Interview, Ganga, Manipur, March 2022.
38. 'UGs' or 'undergrounds' is the colloquial term used for armed groups in the region.
39. Interview, member of the police force, Manipur, March 2022.

population as deserving of financial contribution and support, including along the highway.

The effects of these interlinked levels of figuration on processes of legitimization are mixed, affected by how many actors are stopping drivers and taxing them (level 2), checkpoint interactions (level 1) and state and armed group relationships (level 3). For many of the people we interviewed, there has been an erosion in the legitimacy of armed groups over time, with taxation contributing to this. In the absence of active fighting, it is unclear what the armed groups are taking taxes for, and it is increasingly viewed through the lens of extortion. In other cases, the groups continue to be seen as legitimate authorities, especially when compared to parts of the Indian state such as the police.

Profitable Peace and Patterns of Predictable Violence

Perhaps least intuitively, patterns of increased predictability and reduced violence can be seen as a part of these figurations at different levels. Interviews with drivers and businesspeople showed that the cost of doing business increased over the years as taxation became more routine, but it also led to more predictability and was preferred by businesspeople to the more volatile situation during active conflict. Violence is used in relative moderation. While intimidation, kidnapping of drivers, beatings and threats remain commonplace, deaths are rare. Groups that are in a ceasefire and profiting from the taxation system do not push the limits of what the Indian government can turn a blind eye to, and this keeps the level of violence considerably lower than during the time of active conflict. As noted above, the ability to tax more during a ceasefire can also be an incentive for armed groups to join protracted ceasefires.

On the other hand, finding a long-term political resolution will reduce the income that armed groups are getting through routinized taxation. Hence, in the long run, the taxation by armed groups may keep conflict dynamics in a sort of limbo. Going back to active fighting with the Indian state will be less profitable for many of the groups involved, but so will a definitive political solution. While checkpoint interactions and reduced violence might be seen as influenced by the figurations between state and armed groups forged through ceasefires, not using excessive violence at the site of the checkpoint is instrumental in keeping the ceasefires from breaking down. It is not causal in one direction, but rather these interlocking figurations affect each other and indeed themselves.

That figurations are not fixed but are constantly negotiated power balances is emphasized through the breakdown of this seemingly sticky profitable peace. Recent violence waged along ethnic lines has changed trade routes and who controls them. The dynamic interactions between various actors lead to continuous changes in the structure and function of checkpoints

and trade routes. In fact, there was speculation by interviewees[40] (including Indian security and intelligence forces) that control over trade routes in lucrative places like Moreh was one of the main points of contention in the current conflict.

CONCLUSION

By conceptualizing checkpoints as figurations, this article explores the dynamics of power and control and how order manifests in everyday practices at checkpoints. It also investigates how the checkpoint as a figuration is interwoven with other figurations. The framework offers a structured yet flexible approach to investigating the interconnectedness of different levels of interdependent relationships. This includes interactions between different actors at the site of the checkpoint, between drivers and the various checkpoints they must stop at along the road, and also beyond the road, for example, by considering the wider relationship between the state and an armed group.

In the case of Manipur and Nagaland in northeast India, these interconnected levels of figurations shape processes of legitimization, with a change in a figuration at any level affecting the overall legitimacy of different authorities. Patterns of increased predictability and of reduced violence can also be seen as a part of these figurations at different levels. While these findings apply to this particular case, the framework is designed not only to shed light on roads in northeast India but also to offer a valuable approach for investigating power dynamics and political ordering in other conflict-affected regions.

Empirically, the findings from this study reveal counter-intuitive patterns that challenge conventional understandings of conflict dynamics. Notably, the research demonstrates how 'profitable peace' emerges through figurational interdependencies, where businesspeople prefer the predictability of routinized taxation — despite its substantial burden of as much as 20 per cent of shipment value — over the volatility of active conflict, and how this profitable peace enacted at individual checkpoints is in turn instrumental in keeping ceasefires from breaking down. The paradox that increased taxation can coincide with reduced violence suggests that conflict resolution efforts must grapple with the complex incentive structures that emerge from these interconnected figurations.

The unique strength of this figurational framework lies in its ability to transcend traditional dichotomies of structure and agency, and to bring together levels of analysis and study that are often approached separately. By emphasizing the dynamic and processual nature of these

40. Interviews, Manipur September 2023 and November 2023.

interdependencies, this article underscores that these figurations are not static but are in constant flux, with power balances continuously negotiated and reshaped by events such as new conflicts or changes in state–armed group relations.

The broader theoretical implications of this figurational approach therefore extend well beyond the specific context of northeast India's highways. By demonstrating how micro-level interactions at checkpoints interconnect with macro-level political arrangements, the framework provides a methodological bridge between granular ethnographic analysis and systemic understanding of conflict dynamics. That the same armed group can be perceived as a legitimate authority in one context and an extortive actor in another — depending at least in part on the number of competing actors present — highlights that legitimacy is not an inherent property of institutions but emerges from relational configurations. This insight has important implications for understanding governance in conflict zones more broadly, suggesting that interventions must account for the full ecosystem of relationships rather than treating individual actors in isolation. The framework's emphasis on processual change, made extra relevant in the context of the 2023 outbreak of violence in Manipur that has transformed the checkpoint systems I have been studying, serves as a reminder that political order in conflict zones is perpetually in motion and requires analytical approaches that can capture this fluidity.

The figurational framework encourages us to identify different figurations and connect them on different levels as a better way of making sense of political order in conflict zones. While the approach requires nuanced empirical data, it allows a systemic understanding of conflict to be developed, which shows how actors that are commonly assumed to be competing, connect and collectively shape political order and, indeed, their own everyday lives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is part of the *Development and Change* special issue 'The Politics of Passage: Checkpoints and Claim Making in Conflict' organized by Peer Schouten et al. through the Danish Institute for International Studies. The authors thank the anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

The research for this contribution was supported by the International Centre for Tax and Development (ICTD) through funding from the FCDO (grant number 300211-101) and the Carlsberg Foundation's TRADECRAFT project 'Trade-based statecraft: The new spatial logic of the state' (grant number CF22-1511). The author offers special thanks to Gabriel Bawitlung, Jasmine Maringmei and Golan Naulak who helped with the data collection for this research. The author is grateful to Max Gallien, Vanessa van den Boogard, Kasper Hoffman, Keith Krause, Klaus Schilchte, Lisa

Prügl, Zachariah Mampilly, the Roadblocks and Revenue crowd, and the Rebel and Criminal Governance network for constructive feedback.

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