



Manipur's unrelenting violence



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Factsheet: Manipur's unrelenting violence

Stakeholders' consultation, inclusive development strategies, building cohesive communities under rule of law is the only way out

Neha Dahiya

Recent unrelenting violence, loss of lives and property in India's north eastern state of Manipur has brought to fore the fragile fabric, non-state actors that are at work with divisive agendas.

Over the last few decades, ethnic clashes among many tribes and differences between Hindus, Christians and Muslims have created instability in the state.

This instability got accentuated with active influx of drug mafia, infiltration from across Myanmar border and operatives of fake currencies apart from Islamists and Church proselytisers.

On September 21, 1949, Manipur Merger Agreement was signed between Governor General of India and Maharaja of Manipur which led to creation of Manipur as a state in India.

In the subsequent years, Kukis, mostly converted Christians were awarded Scheduled Tribe status by Indian Government. And, the indigenous tribe of Nagas¹ that came under the fold of proselytisers got converted to Christianity. Today, over 90 per cent of Nagas are Christians.

Hindus by practice, the Meitei tribe, were not awarded Scheduled Tribe and had since been struggling to preserve its culture, tradition, customs, and beliefs amid fast paced religious conversions. The religious demography of Manipur is shown in Fig. 1.

¹ Nagas are naturists or animists who worship natural forces and different forms of nature. These indigenous people were often attributed to be Shaivaites.

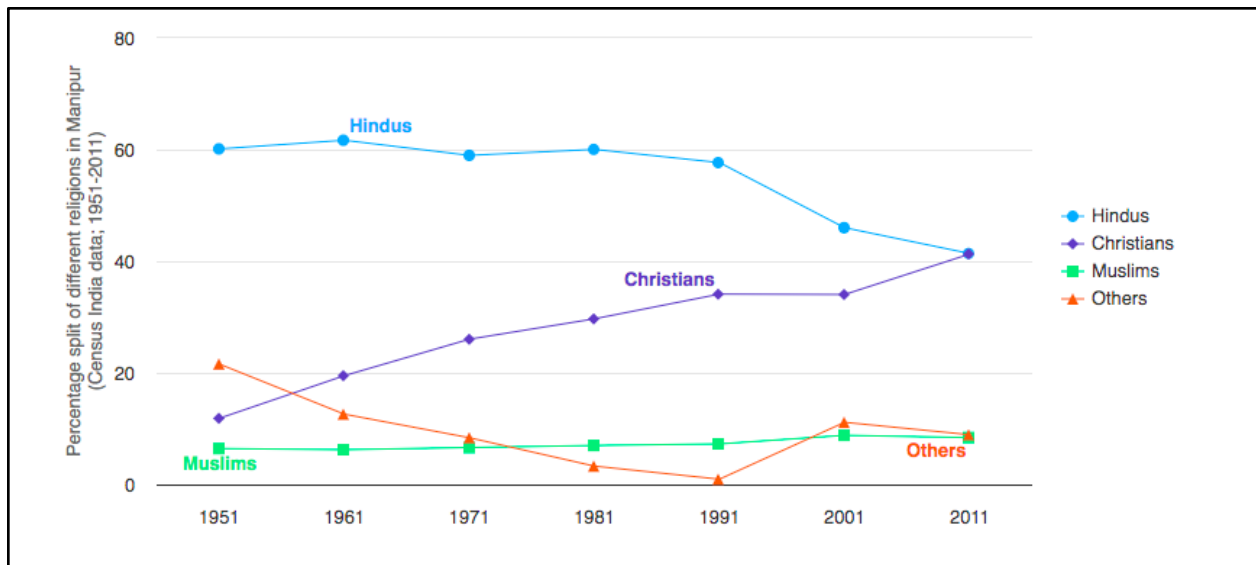


Fig.1. Religious / faith based demography of Manipur. Source: Census 1951-2011; CIHS Analytics.

As depicted in Fig. 1, the Christian population largely the tribes of Kukis and Nagas and Meiteis that are mostly Hindus are equal in numbers across Manipur. While Meiteis have staged protests against their exclusion from the Scheduled Tribe status, these efforts have often met with violence and outrage from Christians at the behest of Church with allegiance to various denominations.

In March this year, Manipur High Court directed state government to add Meitei tribe to the list of Scheduled Tribes within four weeks. This was met with vehement opposition from several tribal bodies including All India Tribal Students Union of Manipur (ATSUM). These bodies claimed that inclusion of Meiteis is unfair to others and will harm social fabric of the state and disrupt their economic and cultural systems. On the other hand, Meiteis believe that ethnic cleansing is a reality in few decades if the government does not grant them ST status and other constitutional protection. By inclusion under scheduled list of tribes, Meiteis would be eligible for admissions into schools, colleges, universities and get access to socio-economic benefits available to tribal population from both state and central governments.

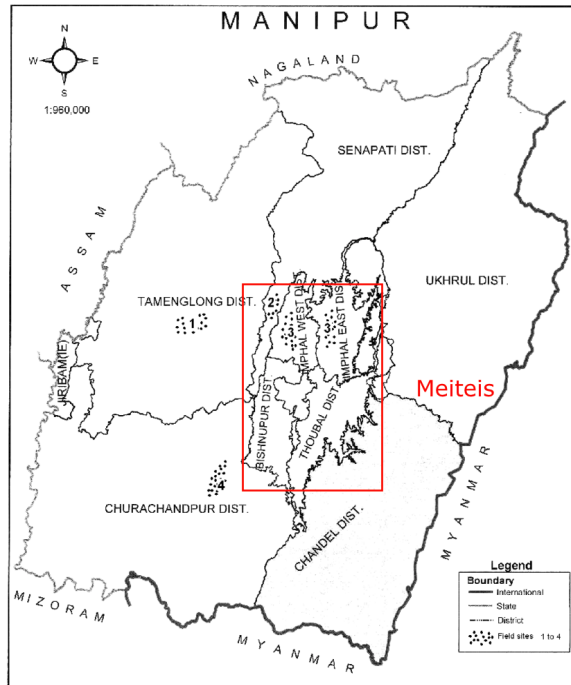


Fig. 2. Meiteis are concentrated in the Imphal Valley. Source: National Mapping Agency, Survey of India (SoI); CIHS Analytics.

Meiteis are also called the Manipuris and occupy the resource-rich and fertile valley which lies in middle of Manipur. This has been shown in Fig. 2. Nagas are concentrated towards north of the valley. And, the Kukis inhabit northern and southern hills of the state. As per recorded history of Manipur, Nagas and Meiteis have been inhabitants of the region longer than the Kukis, who are migrants and relate closely to Chins of Myanmar and Mizos of Mizoram.

Escalating Violence Grips Manipur

On May 03, this year All Tribal Student Union Manipur (ATSUM) organised a Tribal solidarity march initially referred to as a "peace rally." A Christ-centred, Tribal Christian Churches Forum expressed its support and solidarity to the march intended to protest against the Manipur High Court order to add the Meitei tribe to the list of Scheduled Tribes within four weeks.

However, the march took a dark turn as violence erupted leading to burning of several houses and destruction of temples. Initial acts of violence specifically targeted the Meitei community. This day witnessed widespread violence, arson and chaos across various districts including Churachandpur, Imphal East, Imphal West, Bishnupur, Tengnoupal, and Kangpokpi.

A significant number of houses that belonged to Meitei community members were set ablaze in districts such as Tengnoupal, Kangpokpi, and Churachandpur. These incidents involved acts of arson carried out by armed protestors from the Kuki community. In the district of Churachandpur alone, eight temples were reduced to ashes while in Kangpokpi district two temples suffered the same fate.

The state was gripped by a wave of mob violence resulting in a tragic loss of 70 lives and leaving approximately 48,000 individuals displaced. These distressing events unfolded as long-standing ethnic tensions, exacerbated by disputes related to refugees from neighbouring Myanmar erupted into a full-blown crisis.

The 2021 coup in neighbouring Myanmar also known as Burma led to significant influx of refugees across its lengthy and permeable border with India. Manipur, a province characterised by hilly forests shares nearly a quarter of this border. The current upheaval in Manipur serves as a poignant reminder of the far-reaching impact of Myanmar's challenges on the surrounding region.

Gopal Krishna Pillai, a former home secretary and joint secretary overseeing India's entire north-eastern region has stated that the recent wave of violence following the coup in Myanmar marks the first instance where a substantial influx of refugees has led to internal issues.

On May 04, 2023, the Union Government invoked Article 355 of the Constitution, a provision concerning emergency measures. This article grants Union Government the authority to take necessary actions in order to safeguard a state from external aggression or internal disturbances.

Consequently, significant deployments of the Army, Assam Rifles, Rapid Action Force and local police were made in affected districts of the state. Approximately 9,000 individuals were evacuated from the violence-stricken areas and provided shelter. The destructive acts included burning of vehicles, residences and other private and public properties. As per reports from defence sources, out of the 1,041 looted firearms, only 214 have been recovered. These

circumstances strongly indicate that the protest-related violence was not spontaneous but rather meticulously planned and well-organised.

The events that transpired clearly indicate a meticulously planned and coordinated orchestration of violence that disrupted peace and tranquillity of the region. This violent campaign was carried out under guidance and support of Kuki SoO (Suspension of Operations Order) militants with involvement of various groups such as ATSUM, KSO, and Manipur Tribal Forum.

Rationale to grant Scheduled Tribes status to Meiteis



In Manipur, Meitei community surpassed combined population of 34 tribes including Naga and Kukis that currently hold Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. However, Meitei community is confined to mere ten per cent of state's geographic area and its available resources, as a significant portion of the state's territory is effectively reserved for other ST communities.

This limited scope for opportunity has created challenges for the Meitei community. Although, certain subgroups within the Meitei

community are included in the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) lists, there is a demand for the entire Meitei community to be designated as ST based on historical evidence.

Historically, Meitei community held tribal status according to census records of 1891, 1901, and 1931. They were subsequently removed from the ST list of Union Government in the Gazettees of 1951 and beyond leading to several issues faced by the Meitei community. The current non-ST Meitei community is unable to purchase land in the hill regions that constitute 90 per cent of the state's area whereas other ST communities – even those converted Christianity and Islam -- can purchase land in the valley region of Imphal which accounts for only 10 per cent of the

state's area. As a result, the non-ST Meitei community faced challenges and limited resources. Their population which constituted 59 per cent of Manipur's total population in 1951 has now declined to 49 per cent as per the 2011 Census data.

ST status demand extends beyond reservation in jobs, educational institutions and tax relief. It primarily seeks to protect the lands, culture, and identity of the Meitei people. Inclusion in the ST list would provide legal safeguards under Articles 241(1), 244(2), and 275(1), preserving their ancestral land, traditions, culture, languages and shielding them from impact of illegal immigration. The Meitei community believes that obtaining ST status would help safeguard their heritage and identity.

Kukis' oppose ST status for Meities



Kuki community asserts that the democratic system in India is primarily influenced by majority rule. In this framework, the community with the largest population tends to have highest number of Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs). As the Meiteis constitute majority population in Manipur and currently hold a large number of MLAs, the Kukis argue that their Scheduled Tribe (ST) status is the

only safeguard to protect their own interests.

They contend that if the playing field were levelled by granting ST status to the Meitei community, both the Kukis and the Meiteis would likely have an equal number of seats. However, this change may not necessarily favour the Kukis in terms of the demographic dividend they currently enjoy.

Root cause of Rivalry

The rivalry between Meitei and Kuki communities that initially centred granting ST recognition to the Meitei community has other root causes as well. These root causes include:

1- Narco-terrorism

Opium plantations in forested regions have emerged as a significant catalyst in escalation of conflict between Meitei and Kuki communities. The hill region in Manipur is gradually becoming reminiscent of the infamous Golden Triangle due to the state government's concerted effort to combat the drug trade. These endeavours have however faced strong opposition, leading to heightened tensions. Tribal leaders have portrayed the government's initiatives as acts against tribal interests thus mobilising tribal communities on communal lines.

Moreover, allegations have been made against certain tribal groups for their involvement in poppy cultivation and impeding the state government's conservation efforts regarding forests and forest resources. Consequently, on March 10, 2023, the state government made the decision to withdraw from tripartite talks and Suspension of Operations (SoO)



agreement with two armed insurgent groups based in the hills, namely Kuki National Army and Zomi Revolutionary Army.

Kuki community perceived the government's war against drugs as a form of "racial profiling" targeting them. Some Kukis, however, argue that the Meiteis played a role in funding poppy cultivation. While certain Kuki organisations, such as Office of the Kuki National Organization, the Government of Zale'n-gam, and Hmar People's Convention (Democratic), have praised Chief Minister's anti-drug efforts, the situation has reached a point where Manipur Against Poppy Cultivation (MAPC) movement comprising scholars, social and political thinkers, change agents, youth, and legal experts, appreciate the drive against poppy cultivation while cautioning against singling out any particular community for blame.

2- Illegal migration

Illegal migration or infiltration represents another crucial factor contributing to escalation of conflict in Manipur. The rapid and significant changes in demographic composition of the region have raised serious concerns about porous borders and influx of migrants from neighbouring countries such as Myanmar and Bangladesh. These migrants have been settling in the hill region of Manipur without proper documentation. To address this issue, a high-powered subcommittee was formed to tackle illegal undocumented migration and biometric facial identification systems were implemented.

Free Movement Regime (FMR) which allowed 16 kms radius of visa-free movement across border was subsequently cancelled. In response, the state government sought assistance from Union Government to construct border fencing and establish 34 police stations along the India-Myanmar border. However, this initiative was perceived as a threat by the illegal migrants who had settled in the hill region for decades and were providing support to insurgent groups. Notably, some Kuki organisations have also protested against the National Register of Citizens (NRC) aligning them with a pro-immigration policy.

Illegal migration gained prominence in March when leaders from various student organisations representing the Meitei community protested outside Chief Minister Biren Singh's residence. "Illegal immigrants from Myanmar, Nepal, and Bangladesh" were marginalising the indigenous people of Manipur. The impact of migration is further evident in the population growth rates of major communities in Manipur. The Meitei community which accounted for 60 per cent population in 1901 has declined to 49 per cent in 2022, while the Kuki population has experienced a significant increase from one per cent in 1901 to 29 per cent in 2022. This demographic shift has fuelled speculations and added to the complexity of the situation.

3- Forest reserves encroachment

Residents of the Hill region in Manipur particularly the Kuki tribe, strongly advocate for maintaining the existing state of affairs concerning forest reserves. The state government is facing significant opposition from this tribe regarding preservation and protection of these

reserved forests. Under the 1976 amendment to Forest Act, forests fall under the state list granting state government sole ownership and responsibility for their conservation and safeguarding.

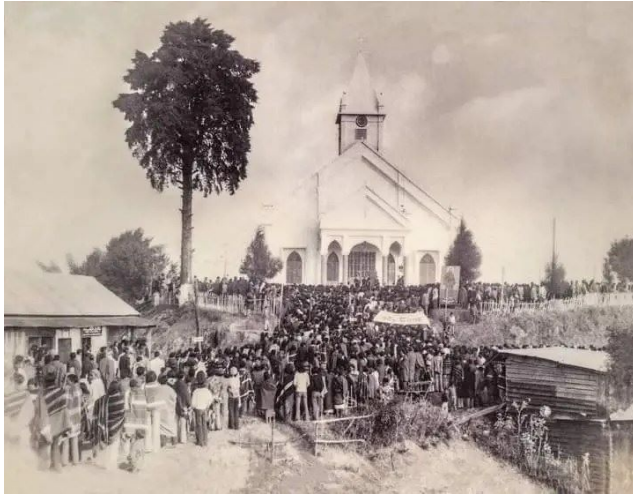
On May 3, 2023, Kuki tribal leaders demonstrated their opposition to the state government's proposed survey of protected wetlands and forest reserves leading to prevention of the survey. The Kuki tribe holds differing opinions regarding land rights which contributed to their resistance. In a related development, the Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF) on April 28, 2023, called for a complete shutdown in Churachandpur from 8 am to 4 pm to protest the state government's survey of protected and reserved forests, wetlands, and wildlife, as well as an eviction drive. The ITLF was responsible for the arson that targeted a newly constructed gymnasium and sports facility just a day before its scheduled inauguration by the Chief Minister. This opposition from Kuki tribe highlights their deep concerns and disagreements regarding the state government's actions and intentions concerning forest reserves and related initiatives. The complex dynamics surrounding land rights and conservation efforts have further exacerbated the tensions between state government and Kuki community in Manipur's Hill region.

4- Clashes triggered by Kukis heighten tensions

Throughout last few decades, Kuki community population has expanded while they picked up clashes with several other communities not only within Manipur but neighbouring states. These confrontations have resulted in significant incidents including Kuki-Naga conflict during 1992 - 97, Kuki - NSCN faceoff in 1993 - 2010, Kuki - Zomi slugfest in 1997 - 98, Kuki Rebellion or demand for Kukiland during 1997 - 2005, Kuki - Garo violence in 2008 -18, Kuki - Sutnga Saipung struggle in 2015 - 17 and Kuki - Karbi conflict in 2003 - 04.

These incidents serve illustrate Kuki community's tendency to engage in confrontations with other communities which disrupts the prevailing social harmony in the region.

5- Role of Evangelical forces



Churches in Manipur have become platforms utilised by evangelical forces to assume a political role in the region. These forces have played a significant part in inciting the common Kuki population and facilitating encroachments on public land under the guise of religious practices.

Recommendations

Manipur violence requires careful consideration and action by all stakeholders in order to reach a fruitful conclusion. A few recommendations are listed here:

1. **Multi-stakeholder meetings and consultations:** Relevant government agencies from both state government and Centre should form a multi-stakeholder ecosystem to include representation from Kukis, Nagas, and Meiteis. Only after discussions and deliberation can all the parties involved reach a fruitful conclusion. Encouraging open and inclusive dialogue among all stakeholders is crucial. Negotiations should aim to address root causes of this violence, find common ground and identify mutually acceptable solutions. Mediation and facilitation by neutral parties can be helpful in fostering constructive dialogue.
2. **Socio-economic disparities:** Socio-economic disparities and inequalities are often underlying factors contributing to violence. Implementing inclusive development policies, providing access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities and

addressing issues of land and resource distribution can help reduce tensions and promote stability.

3. **Rule of law and justice:** Upholding the rule of law and ensuring access to justice is essential for addressing grievances. Establishing transparent and accountable judicial systems, combating corruption, and addressing human rights abuses can help build trust and confidence in society.
4. The demand of regional or territorial autonomy should be viewed in light of “Kuki-Land” and “Zo Nation” theory as it affects the National Security

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Annexure

Merger of Manipur With India: 21st September 1949

The Text of the Agreement

Agreement made this twenty-first day of September 1949 between the Governor General of India and his Highness, the Maharajah of Manipur.

Whereas in the best interests of the State of Manipur as well as of the Dominion of India it is desirable to provide for the administration of the said State by or under the authority of the Dominion Government.

It is hereby agreed as follows:

Article I

His Highness the Maharajah of Manipur hereby cedes to the Dominion Government full and exclusive authority, jurisdiction and powers for and in relation to the governance of the State and agrees to transfer the administration of the State to the Dominion Government on the fifteenth day of October 1949 (there in after referred to as "the said day"). As from the said day the Dominion Government will be competent to exercise the said powers, authority and jurisdiction in such manner and through such agency as it may think fit.

Article II

His Highness the Maharajah shall continue to enjoy the same personal rights, privileges, dignities, titles, authority over religious observances, customs, usages, rites and ceremonies and institutions in charge of the same in the State, which he would have enjoyed had this agreement not been made.

Article III

His highness the Maharajah shall with effect from the said day be entitled to receive for his lifetime from the revenue of the State annually for his Privy Purse the sum of Rupees three lakhs free of all taxes. This amount is intended to cover all the expenses of the Ruler and his family, including expenses on account of his personal staff and armed guards, maintenance of his residences, marriages and other ceremonies, etc. and the allowances to the Ruler's relations who on the date of execution of this agreement were in receipt of such allowances from the revenues of the State, and will neither be increased nor reduced for any reason whatsoever. The Government of India undertake that the said sum of Rupees three lakhs shall be paid to His Highness the Maharajah in four equal installments in advances at the beginning of each quarter from the State treasury or at such other treasury as may be specified by the Government of India.

Article IV

His Highness the Maharajah shall be entitled to the full ownership, use and enjoyment of all private properties (as distinct from State properties) belonging to him on the date of this agreement. His Highness the Maharajah will furnish to the dominion Government before the

first January 1950, an inventory of all the immovable property, securities and cash balance held by him as such private property. If any dispute arises as to whether any item of property is the private property of his highness the Maharajah or State property, it shall be referred to a Judicial Officer qualified to be appointed as a High Court Judge, and the decision of that officer shall be final and binding on both parties. Provided that his Highness the Maharajah's right to the use of the residences known as "Redlands" and "Les Chatalettes" in Shillong, and the property in the town of Guwahati known as "Manipuri Basti" shall not be questioned.

Article V

All the members of His Highness's family shall be entitled to all the personal rights, privileges, dignities and titles enjoyed by them whether within or outside the territories of the State, immediately before the 15th August, 1947.

Article VI

The Dominion Government guarantees the succession, according to law and custom, to the gaddi of the State and to his highness, the Maharajah's personal rights, privileges, dignities, titles, authority over religious observances, customs usages, rites and ceremonies and institutions in-charge of the same in the State.

Article VII

No enquiry shall be made by or under the authority of the Government of India, and no proceedings shall lie in any Court in Manipur, against His highness the Maharajah whether in a personal capacity or otherwise in respect of anything done or omitted to be done by him or under his authority during the period of his administration of that State.

Article VIII

The Government of India hereby guarantees either the continuance in service of the permanent members of the Public Services of Manipur on conditions which will be not less advantageous than those on which they were serving before the date on which the administration of Manipur is made over to the Government of India or the payment of reasonable compensation.

The Government of India further guarantees the continuance of pensions and leave salaries sanctioned by His Highness the Maharajah to servants of the State who have retired or proceeded on leave preparatory to retirement, before the date on which the Administration of Manipur is made over to the Government of India.

The Government of India shall also undertake to make suitable provisions for the employment of Manipuris in the various branches of Public Services, and in every way encourage Manipuris to join them. They also undertake to preserve various laws, customs and conventions prevailing in the State pertaining to the social, economic and religious life of the people.

Article IX

Except with the previous sanction of the Government of India no proceedings, civil or criminal, shall be instituted against any person in respect of any act done or purporting to be done in the execution of his duties as a servant of the State before the day on which the administration is made over to the Government of India.

In confirmation whereof Mr. Vapal Pangunni Menon, Adviser to the Government of India in the Ministry of States, has appended his signature on behalf and with the authority of the Governor General of India and His Highness Maharajah Bodh Chandra Singh, Maharajah of Manipur has appended his signature on behalf of himself, his heirs and successors.

sd/

Bodh Chandra Singh,
Maharajah of Manipur.

sd/

V.P. Menon,
Adviser to the Government of India,

Sri Prakash
Governor of Assam,

Shillong

September 21, 1949.