
IDENTITY STRUGGLES: UNRAVELING THE MANIPUR'S ETHNIC TURMOIL

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ABSTRACT

The state of Manipur has been witnessing violent clashes and instability due to socio-political conflicts. There have been multiple dimensions for the dispute including the ethnic tensions between the communities due to overlapping territorial claims, militancy and insurgency activities, the demand for political autonomy, and human encroachment activities. The recent protest by the tribal communities resulted in communal riots and caused vandalism. The Central government had imposed Article 355 to protect the state from internal disturbance and the armed forces were deployed. Amidst the protest and clashes, there have been reports of killings and lynchings.

The paper deals with the historical background of Manipur's multifaceted and complex ethnic turmoil, the measures taken by the government, the present scenario, and the reasons behind the ongoing violence. It aims to elaborate on the history of relations between the different ethnic groups and explain the reasons for the ongoing violent clashes in Manipur.

INTRODUCTION

The Manipur state is a part of north-eastern India. The Manipur quandary has been a longstanding political issue and conflict caused by the deeply rooted ethnic tensions between the different ethnic groups residing inside the state. This dispute has been on the rise again since the Manipur state government took steps to curb human encroachment. In recent years efforts have been made by the Central government, the state government of Manipur, and different local organizations to reach a future sustainable arrangement and address the grievances of the communities and resolve the historical ethnic conflict.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MANIPUR TURMOIL

Manipur has a rich and complex historical background. The state was incorporated in India by a Merger Agreement signed in 1949. After becoming a part of India the state experienced various socio-political changes. It became a Union Territory of India in 1962 and was directly ruled by the Indian bureaucrats who did not originally belong to the Manipur region and this led to an increase in the instability of the autonomy of the state. It achieved full-fledged statehood on January 21, 1972, by the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act 1971. The state has grappled with issues related to identity, development, and governance. It has been regarded as a neglected state which led to the formation of various militant and insurgent groups within the state which has stirred socio-political instability in the state and significantly affected the economic, political, and social life of the people of the state.

Manipur is geographically divided into two regions: the valley region and the hill region. The state has a diverse population comprising several ethnic groups including Meiteis, Nagas, Kukis, and other smaller communities. The valley region which roughly comprises 10% of the Manipur state is dominantly occupied by the Meitei community and the hill region which comprises 90% of the state is occupied by the different tribal groups namely the Naga and the Kuki. These ethnic groups have their distinct identities, languages, and cultural traditions, which have occasionally led to conflicts and ethnic tensions between these communities.

MAJOR ETHNIC TENSIONS IN MANIPUR

The ethnic tension in Manipur can be traced back to the colonial period when the Britishers annexed the region and applied the 'divide and rule policy'. Competing claims over the same territory arose only after colonially constructed categories of local people who shared local living spaces began to claim exclusive ownership of the entire territory of certain administrative

units.¹ This led to overlapping territorial clashes. The violent sporadic ethnic conflicts were on the rise in the latter half of the 20th century when the state became Indian territory. The different communities have different aspirations which has led to some of the major ethnic tensions including the Meitei-Naga conflict, Meitei-Kuki conflict, Naga-Kuki conflict, and other ethnic clashes between the communities.

The Meitei-Naga conflict: After the merger of the Manipur in the Indian territory, the Nagas, who are spread across different states in Northeast India, sought greater autonomy and self-governance. They demanded a separate administrative unit called Nagalim which included parts of Manipur and other neighboring states. The Meiteis, who are the majority ethnic group, expressed their concerns regarding this demand as they fear that the creation of Nagalim would result in the inclusion of areas predominantly inhabited by Naga tribes, potentially leading to the displacement of Meitei populations and changes in the socio-political dynamics of Manipur. The issue of land ownership and control also contributes to the tensions, as both communities assert claims over certain territories.

The Meitei-Kuki conflict: The conflict between the Meitei and the Kuki community arose due to clashes over land, political representation, and cultural differences. The Kuki community advocated for greater political autonomy and recognition of their distinct cultural identity in the state of Manipur. The Meiteis have expressed concerns that the demands for autonomy and recognition by the Kuki community may compromise the political power and representation of the Meitei community in Manipur. The Kuki community demanded a separate Kuki dominant nation Kuki Territorial Council called Zale n'-gam comprising the Kuki inhabited region of Manipur, Assam, and Mizoram.

The Naga-Kuki Conflict: The Naga- Kuki conflict was a result of overlapping territorial claims. In 1993 the Naga militants allegedly belonging to the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak Muivah) massacred around 115 Kuki civilians in the hills of Manipur.² The Naga-Kuki conflict has had a devastating impact on the communities involved, resulting in loss of lives, displacement, and deep-seated animosity.

¹L. Lam Khan Piang, *Overlapping Territorial Claims and Ethnic Conflict in Manipur*, 35(2), South Asia Research, 159 <https://drupal.alliance.edu.in/drupal/sites/default/files/2021-04/Overlapping%20Territorial%20Claims%20and%20Ethnic%20Conflict%20in%20Manipur.pdf> accessed on: July 4, 2023

² <https://www.aspireias.com/daily-news-analysis-current-affairs/Naga-Kuki-conflict-in-Manipur> accessed on: July 4, 2023

Formation of Insurgent Groups

The ethnic tensions between the communities and the demand for greater autonomic power led to the formation of various insurgent groups. Every ethnic community has an insurgent group that claims to protect the people of their ethnic community.

In 1964 the United Nations Liberation Front declared Manipur an independent sovereign country and 30 insurgent groups were established which demanded the formation of the new nation. This led to political instability in Manipur and an increment in the crimes such as extortion and murder.

The Kuki commando Force, the Kuki National Army, the Kuki National Organization, the Chin Kuki Revolutionary Force, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland NSCN(IM), United Nations Liberation Front are some of the insurgent groups. These groups are supported by Myanmar, China, Communist Party of India (Maoist). These groups perpetuate different propaganda, engage in recruitment, and provide training to their members. Some of them are heavily indulged in terrorist and unlawful activities and promote violent clashes between the communities.

MEASURES TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT

The government of India took several measures to solve the long-standing conflict. The government in the year 1980 declared Manipur a “disturbed state” with a view to employing armed forces in aid of the civil authorities in dealing with insurgents. Another contentious legislation is the imposition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA).³

The Government of India amidst the ongoing insurgencies introduced the Suspension of Operations(SoO) which was a peaceful tripartite agreement between the Central Government, the Manipur government, and 25 insurgent groups of Manipur. The agreement was signed in 2008 and aimed to cease arms and control the insurgent and militant activities in the state. The government has engaged in peace talks with insurgent groups operating in Manipur, such as the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and others. These talks aim to negotiate ceasefires, disarmament, and the potential integration of armed groups into mainstream society.

³ Suresh Mutum, *Manipur after becoming a part of India*, Imphal Free Press, (August 31, 2021) <https://www.ifp.co.in/9483/manipur-after-becoming-part-of-india> accessed on: July 5, 2023

THE PRESENT SCENARIO AND THE REASONS BEHIND THE ONGOING VIOLENCE

The state of Manipur has been witnessing violent clashes for the past few months. There were communal riots and vandalism which led to the destruction of public and private property. The Central government had to impose Article 355 and the state government was suspended. The army and Assam rifles were deployed with shoot-on-sight orders to control the situation.

This issue is multifaceted in nature and has gradually evolved over time due to various elements including the demand for the Scheduled Tribe status for the Meitei community, the approach of the government to curb human encroachment, and the demand for greater autonomy among the communities.

Land Rights

On 10th of March, 2023 the Manipur state government decided to withdraw from the Suspension of Operations (SoO) with two militant groups, Kuki National Army (KNA) and Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA), alleging their involvement in inciting agitation among forest encroachers. A joint survey was launched by the Revenue and forest department in Manipur in order to stop human encroachment within the scheduled forest areas. The survey reported that many villagers were using the protected forest land for poppy cultivation for the purpose of the drug business.

The government thus announced the eviction of the villagers of the K. Songjon village in the Churachandpur district. The Kuki People Alliance criticized the decision and alleged that the government evacuated the villagers without any prior warning. There were many peaceful tribal protests in March against the decision of the government of the alleged forceful eviction and the demolition without proper rehabilitation and resettlement. The Government of Manipur declared these protests unconstitutional. In the Churachandpur district, the tribal leaders announced a massive shutdown and some protesters demolished buildings and venues to be visited by Chief Minister N. Biren Singh. Thereafter the police and protestors clashed. The government imposed a curfew in the district and suspension of mobile services and transportation. The district witnessed a complete shutdown which frustrated the locals. The groups suspended from the SoO came out from their designated camps with arms and joined the protest which led to the communal riots.

Demand for the Scheduled Tribe status for the Meitei community

In 1949 after the inclusion of Manipur in India the Scheduled Tribe status of the Meitei community was confiscated because it was a majority community in Manipur. But now the population of the Meitei community has seen a significant decline in the past years. Thus the Scheduled Tribe Demand Community of Manipur has been demanding the inclusion of the Meitei in the Scheduled Tribe list. They want to safeguard their ancestral land and identity and the Scheduled Tribe status will provide them with such opportunity.

The Manipur High Court directed the Manipur government to submit recommendations to the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs for the inclusion of the Meitei community in the scheduled tribes list. Therefore directing the Manipur Government to ask the Central government to grant the status of a Scheduled Tribe to the Meitei community. This was met by strong opposition from the tribal communities of the state who claim that the Meitei community is already well placed in all social, political, economic, and educational parameters and has a greater political autonomy in the state. Therefore providing them with the Scheduled Tribe status will rip off the opportunities of the tribal communities.

The All Tribal Student Union Manipur (ATSUM) on 3rd May 2023 appealed to the people for a tribal solidarity march. The march was to express their opposition to the directions given by the Manipur High Court. Soon the march turned into communal riots and caused vandalism. Due to the violent protests 55 columns of the army and Assam rifles were deployed with shoot-on-sight orders. Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure(CrPC), which bars the assembly of five or more people in an area, and night curfew were also imposed in the Churachandpur district, particularly in Lamka town, which was the epicenter of the violence.⁴

Demand for the Political Autonomy

Manipur held elections after being declared as a state under the North Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act, of 1971. The state had 60 constituencies, among which 40 of them were in the Meitei-dominated valley area and 20 were in the hill region. Therefore the Meitei community enjoys political autonomy over the tribal communities. In 1979 the Meiteilon language was declared the official language of Manipur. This makes the tribal communities of

⁴ Jimmy Leivon ,*What led to the violence in Manipur's Churachandpur before CM N Biren Singh's visit?*, The Indian Express (May 4, 2023)
<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/violence-manipur-churachandpur-biren-singh-cm-kuki-8585138/>
accessed on: July 5, 2023

Naga and Kuki feel a sense of loss of power and they are being marginalized and discriminated against. The political domination power of Meiteis provides a communal angle to the clash between these communities.

ANALYSIS

The situation in Manipur has instilled fear in the people of the state. There have been reports of killing lynching and ethnic cleansing. Even though the Central government and the state government had been constantly trying to resolve the dispute through the implementation of a sustainable arrangement and address it through various operations and negotiations, there is widespread concern regarding the viability of these holding operations and the perceived lack of advancement in these negotiations.

The dispute remains complex and multifaceted. To resolve this long-standing issue there is a requirement for dialogue, and understanding between the government, various communities, and stakeholders in Manipur. Furthermore, it has been observed that inter-group conflicts can be solved through economic factors. Economic needs can reduce violence between groups. The Central government and the Manipur state government must devise a solution that fosters economic interdependence among all communities in Manipur.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Manipur dispute represents a complex and multifaceted challenge that encompasses ethnic tensions, demands for autonomy, and conflicts over land and resources. In order to achieve a lasting resolution and promote peace and stability in Manipur, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of continued dialogue, understanding, and inclusive approaches. By fostering inclusivity, promoting socio-economic development, and addressing the grievances of the communities Manipur can overcome its disputes and build a united, peaceful, and prosperous society for all its residents.