



UNVEILING INSECURITIES AND PAVING THE PATH FORWARD: ANALYSING THE KUKI-MEITEI CONFLICT IN MANIPUR

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Abstract

This article focuses on the present-day conflict between the Meitei and Kuki communities, which is characterized by disagreements over the distribution of resources, territorial considerations, and power dynamics in the state of Manipur. The ethnic communities residing in the state experience widespread insecurities that can be traced back to the post-colonial era. These concerns are rooted in the divisions formed during colonial rule and have resulted in a lack of trust among the communities. Consequently, this lack of trust has contributed to a recurring cycle of violence. The enduring risk of a return in ethnic violence imposes substantial pressure, particularly on the Indian state, to develop viable answers, a challenge that currently remains elusive.

Introduction

The Northeast region of India primarily comprises extensive hills tribal areas characterised by challenging topography. This region has historically had limited inter-ethnic interactions, prolonged periods of isolation, and the emergence of three distinct forms of political organisation, namely "tribe," "chiefdom," and "state" (Das, 1993). During the post-Colonial era, the Indian (Provincial Constitutional) Order of 1947 largely preserved the provisions outlined in the Government of India Act of 1935, which included the regulation of the Inner Line and the administration of justice in tribal areas in accordance with customary tribal laws. The precarious state of affairs in the Northeast region can be attributed to various causes, including the geographical landscape, the level of socio-economic progress, and historical elements such as linguistic diversity, ethnic divisions, inter-tribal conflicts, patterns of migration, local resource control, and a pervasive sense of exploitation and marginalisation (Bhaumik, 2007).

The presence of socio-cultural hegemony, inter-ethnic antagonism, fragmentation, restriction of identity, and severe regionalism has often resulted in the emergence of ethnic violence or conflict in the Northeast region, causing significant loss of human life and property. Moreover, the prevailing ethnic groups in these governments have exerted authority over political governance and economic assets, thereby subjecting the minority ethnic groups to exploitation over an extended period of time. Furthermore, the divergent ideologies of Indian nationalism and ethnic sub-nationalism have played a substantial role in fueling the instances of violence observed in North East India. However, spanning over a period of more than fifty years, the region has been characterised by a continuous series of violent wars mostly driven by insurgent groups advocating for various objectives, including complete independence and increased democratic self-governance.

The state of Manipur, located in the northeastern region of India, has historically been characterised by intergroup disputes pertaining to matters of exclusivity, domination, and integration. After the conclusion of colonial governance, the former princely state of Manipur amalgamated into the Union of India in October 1949. The state is home to various distinct groups of people, namely the Meitei, Naga, and Kuki, whose coexistence is currently facing challenges due to conflicting interests among these groups. The aforementioned phenomenon has resulted in the emergence of a claim about group identity, as well as intergroup competition for resources, political instability, insecurity, and



underdevelopment (Sharma, 2016). Since the 1960s, Manipur has witnessed the emergence of several armed groups that assert to advocate for the distinct demands and grievances of their respective ethnic communities. Notably, the Kukis and Nagas have been engaged in a protracted struggle to establish their own separate homeland, which inherently contradicts the objective of the Meiteis to safeguard the territorial integrity of the state. The governance deficiency in Manipur can be ascribed to the decentralization of authority, which has been deemed defective and ineffective. This has resulted in the people residing in the hill districts facing challenges in obtaining justice for their problems (Bhatia, 2010). According to scholarly discourse, the interconnections between identity and discrimination within governance have played a significant role in fostering ethnic polarisation in Manipur (Kom, 2010).

The conceptualization of "Manipur" varies significantly among the diverse ethnic communities residing in the state (Singh, 2014). Although there exists a general agreement among the majority of Meiteis and the Nagas regarding their shared origins, the Kukis are perceived as external to this consensus. The assertion made by the Kukis regarding their indigenous status in present-day Manipur, based on the historically significant 'Anglo-Kuki War 1917-1919', is frequently challenged by the Meiteis and Nagas. According to the Meiteis, the Kukis are altering the demographic composition of Manipur, while the Kukis argue that the Meiteis are promoting a dominant agenda. Ethnic conflict broke out in the state of Manipur on May 3, 2023, between the Kuki population from the nearby hills and the Meitei people, the majority of whom reside in the Imphal Valley.

On the 3rd of May 2023, a manifestation of ethnic conflict occurred in the northeastern region of India, specifically in the state of Manipur. This conflict involved the Meitei ethnic group, which constitutes a majority residing in the Imphal Valley, and the Kuki population residing in the adjacent hilly areas.

May 3, 2023 Manipur Violence

The Manipur High Court, in response to a writ petition filed by the Meitei Tribe Union, issued an order on 14 April 2023, directing the state government to submit a recommendation to the central government for granting Scheduled Tribe status to the Meitei community residing in the valley. However, this decision was subsequently criticised by the Supreme Court of India. The All Tribal Students' Union Manipur has organised a peaceful protest on 3 May in response to the Meitei community's aspirations for the scheduled tribe designation. Following one of these political gatherings, confrontations ensued between the Kuki and Meitei factions in close proximity to the demarcation line separating the Churachandpur district and Bishnupur district, subsequently resulting in incidents of arson.

Apart from the state of Scheduled Tribes (ST), there were other unresolved matters that had been intensifying before the outbreak of violence. The Kuki ethnic group residing in the hill districts perceived themselves as the primary recipients of the state government's policies for the protection and recognition of indigenous land rights. The Kuki people have experienced forced displacement due to forest survey initiatives, purportedly implemented to curb the cultivation of the opium-producing plant, Poppy. The Meitei population has witnessed an increase in feelings of vulnerability due to the influx of refugees from Myanmar subsequent to the military coup in 2021, specifically those originating from the Sagaing region. The weaponization of ethnic communities' identities has been prevalent in the current conflict. Instances of partisan killings perpetrated by security forces, coupled with charges of police bias towards the Meitei population, have been reported.



The protracted unrest in Manipur, which commenced on May 3rd, 2023, not only lacks the provision of a feasible resolution but also conspicuously reveals the vested interests that are benefiting from its continuation. It is evident that the central leadership has deliberately adopted distinct strategies in their interactions with the current Chief Minister N. Biren Singh, who adheres to their instructions, and the Kuki insurgents, with whom the central government engages in a prolonged negotiation process. The persistent violence has resulted in a significant loss of life, extensive destruction of settlements, and the forced relocation of a substantial number of individuals inside the region.

The state of Manipur has currently become a site of intense political conflict, characterised by opposing ideological factions from mainland India. This clash is defined by divergent narratives and party stances. This occurrence transpired for the initial instance within the state at an era characterised by the culmination of ethnic divisions, particularly at the uppermost levels. Nevertheless, the origins of the persistent violence in the region remain unclear due to the divergent factions involved. Conducting a thorough examination that considers both the governing political elite and the state's framework could yield valuable insights.

On June 18, 2001, under the governance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the central level, following the well-known Indo-Naga ceasefire Agreement, a group of agitated Meitei individuals in the valley expressed their discontent by igniting the Manipur Assembly. Consequently, this event influenced the electorate of the state to cast their votes for legislators who aligned with their respective ethnic political goals. In Manipur, there is a noticeable trend that increases attempts to forge stronger relations with the central whenever there is friction or conflict amongst ethnic groups.

Exploring the Insecurity Concerns of the Meiteis

Despite the existence of many narratives that emphasise the historical linkages between religious sentiments and the Hindu-dominated mainland, introduced by specific ruling upper-class factions at different historical junctures, the Meiteis of Manipur persist in maintaining a distinct mindset that actively opposes the Indian state. In recent decades, there has been a notable increase in the erosion of trust among the Meiteis towards the central government. This erosion can be attributed to the intensification of counterinsurgency operations and the emergence of counter narratives that question the regressive policies implemented by the Indian state. Moreover, the apprehensions expressed by the Meiteis resident in the valley regarding the potential loss of legislative authority have escalated to an unprecedented degree. The magnitude of fears has escalated to such an extent that it poses a challenge to envision a future in which occurrences from the past, such as the appointment of Tangkhul (Nagas) and even a minority Pangal (Manipur Muslim) as Chief Ministers of the state, may appear inconceivable in the forthcoming decades.

The requests for protecting the ethnic communities within the state are motivated by a combination of discontent with the historical treatment by the Indian state and the perception that constitutional provisions will ensure the preservation of their land and resources. Upon closer examination of the practical application of constitutional protection mechanisms in the context of specific political conflicts, it becomes apparent that their achievement is limited, temporary, and insufficient. The implementation of novel recognition mechanisms is typically impeded by limitations imposed by the prevailing political environment and the various stakeholders engaged in the negotiation process.

The ethnic communities in the Northeast region of India have developed a strong desire to achieve a fair postcolonial settlement that addresses historical injustices, ensures rightful representation, and



guarantees autonomy. This aspiration is primarily driven by the constitutional protection measures established in the Indian Constitution. Despite the widespread discussion around the issue on constitutional protection, the question regarding the potential outcomes that can be anticipated remains unresolved. The phenomenon of constitutional protection's opacity is seen in the construction of narratives following the occurrence of ethnic tensions in Manipur. A thorough study of constitutional safeguards is essential for appreciating the existing impasse between the Meiteis and Kukis, as well as for gaining insight into the historical and prospective interconnections among different ethnic groups in Manipur.

After its integration into the Indian union, Manipur was initially designated as a Part C state. Subsequently, on November 1, 1956, it attained the status of a union territory. However, in 1963, Manipur was further elevated to the position of a Territorial Legislative Assembly. The conferral of statehood on January 21, 1972 was a response to the prevalent dissatisfaction observed among the integrationist Meiteis, who have aspirations for a future aligned with India. The Manipur (Hills Areas) Autonomous District Council Act of 1971 was enacted with the objective of safeguarding the hill areas and ensuring the protection of the tribal communities in Manipur. However, it is worth noting that this legislation is comparatively less comprehensive in comparison to the special provisions granted to Nagaland under Article 371-A of the Indian Constitution. In a separate development, the Meiteis residing in the valley region actively campaigned to preserve the constitutional status of the Manipuri language, also known as Meiteilon, and succeeded in having it included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution on August 20, 1992.

Within the geographical region of Manipur, a noticeable pattern can be observed, wherein a strong collective mobilisation is coinciding with a decline in armed insurgent activities. The movement, which is predominantly led by self-proclaimed 'civil society' organisations in the region of Manipur, has frequently faced criticism from the hill communities due to its apparent alignment with both governmental and non-governmental rebel groups that prioritise the interests of the Meitei majority. The gap between civil society and ethnic groups and communities in the Northeast region grows increasingly intricate due to a variety of interconnected circumstances. In recent decades, there has been a noticeable increase in the momentum of this migration, resulting in significant effects on the dynamics of the region.

In 2012, the Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur (STDCM) initiated a demand for the Scheduled Tribe (ST) classification to be granted to the Meitei community (Haokip, 2015). The STDCM asserts that the proposed status will reinstate the previously amicable connection between the inhabitants of the valley and the hills, which existed prior to Manipur's integration with India in 1949. According to Burman (2009), a crucial determinant for tribes is their ability to acquire territorial sovereignty, land entitlements, and authority over natural resources. However, individuals residing in the hilly regions perceive this request as a deliberate effort to diminish the impact of the Naga and Kuki demands, while simultaneously facilitating the Meitei community's penetration into these mountainous areas. Subsequently, it was documented that the Union government and the state administration had deliberated on the matter of granting Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the Meitei community on two occasions, namely in 1982 and 2001, wherein the proposal was declined on both instances. The aforementioned information was not disseminated to the public during the initial stages of the conflict.



The call for the adoption of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system and the granting of Scheduled Tribe (ST) status in Manipur is indicative of a perceived endangerment to tribal land rights and further amplifies their state of marginalisation. In the contemporary setting of Manipur, where the Kuki community is subjected to discrimination, the nationwide advocacy by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which selectively focuses on Muslims for potential deportation as "illegal immigrants," aligns with this backdrop. The academic discourse often interprets the political imagination surrounding Kukiland, Zalongam, and Zongam narratives as a consequence of the BJP government, under the leadership of N, engaging in both intensified actions and deliberate focus on these particular groups. The individual in question is Biren Singh. The aforementioned phenomena is observable in the cumulative behaviours exhibited by the societal collective, exhibiting a gradual increase as time elapses. The aforementioned developments have contributed to the rise of chauvinistic factions within the Meitei community, purportedly influenced by specific leaders associated with the BJP government in the region. These factors have played a role in intensifying the ongoing violence, as acknowledged by the Kukis and echoed by select Meitei activists, thereby exacerbating the prevailing circumstances. Consequently, the Kukis are presently lobbying for and visualising the establishment of a distinct administrative body as the only feasible solution to the ongoing impasse.

The Enduring Quest for the Kukis

The Kukis have persistently advocated for self-determination within their society for an extended period of time. The initial instance in which the Kukis expressed their desire for an autonomous state may be traced back to 1960, following the conclusion of the 1957 elections held to select village leaders within the state. The Kuki community expressed their contention that the implementation of the Village Authorities Act of 1956, which introduced a system of choosing village chiefs, was a deliberate attempt to undermine the traditional authority of chiefs over land. As the Kukis traditionally adhered to a system where village chieftains were not elected but held their positions by virtue of their lineage, they voiced their opposition to this new system. The Kukis' inclination to protect their interests was further strengthened due to their strained relations with both the Meiteis and the Nagas. The Kukis harbour a sense of resentment towards the Meiteis due to their perception that the Meitei-dominated state governments have perpetuated underdevelopment in their regions and failed to ensure sufficient political representation for them. The source of their discomfort towards the Naga community originated from the National Socialist Council of Nagalim's (NSCN) request in the 1980s to incorporate the region occupied by the Kukis into the Greater Nagalim. The emergence of a distinct desire for a separate state gained prominence subsequent to confrontations with the Nagas during the 1990s.

During the period from 1992 to 1997, the Kuki community experienced a series of targeted acts of violence and forced displacement, sometimes referred to as ethnic cleansing, perpetrated by Naga militant organisations. As a result of these events, many armed factions emerged within the Kuki community, advocating for the establishment of a separate and autonomous territory known as Kukiland within the state. Following a prolonged period of conflict, a total of 23 insurgent groups, which later expanded to 25, associated with the Kuki, Zo, Paite, and Hmar communities, successfully established two overarching entities known as the Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and the United People's Front (UPF). These groups subsequently entered into a Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with the Union and Manipur governments in August 2008. In 2016, a period of eight years following the signing of the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement, the Union and State administrations initiated peace negotiations with the Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and United



People's Front (UPF). Despite engaging in multiple rounds of negotiations, the KNO and UPF were unable to make any progress due to their divergent demands. The Kuki National Organisation (KNO) advocated for the establishment of an independent Kuki state, but the United People's Front (UPF) advocated for a state-within-a-state arrangement as outlined in Article 244A of the Indian Constitution. Currently, it seems that both factions have reached a state of resolution, wherein they have embraced the establishment of a Kukiland Territorial Council. This council has been delineated from areas inhabited by the Kuki community, namely Churachandpur, Pherzawl, Chandel, Tengnoupal, Kangpokpi, and Kamjong. According to their perspective, it is suggested that the Territorial Council should be structured based on the Bodoland Territorial Council, which was founded in 2003 under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule. The noteworthy victory of the Hill People's Alliance (HPA), a coalition of autonomous candidates supported by the United People's Front (UPF), in the 2015 elections for the Churachandpur district Autonomous District Council, serves as an indication of the Kuki community's fervent aspiration for the establishment of a Kukiland Territorial Council.

The Way Forward

Presently, there exists a pressing necessity to reassess the enduring requisites for the Sixth Schedule in light of escalating appeals for autonomous governance in the shape of statehood or a union territory subsequent to the eruption of conflict in Manipur. The Manipur (Hills Areas) Autonomous District Council Act, which was passed in 1971, entrusted the autonomous district councils with restricted executive and financial authority. This is in contrast to the extensive judicial and legislative powers provided under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution. Consequently, there has been a growing demand to expand the Sixth Schedule with the aim of facilitating the formation of empowered Autonomous District Councils and enabling self-governance in the hilly areas of Manipur.

While disputes in Manipur are not only confined to tensions between the valley-dwelling majority and the hill-dwelling minority groups. There is a lack of agreement among tribal groups, specifically the Nagas and the Kukis, about the expansion of Sixth Schedule provisions within the districts governed by the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs). In the report released in March 2002, the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution proposed the expansion of the Sixth Schedule in the hilly regions of Manipur. Nevertheless, the Nagas exhibited a lukewarm reception towards the aforementioned initiative, since prominent militant organisations like as the NSCN-IM and the United Naga Council (the primary governing body representing the Nagas) perceived it as an obstacle to their overarching aspiration of establishing an independent territory known as Nagalim (Hausing, 2015).

The Sixth Schedule holds potential as a noteworthy constitutional accomplishment for the ethnic tribes residing in the northeastern region, with particular relevance to the Kuki community. Nevertheless, the practical implementation of constitutional recognition has already revealed its inadequacy, as exemplified by the experiences in the Northeastern states. These experiences highlight the disregard of vital and essential elements of self-governance. In scenarios where the national autonomous institution as a whole lacks significant duties, each unit within it remains dependent on and submissive to central authorities who administer the entire territory. According to Ray (1999), the decentralisation objective in the region has not been effectively realised by the Panchayati Raj institutions, Autonomous District Councils, and Sub-State Regional Development Councils due to their limited authority and inadequate modernization and efficiency. While the concept of self-governance, exemplified by the Sixth Schedule, may appear attractive in principle, it is important to note that these arrangements lack legal validity and primarily serve as symbolic acknowledgments.



The opposition to the proposal for implementing the Sixth Schedule in the hill districts of Manipur by Meitei intellectual and civil society leaders in the valley is based on concerns regarding the potential threat to the state's territorial integrity that may arise from the installation of district councils. The apprehension expressed by the Meiteis regarding the prospective direct fiscal association between the Kukis and the central government, in the event of the implementation of the sixth schedule in Manipur, lacks justification. This concern emerges during a period when the potential for development in the areas governed by the sixth schedule is in jeopardy. Within the domain of political movements, particularly in the Northeast region, several ethnic communities have utilised the development of unique geopolitical narratives as a means of engaging in negotiations with central authorities. This may be observed in the example of Nagalim, which seeks to facilitate the integration of the Nagas residing in India and Myanmar. The Meiteis, who continually call for integration, should examine the current historical circumstances that have given rise to rival nationalistic movements in Manipur. These movements are perceived by the Meiteis as constituting a threat to the unity and integrity of the state.

Conclusion

Currently, in order to promote inclusivity and address the concerns of the Kukis within the context of Manipur, it is suggested that the Meiteis, who constitute the majority, should take the initiative to reconsider or develop appropriate administrative mechanisms. These mechanisms could include the implementation of the Sixth Schedule or the exploration of alternative frameworks. It is recommended that this process involve limited interaction with the central government. The Indian constitution has numerous provisions that restrict the autonomy of constituent states in choosing and creating their systems of self-governance. Nevertheless, it is imperative that the design of the administrative structure or arrangement is in accordance with the consultative meetings and dialogues that involve not only the Meiteis and Kukis, but also the Nagas, Pangal, and other communities within the state. This is crucial since the implementation of these decisions might result in a wide range of consequences. The implementation of any constitutional system should not be regarded as the ultimate resolution of postcolonial issues, but rather as a provisional accomplishment that currently calls for the establishment of a unified and inclusive Manipur.

In order to pursue a durable resolution, it necessitates ongoing deliberation and renegotiation with the central authority, encompassing the exploration of methods that extend beyond the boundaries prescribed by the Indian constitution. The insertion of some provisions or norms beyond the codified constitutional text is necessary in order to effectively handle the subject at hand. Therefore, the central solution to addressing the fundamental issues in the state of Manipur involves modifying the primary allocation of governmental authority among the various communities, with the aim of promoting unity and territorial integrity.

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