



Ethnic Conflict in Manipur, Northeast India: Historical Roots, Current Challenges, and Pathways to Peace

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ABSTRACT :

This article explores the ethnic conflict in Manipur, a northeastern state in India, examining its historical roots, socio-political causes, and enduring impact on local communities. Ethnic diversity, issues of land ownership, political disenfranchisement, and socio-economic inequalities have fueled conflict between the major ethnic groups: the Meitei, Naga, and Kuki communities. The analysis also considers the role of national policies, such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), and their effects on local tensions. Finally, the paper offers a discussion on conflict resolution strategies and potential pathways to sustainable peace in Manipur.

Keywords: Ethnic conflict, Manipur, Northeast India, Meitei, Naga, Kuki, Colonial legacy.

Introduction :

The ethnic conflict in Manipur, a state in Northeast India, is a complex and enduring issue rooted in historical divisions and influenced by contemporary socio-political dynamics. Known for its rich cultural diversity, Manipur is home to multiple ethnic communities, primarily the Meitei, Naga, and Kuki groups, each with distinct identities and aspirations. Over time, tensions among these groups have intensified due to colonial legacies, overlapping territorial claims, and demands for political autonomy. Compounding these historical factors are economic disparities and limited access to resources, which have further fueled grievances and alienation among communities. The region's geographic isolation from mainland India has also contributed to its unique challenges, shaping local perspectives on governance and identity. This article examines the origins and development of ethnic conflict in Manipur, analyzes the current challenges facing the region, and explores potential pathways toward lasting peace, including inclusive dialogue, economic initiatives, and local empowerment strategies. Through this analysis, the article seeks to offer insights into both the roots of the conflict and actionable solutions for fostering a peaceful and cohesive society in Manipur.

Historical Background of Ethnic Conflict :

The conflict in Manipur is firmly rooted in the historical, cultural and religious context of the region. Manipur is a multicultural hub of diverse ethnic groups, each fiercely defending their cultural heritage, land and rights. The Meitei are predominantly Hindu, while the Kuki and Nagas are Christian. These religious divisions often reflect ethnic divisions, deepening inter-communal rivalries. Recent attacks on places of worship highlight the sectarian dimension of the conflict. (Sidhu, 2023) The historical roots of violence in Manipur go back to the colonial era, when the British divided the population into "hills" and "valleys," each subject to different laws. This division reinforced the sense of alienation between the Meitei, who mainly lived in the valleys, and the tribal communities of the hills, such as the Nagas and Kukis. After India's independence, these differences were reflected in the form of the political structure, which granted Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the hill tribes but not to the Meiteas. This status provides certain advantages, including reservations in government jobs and educational institutions, and is a major source of inter-group discord. The Meiteis' demand for ST status threatens to undermine the economic interests of other groups and change the political landscape. ST status could shift political power and influence towards the Meites, given the sheer size of the community that makes up more than half of Manipur's population. This redistribution of power could potentially disenfranchise the Kukis and Nagas, further exacerbating ethnic tensions. In contrast, this controversial positive discrimination mirrors other instances in India, such as the Patidar agitation in Gujarat and the Maratha protests in Maharashtra, where the dominant group demanded inclusion in the reservation policy. However, the situation in Manipur is unique in that it has an ethnically diverse population and communal violence is likely to escalate into protracted armed conflict. (Sidhu, 2023)

Ethnic Composition and Cultural Diversity :

Manipur's complex demographic landscape includes a majority Meitei population in the valley and the Naga and Kuki tribal groups in the hills. Each group possesses distinct linguistic, cultural, and religious identities, which foster a sense of exclusivity and mutual distrust. The Meitei community,

seeking Scheduled Tribe status, has advocated for broader access to resources and rights in the hill areas, which the hill tribes view as a threat to their autonomy.

Causes of Ethnic Conflict in Manipur

1. **Political Marginalization:** The political landscape in Manipur has frequently marginalized minority voices. While the Meitei majority controls most state politics, the hill tribes have limited influence, leading to grievances and demands for greater representation or even secession from the state. (Alam & University, 2023; *The Social and Political Dimensions of Ethnic Conflicts in Manipur*, n.d.) The Meitei, who make up about 53% of the population, are confined to about 10% of the total land area of Manipur. The rest of the area, including the hilly areas, is mainly inhabited by tribal communities, especially the Kukis and the Nagas. While the Nagas of Manipur have also opposed the Meiteis' demand for inclusion as STs and prefer to maintain the status quo in Manipur state, they have chosen to maintain their long-standing friendship with the Meitei community. There is a lack of conflict between the two groups amidst the ethnic conflict. These ethnic tensions highlight the deeper divisions between the valleys and hills of the state. (Alam & University, 2023)
2. **Land and Resource Conflicts:** Land is a deeply contentious issue, as traditional land use rights among tribal communities conflict with the Meitei community's aspirations for access to hill territories. Land ownership laws also vary by community, leading to tensions over resource control and agricultural rights. On May 3, 2023, violence broke out between the Meitei community and the Kuki tribe in the village of Churachandpur, Manipur, near the state capital Imphal. The immediate cause of the conflict is said to be the Meitei people's demand for scheduled tribe status, not the tribe's. The Meitei and the Kuki have a complex history and complicated relationship. The Meitei see the Kukis as outsiders and drug dealers, while the Kukis see themselves as marginalized Meitei who occupy important political and administrative positions in the state. ("Violence in Manipur," n.d.)
3. **Identity Politics and Cultural Distinctions:** Political actors often manipulate ethnic identities to garner support, exacerbating divides among Meitei, Naga, and Kuki communities. This politicization of ethnic identity has led to violent clashes, with communities competing for governmental resources and recognition. Identity politics plays a significant role in Manipur, with various communities seeking cultural and political protection. Identity. This leads to tensions and conflicts over issues such as land rights and language. In response to the ethnic conflict, the Manipur state government faces problems related to governance and administration. Problems faced by the government It is difficult to ensure equal representation and meet the diverse needs of the various ethnic groups. Thus, the central government in New Delhi sometimes finds it difficult to mediate effectively the conflicting demands of different ethnic communities. (Saha, n.d.)
4. **Armed Groups and Insurgency:** Insurgency movements within different ethnic groups have contributed to ongoing instability. Armed groups like the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) operate in the region, each with distinct objectives tied to ethnic identities and sovereignty claims. The cumulative activities of various armed groups have led to the breakdown of law and order and state administration. Despite the breakdown of the country's development and aid delivery mechanisms, which has led to the cessation of planned development activities, a significant portion of the country's resources are being drained directly and indirectly by the extortion campaigns of the armed groups. Over the years, the government departments of Manipur have been regularly paying a fixed percentage of their revenues to various armed groups. The armed groups also directly interfere in the awarding of government contracts and development projects, which are essentially rewards under their control rather than projects that need to be implemented on the ground. This pervasive environment of extortion and widespread corruption at all levels of government have led to the weakening of development activities. Basic infrastructure like roads, communication, health and education are showing signs of deterioration. The situation has reached a point where government employees have started protesting against the failure of the state to protect them. On February 8, 2006, the fisheries department employees went on a general strike at Rampella in the capital Imphal to protest against extortion notices issued by unspecified armed groups. Similarly, the revenue department of the Manipur government also stopped operations on August 25, 2006 after all employees except the head of the department went on a mass leave due to threats from various armed groups. At a function in Imphal on June 2, 2006, the chief minister said, "No external company is interested in operating in the state due to the huge demand for extortion." Whether in the Hills or the Valley, the underground groups demand a share in all development projects in the state. Armed groups also issue orders on social and cultural issues to make the administrative apparatus look inadequate and ineffective. On August 7, 2006, Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL) banned all public discussions and meetings on the Meitei script debate, claiming that such claims would derail the movement to replace the existing Bengali script with the Meitei script. According to them, the ban would remain in effect for the next 10 years. Similarly, since September this year, three armed groups - the United Nations Liberation Front (UNLF), the People's Revolutionary Party of Kanreipak (PREPAK) and the KYKL - have jointly banned the import, production, sale and consumption of all types of narcotic drugs and intoxicants in the country. (*State of Militancy in Manipur*, n.d.)
5. **Impact of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA):** The AFSPA, imposed in Manipur since 1958, grants the military extensive powers in "disturbed areas," leading to reports of human rights abuses and further alienating local populations. While intended to maintain order, the act is deeply unpopular and perceived as a symbol of state repression. Each country has its own laws and regulations to deal with insurgency or terrorism. This is a bill to combat this menace. Similarly, India has a law to deal with riots. Terrorism has given legal power to the armed forces to operate in troubled areas. According to AFSPA 1958. The power to declare an area as "unrested" belongs to the Governor or the Central Government. The government must form the opinion that it is necessary to mobilize the armed forces in support of civil rights and announce it as a "disturbed area". Security forces are protected under Section 6 of the Act. They have violated the law and will be severely punished under the Act, and the powers granted to the army under the AFSPA have been upheld. Supreme Court in 1998. 9 People affected by the militants are concerned about human rights violations. According to the Security Forces, what are the violations committed by the militants? According to police reports, between 2000 and 2004, the militants killed more than 450 civilians, and kidnapped several senior government officials. Initially, there were only three militant groups. At least 26 are now operating in this small state. Armed groups. Most of

the groups operate as follows: Influence of outside directors. There is also a threat of drug trafficking in the state. The overall situation in Manipur is worrying. To counter this, the military operating in the state needs special powers to support them. (Kamboj, 2004)

Socio-Economic Impact of Ethnic Conflict

The protracted ethnic conflict has had profound socio-economic repercussions for Manipur. Development initiatives are often disrupted by instability, which deters investment and affects employment. Access to essential services like healthcare and education is limited, particularly in conflict-prone hill areas. This lack of infrastructure and development perpetuates poverty and economic stagnation, creating a vicious cycle that fuels further discontent and violence.

Recent Conflicts

1. **Meitei-Kuki Clashes:** In recent years, Meitei and Kuki communities have experienced increased hostilities, primarily over land access and political representation. Incidents of violence have led to internal displacement and loss of life, revealing deep-seated distrust between the groups. According to the Kuki Students Organization, at least 207 of the dead were from the Kuki-Zo community and 41,425 were displaced. The Meitei organization said 114 people were killed and 31 other community members are still missing. Hundreds of women are living in relief camps and, according to the NGO, women suffer the most as they have to support their families while men continue to struggle to find work. Timeline of events: May 4, 2023: Two Kuki women are paraded naked by a mob in Gangpokpi district. June 4, 2023: A Meitei Christian woman married to a Kuki, her seven-year-old son and a relative are burned alive in an ambulance in Imphal West. September 1, 2024: A Meitei woman was killed and her eight-year-old daughter injured in a bomb blast carried out by Kuki militants in Koutruk village of West Imphal. November 8: A Hmar (relative to the Kuki people) woman was allegedly raped and burned alive by suspected Meitei gunmen in Jairaven village of Jiribam district. November 9: A 31-year-old female Meitei farmer was shot dead by suspected Kuki militants in Saiton area of Bishnupur district. (*Raped, Burnt Alive and Shot Dead*, n.d.)
2. **Naga-Meitei and Naga-Kuki Conflicts:** Ethnic tensions between Naga and Meitei communities often center on demands for political autonomy. Nagas seek integration with a larger "Nagalim," which is resisted by Meitei leaders due to the territorial implications for Manipur. In 1992, violent clashes broke out between two tribes in the northeastern state of Manipur, home to many tribes including the two. The Nagasami and the Kuki. The clashes left hundreds dead and many more injured. They were made homeless, their lives were ruined, and their long-standing tradition of living side by side was broken. It is believed that More than 1,000 people were killed, and about 130,000 were killed. The clashes resulted in refugees and racial mixing. The villages that were once common in Manipur are few and far between. They no longer exist. These tribal clashes often took place against the backdrop of much larger violence, including: Long and difficult Battles Between the Nagas Indian states, and several smaller Factional Wars In and around them. (Jeyaseelan, n.d.) The Naga social structure is different from that of the Meiteis. The Naga woman's status is better than that of her Meitei counterparts. (Jeyaseelan, n.d.)

Government and Regional Responses

The Indian government's response has primarily involved security measures and periodic dialogue with insurgent groups. While peace accords have been signed with some factions, comprehensive peace remains elusive due to ongoing grievances and factionalism among insurgent groups. Local organizations and NGOs have attempted to foster dialogue and inter-ethnic understanding, though their impact is limited by persistent hostilities. The inconsistent policies adopted by the central government to address this The problems in the northeast only served to anger the dissident elites in Manipur. They Gradually realized the practical necessity of embracing armed rebellion as a form of political struggle. The interaction of two factors provided the trigger The emergence of the rebellion in Manipur at a certain stage of the statehood movement. First, the recognition of a territorial council in Manipur in 1963. The statehood movement was far from the democratic aspirations of the dissident elites. Second, the creation of Nagaland as a full-fledged state from the Naga hills In response to the armed action carried out by the Tuensang (NHTA) in 1963, The Naga National Council had completely convinced the dissident elites that The Indian government was more focused on violence than on democratic struggle. It was completely unthinkable to grant statehood to Nagaland and deny it to Manipur on grounds of economic unviability. (Dogra, 2018)

Challenges to Sustainable Peace

Achieving lasting peace in Manipur faces multiple challenges. Deep-rooted mistrust between ethnic groups, coupled with inadequate political representation, hinders cooperation. The legacy of past grievances, compounded by ongoing economic hardships and security measures like AFSPA, perpetuates a sense of alienation among the hill tribes. External factors, such as cross-border insurgency influences from Myanmar, add complexity to peace efforts.

Prospects for Conflict Resolution

1. **Promoting Local Governance and Autonomy:** Expanding local governance could enable each ethnic group to manage its own affairs while remaining integrated within the state framework. Such decentralization could foster a sense of inclusion and reduce grievances.
2. **Socio-Economic Development:** Addressing the development deficit in Manipur is critical for peace. Investment in infrastructure, education, and employment can reduce poverty, creating more equitable economic conditions that lessen competition over resources.

3. **Reforming AFSPA:** Revisiting AFSPA's implementation or replacing it with community-policing models could address local grievances and improve relationships between security forces and residents.
4. **Facilitating Inter-Ethnic Dialogue and Cultural Exchange:** Education programs that promote cultural understanding and celebrate diversity can help counter stereotypes and build a foundation of mutual respect.

Conclusion :

The ethnic conflict in Manipur is a complex issue rooted in historical injustices, socio-economic inequalities, and competing political aspirations. Addressing these conflicts requires a multi-faceted approach that includes equitable development, political reforms, and the promotion of inclusive governance. By fostering inter-ethnic dialogue and creating economic opportunities, Manipur can work towards sustainable peace, setting a precedent for addressing ethnic conflicts in similar regions.

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