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## Between Hills and Valleys: The Meitei – Kuki Conflict in Manipur

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### INTRODUCTION

Manipur is a northeastern state of India. It is a state known for its diverse communities and rich cultural heritage. The hilly northeast Indian state sits east of Bangladesh and border of Myanmar. It is home of 3.3 million people. More than half are Meiteis who are around 43% of the population and others are Kukis and Nagas. Manipur has been a site of ethnic diversity and its associated tensions. The recent violence in Manipur reflects the deep rooted ethnic conflicts particularly between Meiteis and Kuki communities, leading to widespread instability, displacement, and loss of life. The conflict stems from historical grievances, identity, politics, and competition over land and perceived inequalities in political representation and state policies. The conflict arose mainly due to the Meitei communities demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status .While Meiteis argue that ST status will help them preserve their culture and provide them reservation benefits; the hill tribes strongly opposed this demand. They feared that granting ST status to Meiteis would allow them to buy land in protected tribal hills, which would threaten their land rights, culture, and identity of tribal communities like the Kukis and Nagas . This fear turned into anger, leading to violent clashes, burning villages, deaths and mass displacement of people.

The violence first started on May 3rd 2023. According, to the government as of 22 November 2024, 258 people have been killed in the violence and 60000 people have been displaced. Over 1000 injured and 32 missing, 4786 houses were burned and 386 religious structures were vandalized including temples and churches.

The violence has deeply affected the economy, education, and daily life in Manipur. Thousands of people have been forced to live in relief camps with limited access to basic needs. The state government imposed curfews and internet band and security forces were deployed to control the situation. However the government's response was criticized for being delayed and biased.

This study examines the cause of ethnic conflict in Manipur. The impact of the conflict and the state's response to it. It also assesses the security measures and peace building measures undertaken.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- i. To know the reason of the conflict between Meitei and Kuki .
- ii. To study the impact of the conflict in the state.
- iii. To assess the state's and central government response to the conflict.
- iv. To suggest possible solutions.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach focusing on secondary data to study the Manipur conflict. The study is descriptive and historical in nature, aiming to understand the cause, impact and government responses to the violence between the Meitei and Kuki communities. Data is collected from secondary sources from existing literature, including newspaper, research articles , editorials , human rights reports and government documents published between 2023 and 2025 . These sources were analyzed through content and thematic analysis to identify key factors, patterns and responses related to the conflict.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is limited by its dependency on secondary data, as no primary data such as interviews or surveys could be conducted due to safety, time and resource constraints.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This Study is significant as it provides a deeper understanding of the ongoing ethnic conflict and violence in Manipur between the Meitei and Kuki communities. By analyzing the cause, impacts and government responses, the research highlights the underlying social, political and ethnic tensions that continues to affect peace and stability in the region. It may help policymakers, researcher and students to comprehend the complexity of ethnic conflicts in North- east India, contributing to future policy recommendations, peace building strategies and inclusive development efforts. Furthermore the study adds to the academic discourse on ethnic conflict in India, encouraging further research on conflict resolution, human rights protection and governance challenges in ethnically diverse states.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

Bhagat Oinam (2003) in his research paper “patterns of ethnic conflict in the North – east a study on Manipur” examines the historical social and political roots of ethnic conflicts in Manipur. He argues that conflicts arise from contested ethnic identities, territorial claims and issues of political representation among Meitei and Kuki. Oinam highlights how colonial policies, post – independence state formation and uneven development have intensified inter – community tensions. He explains that ethnic groups use violence and political mobilisation to assert identity and protect interest, leading to cycles of conflict

Anshuman Bhena (2023) in his research paper “The social and political dimensions of ethnic conflict in Manipur” examines how ethnic conflict in Manipur is deeply rooted in social and political factors. He argues that these conflicts arise from issues of ethnic identity, historical grievances and competition over resources and political powers. The study highlights how state policies and political structures often fail to accommodate diverse ethnic aspirations leading to feelings of exclusion among communities like the Kukis and Nagas, while the Meiteis dominate the valley’s socio- political landscape. Bhena also analyses how the state’s response, often biased or inadequate, exacerbate ethnic divides. He emphasizes that these conflicts are not only territorial or political but also about social exclusion, insecurity and identity preservation.

Bipin Kumar (2024) in his research paper “ethnic conflict in Manipur, North – east India historical roots, current challenges and pathway to peace”, explains the historical origins, present challenges and possible solutions to ethnic conflicts in Manipur. He traces the conflict to colonial administrative divisions and the post – independence state’s failure to integrate diverse ethnic identities harmoniously. The author discusses how competing claims over land, political autonomy and cultural recognition among the Meitei, Naga and Kukis have deepened distrust and violence. He suggested that peace buliding must focus on inclusive governance, inter- community dialogue, economic equality and recognizing the unique identities of all ethnic groups.

Veronica Khangchian (2019) in her research paper “understanding conflict in Manipur: A socio – historical perspective” provides a socio – historical analysis of conflicts in Manipur, focusing on how historical events, social structures and ethnic identities have shaped tensions . She argues that colonial policies of segregation and the creation of administrative boundaries reinforced the ethnic divisions among communities like the Meitei, Naga and Kuki . The study also highlights how post-independence political developments, identity based mobilization and unequal access to resources and opportunities have intensified conflicts. Khangchian concluded that the complex interplay of history, social hierarchy and politics continues to drive instability.

Rajan Choudhary (2024) in his journal “Manipur on fire : eye witness to ethnic strife and survival ” here in this article offers a firsthand account of the recent ethnic violence in Manipur , focusing on the lived experiences of affected communities. Through his observations, he highlights the intensity of clashes between the Meitei and Kuki groups describing the destruction of homes, displacement of people and breakdown of social harmony. Choudhary emphasizes how fear, mistrust and deep rooted prejudice fuel the conflict while inadequate state response and delayed intervention worsen the crisis.

Esha Roy in her article in Indian Express, “In 10 years of Meitei ST demand, repeated pleas to state, Centre”highlighted how Meitei community's demand for ST status reignited deep-rooted ethnic faultlines between the valley-based Meitei and hill-based tribal groups (Kukis and Nagas). The Meitei claim that such status is necessary to "preserve ancestral land, tradition, culture and language" — especially amidst concerns over demographic shifts from immigration as argued by the Meitei Tribes Union and Scheduled Tribes Demand Committee. While earlier proposals in 1982 and 2001 were rejected, March 2023 High Court order directing the state to reconsider the demand triggered tribal backlash and mass protests led by hill students’ tribal organizations. The tribal opposition is rooted in fears of losing land rights, jobs and educational reservation, as granting ST status to the numerically and politically dominant Meiteis could significantly encroach on tribal benefits.serious human rights violations and state failures during the intense clashes in Manipur between the dominant Meitei and hill-based tribal communities, primarily the Kukis. They reveal that over 200 lives were lost, more than 50,000 people were displaced, and thousands have been living in dire conditions across hundreds of relief camps, with inadequate healthcare, sanitation, nutrition and security. The publications also highlight the failure of state authorities to investigate or hold accountable perpetrators. Vigilante groups such as Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leippun allegedly committed acts of gender-based violence, arson, looting and even beheading, yet no prosecutions have occurred, reflecting deep impunity.

N. Pauntanthang (2024) in his research paper "Ethnic Stereotypes of the Meitei-Kuki Conflict in Manipur", examines how ethnic stereotypes have shaped and intensified the Meitei-Kuki conflict in Manipur. He argues that mutual perceptions based on historical prejudices, myths, and exaggerated identities have deepened mistrust between these two communities. The study highlights that stereotypes such as viewing the Meiteis as "dominant" and Kukis as "outsiders" fuel hostility, justify exclusionary attitudes, and sustain inter-group violence. He also concluded that these negative representation are socially constructed and politically manipulated and addressing them through inter- community dialogue, education and cultural understanding is crucial for long term peace in Manipur.

Mr. Pradeep V. Kamat C Dr. Neela Kamat in their Article – “Manipur Ethnic Conflict, Endemic Violence, Elusive Peace”, analyze the persistent ethnic violence in Manipur, highlighting how historical territorial claims, identity politics, and weak governance fuel tensions between communities like the Meitei, Naga and Kuki. They argue that state interventions often fail due to insensitivity towards local ethnic realities, making peace efforts ineffective. The authors conclude that sustainable peace requires inclusive governance, cultural understanding, and community-based reconciliation to address the deep-rooted causes of conflict.

### **Reasons and Impact of the Meitei – Kuki Conflict in Manipur**

The conflict between the Meitei and Kuki communities in Manipur is related in historical, ethnic, political and economic differences. Tensions have escalated due to issue of land rights, identity and political representation. This conflict has deeply impacted the state by causing violence, displacement of people, loss of lives and breakdown of social harmony , ultimately affecting the development and stability or Manipur. The impact of this conflict has been on Manipur’s society and development which is a consequence of violent clashes since May 2023.

#### **Reasons for the conflict –**

There are several intertwined reasons behind the Meitei –Kuki conflict.

Firstly **ethnic and cultural differences** form the root of tensions. The Meitei primarily residing in the Imphal valley are predominantly Hindu with distinct language and cultural identity while the Kukis are tribal people inhabiting the surrounding hills largely Christians, with their own customs and traditions. These differences create a psychological divide, fostering mutual suspicion and prejudice.

Secondly, **issue of land rights and reservation policies** have escalated the tensions. The Meities demand Schedule Tribe (ST) status to gain constitutional benefits for job reservation. However the Kukis and other hill tribes fear that granting ST status to Meiteis would allow them to purchase lands in the hills, thus threatening tribal lands protection under Article 371 C of the Indian constitution.

Thirdly **political representation and autonomy demands** have fired the conflict. Both communities seek to expand their political power leading to competition over government structure, local bodies and resource allocation. The Kukis have also demanded a separate administrative arrangement within Manipur to protect their identity and interests.

Another reason is **historical tension and colonial policies**, which created divisions among ethnic groups. British colonial administration divided communities for administrative convenience sowing seeds of ethnic rivalry that persist today.

Finally, **the issue of illegal migration** contributes to the conflict narrative. The Meiteis accuse Kukis of facilitating illegal migration from Myanmar, alerting the states demographic balance . However this remains a contested and politically sensitive claim.

#### **Impact of Conflict**

The Meitei- Kuki conflict has caused severe impacts across various dimensions:

**Firstly, loss of lives and widespread violence** has traumatised communities. Numerous people have been killed or injured in ethnic clashes with reports highlighting targeted attacks on villages and individuals.

**Secondly mass displacement** is a grave consequence. Thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes, taking shelter in relief camps under poor humanitarian conditions without adequate food, sanitation or medical care.

**Thirdly, the conflict led to economic backwardness and disruption.** Frequent violence and bandhs affect markets, schools, transport and daily life.

**Fourth, communal divided have deepened** creating a society ridden with mistrust and hatred. Inter -community relationship has deteriorated, affecting peace – building efforts

**Additionally, mental health issues have escalated.** Trauma, depression, anxiety and fear are prevalent among affected people especially women and children living in camps with uncertain future.

Lastly the conflict has caused **governance and administrative challenges.** The state government struggles to restore law and order, rehabilitate displaced people and maintain long- term peace. The presence of armed groups further complicate the security situations.

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### **The State and Central Government Response –**

The response of both the state and central government to the Meitei – Kuki conflict has been multifaceted, involving law enforcement actions and peace negotiation interventions. However, these responses have often been criticised for being inadequate or delayed, leading to prolonged suffering and instability in Manipur. While both government have taken visible measures to contain violence and assist affected population but the response have largely been reactive.

#### ***State Government Response***

##### **1. Deployment of security forces.**

The Manipur state government has deployed the state, Rapid Action Force (RAF) , and called in additional forces to control violent clashes . Curfews and internet shutdown were imposed in conflict – affected areas to prevent the spread of rumours and maintain law and order .

## **2. Imposition of curfews and internet Shut- downs**

Frequent curfews have been imposed in districts experiencing violence to restrict public movement. Internet shutdowns have been used to curb the spread of provocative messages and misinformation, but these measures have also effected communication and education.

## **3. Relief camps and Humanitarian Assistance**

The state established relief camps for displaced people, providing basic necessities such as food, water, temporary shelter, and medical facilities. However these camps have been criticized for poor sanitation, inadequate security and lack of mental health support for traumatized citizens

## **4. Peace Talks and Community Meetings**

The state government initiated peace meetings with community leaders to ease tensions . However the lack of consensus and mistrust between groups has hindered effective conflict resolutions.

## **5. Investigation Committees**

Judicial and administrative inquiry committees have been set up to investigate incidents of violence and property damage, but their outcomes are often delayed or inconclusive, creating dissatisfaction among affected communities.

### ***Central Government Response***

## **1. Deployment of Central Armed Police Forces(CAPF)and Army**

The central government sent additional forces including Assam Rifles , CRPF, BSF and the Indian Army to restore peace and maintain security in sensitive areas . The army conducted flag marches to instill confidence among civilians.

## **2. High- level visits and Assessments**

Union ministers and central teams visited Manipur to assess the situation and to meet with state officials and review security arrangements. These visits were aimed towards ensuring coordination between central and state agencies.

## **3. Appeal for peace**

The Prime Minister and the Home minister issued appeals to communities for maintaining peace and harmony urging leaders to engage in dialogue and to avoid violence.

## **4. Financial Assistance and Relief Packages**

The central government announced financial aid to support relief efforts, compensate victims' families and rebuild damaged infrastructure. However the disbursement process has often faced administrative delays.

## **5. Long term peace initiations**

The Ministry of Home Affairs has explored long-term solutions through dialogues with community organisations aiming at political statements, better administrative arrangements, and protection of tribal rights. Despite these efforts, a sustainable solution remains elusive due to deep – rooted mistrust.

While both governments have taken visible measures to contain violence and assist affected populations, critics argue that response have largely been reactive rather than preventive. There is a need for inclusive peace – buildings, addressing core issues like land rights, ethnic representation and historical grievances through constitutional and social reforms . Without long – term political solutions, security interventions alone cannot bring lasting peace in Manipur.

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## **CONCLUSION**

The ethnic conflict in Manipur between the Meitei and Kuki communities reflect deep historical and social complexities. This violence is not just a result of recent events but is rooted in long- standing issues such as identity – based tensions, competition over land and resources and feelings of political and economic marginalization. The recent clashes have caused loss of lives, displacement and destruction of property, affecting the lives of thousand especially women and children who remain traumatized by the violence.

The response by the state and central government included deploying security forces, imposing curfews and initiating peace talks. While these steps were necessary to control the immediate situation, they failed to address the underlying causes of the conflict.

Moreover, allegations of biased state actions have further increased mistrust among communities. For lasting peace in Manipur, it is essential to go beyond temporary solutions and adopt long term measures that address ethnic grievance, ensure equitable development and promote, fair political

representation and community based peace building efforts are crucial. Education and cultural exchanges programmes can also reduce prejudice and stereotypes.

***Suggestion for possible solutions:***

- i. **Promote inclusive governance** – ensuring fair political representation for all ethnic groups in decision -making bodies so that the concerns of both hill and valley communities are addressed equally.
- ii. **Strengthen dialogue mechanism** – organize regular inter-community dialogues facilitated by neutral bodies to build trust , clear misunderstanding and find common ground for peaceful coexistence.
- iii. **Equitable development policies** –Develop policies that reduce socio- economic dispute between communities by improving education, health, infrastructure and employment opportunities in underdeveloped areas.
- iv. **Protect land and identity rights** –Formulate clear land policies respecting traditional land rights of tribal communities while addressing the concerns of Meiteis to avoid fears of encroachment or exclusion.
- v. **Enhance community based peace building** - Empower local civil society groups, women’s groups and youth organisations to engage in peace building, awareness and reconciliation initiated at grassroots levels.
- vi. **Address Human Rights concern** –Investigate allegations of violence and human rights violation transparently to restore public faith in the state’s commitment to justice and equality.
- vii. **Educational and cultural integration**–Introduction of programmes in schools and colleges for promoting cultural understanding, history of peaceful coexistence and respect for diversity to reduce stereotypes and prejudices.
- viii. **Strengthen early warning and conflict prevention systems**– establish Community based monitoring systems to identify tensions early and take preventive measures before conflict escalate into violence.
- ix. **Implement rehabilitation and counselling services** –Provide psychological rehabilitation assistance to displaced people and victims to help them rebuild their lives with dignity.
- x. **Ensures Neutral and Effective Law Enforcement** – Train security forces to act impartially and sensitively during ethnic tensions to avoid accusation of bias and further alienation of any community

In conclusion it can be said that the Manipur conflict shows that sustainable peace requires sensitive governance and the participation of all communities in decision – making processes. Only through inclusive and protective approaches can the cycle of violence end ensuring stability and harmony in the state. The lesson from Manipur urge policy makers to adopt inclusive and preventive approaches towards ethnic conflicts to ensure that India’s diversity becomes it’s strength rather than a source of division.

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