



The Meitei-Kuki Conflict in Manipur: Historical Roots, Contemporary Triggers, and Pathways to Peace

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Abstract : This study analyses the ethnic conflict between the Kuki and Meitei communities in Manipur. This northeastern Indian state is influenced by the historical legacy of medieval kingdoms, British colonial rule and the failures of post-independence government. The conflict is linked to colonial-era local and administrative divisions, uneven economic and demographic development between the fertile Imphal valley and the surrounding hills, and claims to land, identity and political representation. Current triggers, such as the debate over Scheduled Tribe status and the spillover of instability across the border from Myanmar, exacerbate tensions. The paper analyses external factors such as militarisation, socio-economic inequalities and drug trade. It proposes a multi-faceted path to peace, including disarmament and governance reforms, inclusive dialogue mediated by neutral groups, legal reforms to protect tribal land rights and equitable distribution of resources, and strong border security. Finally, the study emphasises that for lasting peace to be achieved in Manipur, historical injustices must be redressed, justice and equality must be promoted, and ethnic diversity must be reconciled within the larger national framework of India. Without urgent comprehensive action, Manipur risks perpetual instability that threatens regional security and India's Act East Policy.

Key terms: Ethnic conflict, Land rights, Inclusive governance, Socio-economic disparities, Peacebuilding.

Introduction

Manipur, a two-thousand-year-old northeastern state of India, is the centre of fierce ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki communities. Manipur's political and cultural character was historically shaped by the Meitei people living in the fertile Imphal valley, once an independent kingdom ruled by the Ningthouja dynasties. The valley is surrounded by beautiful hills, home to mainly Kuki and Naga tribal groups, whose separate identities and socio-political demands have long contributed to the complexity of the region. Violent protest is going on in Manipur and it started with the order of Manipur High Court when the court directed the state government to consider giving scheduled tribe status to Maitri. Demography of Manipur is like on one side is Maitri community and on the other side are Naga people and other tribal groups of Manipur like Kuki. Tribes together have about 35% share in the state's population and are based largely in hilly areas, as they have got the status of scheduled tribes, due to which they can enjoy land owning rights in hills and forest regions. In Manipur, more than 65% share in total population is of Maitei community, that is demographically it is the dominant community here and mostly they live in Imphal Valey. Along with this, they are also considered strong academically and politically. 40 out of 60 MLAs of the state belong to this community, but despite all this, they call themselves marginalized communities as compared to the tribal community and keep demanding scheduled tribe status. According to Kuki tribal group, giving status to Maitei would be an infringement of their rights. The Kukis and Nagas also say that tribal areas comprise 90% of the state's geographical area, but the state's budget and development focus is only on the dominated Imphal region. After getting the status of scheduled tribe to the Maitei community, they will also get the right to own land in the hills. This clash of interests among tribal groups has become the reason for violence in Manipur. This paper analyses the historical roots and contemporary causes of the Meitei-Kuki conflict and a pathway to peace to promote stability, regional security and integration within India's broader national development goals.

Review of Literature

'ETHNIC RELATION AND DEVELOPMENT-A CASE STUDY OF HILL VALLEY RELATIONSHIP IN MANIPUR' by **Sheikhohao Kipge** analysis of ethnic relations and Manipur's development reveals historical, political and socio-economic complexities. The founding work traces Manipur's Kuki, Naga and Meitei ethnic identity and political development. Inequality in education, agriculture, infrastructure and industry has fuelled mistrust and political tensions. Tribal representation and equitable development have been limited by institutional failures, particularly the Hill Areas Committee. Competing nationalist goals such as the Nagalim and Kuki homeland movements challenge the majority Meitei people's unified vision of Manipur, fuelling ethnic conflicts. Government statistics confirm wide developmental imbalances between the hill and valley districts. The literature collectively emphasises that these inequalities must be addressed through inclusive policies, good governance and mutual cultural respect to promote peace, coexistence and progress in Manipur's multiethnic society.

The paper "**Hills–Valley Divide as a Site of Conflict**"(2009) by **H. KHAM KHAN SUAN** examines the socio-cultural, historical, and political dynamics underlying the persistent conflicts in Manipur between the hill tribal communities and the valley-dwelling Meitei people. It shows that the hill-valley divide is rooted in the hill tribes' distinct independent traditions and state-building efforts concentrated in the valley. Hill communities often perceive the state's attempts to establish control through law and order, uniform cultural policies and democratic arrangements as alien and exclusionary, leading to demands for autonomy and self-determination. The paper also emphasises how colonial legacies and nationalist schemes have created an opposing overall agenda, whereby the hill-valley divide challenges the Indian state's claims to democracy and statehood in Manipur.

'**Justice Denied to Tribals in the Hill Districts of Manipur**'(2010) by **BELA BHATIA** discusses the lack of justice for tribal communities in the hill districts of Manipur, including their long-standing demand of inclusion in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which would give them greater autonomy and security over their land and resources. The district council elections held in 2010 without tribal consent and the state's refusal to accept this demand have further aggravated alienation and conflict. Amid the state's efforts to control the region through legislation and administrative measures, locals fear land division and loss of cultural identity. Genuine peace and development in the hill areas of Manipur requires redressing historical injustices and fulfilling tribal rights rather than militarisation or forced elections, the report said.

The paper "**The Unfolding Kuki–Meitei Conflict in Manipur**"(2023) by **Dr. Pushpita Das** analyses the ethnic violence between the Kuki and Meitei communities erupting in May 2023. The immediate trigger was the High Court order to consider the Meitei community for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe list, which escalated the existing conflict. Long-standing grievances of the Kuki people against the Meitei-dominated state government, particularly eviction drives, crackdowns on illegal activities and demands for a separate Kukiland, led to severe distrust and violence. The conflict left many people dead, displaced and property destroyed. In response the government took action by imposing curfews, shutting down the internet, deploying army and paramilitary forces and appointing security advisers. The paper stresses the need for inclusive governance, economic development, and compromises from all communities to achieve lasting peace in Manipur.

Historical Aspect of the Meitei-Kuki Conflict in Manipur

1. **Ancient Origins of Manipur and Manipuri Identity:** Manipur dates back more than 2,000 years, with the Meitei community being the cultural and political centre of the state. Manipur was made an independent state by the Ningthouja dynasty and subsequent rulers, which extended into Myanmar and China today. The Meitei people developed a distinct cultural identity, such as their own language, classical dance and polo game, which further strengthened their long-standing custodianship over the fertile Imphal valley.
2. **Spatial and demographic divisions:** The Meitei, who make up about 53% of the population, live in the Imphal valley, which accounts for only 10% of Manipur's land area but is politically strong. In contrast, the surrounding hills, which make up 90% of the land area, are home to the tribal Kuki people, who make up 28% of the population, and the Naga people, who have distinct linguistic and cultural identities. A defining feature of Manipuri society is the valley-hill divide.
3. **Colonial legacy and policies:** The British colonial government controlled the valley-hills directly and the hills indirectly by designating them as "excluded areas." Indian hill tribes resisted assimilation and feared losing autonomy after independence, leading to distrust. Also, the British encouraged Christian missionary activities among the hill tribes, which replaced traditional anticlerical customs and led to further cultural divergence. These policies strengthened administrative and ethnic fault lines.
4. **Integration and policy failures after independence:** After Manipur merged with India in 1949, efforts to accommodate ethnic diversity, such as the establishment of autonomous district councils (ADCs), failed to resolve sovereignty demands and conflicts. Classifying communities deepened inequalities: Nagas and Kukis were given Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, which gave them land rights and affirmative action, while the Meitei were barred from buying land in the hills, being treated as "other backward classes" (OBCs). These discriminations deepened socio-economic and political cleavages. Insurgencies led by ethnic militias such as the Meitei Arambai Tengole and Kuki-Zomi groups fuelled disputes over autonomy, identity and access to resources, which led to militarisation and rebellions. Harsh counter-insurgency measures such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act further divided communities and increased militarisation in the region. Recurrent violent clashes and displacements have fuelled resentment and conflict propensity.

Demographics and geographic dynamics

The Imphal valley (10% land, 65% population) is a fertile and politically important region, historically inhabited by the Meitei people.

The hills (90% land, 35% people) are inhabited by the Kukis and Nagas, who live in these resource-rich but underdeveloped areas, who are Scheduled Tribes (STs) with no land ownership rights. This spatial division exacerbates resource competition: the Meitei want access to the hill lands after being stripped of ST status in 1949, but the Kukis see this as cultural and territorial encroachment.

Root Causes of the Meitei-Kuki Conflict in Manipur

1. Land and resource scarcity

The Imphal valley, home to the Meitei people, makes up only 10% of Manipur's land but is home to nearly 65% of the population. This leaves the Meitei community with very little land. The surrounding hills, which cover 90% of the land area, where the Kukis and Nagas live, are thriving but still underdeveloped. The Meitei want to address the scarcity of hill land, while the Kukis see such demands as a threat to their ancestral land rights and livelihoods. This struggle for land and resources is a significant issue.

2. Identity Politics and Ethnic Exclusivism

Narratives in which the Kukis and Meiteis fight for political recognition and dominance are driven by competing ethnic identities. The Meiteis, who were previously dominant in the valley but were stripped of Scheduled Tribe (ST) status in 1949, want their restoration to protect their cultural identity and rights over hill lands. The Kukis, who are already STs, fear that the inclusion of the Meitei will reduce their political influence and control over 90% of the state's land. Exploiting these grievances, armed ethnic militias continue to perpetrate violence and mobilise support.

3. Asymmetric Development and Political Representation

The development model has been valley-centric, with about 98% of the state's development funds going to the Imphal Valley, with most hill districts neglected. This imbalance has exacerbated economic inequalities: Meitei areas benefit from better infrastructure, health services and economic opportunities, while Kuki villages have suffered underdevelopment. Politically, the Meitei hold a majority in the Legislative Assembly (40 of 60 seats), enabling them to enact policies perceived as discriminatory by the Kukis, such as aggressive anti-drug campaigns targeting opium cultivation associated with hill communities.

4. Historical and Colonial Legacies

Britannic colonial rule formalised the valley-hill divide by directly controlling the valley and indirectly controlling the hills, thereby isolating the hill tribes institutionally and culturally.

Even after independence, there were divisions among the hill tribes, but they failed to grant autonomy. Religious conversion and cultural intervention deepened the identity.

5. Security, Militarization, and External Influences

State counter-insurgency efforts under laws such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and the presence of ethnic militias have militarised the conflict, fuelling violence and conflict. Cross-border incidents, including the civil war in Myanmar and involvement in the Golden Triangle drug trade, have destabilised border areas, fuelling arms smuggling and an illicit economy that fuels violence. State-led evictions of Kuki communities and harbouring "narco-terrorists" have fuelled grievances and insecurity.

Contemporary Triggers of the Meitei-Kuki Conflict in Manipur

1. Demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) Status by the Meiteis

The Meitei community currently does not have ST status, which provides constitutional protection and affirmative action to marginalised groups.

The Meitei want ST status to preserve their cultural identity and address perceived demographic changes caused by migration from Myanmar.

This demand is seen as a clear challenge to the current tribal classification and associated rights.

2. Opposition by Kukis and Nagas

The Kukis, who are already classified as Scheduled Tribes and control about 90% of the land area, oppose the Meitei demand as they fear it will lead to the Meitei people monopolising resources and political dominance in the hill areas. The Nagas also oppose the move as they see it as territorial encroachment and loss of autonomy. Tensions escalated when the Manipur High Court ordered the state government to expedite granting ST status to the Meitei people in April 2023 as it was a legal endorsement of the Meitei people's claim.

3. Ethnic Militia Mobilization

Both Meitei and Kukis form, consolidate and support armed ethnic militias (such as the Meitei-led Arambai Tengole and the Kuki-Zomi militias) and engage in violent confrontations for political and military reasons. The presence of these militias increases the brutality of war and perpetuates a cycle of retaliation.

4. State Security Measures and Governance Issues

The introduction of new anti-drug laws seen as targeting Kuki communities and accusing the Kuki people of harbouring "narco-terrorists" exacerbates grievances.

Military counter-insurgency operations, such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), increase animosity and alienation between the state and communities.

Harsh governance measures that foster mistrust occur without inclusive debate.

5. Cross-Border Security and Illegal Activities

The ongoing civil war in Myanmar and the control of the Golden Triangle drug trade are destabilizing Manipur's border areas. Smuggling of arms and narcotics across the border fuels militia activities and violence. Border control is weak and geopolitical situations are complex, fuelling insecurity and conflict.

6. Judicial and Constitutional Disputes on Tribal Status

While the dispute over ST status is based on constitutional values, judicial interventions sometimes exacerbate caste animosity rather than reduce it. Inter-community distrust has grown as the need for a clear legal framework and transparent dialogue is not being met.

Pathways to Resolution of the Meitei-Kuki Conflict in Manipur

1. Inclusive Dialogue and Civil Society Engagement

The establishment of a peace commission made up of impartial ethnic groups to mediate talks between the disputing parties should be a priority for the government. Encourage grassroots projects that eliminate myths and build trust, such as community-led discussions and cross-cultural exchanges. Involve women's organizations and civil society organizations in peacebuilding initiatives to foster inclusive involvement and reconciliation. Give the rehabilitation and assistance of the over 50,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) impacted by conflict first priority.

2. Revising Scheduled Tribe (ST) Status through Transparent Dialogue

Conduct transparent, participatory consultations to address Meitei demands for ST status without diluting tribal rights. Resolve ST status disputes by ensuring legal clarity and legitimacy rather than judicial overreach. Amend the Land Reforms Act to protect tribal people from corporate exploitation and expansionist pressures, while providing equitable access to land.

3. Security and Governance Reforms

Implement strict arms disarmament and surrender policies targeting ethnic militias. Repeal the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) to reduce militarisation and build community trust. Create a federal commission to address ethnic bias and restore institutional fairness and credibility. Prevent smuggling, arms trafficking and illegal migration by fencing the India-Myanmar border and controlling cross-border movement. Strengthening the anti-drug drive in collaboration with central bodies such as the National Investigation Agency (NIA), as well as encouraging alternative livelihoods to reduce dependence on opium cultivation.

4. Economic Development and Resource Redistribution

Provide equitable state funding for infrastructure, sustainable agriculture, healthcare and education to address economic inequality in hill districts. Promote employment and livelihood diversification, especially to reduce dependency on drugs and poverty

5. Legal and Constitutional Measures

Central government should implement a National Register of Citizens (NRC) for Manipur with a cutoff date of 1949, to resolve the issues of citizenship and address fears of illegal immigration. Deport those unable to prove residency and citizenship by the cutoff date back to Myanmar, to address illegal migrant's issue. Through legislation government should secure land rights to protect tribal areas.

6. Long-term Vision of Justice, Equity, and Participatory Democracy

Resolve historical injustices and systemic inequalities through participatory democratic mechanisms with an emphasis on the principles of justice, fraternity and equality. Recognize that lasting peace is essential to the success of the East Policy, as well as regional stability and India's broader rule of law.

Conclusion

The ethnic conflict in Manipur, born of decades of colonial legacy and post-independence policy failures, poses a grave challenge to India's values of unity and diversity. At its core is a web of historical injustices, identity conflicts and systemic inequalities that have divided communities and fuelled cycles of violence. The clashes in 2023, marked by tragic loss and displacement, revealed a lack of trust in the institutions created for security, highlighting deep differences among the Kuki, Naga and Meitei communities. These tensions are exacerbated by porous borders that enable illicit trade and armed militancy, leaving the economically and politically marginalised. Despite this, there is still a way out. Ceasefires, disarmament and urgent measures to secure borders must pave the way for deeper healing. To repair the social fabric, reimagining land policies to respect tribal rights and the wishes of the valley, as well as governance reforms that empower hill councils and ensure fair representation, are critical. To rebuild trust, economic initiatives to replace opium cultivation with sustainable livelihoods, along with efforts to rehabilitate displaced families.

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