

Manipur's Recent Widespread Unrest Amidst Ethnic Fault Lines The Meitei Community vs The Kuki-Naga Battle Behind Manipur's Violence

The many fault lines in Manipur are re-igniting, putting the state back on the boil. Following protests by tribal groups in numerous districts over a Manipur High Court order to evaluate the Meitei tribe for Schedule Tribe status, new violence broke out in the Churachandpur district of Manipur. To prevent things from going out of control, army and paramilitary personnel were stationed in regions where there had been a lot of violence. In response to the violence, Manipur's eight districts were placed under a curfew, and mobile internet access was shut down throughout the whole northeastern state.

Manipur's Cultural Geography

Skirts of low hills that extend into Nagaland and Mizoram surround the Manipur valley. The majority of Manipur's land is made up of hills, where 15 Naga tribes, as well as members of the Kuki, Thadou, Hmar, Paite, Vaiphei, and Zou peoples of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo-Zomi group, reside. Naga tribes that descended from the northern hills frequently raided the Kangleipak kingdom, which was then a protectorate of the British. The Kuki-Zomi are thought to have been transported from the Kuki-Chin hills of Burma by the British political agent in Manipur in order to serve as a barrier between the Meiteis and the Nagas and defend the valley from looting. The Maharaja granted the vicious headhunting Kukis territory along the ridges so they could serve as a shield for the Imphal valley below. The Kukis were similar to the Nagas in that they were fierce warriors.

Manipur's Ethnic Composition

A lot of Manipur's problems are geographical in nature. Four motorways serve as the valley's entryways to the outside world, including two that are crucial lifelines for the State. The non-tribal Meitei are the majority ethnic group in the valley, which accounts for about 10% of Manipur's landmass and produces 40 of the State's 60 MLAs as well as more than 64% of its people. More than 35% of identified tribes live in the hills, which make up 90% of the area's landmass, although they only send 20 MLAs to the Assembly. The majority of the 33 recognised tribes—generally classed as "Any Naga tribes" and "Any Kuki tribes"—are Christians, despite the fact that the majority of Meiteis are Hindus, followed by Muslims.

History of Kuki-Miety Divide

The hill villages and the Meiteis have long been at odds on an ethnic level, but since the 1950s,

when the Naga national movement emerged and called for an independent Naga nation, tensions between the two groups have been worse. The growth of rebel organisations among the Meiteis and Kuki-Zomi helped quell the Naga insurgency. The Kuki-Zomi groups started to militarise in the 1990s as the NSCN-IM intensified its calls for self-determination, and the Kukis started their own drive for "Kukiland"; unlike the Naga movement, however, the Kuki-Zomi call was for a state within India rather than a separate national territory. The Kukiland demand caused a split between the communities even though the Kukis had first served as the Meitei people's guardians. According to reports, NSCN-IM militants purportedly went from village to village in regions they claimed belonged to Nagas during the Naga-Kuki conflicts of 1993, expelling Kuki villagers. Many Kukis went to Churachandpur, where the Kuki-Zomi populace predominates. Analysts have noted that the Kukis' sense of insecurity was heightened by the fact that they were confined to a single district (although there are still isolated Kukis settlements in other regions of Manipur).

Fears of Meitei

Meitei nationalism was fueled by the Naga and Kuki movements, and several organisations appeared in the valley. In the 1970s, worries about demographic shifts and the dwindling size of traditional Meitei districts began to emerge. There were some requests for the Meiteis to be listed as a Scheduled Tribe, but the conversation remained generally quiet. Widespread violence broke out in Manipur in 2001 as a result of the Indian government's decision to include states other than Nagaland in the ceasefire agreement with the IM. Protesters in Imphal set fire to the Assembly building. From this point forward, the demand for ST status grew significantly as uneasy Meitei people worried the potential development of Greater Nagalim would result in the reduction of Manipur's geographic region. In Manipur, there was a demand for an Inner Line Permit (ILP) between 2006 and 2012, which would prevent foreigners from entering the state without authorization. Fears of demographic change were sparked by the Kuki-Zomi's unrestricted movement across Manipur's porous border with Myanmar. These communities are linked by strong ties to ethnicity, customs, language, and dress, and frequently see themselves as a fluid population living without boundaries of country and state.

The Federation of Regional Indigenous Societies, which led the ILP demand in 2006, asserted that after the permit system was abolished, Manipur's population growth rate increased from 12.8% between 1941 and 1951 to 35.04% between 1951 and 1961 and to 37.56% between 1961 and 1971. The Meiteis claim that the reserve of jobs for STs amounts to an unfair advantage in a state where the government is the major employer and there are few other employment options. They further point out that Meiteis are not permitted to purchase land in the hills, whereas tribals are permitted to do so in the valley. Insecurities have gotten worse as a result of news of infrastructural development, such as the arrival of railroads that will further open up Manipur.

How Did the Conflict Escalate?

The Meitei community has long pushed for Scheduled tribal designation. According to the community, their problems are a result of widespread immigration from Bangladesh and the nearby countries of Myanmar. Meiteis mostly reside in the Manipur Valley because they are unable to purchase land in the state's hilly regions according to current rules. Since Manipur is not acknowledged as a tribal state like Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Nagaland, it is not eligible for funding allocations, subsidies, and other benefits that are typically provided to tribal states. This is why they are requesting ST designation.

As this problem has been going on for ten years, the Manipur High Court ordered the Biren Singh-led BJP government to take the Meitei community's plea for inclusion in the ST list into consideration within four weeks and provide a suggestion to the Union government for consideration. Following the All Tribal Student Union Manipur (ATSUM)-organised "Tribal Solidarity March" in eight hill districts in response to the High Court's decision regarding the Meitei community's demand, clashes between members of the tribal Kuki community and non-tribal Meitei community occurred. There were apparently protests against the ATSUM event in other places as well.

The mounting resentment that the Kuki and Naga groups have towards the state administration is seen to be a contributing factor to the frequent conflicts. The state government recently conducted an eviction campaign in the forest areas where it claimed the restricted forest areas had been invaded. It is significant because the Kuki and Naga communities have inhabited these regions for many years.

The Way Forward for Manipur

Manipur is a mix of cultures, religions, and ethnicities, many of which have a history of mistrust, much like the majority of northeastern India. How long must a group of people reside in Manipur before they may claim the name "Manipuri"? The demand for ST status has existed for almost ten years, so this is not a brand-new problem. Because they seek growth for their state, the Meitei community's case appears to be valid. On the other hand, the argument made by the Kuki and Naga populations is valid given that they have lived in these regions for a long time and that it finally boils down to their identity. To change this statute, the state introduced a contentious Bill in 2015 along with two other bills i.e. the Indian Constitution's Article 371C prohibits the transfer of tribal land to non-tribal people, including Meiteis, and protects the land of the tribal peoples in the hills of Manipur under Section 158 of the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms (MLR and LR) Act, 1960. The situation is unlikely to get better unless the government comes to an agreement and engages in meaningful conversation with civil society organisations from both populations. Political relationships inside the state and with New Delhi must be controlled, and disagreements must be diplomatically resolved.