

Manipur Violence: Understanding North East India is essential for viable Solutions

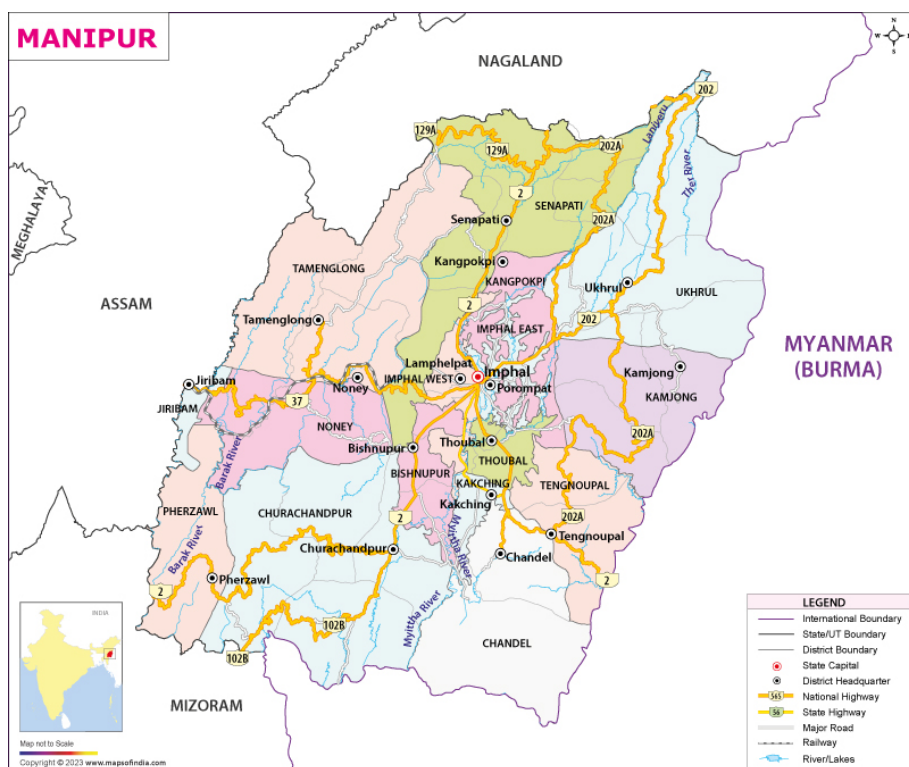
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Whenever an ethnic clash or terrorist attack occurs in India's Northeast, there is a beeline of "national media" reporters to the region for a quick report. Many energetic journalists move to the site of the incident to get "firsthand" information while many others air all kinds of "Breaking News" from cities like Guwahati or even from the national capital. In such a situation one can even see the emergence of "experts" who give their views from the comfort of their homes. These experts who had gained experience by serving in the region at some time in their careers do have adequate background knowledge, but they are at times out

of sync with the ground realities. Ministers and political leaders also descend on the violence-hit region but many have political agenda and very often end up making unsolicited, unrealistic, and even provocative remarks. This trend is not new and is an increasing tendency for the past several decades.

Unfortunately, such flying visits do not help. Sometimes such reporting that makes headlines in electronic and print media and is generally accepted as authentic may not convey the ground reality as some inputs may be biased or doctored depending upon the source of the information.



Unlike other states of the country, the Northeast of India is unique with its cultural and geopolitical characteristics. The region shares 96% of its border internationally with four countries including China, and is an extremely complex region with more than 200 ethnic groups with distinct cultures, food habits,

languages, or dialects. Amongst all the northeastern states, Manipur is the most complex state with more than thirty-five ethnic groups. The state shares a large part of its boundary with Myanmar (398 Kilometers) presently ruled by the Military junta. Manipur also shares a boundary of 96 Km with Mizoram, 205 km with Assam and 204km with Nagaland. The state has a diverse demography. Nagas (24%) and Kukis (16%) are mostly Christians whereas Hindu Meities and Muslims constitute 53% and 6% of the population respectively.

While India's border with Pakistan and Bangladesh is fenced, the border with Myanmar is not. There is also a policy of Free Move Regime (FMR) which allows Citizens of both countries to come up to 16 Kilometers within each other's territory without a visa or passport documentation. Though the aim of FMR is noble as it allows better interaction amongst people who are mostly from the same ethnic tribe, it is prone to exploitation by militants, as well as smugglers.

Myanmar military's operations against rebel groups have forced many tribals particularly Chin-Kuki to enter Indian states particularly Mizoram and Manipur for safety. However, Meities allege that infiltration of Chin-Kuki, as well as rebels to Manipur from Myanmar, is part of a grand design to occupy land and carry out nefarious activities like land grabbing, arms smuggling, drug trafficking etc. As per an unconfirmed report, approximately 35000 Chin/Kuki refugees from Myanmar have taken shelter in Mizoram and another about 5000 have taken refuge in Manipur.

The smuggling of drugs, timber, areca nut, cheap Chinese clothes, and electronic items from Myanmar into Manipur and further to other parts of the country is a lucrative business. There is fierce competition to control the lucrative drug trade. While Kuki tribes are primarily involved in poppy cultivation, almost all other ethnic groups are involved in the drug trade in some form or other. It is learnt that fertilizer (urea) provided for distribution to farmers is diverted for poppy cultivation by vested interests with the connivance of Government officials.



There are a large number of small or big militant groups active in Manipur, each vying for influence and claiming to be the “protectors” of the interest of the respective ethnic groups. Many of these groups, particularly Kuki militant groups, are under Suspension of Operation (SoO) with the Central Government. Approximately 2000 Kuki militants representing about 26 different Kuki Militant groups are lodged in Designated Camps set up in various Hill districts of the state. The allegations by Meities that the Kuki militants are abetting and instigating Kukis to carry out violence against them cannot be ruled out. Similarly, Kukis allege the involvement of Meitei militants in the ongoing ethnic violence. The ethnic violence which has been continuing since 3rd May 2023 has not seen a substantial reduction despite Union Home Minister Amit Shah and others’ appeal. The Nagas are closely observing the emerging situations. In such a delicate environment all that is needed is just a spark to aggravate an already volatile situation.

Despite many differences, the various ethnic groups have learnt to live together in

Manipur. However, a number of actions in the recent past by the present ruling dispensation in the state has led to resentment amongst tribals mainly Kukis. These include eviction of Kuki encroachers from forest land, action against Kukis involved in poppy cultivation etc. While these appear to be genuine actions of an elected Government, Kukis feel that they have been deliberately targeted. A section of Meities has now demanded that NRC (National Register of Citizens) should be made for Manipur state as they feel that immigration of Chin/Kukis from Myanmar has substantially increased. Thus, the trust deficit between Kuki and Meities had already reached a peak. It will take substantial effort from everyone from the Government machinery to the common citizen to restore confidence and goodwill amongst the ethnic tribes.



The direction of the Imphal High Court on 27 March 2023 given out publicly on 19th April directing the Manipur Government to consider ST status for Meities triggered a large-scale violence on 3rd May. Incidentally, Muralidaran who was appointed Acting Chief Judge of Manipur High Court on 6th February 2023 had given the very important judgment within two months of his assuming office. The

Supreme Court however on 17th May 2023, criticizing the Manipur High Court judgement as ‘factually wrong’, expressed the need to nullify the order of the Manipur High Court. It is worth noting that the President of the country is the constitutional authority vested with the power of declaring a Caste or Tribe as SC or ST. The case to declare Meities as ST was first filed in 2013 (MutumChuramaniMetitei versus the State of Manipur).

According to the census records of 1891, 1901 and 1931, the Meitei was listed as a Scheduled Tribe, however, since 1951 were removed from the ST list of the Indian Union without any information or communication to the people of Manipur. In 1949, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India constituted a minority commission to verify the social status of Meities. There are reasons to believe that many Meities were not keen on the ST tag as they probably felt that they were of a higher class and being accepted as tribal will lower their social status. However, a faction of low caste Meities enjoys OBC and SC status.

Meities are probably now realizing the folly committed by their elders for not advocating for ST status. Incidentally, like Nagas and Kukis, Meities are also from Mongoloid genetic backgrounds. However, in the 19th century, under the influence of Bengali Hindus, Meities adopted Hindu culture, accepted Vaishnavism, and hence, are influenced by caste and social stratification patterns.

The pressure on land in the Manipur valley where other tribes (being ST) could own land as well as enjoy other benefits in terms of education and employment made the present generation of Meities feel insecure. They realized that only if they were granted ST status could they buy land in the hills or compete in jobs with other tribes. In a civil writ petition filed by a section of Meites in Manipur High Court in April 2022, the High Court on 27th March 2023 had directed the state government to submit the recommendation to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs to include the Meities in the ST list.

While both the tribes, namely Kukis and Nagas protested on 3rd May against the High Court's directions, the protest by Kukis turned violent. It is also a singular failure of Biren Singh's Government for not anticipating the law-and-order breakdown and accordingly taking effective measures to prevent the chaos.

In Manipur, the tribals enjoy some benefits under Article 371C of the constitution as well as the Manipur Hill Area District Autonomous Council Act of 1972. However, Kukis have been demanding a separate Autonomous Council on similar lines of the Bodoland Territorial Council operative in Bodo-dominated areas of Assam. Some Kukis have gone to the extent of demanding "Kuki land", a separate state to be carved out of Manipur. On the other hand, the demand of the Nagas is for the integration of Naga Areas of Manipur with Nagaland (Greater Nagaland). Therefore, the issues in Manipur are very complex. Many other tribes in the Northeast have been raising demand either for ST status or Autonomous council or even for separate states. Hence, the Centre needs to be very cautious in resolving the current Manipur imbroglio as the decisions can have ramifications in the other Northeast states.

The Central Government, though sincere in its efforts at solving the problems of the Northeast, has made many mistakes in the past simply because of the politicians' lack of patience to understand the intricacies of the region. One glaring example was the extension of the Ceasefire with NSCN (IM) to the state of Manipur in 2001. The Government had signed a Ceasefire agreement with dominant NSCN (IM) groups in 1997 which was confined to the state of Nagaland. However, under pressure from the NSCN (IM), the Govt in 2001 extended the Ceasefire to Manipur by incorporating the words "Without Territorial Limits". The Central Government's decision, taken without understanding the psyche of Meities and without consulting the Manipur government, led to large-scale violence leading to the killing of thirteen protestors in police firing on 18 June 2001. The Government had no option but to

withdraw the Ceasefire from Manipur. However, it took decades to normalize the relations between the Nagas and the Meities.

Similarly, the “Assam Accord” signed by the Central Government with the All-Assam Student Union (AASU) in 1985 has been a non-starter even after almost forty years of signing the accord. The Assam Accord talks of “Detection, Deletion (from Voters List) and Deportation of illegal Bangladeshis who have entered Assam post-1971. These illegal Bangladeshis cannot be deported to Bangladesh as there is no deportation agreement with Bangladesh. Moreover, Bangladesh denies that her citizens have infiltrated Assam or any other state. The government has signed an accord which it finds difficult to implement.

The Manipur situation is becoming tricky with neighbouring state Mizoram getting involved in the Manipur issue. Mizos belonging to Chin tribes just as Kukis are providing all help to their brethren who have taken refuge in that state. Now a section of the people particularly from Mizoram are trying to bring a religious angle to the issue saying that Christians have been deliberately targeted in Manipur. A section of Mizo politicians is now supporting the Kukis’ demand for Autonomous Council/ separate state that will further complicate the issue. Incidentally, a few newspapers published in Israel have also talked about the safety and security of the Jews in Manipur. Similarly, the role of RSS in the present violence has become conspicuous.

Both Kukis and Meiteis are attempting to internationalise the issue which is essentially an internal issue of the country. On 30th June 2023, World Kuki-Zo Intellectual Council (WKZIC) submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister of Israel seeking urgent intervention for the protection of the Kuki people. On 6th July 2023, the US Ambassador to India, Eric Garcetti, stated that the United States is ready to assist India in resolving the current ongoing issue.

It is creditable that other ethnic tribes, particularly Nagas of Manipur have

shown great restraint however, they are concerned about the possible political fallout of the ethnic clashes. Their concern is that any solution between Kukis and Meities should not in any way put the Nagas in any disadvantageous position.

The allegation by a section of Meitie leaders that Assam Rifles has been partial to Kukis appears to be politically motivated to malign India's oldest Para Military Force. The security forces, particularly the Assam Rifles, have been working round the clock to maintain peace in the state. Assam Rifles has rescued Meities from Kuki-dominated hill districts and similarly had rescued Kukis from Meitei-dominated valleys. It is hoped that the Central Government does not give in to the demand of some BJP leaders of Manipur to withdraw Assam Rifles from the state. On the contrary, there are allegations that at times Manipur Administration, in particular, the state police have been biased. It is pertinent to note that sizeable arms were looted from many police stations by miscreants which indicates the nexus of police with the miscreants, especially at the lower level.

Despite Home Minister's appeal to surrender arms looted from many police stations, only a few have been deposited. COCOMI (Coordinating Committee of Manipur Integrity), in a statement on 07th June 2023, rejected Home Minister Amit Shah's appeal to surrender looted arms and resolved not to allow Security Forces to launch operations to recover looted weapons. Such actions at this critical time are bound to aggravate the situation. The organization COCOMI has recently declared "Manipuri's National War against Chin Kuki Narco terrorism". Terming the entire Chin- Kukis as a narco-terrorist group will further widen the gap. It is to be noted that the spoils of the drug trade are enjoyed by most of the tribes including smugglers based in places outside the Northeast region,

The immediate aim, particularly of the Governments at the Centre as well as at the State, should be to win back the trust and confidence of people of all communities. The civil society, the media and common Meitei as well as the Kuki people must play a responsible role keeping in mind the sensitivities of all



communities. Panel discussions are good but putting one tribal group against another in the TV debate will further antagonize the common people. Similarly, people on social media must exercise utmost restraint. A long-term solution will need great deliberation. Patience and restraint are the key words at this juncture.

The views expressed are the author's own.