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Manipur Mayhem: A Latent Enmity, Generalized Violence and State's Apathy

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ABSTRACT

The viewpoint-based article provides an objective assessment of the ongoing ethnic conflict in the Indian province of Manipur. The author has critiqued the changing socio-cultural landscape, explicit demand of the scheduled tribes, apprehensions of Kuki-Zo regarding National Register of Citizens, and apathy of the state and central governments towards the basic need of the people as precursor of the violent conflict in Manipur. The author also provides his perspective on the way forward to amicably resolve the crisis in Manipur by opening sincere dialogues with all the stakeholders. Politicians, public policy champions, community-based organizations, and non-profit organizations can take cues from the article to develop a broad-based intervention strategy acceptable to all the stakeholders for mitigating the crisis in Manipur.

KEYWORDS: Ethnic Conflict, Kuki, Meitei, Manipur, India

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INTRODUCTION

Manipur, with a geographical area of 22, 327 sq. kms, is a home to mainly three ethnic communities: the Meitei, the Naga, and the Kuki¹. As per 2011 census of India, population of the state is 28.56 lakhs. Majority of the Meitei settled in the valley that constitutes roughly 10% of the geographical area of Manipur while the Naga and Kuki mostly settled in the hills. In the last few decades, Manipur has had a very rough period of political pandemonium triggered by armed insurgents and ethnic clashes, inter alia. Attempt to trace the history of violence and conflict in Manipur unfolds contemporary violence and conflict deeply rooted in hills-valleys binary, sociocultural factors, and ethnic identity. Ongoing conflicts in Manipur, including the current violence, are the results of latent hostility, a long-drawn enmity amongst the ethnic groups. The state's apathy has also prompted violence and conflict in different parts of Northeast India, not least in Manipur. Present turmoil therefore can be attributed to a complex interplay of multiple factors allied to social, physical and the politics of distribution and redistribution.

CHANGING SOCIO-CULTURAL LANDSCAPE AND CONFLICT

Located in one of the most strategic corners in the eastern periphery of the Indian sub-continent, socio-political conflicts that have occurred in the last few decades, including the current conflict, in the state of Manipur are often tainted with influences of external forces, some pointing to China, even the West for supporting through religious affiliation, and porous Indo-Myanmar borders. Some of the crucial historical events, such as proselytization of Hinduism amongst the Meitei and its impact on social relation between the hill tribes and the Meitei seldom capture the attention of the mainstream politics and liberal imagination. It may be mentioned that contemporary conflicts in Manipur have a very long history, even more than a century (Allen, 1905, Reid, 1942/1983), therefore revisiting the historical events accountable for changing socio-cultural landscape of Manipur is very crucial not only for analysis purpose but also for formulation of appropriate measures for conflict resolution.

¹ Refers in the present context to the broader ethnic group of Kuki-Zo people.

Socio-cultural landscape of Manipur underwent changes with the arrival of Islam in the 16th century, followed by Hinduism in the 18th century and Christianity towards the end of the 19th century. Going back to the history of Manipur beyond 19th century, the Meitei encountered first a systematic proselytization of Hinduism in the 18th century. Until the formal introduction of Hinduism during the reign of Garib Niwaz (Pamheiba), people buried the dead bodies, ate meat, drank ardent spirit, behaved just like the hill people (Hudson, 1908). When he embraced Hinduism, his subjects were made to follow the same faith willingly or forcefully. Since then, the entire social structure of the Meitei was recanted into Kshatriyas, Brahmins and other Hindu Varna (Chishti, 2005). Hitherto unknown social system somewhat similar to the caste system practiced in the mainland India was introduced amongst the Meitei, renouncing their traditional religion called Sanamahism that was followed for more than a thousand years. Newer form of social relation emerged in due course and eventually caste system become a distinctive feature of the Meitei society. Social relations approach changed and their projection of 'social superiority' became a well-established marker of societal attitude. The hill people were labelled with a derogatory name like '*Hao*²', a sign of affronting or insulting to the hill people (Mawon, 2014), and considered untouchable, unclean and uncivilized. The word *amang-asheng* (pure-impure) was attached to their daily social practices and become more of a social norm that restrict contact, sharing or exchange of things, a common practice within the residential propinquity, with the hill tribes or other schedule caste. This marks the beginning of watershed in the social relation between the hill tribes and the Meitei. Such social taboos didn't exist amongst the Meitei before the arrival of Hinduism (Chandra, 2018).

Proselytization of Hinduism prompted almost annihilation of centuries-old traditional religion and social system of the Meitei. One of the objectives of an organization like Arambai Tenggol, believed to be a radical group, is therefore to revive this indigenous religion and cultural practices. In the last few decades, Meitei revivalism has also grown and gained popularity in the valley. Meitei revival movement, like Apokpa Marup, attempts to present a unified religion

² Neighboring tribes/hill people including Naga, Kuki, Mizo etc. as called by the Meitei

called 'Sanamahism' as marker of pre-Hindu identity to resist Indian political hegemony (Sabastian, 2021).

SCHEDULE TRIBE DEMAND AND ITS REPERCUSSION

Considering the various agendas and propagandas disseminated by the Meitei organizations, demand for schedule tribe is a manifestation of the Meitei's intention of salvaging the lost culture, language and identity, inter alia. Why such advanced community has to demand 'backward status', come down to a lower level in social strata where people of this class were at one point of time considered untouchable, impure and unclean by the Meitei themselves, speak for itself but such move without a doubt has deepened the hill-valley divides and complicated Meitei-tribal relation. There are claims and counterclaims that Meitei were recognized as a tribe before the independence of India, they lost their tribal tag after signing the merger agreement with India on September 21, 1949. Meitei was left out while preparing the ST list under Article 342 of the Indian constitution. Current demand for ST is therefore deemed to salvage the lost status (The Sangai Express, 2023). While commission or omission about inclusion of Meitei in the ST list is a subject of debate, it is also argued that Meitei were not denied ST status, but they rejected it outright. It was R.Suisa, a tribal Lok Sabha MP (1957-1962), who gave an advice to the Meitei to accept ST status. His advice was apparently not only rejected but he was, mocked, insulted, and humiliated by the Meitei. He even went up to the Meitei Maharaja, but he was given a stringent warning with dire consequences if he continues to pursue the matter amongst the Meitei. Foreshadowing the potential of ST demand in the future, R. Suisa wrote in his diary: *One day these people (Meiteis) will demand ST status by then, it will be too late to undo things that are achievable now.* In the early 80s, the then Chief Minister of Manipur, Mr. Rishang Keishing, took up the matter in the State Assembly, only to be rejected outright again by the Meitei. In 1995, Meitei community was granted the status of Other Backward Class (OBC). Two groups within the Meitei community—Chakpas (previously known as lois) and Thoubal Khunous (previously Yaithibis)—were already identified as Scheduled Castes (SC) in 1956 (Das, 2023).

It was in the year 2012 that a few sections of the Meitei community formed Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur (STDCM). Their demand has gained impetus in the last few years. Meanwhile there is a growing sense of apprehension amongst the tribal as they fear for further alienation and marginalization, in term of employment and other opportunities meant for schedule tribes, if the demand were granted. As the demand for ST intensified, apposition from the tribal community has also intensified. There has been several round of protests and counter protests in the hill districts of Manipur at different point of times against the ST demand of the Meitei. Tribal communities always see Meitei's demand for ST status through the lens of contemporary power relations and consider it as an attempt to extend their control over the tribal, a ploy to extend their power and keep all the land and resource under their control. Nagas and Kukis have no issues with the right-minded kind of demand that would promote equal development, peaceful coexistence and harmony between the hills and the valleys. Meitei community has enjoyed the upper hand in all sectors and government affairs having 40 legislatures out of the 60-member legislative assembly. There have been several cases of allegation by the All-Tribal Students Union Manipur (ATSUM) against the state government for gross violation of reservation policy.

Present turmoil resulted from complex interplay of multiple factors. Notably, the Manipur high court order on 27th March, which directed the state government to recommend for inclusion of Meitei n the ST list, is the main cause of the present violence. Opposing the high court order, tribal communities in Manipur led by the All-Tribal Students Union (ATSUM) took to the street across the hill districts of Manipur on May 3, 2023. Unfortunately, violence broke out in Torbung area of Churachanpur district, and it spread like wildfire in the Meitei and Kuki dominated areas. What followed in the milieu is the mass killing, arsons, looting, mass exodus of the Kuki from Imphal city, not a single Kuki is living in Imphal and all the houses belonging to the Kuki are apparently reduced to ashes. Many Meitei populace living in the Kuki dominated areas met with the same fate.

MAINSTREAM POLITICS, STATE AND THE CENTRAL'S APATHY

It has been almost four months since the conflict erupted yet the efforts of the central and the state government have yielded no convincing result. There is no glimmer of hope for peace with sporadic killings and arson happening up till today. On May 29, 2023, Union Home Minister, Amit Shah, visited Manipur and promised to restore peace in the state within 15 days but the situation on the ground tells us otherwise. Is the present government not able to quell the crisis? Is our country, proud of being the largest democracy in the world, not capable of dealing with this internal crisis? Crisis of this magnitude, having displaced more than 60,000 people and lost more than 150 souls, let alone the properties lose in the ensue, in a span of three months or so, if cannot be contained in these many days and months, concerned citizens have the rights to question the integrity and sincerity of the state and the central government. Several civil organizations and political parties have held protests and rally showcasing anguish over the lackadaisical response from the state and central Government.

Lately on 7th August, the Supreme Court of India constituted a three-member committee of former judges of high courts to monitor diverse aspects of humanitarian nature in Manipur. What measures central government has taken to neutralize the crisis? There were claims and counterclaims that even the paramilitary force sent immediately after the violence erupted were not deployed immediately on the ground which gave advantage to certain section of the communities leading to escalation of the violence, perpetrators even looted several weapons and ammunition from the state armories. Report of missing over 4537 thousand weapons (as reported in the INDIA TV news) and 50,000 rounds of ammunition from the police stations and armories, allegedly captured by the perpetrators, has proven the incapability of the state force. Further, this has also created room for much speculation of the state's complicity in the conflict where the state machineries, not least the state police force, became a mere accessory by allowing such act, looting of arms and ammunition, without any retaliation and resistance.

Silence and unforthcoming of the Prime Minister of India on Manipur crisis, for the reason best known to him and the party, have also let many citizens raised questions on the central's

interest and strategies for tackling the crises. The Prime Minister of India has not made any exhaustive public speech or comments on the crisis nor taken up for serious discussion in the parliament. He spoke in the parliament for the first time on 10th August on the Manipur violence, after three months of the incident but talked barely 6-7 minutes on the Manipur violence in his 2 hrs 20 minutes long speech. This outraged the opposition party and many citizens across the country. Earlier he made a selective comment on the viral video of two Kuki girls who were stripped naked and sexually molested by a mob of Meitei. Whether technical issue or deliberate act, when the issue of Manipur was raised by a Mizo National Front MP, Mr. K Vanlalvena in the Rajya Sabha, his microphone was muted. Further, Rajya Sabha Chairperson and Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar directed that Mr. Vanlalvena's speech should not go on record (ABP New Bureau, 2023). Besides, Dr. Lorho Pfozii, Member of Parliament from outer Manipur constituency, was advised not to speak on the crisis in the Lok Sabha (Lakshman, 2023), he was not even consulted on the ongoing crisis which have let down the people of outer Manipur constituency.

The whole-of-government approach to the crisis has also seemingly suffered a setback, resulting in an iatrogenic like situation. There were cases of confrontation between Manipur police and Assam Rifles for allegedly siding with a particular community. The Manipur Police has lodged FIRs against Assam Rifles for obstructing Manipur police from arresting men who were allegedly behind the killing of three people in Bishnupur district on 5th August. The Meitei have no faith in the Assam Rifles likewise Kuki people have lost their faith in the state force – Manipur Police. A group of Kuki-Zo women in Kangpokpi district, were seen crying and begging Assam Rifles troop not to leave their village as they don't trust in the state security force. Meitei women torch bearers (Meira Paibi) are very skeptical about the veracity of the Assam Rifle for which they even went to the extent of checking Aadhaar cards of the Assam Rifles personnel deployed at some places in the valley. They demanded for immediate withdrawal of the Assam Rifles from the conflict zones, stating they don't trust the Assam Rifle. Lack of coordination between the state police and the paramilitary forces deployed in the conflict areas is quite apparent, all that happened because of lapses in the whole-of-government approach to the

crises. Intermittent arsons and shooting are happening and the situation is not expected to calm down anytime soon. Meanwhile Kuki-Zo have intensified their demand for an alternative arrangement in the form of separate administration. Such demand may not be however accepted by the Meitei and the Naga easily as evident from the public announcement and discussion by leaders of several organizations. Foreshadowing potential impact of such demand on Naga inhabited areas, if at all granted, Naga political and civil organization's representatives have categorically stated in several public appearances that while appreciating the initiatives taken by the state in quest for restoration of peace, Naga country should not be appropriated.

Against the dynamics of current crisis and community deficit trust disorder, the way the state and central government is handling the situation has come under severe criticism from several civil and political organizations. The immediate need is probably not a solution to the problem but measures to subdue the violence from further escalation. There were debates on potential imposition of central rule. Looking at the reasons of some of the states that have been under the central rule in the last few decades, I have not seen any state with such intensity and magnitude of crisis being exempted from the central rule. Central rule may not be the solution but could keep the situation under control and restrict from escalation further. It may be mentioned that arms groups of both the communities are directly and indirectly involved in the violence. Once the involvement of the arms group is curtailed and their movement is restricted, and if all the civilian settlements are given appropriate measures of security protection by the central paramilitary forces, situation would be different from what it was.

NATIONAL REGISTER OF CITIZENS (NRC) AND KUKI-ZO APPREHENSION

Considering the phenomenal growth of the state population and the rising number of illegal migrants, pressure for implementation of NRC got a fresh push in Manipur in the recent past. Civil organizations and students' bodies of the Meitei and the Naga have been pressing for implementation of the NRC in the few years. Taking up the matter in the state assembly, the Manipur Assembly unanimously passed a resolution on 6th August, 2022, for implementation of

National Register Citizens (NRC) and established a State Population Commission (SPC). The cut year of the NRC is 1961.

Some of the Kuki organizations, including the Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF), do not endorse the Manipur Government's decision on NRC implementation. This is quite understandable as the Kuki-Zo people straddle the Indo-Myanmar border. This allows them to have free and easy border crossing whenever political crises erupted in Myanmar. Several Chin refugees from Myanmar have entered Manipur and Mizoram over the years. Meanwhile, Kuki population in Manipur has drastically increased, besides there have been also a large number of unspecified populations among the Kukis. Such abnormal growth of population during the last decades and increasing unspecified population would raise questions to every concerned citizen. It may be mentioned that it was during the heights of political pandemonium in Myanmar in the 1980s, for example in the aftermath of 8888 uprising in Burma where more than 3000 people were massacred, that Kuki population in Manipur gained massive growth (Table 1). Though no official statistics could be ascertained, thousands fled the country in the aftermath of the 1988 massacre. Similarly, in the aftermath of the military coup in February 2021, thousands fled the country and crossed into neighboring countries including India. According to ACAPS 2023 report, there are over 74, 600 Myanmar's refugees India. As appeared in the UNHCR report 2023, as of May 1, 2023, over 53,500 Myanmar's refugees have crossed into India since the military coup in February 2021 out of which 40,150 individuals are currently residing in Mizoram and 8,250 individuals are in Manipur. As many as 5,092 individuals have approached UNHCR in New Delhi for registration since February 2021, the report says.

Table 1: Growth of Kuki population (Population by Mother Tongue/Language)

Year	Thadou Kuki	Kuki (Unspecified)
1951	8284	26166
1961	22988	17792
1971	49217	14488
1981	57699	37174

1991	103667	23072
2001	178696	12900
2011	223779	37805

Source: Economic Survey Manipur 2020-21

What makes the Kuki-Zo community worry about the implementation of NRC is comprehensible. They fear the potential displacement of large number of unspecified Kuki-Zo people reported in the census and refugees who have crossed into Manipur. Further, they perceived NRC as systemic target against the community when they are even portrayed as illegal migrants and non-indigenous people. Why Kuki-Zo people should worry about NRC if there are no illegal Kuki-Zo migrants in Manipur? Their apprehension on implementation of NRC creates a room for speculation that there are high chances of illegal immigrants being absorbed in the local Kuki-Zo populace. NRC does not target any community; it applies to all the people living in the state of Manipur. In addition, Manipur being in a very politically strategic location, implementation of NRC and strict monitoring on movement of people in the border areas is crucial at this juncture.

WAY FORWARD AND CONCLUSION

Looking back on some of the crucial events that occurred in the history of Manipur during the last few centuries, one finds the present situation deeply rooted in the hill-valley dichotomy and disparate socio-cultural praxis. Further, the post-independence set in new political crises with the rising consciousness of nationalism amongst all the ethnic groups. Since the post-independence period, Manipur has witnessed civil unrests multiple times due to arms insurgents, ethnic violence, and atrocities of state forces and central forces. New splinters armed insurgency groups keep cropping-up despite central's initiatives to quell all the armed insurgents through talks and appeasement projects, calling the armed groups to join mainstream politics. The calls from Delhi have not produced any convincing results. This could mean the need for restructuring the existing approaches and remodeling, taking into consideration the importance of socio-cultural and geographical parameters. The myopic view

of the center at times allows violence and conflict to drag on for years. The crises are therefore conveniently deemed generalized violence for if the Centre is serious enough, Manipur with a relatively small size of geography and population, solution would not have been beyond the reach as it appears today. There are things to be prioritized. De-escalation measure is the need of the hour, and the central government needs to take accountability with people of the rival groups having lost their faith in the state machineries. The narrative of present crises contextualizing as war on narco-terrorism and labelling Kuki-Zo as poppy cultivators, drug traffickers etc., is a tactic to evade from the core issue. Past experiences and ongoing drug related cases in the high court of Manipur suggest that Manipur has had cases of the state machineries with no exception of military officers involving in such illegal trade during the last few year (Langer, 2018). While the narrative of the Meitei has proclivity of handpicking Kuki-Zo militants, one cannot sideline and ignore the case of top politicians being directly or indirectly indulging in the drug-trafficking, let alone other militant groups in the state. Dialogue at different levels is required but only if central government give the utmost efforts. Serious intervention and peace building mechanisms from the Centre is the need of the hour, Manipur state should not be left alone to fend for itself.

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