

Decoding the conflict and causes between Meitei and Kuki people

Chingangbam Ningthilsana, *Arvind Shanker Shukla

Research Scholar, Sharda University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh-201310

Email: chingangbamningthilsana@gmail.com

Ph no:9515732193

Assistant Professor, Political Science, Sharda University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh-201310

Email: shuklasarvind@gmail.com

Ph no: 7905545728

ABSTRACT

Meitei and Kuki conflict started with Meitei fears of losing their land, culture, and tradition due to internal and external influx. To overcome this fear Meitei people, want ST which will give them constitutional protection, whereas Kuki and Naga on the other hand don't want Meitei to become a scheduled tribe. Many Burmese Kuki have illegally crossed the border and started sheltering in Manipur since 1951. This paper is based on primary data and uses secondary data from local newspapers and journals. Due to political instability in the neighboring country, many Burmese Kukis have come in different migration waves of different periods in the last 70 years and enjoyed the scheduled tribe privilege and protection given by the Indian constitution. This huge migration brings anxiety to the indigenous people of Manipur, especially about demographic changes. When ATSUM organised a rally on 3rd May against ST status for Meitei which is pre-dominated by Kuki people. The violence started at Torbung which is also the border between Bishnupur district and Churachandpur district with Kuki people started burning down Meitei houses and temples. Other districts like Kangpokpi, and Tegnoupal also hit the violence on the same day at the same time which is dominated by Kuki people. And with this Meitei People retaliated as a result.

KEYWORDS: Meitei, Kuki, Tribe, Homeland, Separate administration

INTRODUCTION

The Manipur state is located in the North eastern part of India and gained considerable attention due to a new conflict between Meitei and Kuki. Many ethnic or tribal tribes that can be broadly classified as Kuki and Naga live in the hills of Manipur, while indigenous religion Sanamahism, Vaishnavism and Hindu Meitei, along with several Muslim populations, dominate the valley (Saisin et al. 2023). Meitei activists assert that before the Manipur princely states became part of the Union of India on September 21, 1949, the group was recognized by the British colonial authority as a tribe. The Meiteis' acquisition of ST status would guarantee constitutional protections against outsiders because they were acknowledged as a tribe before Manipur's unification with India. Scheduled Tribes Demand Committee was established in 1981, which demanded the Meiteis' ST status more impetus (Journal and Alam 2023). The state government did not reply to the Committee's demand, despite the Committee submitted a memorandum to the Governor on the matter. On March 27, 2023, the Manipur High Court directed the state government to examine the community's appeal for inclusion and provide a proposal to the Union government for additional deliberation within four weeks. On May 3, 2023, a tribal solidarity march was held in Churachandpur, which is when the fighting started. There were fights and bloodshed between the two communities as a result of the All-Tribal Students' Union of Manipur organizing a Tribal Solidarity March to express opposed to the Meiteis' demand of ST.

The violence got out of control and the number of deaths kept rising up, so the assurances had little impact. On June 25, 2023, the centre asked Manipur government for instructions to "work harder" to bring about peace. Over 60,000 people were forcibly relocated from Manipur due to the protracted conflict between the Kuki and Meitei people (Saisin et al. 2023). And there was no longer any noticeable Meitei presence in Churachandpur

or other Kuki-dominated hill districts. The Meiteis, who make up roughly 53% of the population, are restricted to ten percent of Manipur's total land area. The rest of the areas, which include the hill districts, are primarily populated by the Kukis and Nagas.

Despite ethnic strife, the Nagas of Manipur have chosen to maintain their long-standing friendship with the Meitei community, as demonstrated by the absence of conflict between the two groups. This is despite the fact that they share the Meiteis' opposition to inclusion as a ST and have stated that they would prefer to maintain the status quo in the state of Manipur.

Since 2012, the STDCM has led a popular campaign to enlist Meitei/Meetei in the ST category in order to provide constitutional protections for their identity, similar to those enjoyed by other indigenous communities. According to a press release from STDCM, "everyone now agrees that enlisting Meitei/Meetei in the ST category is a legitimate and constitutional option to ensure the survival of Meitei/Meetei community (e-pao³). The NSCN-IM or the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak Muivah have not been visible (Bhattacharjee 2023). Experts have warned that unless the federal and state governments act quickly to quell the unrest, it may spread to other areas of the Northeast, where Shangri-La is currently experiencing unrest. Complicating matters further, Mizoram's Chief Minister Zoramthanga expressed support for the concept of "Greater Mizoram," which would encompass parts of Manipur inhabited by the ethnic Zo people.

He underlined that peaceful means and the constitutional framework would lead to the creation of a Greater Mizoram and that any efforts to include should follow Article 3 of the Constitution rather than using force. Following the ethnic violence on May 3, the Kuki-Zomi organizations in Manipur increased their demand for a separate administration. Some Mizo groups supported their demand, most notably the Mizo National Front, the ruling party of Mizoram. The Mizo National Front had led an armed separatist movement that called for the creation of Greater Mizoram until a peace agreement was signed in 1986. Tensions remained high at the end of July 2023, almost three months after the conflict between the Meiteis and Kuki-Zo tribes broke out.

The other set priorities at odds with his, making peace a prerequisite for Kukis's political ambition to govern. The editor of the Imphal Review of Arts and Politics argued in a piece in The Telegraph that, even if a separate administration for Kukis was decided upon for the sake of peace, the plan was "already running into walls because of flawed presumptions." Its main flaw was that it ignored the significance of the Nagas, the other major ethnic group in Manipur, and instead characterised the war as a bilateral matter involving the Kukis and Meiteis.

To guarantee enduring peace, prior consent from all parties involved was essential. No territory the Nagas considered their own should be touched in any separate administrative arrangement for Kukis, as stated by the ten Naga legislators in Manipur. According to Phanjoubam, the Naga stance may be a spoiler because Kukis are dispersed throughout all of Manipur's districts due to their villages' propensity to split apart and multiply. He clarifies that the Kukis had assumed that the endemic division of Manipur between the hills and the valley would bring the two main hill tribes together to fight against Meiteis. However, this assumption ignored the fact that over the years, the valley has served as a melting pot for identities, causing Meiteis to inherit linguistic and cultural traits from all of the surrounding hill communities, including Kukis. Because of the identity-swapping, Nagas and Meiteis had a strong innate bond.

The Meitei myths of origin refer to the Koubru range as their sacred last station before descending into the valley, likely acting out Jungian archetypal memory. "Tellingly, Meitei kings wore Tangkhul Naga costume at coronation," he continues. Similarly, Leirum Phi, a sacred shawl shared by Meiteis and Tangkhuls, is ritualistically used to cover the Meitei bridal bed on the night of the wedding. Furthermore, the Meiteis have not abandoned their pre-Hindu practises of worshipping nature; they regard peaks, wetlands, and forests as sacred places inhabited by sylvan deities that should never be disturbed. These forests and peaks are also revered by many Naga tribes, though Christianity is currently displacing these more traditional beliefs. He says that despite provocations and extremely bitter confrontations brought on by divergent political goals,

"such primal bonds had kept Nagas and Meiteis from crossing the red line that can shatter their relationship." Consequently, on May 3, both Kukis and Nagas participated in a protest rally in response to the Meiteis' desire to be included on the Scheduled Tribe list. But only Kukis, who went on an arson rampage against Meitei villages at Torbung in Churachandpur district after hearing a story that Meiteis had destroyed a Kuki war memorial, breached this red line.

The result is the current state of savagery in the state. "Rendering hollow the familiar conflict templates of tribals vs. non-tribals, Christians vs. Hindus, minority vs. majority, readily lapped up by reporters and commentators of the crisis, including the European Parliament in its Manipur resolution," Phanjoubam claims, the Nagas had distanced themselves from the Kuki cause in this battle. Finally, "Kukis and Meiteis must realise that by rediscovering their old ties, they alone, not the self-righteous voices from outside, can end their mutual tragedy." The migration of Manipur's Meiteis and Kukis into neighbouring states presents additional threats to the Northeast's ability to see violence spread. Following a "advisory" released by an organisation of former militants, which advised Meiteis to leave Mizoram in the wake of the clashes, a large number of Meiteis fled the state into neighbouring Mizoram in order to avoid the violence. There were reports that more than a thousand Meiteis had reached the southern Assamese region of Barak Valley, where the government of Assam had set up relief camps in the Cachar district.

In response to the "ex-militants' association" counsel, the All-Assam Manipuri Students' Union gave a counteradvice to Mizos living in Barak Valley areas. They were informed that their safety was in jeopardy and that the Meiteis of Assam were becoming increasingly disgruntled. 596 Manipuris were reported to have fled to the nearby state of Mizoram on May 7, 2023, adding to the already heavy weight this state bears from refugees from Bangladesh and Myanmar. Aizawl district received at least 151 members of the Chin Kuki-Mizo community, while Kolasib district, which borders Assam, received 228 and Saitual district, which borders Manipur, 217 of them. The majority of those who were displaced were housed in makeshift camps spread across multiple villages, with some finding temporary housing with local relatives. Currently, Mizoram is home to roughly 30,000 refugees from Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Following the military coup in February 2021, Myanmar citizens sought shelter in Mizoram, whereas the Kuki-Chin people of Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts had fled their villages in February 2022 due to the Bangladesh Army's ongoing crackdown on an ethnic rebel group. International scholarly scrutiny has mostly avoided the long-running insurgency in the remote Northeast of India. Most Western academic study on security and development studies has ignored the ongoing conflicts in contemporary Asia in favour of concentrating on crises in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Because the Indian Northeast is tucked away from the spotlight and is geographically isolated, it is understandable that people there are unaware of the conflict. The Northeastern region of India is a culturally heterogeneous area that includes a multitude of racial and religious minority groups, as well as tribal groups and ethnic and religious minorities like the Meitei-Pangal Muslim community in Manipur and the Naga Christians in Nagaland.

The Manipur conflict is noteworthy for its frequent absence of a religious component, despite religious differences starting to cause divisions among the communities in the 1990s. The majority religion of the Meitei community is Hindu, but some also practise the native Sanamahi religion. While some significant minorities follow ancestor worship and animism, the Kuki and Naga communities are predominantly Christian. Because Muslims arrived in Manipur during the reign of Maharaja Khagemba (1579–1651) and settled by marrying Meitei women, the Meitei Pangals, who are Muslims, share ancestry with the Meiteis. About half of the state's population is made up of Meiteis, followed by the Naga and Kuki communities at roughly 39% and the Meitei Pangals at roughly 8%. Separate from the Meitei majority community, the Meitei Pangals have been demanding Scheduled Tribe (ST) status.

The All-Manipur Muslim Organisation Coordinating Committee created the Meitei Pangal ST Demand

Committee in 2013 to represent them. Tribal elders, however, have expressed disapproval of the requests made by the Meiteis and Meitei Pangals. Notably, there hasn't been any hostility between the Meitei Pangals and the tribal people. Nonetheless, the Meitei Pangals have served as a line of defence between the Meiteis and the Kukis. They are now involved in the ethnic dispute between the Kuki and Meitei communities. The conflict grew worse in the 1950s with the rise of the Naga national movement and the demand for an independent Naga nation. The Naga insurgency was thwarted by the rise of rebel organisations among the Meiteis and Kuki-Zomi. The Kukis began a struggle for Kukiland in the 1990s, which was separate from the Naga movement, and the Kuki-Zomi organisations began to militarise as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) group pressed more for self-determination.

When churches were set on fire and a call for Hindu unity was made in May 2023, the Meitei-Kuki conflict took on a more militant religious edge. The supreme authority of all Kuki tribes in the northeastern state, the Kuki Inpi Manipur (KIM), reiterated its call for a separate state amid the ethnic violence. The majority of the conflict is felt by common people, whose worries about economic hardship and underdevelopment go unanswered in the face of social unrest, political unrest, government suppression of insurgencies, and insurgent reprisals. There is now a troubling normalcy of exceptionalism that feeds the cycle of violence and counter violence. It is crucial to question the validity of the destructive cycle in order to escape it. But given the complexity of the conflict, depending only on established legal avenues like state institutions, courts, and human rights commissions may not be sufficient.

MISBELIEF OF THE VIOLENCE

Following the violence in Manipur on 3rd May, a number of stories have been spreading. Various narratives have been fabricated in the national and social media by intellectuals and civil society organisations interpreting the violence as the result of a conflict between the Meiteis and the tribal people. Capture the Meiteis and unite the tribal (Kuki-Chin-Mizo) voices is the goal. Other terms that are used are "Hills vs. Valley," "Christian Tribal vs. Hindu Meitei," and so on. These dichotomies remove the problem from the context of reality. It is crucial to present the issues in the appropriate light as a result. This suggests that in addition to organising the facts, one should investigate the source of the violence and reveal the larger story behind.

ATSUM protest against Schedule Tribe demand by Meitei

Fearing that the Meiteis would be granted Scheduled Tribe status, the All-Tribal Students Union Manipur (ATSUM), a Pro-Kuki association, had organised the infamous "peace march" on May 3, 2023, which marked the outbreak of violence. Although the peace rally was intended for all of the State's tribal areas, it only happened in the district headquarters of Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, and Tengnoupal, which are dominated by the Kuki people. In Churachandpur, the Kuki militants guarded peaceful rallies that quickly descended into violence as early as 10:30 in the morning, forest offices were set on fire. A few days later, the Manipur Tribal Forum challenged the Manipur High Court's order, directing the State government to respond to the Meiteis' request for ST reservation, in a writ petition filed with the Supreme Court.

The Manipur High Court postponed its own ruling by a year due to the intervention of the Supreme Court. It's odd that Kuki civil societies didn't try every legal avenue to resolve the matter something they eventually attempted to do with some degree of success. The use of force when non-violent alternatives are available reveals the political inclinations, character, and overarching strategy of the Kuki leadership. It is also difficult to comprehend how a widespread sense of fear could lead to violence in districts dominated by the Kuki while Naga districts continue to be completely peaceful. CSOs and Kuki intellectuals worked together to narrow down the potential flashpoint for violence to an attempted burning of the Kuki Centenary Gate in Leisang village after this concern was raised. A hit-and-run car driven by a Meitei driver was floated while more suspicion was expressed. Given what has transpired over the past two weeks, it is evident that the anti-ST reservation demonstration was merely a front for multiple political agendas. There is a great deal of arbitrariness involved in the nomenclature used to designate a community in the Northeast as either tribe or non-tribe. Regarding the Kukis' objection to the Meiteis being listed as a Scheduled Tribe under the Indian

constitution, the disputing communities are not entitled to determine whether or not the Meiteis are backward. The issue will be decided by institutional bodies and suitable forums. Kuki CSOs have disregarded those democratic and legal procedures.

Influx of illegal migrations of Kuki or Meitei domination over others

The story of Meitei hegemony in the state is one that is currently trending. One common argument is that the chief minister of Manipur is a Meitei, and there is a 40:20 political representation ratio between the valley and the hills. Although the statement is factual, its underlying spirit is not entirely accurate. When one looks back at Manipur's past, one finds that the region has always been governed in an inclusive manner, devoid of any distinction between tribal and non-tribal, or between hills and valleys. Following Manipur's statehood in 1972, Mohammed Alimuddin, a member of the Muslim community which at the time made up less than 8% of the total population, served as the state's first chief minister. Twice, he held the position of State chief minister.

Tribal leader Shri Yangmaso Shaiza, who held the position twice, was the next chief minister. And Tribal leader Shri Rishang Keishing was the longest-serving Chief Minister of Manipur. Shri T.C. Tiaankham, a member of the Kuki tribe, was the Manipur Assembly's first speaker. Thus, it is a white lie to claim that the Meitei dominates political power. Meiteis believe in the plurality of identities and viewpoints, as this fact alone demonstrates. There are claims of Meitei control over the State's polity. The ratio of hills to valleys should be interpreted as both reserved and unreserved seats. There are forty unclaimed assembly seats in the valley, and there is only one seat in the Kangpokpi district. All 41 of these open seats are open to contest by any Indian citizen.

Conversely, there are 19 reserved assembly seats that can only be won by tribal people. Another myth is that state funds are being siphoned off to the valley while no development is taking place in the hills. This is also untrue. Disregarding the propaganda, a more thorough examination of the Manipur government's spending in the valley and hills over the past few years will reveal more. Those propagandas are false the current BJP government, led by a Chief Minister, approved the aforementioned budget. During the 2020–21 fiscal years, Manipur Hill areas received 45.75% of the development fund, despite having a 42.83 percent population. As such, the narrative surrounding the discrimination against the tribal people in development policies and programmes is fabricated. However, some tribal groups in Manipur are afraid of changes to the state's current culture and demographics due to the increasing number of Chin and Kuki refugees. Non-Kuki groups have further claimed that the refugees have seized control of the hills and begun encroaching on the region's meagre resources, thereby assuming the locals' entitlement to government assistance and programmes. In response, Manipur's National Register for Citizens (NRC) practice has been demanded by civil society organisations such as the Unified Naga Council (UNC) and the Coordination Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI). That is capable of separating refugees from Indian citizens and eliminating the latter. Maharaja Leishemba Sanajaoba, the titular King of Manipur and BJP Rajya Sabha MP, brought up this matter in parliament as well, requesting that the Manipur-Myanmar border be fenced off to keep refugees out of State (Mathur 2023). The state of Manipur are frequently tarnished by outside influences; some blame China and even the West for their support due to their shared religion and the state's porous Indo-Myanmar borders (Khamrang 2023). Over 1,000 Myanmar refugees are already taking shelter in the relief camps set up at Phaikoh, Kheronram, Namli, Wangli and Ashang Khullen under Kamjong district and the number is likely to increase in the next couple of days, said Raang Peter, Deputy Commissioner of Kamjong (e-pao¹).

By diverting the Law of the country, illegal migration is a cultural phenomenon

Numerous Kuki scholars have maintained that the concept of boundary exists in the cultural and mental maps of the communities and that migration is a fact of human reality. Therefore, the international borders are meaningless to the Kuki-Chin communities because they are always changing. One of the cabinet Minister went on to say that a report by the Myanmar-based news channel Mizzima TV indicated that between 500,000 and 700,000 Burmese Kuki had trespassed into Manipur (e-pao⁴). Their cultural imagination and way of life shape their conception of land. All this does is trivialise the legitimacy of the contemporary state and give the Kuki infamous nomadic way of life legitimacy. We must clearly distinguish between the legal domain of the

contemporary state structure and cultural beliefs and worldviews. It is indisputable that the Westphalia Treaty of 1648, which established the concept of the modern state, is based on the state's legal authority and sovereignty over its citizens and other sovereign states.

A state's existence cannot be deemed null and void due to shortcomings in its policies. When a state is weak, it can force itself to become strong, even to the point of using its legal authority to dominate both its citizens and non-citizens. This is the definition of state sovereignty, which has been upheld by the Indian state since 1947. It is also important to remember that the Government of India is ultimately responsible for establishing and enforcing strict international borders. The Indian state has the last say that state governments can only offer their opinions by requesting information and discussing the issues and worries that their citizens are facing. Because they are nomads, Kuki have little collective memory. They also don't respect the memory of others. Everywhere they go, that becomes their land. To put it simply, shifting cultivation is the foundation of their mode of production. Their migration pattern is shaped by the soil's fertility.

They are constantly dispersing into smaller villages as they move from place to place. They frequently become closer to the habitation of other tribes or communities as a result of their nomadic lifestyle, which causes conflict. As early as the 1950s, ethnic conflicts were observed in Manipur and Assam between Kuki and other tribes/communities. Today, Kuki, Hmar, and Paite, three of these warring tribes, have united to fight and drive the Meitei out of the Kuki-dominated area. Meitei and Naga, on the other hand, continue to have a strong bond with the land they live on. The Naga tribe is one of the oldest in the Northeast among the hill tribes. They typically do not encroach on the territory inhabited by other communities because of their fixed and sacred affinity with their land. This is the distinctive feature that sets the Kuki apart from the Naga.

The foundation of Meitei connection to their land is a world view that sees the body as an extension of the self. The concept of the sacred shapes this extension. The Meitei adhere to the eight sacred directions, each denoted by a distinct concept of space as a frontier. The corresponding deities who reside in the sacred groves also watch over and defend these. Furthermore, the point where one stands, and two additional upward directions are identified. The four formidable directions—South East, South West, North West, and North East—are denoted by a designated area, in this case a mountain, and by corresponding guardian spirits that stand watch over the region and its inhabitants. The Meiteis have a cultural concept of space that encompasses plains, hills, and bodies of water. Lai Haraoba invocation of the ancestral spirit is based on these areas. Today's Meiteis, however, are confined to the valley due to the legal framework of the contemporary state structure such as the MLR&R Act, which prohibits them from defending their ancestral sacred sites.

Their cultural centres are gradually disappearing. Conversely, Kukis have violated social norms in order to further their own unethical interests. Many Kuki scholars conveniently use the Manipur Land Revenue & Reform Act to prevent the Meiteis from coming and settling in the hills, despite the fact that they acknowledge the significance of their lived space and cultural imagination and deny the existence of the international border between India and Myanmar. When it suits them, they conveniently cling to the contemporary state structure; in another instance, they conveniently employ cultural categories. This contradictory political imagination only serves to highlight the highest level of hypocrisy and double standards. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees reports that as of June 30, 2022, there were an estimated 1,086,000 Myanmar refugees and asylum seekers in neighbouring countries, and as of early December 2022, an estimated 49,600 of them were crossing into the states of Manipur and Mizoram(Saisin et al. 2023).

Attack on Church, retaliation on Kuki aggression and causes

There are numerous seminars on Manipur violence held in academic spaces around the nation. Vandalism of churches in the Imphal valley is mentioned in all of these proceedings. Although this is a regrettable development, the violent mob mentality was the driving force behind the retaliatory act. Retaliatory actions against the Kuki aggression, which was masterminded by Kuki militants, were motivated by anger and had an impact on Kuki churches. However, reason won out in the brutal act of arson, and the churches in Naga and

some in Kuki were largely spared. But these seminars don't ask questions about why these regrettable things happened. The church burning was preceded by a sequence of events in which a number of Meitei places of worship (Koubru and Thangjing) in the hills were vandalised over an extended period of time.

In certain instances, the migrant Kuki population has posed such strong resistance that the construction of indigenous temples in hill districts has come to a standstill. These hallowed locations and the related native customs are frequently met with disdain and mockery. Furthermore, during the recent unrest as well as in the past, a number of armed Kuki militants have attacked Meitei/Hindu religious shrines and symbols. In Koubru Leikha, a 200-year-old Shiva temple was demolished by a bulldozer operated by the Kuki tribe-dominated Kangpokpi District administration. The entire incident was ignored by the local government. This act demonstrates a well-planned strategy to destroy the indigenous place of worship and the sacred sites, in contrast to the unrest among the Meitei. Additionally, Kuki militants have desecrated the Meiteis' seven-colour flag.

THE FACT: INTRINSIC LINKAGES

The anti-reservation protests are actually the result of a well-planned network of activities by Kuki militants, frontal organisations, intellectuals, and politicians. The fact that some Meitei houses at Torbung Bangla were still being set on fire by Kuki militants ten days after the violence started. This reburning took place on May 13. Furthermore, on May 20, Kuki militants in Dolaithabi, Imphal East, completely destroyed two houses. These demonstrate not only the extent of the retaliation but also a well-thought-out plan to drive out the Meiteis from various foothills of the Imphal valley and establish Kuki lebensraum—a nation whose population is growing-into these areas. It is critical to expose the covert agenda and the connections between the various elements that have contributed to the current state of unrest. It is necessary to uncover the Kuki armed groups' sinister designs, as well as those of political figures, bureaucracy, and CSOs.

Manipulated rage against the forest removal campaign

The destruction of multiple forest offices on May 3, 2023, at Bungmaul Village, Mata Maultam Village, Saikot Village, Maullam Village, Singhat Mission Veng, Kotlian Village, and Henglep, demonstrates that certain stakeholders orchestrated a carefully thought-out and deliberate act of burning. Why were the forest offices the only ones targeted? There must be a purpose for this. Since the government began a campaign against illegal Kuki immigrants' encroachment into forest areas, we cannot rule out any attempt to destroy official records on land and in forest areas. The Manipur government recently launched an eviction campaign against encroachment on Reserved Forest (RF) and Protected Forest (PF), starting in 2021–2022. In Kangpokpi District, new construction at the Langol Reserved Forest was forced to vacate in several phases between 2021 and 2022.

The majority of these intruders were Meiteis. Additionally, in the Waithou Reserved Forest in the Thoubal district, Meitei and Meitei Pangal encroachers were driven out of RF & PF between April and May of 2022. Fifteen temporary Katcha houses in K. Sonjang Village, Churachandpur–Khoupum Protected Forest (C-KPF), close to the National Highway, were forced to be evacuated in February 2023. The Kuki migrants from Myanmar violently resisted it. In defiance of CrPC 144, the Kuki Student Organisation organised a rally in Manipur's Kuki-dominated areas on March 10, 2023. It was an illegal meeting. The voice of KSO was also echoed by Kuki Inpi, Manipur. Later on, the demonstration moved to New Delhi, where participants pleaded with the Indian Prime Minister to halt eviction. However, the State government clarified that K. Sonjang Village was a new settlement that was founded in 2021—many years after the Protected Forest was declared—and as such, it violated the Protected Forest Act 1927.

The 1966 notice concerning C-KPF, according to KSO's response, was deemed unacceptable, illegal, and arbitrary due to the fact that the area it encompasses is not state property, despite the boundary being allegedly well-defined. Afterwards, it was revealed in the media that the drive was only intended for the Kuki-Chin-Zo communities. This claim is untrue in light of the information about the State's eviction campaign provided above. The State government is not targeting any particular community with its drive. The forest land was

designated as "Protected" long before the Kuki migration afflicted Churachandpur district as a whole. The drive for evictions was a component of a broader State strategy to safeguard the RF & PF. In reference to the Manipur government's campaign, Hon. Bhupender Yadav, Minister of Labour & Employment, Environment, Forest & Climate Change, Government of India, stated on April 30, 2023, that protection of Reserved Forest and Protected Forest is a state subject and that Manipur Government is carrying out its constitutional duty. The KSO declaration is against national law and customs. Using violence appears to be the Kuki Frontal Organization's new standard. It makes sense that the impacted parties would be unhappy.

They had the option to challenge the State legally, though. Regretfully, rather than debating the virtues and shortcomings of state policies, many tribal communities interpret government actions according to ethnic lines. The 10 Kuki MLAs' declaration calling for an independent administrative structure is an extension of this politics based on ethnicity. However, 38 BJP MLAs who are Meiteis, Meitei Pangals (Manipuri Muslims), and Nagas have contested this evil plan. A growing number of Non-Kuki CSOs are coming out against the menacing plans of the militant Kuki group. Additionally, the All Zeliangrong Organisation mocked the notion of a separate Kuki tribe administrative structure.

Deforestation and practise of poppy cultivation

The region's environmental imbalances and deforestation are major issues that require attention. Large-scale deforestation has resulted in erratic rainfall, temperature fluctuations, muddy flash floods, and other phenomena in the state. It is necessary to approach the problem from a disaster management stand point. The situation has gotten worse recently due to the widespread, massive poppy plantations that have resulted in narco-deforestation, especially in the C-KPF areas. Intelligence reports state that Chin/Kuki migrants have been entering India through Kuki militant groups. They live in the old villages while the residents of the old villages are moved to a new village. They provide military training and basic language instruction in their camps. In addition, they are using them as drug and gun couriers and in poppy fields. When the poppies were about to bloom, the state government began to attack the poppies plantation.

Over 18,000 acres of poppy cultivation have been destroyed by the government since 2017, the majority of which are located in districts dominated by the Kuki ethnic group. This has had a negative impact on Manipur's poppy farming and drug trade, which is controlled by both local and Burmese drug lords. The drug gangs and the poppy farmers have suffered significant financial losses as a result of the crackdown, which prevented the poppy crop from being successfully harvested this year. The drive to expel illegal encroachers from reserved and protected forests heightened the ire. The culmination of these elements led to ethnic violence in the end. The "illegal immigrants" from Myanmar, the cross-border terrorist organisations, and local and Myanmar-based drug lords are among the groups who are responsible for this planning. A total of 15,496 acres of poppy-cultivated land in the hills had been destroyed after the Manipur government launched the War on Drugs in 2017, leading to the arrest of 2518 people.

The Kuki-Chin community had recorded significant areas of poppy cultivation. Additionally, it has been discovered that the State of Mizoram is home to numerous poppy plantations. The Mizoram government's silence on the matter is very telling. It is reasonable to wonder if drug lords, armed militants, and political leadership in Mizoram are connected in any sinister ways. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that the only tribes involved in the cultivation of poppies in Churachandpur, Tengnoupal, Mizoram, and Kangpokpi are those belonging to the Kuki-Chin-Mizo fraternity. This area is witnessing the growth of an underground, illicit narco-economy that must be discovered and checked. Both the national economy and security of the nation are at risk from this.

Narco-terrorism and threat to National Security

There is ample proof that the armed militants (KNA, ZRA, and others), who have been operating under a tripartite ceasefire agreement known as the "Suspension of Operation" (SoO) between the governments of Manipur and India since 2008, have repeatedly broken the truce. The Manipur government unilaterally broke the SoO due to their funding of the poppy plantation and drug trafficking, intimidation of noncompliant

villagers, and incitement of CSOs to violent protests. India's national security is under threat from both migrant populations and armed militants. The entire subcontinent is extremely concerned about their involvement in the drug trade, which finances the arms trade. It should be mentioned that the Manipur government's War on Drugs campaign may be able to curb the illicit drug trade that operates within the State. The state government has made available extensive data regarding the poppy cultivation and arrests of illicit drug traffickers that occurred between 2017 and 2023. The numbers below provide insight into the measures the government has taken to prevent drug-related activity and protect the welfare of the community.

The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act arrests have been grouped by community, offering information about the level of participation and the shared accountability in resolving this problem. Armed militants (ZRO/KRO) pose a serious threat to the internal security of the country because they are directly involved in both drug trafficking and poppy cultivation. These groups' movement across the international border between India and Myanmar remained unrestricted because they are under a letter of agreement with the Indian government.

Effect on Electoral Politics and demographic of the state

The recent crisis has its roots in the new waves of Kuki-Chin-Zo migration that have occurred in the last 50 years in Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland. The Kuki-Chin population in Manipur has increased due to the unnatural population growth caused by waves of illegal migration. It has also been discovered that a large number of these migrants arrived in Manipur by way of Mizoram and Nagaland. Some of these citizens of Myanmar easily obtain an Aadhar card and then a voter ID. This is a significant issue. Without a well-defined national policy regarding refugees from other countries, it is difficult to distinguish between "citizens" and "non-citizens. Due to the poorly managed camps and the assistance of previous migrants and locals, obtaining official identification documents such as voter ID cards and Aadhar cards is frequently effortless for the migrants.

As a result, they not only obtain Indian citizenship illegally but also use government services, which limit the opportunities available to the locals. Numerous of them reportedly secured prominent positions in the Central government's administration and services, according to unconfirmed reports. Such migrants from Myanmar have been known to join a number of electoral representative bodies in both India and Myanmar. The Central government intelligence was not interested in a case involving the former chairman of the Manipur Autonomous District Council, a prominent political figure in Myanmar and a native of that country, despite it being widely reported in the local media. On such important issues, neither State government intelligence worked. The connection between the immigration process and obtaining government services, including the ability to run for office, is a significant issue that needs to be addressed. This supports the connections between local politicians, foreign migrants, money laundering, narco terrorism, etc. It should go without saying that the already underway delimitation process will be impacted by these waves of illegal immigration.

As of the 2021 census, the Kuki-Chin-Zo population had risen to the position of second largest in Manipur, while the Naga population had fallen to third. There is no doubt that this will have an impact on electoral politics. While the number of reserved electoral constituencies in the Kuki-dominated areas may rise, the number of unreserved constituencies may decline. According to calculations, the number of unreserved seats could drop from 41 to 38, which would increase Kuki's representation in the State assembly.

Agenda for Kuki-Zomi Homeland

The Meiteis see themselves as Manipur's stewards. Former Indian Home Secretary G. K. Pillai once contended that giving Nagaland statehood before Manipur an extension of the ceasefire agreement's provisions to the Manipur areas restricted by Naga—legitimizes the rise and activities of Meitei militant groups in the name of defending the territorial integrity of Manipur in many ways. Various names for the Kuki-Zomi political imagination with a physical region include Greater Mizoram, Zalemang, Zoram, and Kuki homeland. While speaking about greater Mizoram, the Mizoram Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act of 1960 makes a cautious statement that meddles in Manipur's internal affairs. With his additional claim that the "Zo"

community, who live in the hilly region of Manipur that borders Mizoram and who share the same culture, religion, tradition, and ancestry, the possibility of a "indirect" intervention is not completely ruled out. The Mizo National Front, with which Zoramthanga is associated, fought a bloody war in 1984 to establish an independent Greater Mizoram. Furthermore, the 10 Kuki MLAs, who are presently stationed in Mizoram, have declared their support for a different administrative structure, indicating the persistence of politics centred on Mizo hegemony and ethno-nationalism that could lead to another round of intra-ethnic strife among the Mizo, Kuki, and Chin people.

Their demand is in line with KNO and ZRO's goal of granting the Kuki and Zomi peoples' right to self-determination in the form of a defined territory that passes through Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar. The concept of a Kuki homeland originated with the formation of the Kuki National Organisation (KNO), a group of Kuki-Zomi rebels, in the late 1980s. The desire for a distinct Kuki and Zomi homeland led to the creation of the term "Zalengam." The recent surge in violence in Manipur is indicative of the return of the demand for a separate Kuki administration, which had faded after peace talks between the Indian government and the two militant groups, KNO and ZRO, under the terms of the SoO pact. These two illicit armed groups originated in Myanmar. The leader of the KNO PS Haokip was not born in Manipur. He was raised in Nagaland and was born in Myanmar.

The Kuki State Demand Committee (KSDC) was established in 2012 in response to calls for the creation of a separate Telangana state. Its goal was to organise a movement for Kukiland. Even earlier, the KSDC had been threatening sporadic strikes and economic bandhs, closing roads and preventing the entry of goods into Manipur. More than half of Manipur's 22,000 sq km area, or 12,958 sq km, are claimed by the Kuki's armed groups and civil society organisations as Zalengam territory. The Sadar Hills, which encircle the Imphal valley on three sides, the Churachandpur district, which is dominated by Kuki people, the Chandel district, which is home to a mixed Kuki and Naga population, and even portions of Tamenglong and Ukhrul, which are dominated by Naga people, are all included in the claimed territory. Furthermore, Mizoram is included in their cartography. In addition, they hope to incorporate parts of Myanmar's Sagaing Division and Chin, as well as the Chittagong Hills Tract of Bangladesh.

According to the Kuki homeland narrative, Kuki-Chin-Zomi's tribal lands "are yet to be a part of the Indian Union." This greater plan includes the current wave of violence directed towards the Meitei settlements. It is not possible to achieve the right to self-determination by restricting the freedom of other communities. The right to self-determination belongs to everyone.

Chronology of the spark

Prior to May 3rd, Kuki communal forces were accusing the entire Meitei in their protests against specific policies of the Manipur government. An open gym at P.T. Sports Complex was to be inaugurated the following day, but Kuki mobs destroyed it on April 27, 2023, to dissuade the Chief Minister of Manipur from coming to Churachandpur. Additionally, they demolished the venue set up to commemorate Churachandpur MLA L. M. Khoute's election victory one year ago. The Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum declared that all government-related programmes would not be cooperated with, and that the district would be completely closed on April 28 from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. For five days, the State Government shut down the internet and 144 Cr. PCs. But violence and militancy persisted. An attack occurred on the Range Forest (Tuibong) office on the 28th.

The shrine of Meitei God Ibudhou Pakhang-ba and the Meitei seven Colours flag were desecrated by Kuki miscreants on the 29th. Despite the curfew still in effect from April 27, Kukis marched through Churachandpur on May 3, 2023, carrying sophisticated weapons. How the district administration permitted the march to take place without lifting the prohibition order is the question. Why were there armed military personnel dressed in combat gear at the supposed to be peaceful march? Why didn't the police implement strong security protocols to deter possible violence? What actions were the district administrators taking? Was there a lapse in intelligence or intentional encouragement of violence? On May 21, 2023, Manipur's Chief Minister acknowledged that security and intelligence failures were to blame for the violence. The real question is

whether or not specific political, governmental, bureaucratic, and legislative groups were involved in planning the violence. Kukis from Churachandpur district attacked the forest beat office in Bungmual village on May 3 at around 10:30 a.m. They launched an attack on Khumujamba Meetei Leikai at approximately noon. Kukis looted Manipur Gun House and set shops and houses on fire. At 1:30 p.m., the Saikot village forest beat office caught fire. At approximately 2:40 p.m., they stage-managed the burning of their unapproved hoarding across the National Highway in Leisang Village, and they used the Meeteis as justification for their attack.

In the Bishnupur district's Torbung Bangla, about 300 Meetei homes were set on fire at approximately three o'clock in the afternoon. They destroyed the Meetei village of Phougakchao Ikhai Makha Leikai at around 2:30 p.m. They set fire to Meetei dwellings in Phougakchao Ikhai Makha Leikai, Torbung Govindpur, and Torbung Bangla between 3:30 and 4:00 p.m. The Meetei homes in the Tegnoupal district, namely those in Moreh town, Moreh Bazar Leikai, Moreh Ward numbers 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, Moreh Heinoukhongnembi Ward 7, Moreh Khunou Leikai Ward 9, Moreh Khodumpam Leikai Ward 9, Moreh Khuman Leikai Ward 9, and Premnagar Ward 4, were attacked and set on fire at approximately 4:30 p.m. They attacked the Meetei and Bijang Khunou Meitei Leikai areas of D Phailian Leimaram, Compound Veng, Churachandpur, at about 4:30 p.m. Beginning at approximately 4:30 p.m., they also attacked Meetei residences in Tuibong Zion Veng, Sumchinum Singhat, Zou Veng Singhat, Yaifakon, and other areas of the Churachandpur district.

They attacked the forest beat constables at Singhat Mission Veng and Muallam Village at about five o'clock in the evening. They broke into Meetei residences in Khuga Tampak at around 5:30 p.m. and took guns from Singhat Police Station. In Phougakchao Ikhai, Lingsiphai Village, and Khumu-jamba Leikai, the attacks against Meeteis continued. Maning Leikai, somewhere around 5:30 p.m. Maning Leikai, somewhere around 5:30 p.m. They attacked the Old Bazar Zenhang Lamka, Higgon Marup Meetei Leikai Zenhang Lamka, Khuga Meitei Christian Leikai Zenhang Lamka, and the forest beat office at S. Kotlian Village and Meetei villages in the Khuga Tampak area at around 6:00 p.m. They resumed their attacks on Meetei at about 6:30 p.m., hitting the Khuga Tampak region, Churachandpur Mandop Leikai, Kangvai, Saikot Jayon Veng, and Torbung Bazar. They attacked Meetei at Gamgiphai in the Kangpokpi district at around 6:40 p.m. Meeteis launched their counterattack against Kuki in the Moirang region of the Bishnupur district at approximately 6:45 p.m. Meetei rioters and Kuki militants launched a series of attacks and counterattacks that have persisted to this day.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- The riots in Manipur have multiple-reasons, debate of illegal immigrants, and anxiety over demographic changes
- The reasons for conflicts, clashes and protests in Manipur.

DISCUSSION

The people of Manipur have been facing the conflicts for more than nine months till now. Both the sides have been affected and the central and state government has not been doing enough in terms of security arrangement to protect the people especially those civilians, farmers who resides closely between the districts borders where Meitei and Kuki are inhabitants. Till now there are more than 80,000 central Para military forces are deployed in different parts of Manipur but unable to control the violence.

CONCLUSION

Although there has been a decline in violence in many areas, Manipur still faces severe instability. One Ex-Minister expressed frustration and unhappiness with the violence in Manipur continuing and questioned whether the government would rather watch more people perish than find a solution to the problem. Unresolved conflicts in Manipur and the surrounding area are a serious threat to India's security and a setback to the country's goals of democratisation and nation-building. To avoid becoming another "black spot" of unresolved conflict and political unrest, both the centre and state government must thus approach the complex issue of ethnos cultural diversity in a more nuanced and equitable manner. Gaining a thorough grasp of the changing nature and dynamics of the conflicts that exist in the region is essential to developing effective peace building strategies that are specifically adapted to the context of North-eastern India. The government of India

is allegedly protecting Kuki militants under the guise of the Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement, despite being fully aware of their involvement in the unprecedented attacks and deaths of Meitei people since May 3. Six student bodies, including have accused the government of this, and have demanded the immediate revocation of the SoO. The Federal and State government should focus on Implementation of NRC, Indo-Myanmar border fencing, deportation of illegal immigrants to bring end to this violence.

REFERENCES

1. Attacks, Ruthless. 2023. "The Burden of Conflict on Manipur ' s Healthcare : An Evolving Humanitarian Crisis." 2023: 1–6.
2. Bhattacharjee, Kishalay. 2023. "Manipur ' s Silent Suffering and the Broken Promises of." : 1–9.
3. Journal, Rising Asia, and H M Izhar Alam. 2023. "Ethnic Clashes Jeopardize Manipur's Roseate Economy as Flaring Violence Threatens the Wider Northeast." 3(3): 606–78.
4. Leishipem Khamrang. 2023. "Manipur Mayhem: A Latent Enmity, Generalized Violence and State's Apathy." *Journal of Management & Public Policy* 15(1): 4–15.
5. Mathur, Priyanca. 2023. "Caught in the Crossfire : Myanmarese Refugees in India." 2(1): 31–36.
6. Saisin, Atchareeya, Siriporn Somboonboorana, Rajen Singh Laishram, and Somrak Chaisingkananont. 2023. "Securitization in Moreh Town of Manipur State, India and the Impact of the Myanmar Political Conflict." *Research in Globalization* 7(July): 100150. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resglo.2023.100150>.
7. ¹ E-pao, "Myanmar refugees likely to increase in border villages : Kamjong DC Over 1000 refugees taking shelter," November 28 2023, <http://disq.us/t/4kmk7ke>
8. ²E-Pao, "Mirabai questions," November 19 2023, <http://disq.us/t/4kewm9u>
9. ³E-pao, "STDCM to hold consultative meet on Nov 23," November 18, 2023, <http://disq.us/t/4ke4rsj>
10. ⁴E-pao, "Over 5 lakh Burmese Kukis have intruded into Manipur' Narco-terrorists behind violence : Susindro," November 08 2023, <http://disq.us/t/4k69huz>
11. ⁵E-pao, "Abrogate SoO: Student bodies to Centre," November 02 2023, <http://disq.us/t/4k1n10u>