



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Unravelling the Identity Conundrum in Manipur: Gender, Ethnicity and Peace-Building

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ABSTRACT

‘What is the underlying cause for the Manipur Conflict?’ The research article evaluates the ethnic composition of Manipur as a multicultural state with presumed dichotomies that have given a “conspicuous” nature to its society and polity, creating strife between the Meiteis and Kukis which has resulted in ethnic violence since 2023, and a failure of state machinery to resolve it swiftly. Located in a geopolitical hotspot, Manipur has suffered from relative neglect and a prolonged history of insurgency that has resulted in a backsliding of democracy and development, coupled with a heightening of communal violence as well as gruesome atrocities committed against women, who continue to bear the brunt of retaliation and vengeance. Since India’s independence, Manipur’s historical trajectory has been dotted with several instances of ethnic unrest. This paper tries to situate the recent 2023 uprising in existing theories of ethnic conflict while also noting the reactions of the political leadership and suggesting peacebuilding efforts.

Keywords: Manipur; Nature of government intervention; Response and reactions; Conspicuous identity; Securitization of identity; Weaponization; Dishonour; Dehumanization

MANIPUR IN STRATEGIC SOUTH ASIA

Situated at the intersection of Bangladesh, China and Myanmar, the Indian northeastern state of Manipur, has been a ‘hotbed of separatism’ and a ‘tinderbox of tensions’ between different ethnic groups.¹ Lack of identification with the traditional Indian territory, role of external powers like China and Myanmar has led to internal conflicts among the inhabitants of the region, building on tribal and communal differences. The demographic profile of the tribes inhabiting the hill areas of the state is important to understand the ethnic conflicts. Manipur houses about 3.3 million people, wherein more than half are Meiteis, while around 43% are Kukis and Nagas, the predominant minority tribes.² The Meitei are predominantly Hindu and mainly live in Imphal and the prosperous valley around it, while the mainly

Christian Kuki-Zo usually live in scattered settlements in the state’s hills. Manipur houses 39 ethnic communities following different faiths, including Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, as well as indigenous religious traditions such as Sanamahi. The multi-ethnic composition of the state is compounded onto by the relative neglect that north-east India faces in discourses in Indian development and democracy, with a lack of sustained development and lack of political agency creating divides that are more pronounced and glaring.³

Manipur is now on edge as no signs of thaw can be seen even after two years of ethnic violence, without sustainable peacebuilding efforts. The violence in Manipur cannot be left as an isolated cause. Lying in a geostrategic position, between South Asia, China and South-east Asia,



Manipur lies on the porous India-Myanmar border, and is proximate to the Golden Triangle, with fears of transborder insurgency, illegal infiltration, drug and arms trafficking, thereby playing as a chokehold location in Indian national security, and playing a seminal role in India's current Act East policy to increase connectivity between South and South-east Asia.⁴ Thus continued unrest in Manipur is undesirable with respect to both human and national security in India. North-east India, attached by a frail 'chicken's neck,' lacking physical connectivity and culturally distinct from its mainland counterparts has, for long, been detached from mainstream Indian public, state and media, with the region being situated as a bystander, undervalued and understudied, in both the development and democratic destiny of India. Manipur constitutes a peripheral territory of India, but the failure of state constitutional machinery to maintain law and order is a harrowing thought to its pan-India. The Manipur conflict poses a substantive challenge to the sovereignty and integrity of India, as well as an image problem in diplomacy, necessitating an evaluation of the current conflict for an immediate process of peacebuilding.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE 2023 MANIPUR ETHNIC VIOLENCE

Any commentary on the Manipur conflict is a gruesome reminder of the how inter-group insecurities of marginalization have resulted in the politicization of identity in Manipur, however warning that real-time conflict is not a unicausal outcome, nor a simple mismanagement of spontaneous causes, but a culmination of grievances that have remained unaddressed, poor mediation, political insensitivity and mass mobilization through politicization of identity.⁵

Resistance to the way Manipur merged with India in 1949 set the stage for early separatist movements and continues to be a core issue in the ongoing conflict between New Delhi and various deviant regions of the Northeast. To stifle this dissent, the Indian government imposed the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act in 1958, which again attracted criticisms.⁶ The decade of the 1970s witnessed an armed confrontation between the centre and the state of Manipur, where the latter accused the former of ignorance and negligence of its demands. Since then, the state has not experienced any major upheaval, except for the rebellion in 2015.¹

Classic Model of Ethnic Outbidding:

The 2023 violence has revived calls among the Kuki-Zo to be granted a separate state administration, which has been rejected outright by the Meitei.¹ The seeds of the 2023 conflict were laid when the Manipur High Court asked the state government to consider Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for the Meitei community, with the intention that such a status

would ensure protection within the Indian Constitution and allow the Meitei expanded access to benefits, including reserved seats in government. However, this move might deepen ethnic divisions.

As the Court's verdict was proclaimed, All-Tribal Students Union of Manipur held a rally on May 3. Violence broke out after the Anglo-Kuki War Memorial Gate was burned, leading the Kukis to attack Meitei villages in Churachandpur. In retaliation, the Meitei set fire to Kuki areas in the Imphal Valley, causing several casualties. While this protest can be seen as the trigger of violence in Manipur, ethnic tensions had already been boiling way before this. The state government's actions on indigenous land rights have been seen as targeting the Kuki communities in the hills and efforts to survey reserved forest in the hill regions was said to be an effort to reduce poppy cultivation but has resulted in evictions in Kuki villages. The Kukis believe that the war on drugs unleashed by the Meitei-led government is a conspiracy to uproot their communities.² Moreover, the influx of refugees following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar (particularly those from Sagaing region, who have strong ties with the Kukis) pose a threat of insecurity for the Meitei community. The challenges posed by growing population and unemployment rates further aggravate the situation.

The tussle between Kukis and Meiteis have political and economic dimensions as well which fuels the hostility between the two. Politically, the state legislative assembly has 60 seats, wherein the people from the hill areas have 20 seats and the valley areas have 40 seats. This is mainly due to the differences in population in the two areas. Economically, it is alleged that people residing in the valley region are comparatively richer than those in the hill region.

The Kukis and Nagas face discrimination on several fronts. The official language of Manipur is Meiteilon, also known as the Manipuri language, is recognised as a Scheduled Language under the Eighth Schedule to the Indian Constitution. Moreover, the Meiteis and Kukis have had disagreements regarding the Inner Line Permit. The geographical location and political representation in the state assembly give the Meiteis an added advantage. The Kukis have been demanding for a separate 'Kukiland' since the 1980s.⁷ The infamous Kuki-Naga clashes that erupted in 1992 and continued till the middle of the 1990s have further intensified the demand. The demand for inclusion in the Sixth Schedule by the Kukis and the ADC Amendment Bill 2021 are other contentious issues deepening the ethnic tensions. The Manipur (Hill Areas) District Councils Sixth and Seventh Amendment Bill passed in the state legislative assembly by the BJP government in August 2022 further aggravated the situation.⁸ It was alleged that the Bill was passed without discussion with the Hill Area Committee. Consequently, the discontented tribals engaged in protests and demonstrations. Under intense pressure from the



protestors, the government agrees to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the protestors and assures them that they will consult with the Hill Areas Committee.

Military Solutions to Political Problems:

Furthermore, in March 2022, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) was gradually withdrawn from the valley districts due to a significant improvement in security. The government had already signed a ceasefire with the insurgent groups in the hills to ensure no conflict. A Suspension of Operations agreement was signed in 2008 by the central government, Manipur government 2 Kuki organisations which included 25 insurgent groups. Under the agreement the groups had to surrender their weapons, join peace talks and stay in designated camps.⁹ Since the ceasefire was a success, the people expected that the government would lift AFSPA from the hill areas as well and a long-lasting peace would be established.

However, things didn't go as expected. In March 2023, the Suspension of Operations agreement was withdrawn by the Manipur government by stating that the insurgent groups in the hill areas "influenced agitations among forest encroachers."¹⁰ Moreover, the state government redrew district boundaries, incorporating parts of land historically inhabited by the tribals in the hill districts in the valley districts without proper consultation with the tribal landowners or local bodies.¹¹ Consequently, these tribes were made to pay land taxes. Further resentment was fuelled by the eviction drives in K. Songjang village in Manipur. Furthermore, in 2023 the Rajya Sabha passed the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Bill and the Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill in the absence of opposition.¹² The state government response mirrored the strategies India has previously employed during unrest in the Northeast or Jammu and Kashmir, which includes issuing military curfews, suspending internet services, and deploying numerous troops and paramilitary forces with shoot-on-sight orders in effect for "extreme cases." Local communities are looking for a peaceful solution by holding peace and prayer meetings. Religious leaders have called for peace, while others are contemplating a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The women's groups have issued appeals and formed 'Mothers Peace Committees' in various localities.

The central government's response has remained largely nonpartisan. In June, Indian Home Minister Amit Shah visited Manipur's capital, calling for the recovery of weapons looted from police stations during the unrest. He has also assured an "impartial investigation" into the violence.¹ Prime Minister Modi's prolonged silence about the conflict attracted criticisms from the opposition, who allege that the BJP is concentrating more on the upcoming elections and is using silence to foster violence. He responded in July after the publication of a disturbing graphic video, saying that the

incident had filled his heart with "pain and anger."¹ Finally, the Indian government-imposed President's rule in Manipur on February 15, 2025, after the resignation of their Chief Minister N. Biren Singh on February 9.

WOMEN, THE FIELD OF VIOLENCE

The tumultuous state of affairs that ensued post 2023 in Manipur represents the complexity and compounding of social roles, processes and their histories that create a myriad of outcomes. Oppression and privilege cannot be understood by simply looking at one analytical category¹³. In the nascent stages of the conflict, the violence seemed to possess "religious manifestation, evidenced by multiple instances where places of worship were targeted¹⁴." However, it soon became clear that the nature of the conflict, while being predominantly ethnic, involved an interplay of several identities that overlap with each other. The outcomes of the conflict, therefore, could be similarly viewed through a gendered lens.

"To say that the honour of a nation rests on the chastity of its women seems cliché today. It sounds a truism to say that women's bodies are the battlefields on which nationhood, community, religion and politics get played out. And yet these truths were not so self-evident as to sound hackneyed overnight (Kannabiran K., Kannabiran V.)."¹⁵ Kalpana Kannabiran and Vasanth Kannabiran's work, "De-Eroticizing Assault: Essays on Modesty, Honour and Power" echoes the sentiment perfectly depicted in war-torn societies. Manipuri women's rights activist and expert on issues regarding women in conflict zones, Mary Beth Sanate reiterates this when she says that Manipur has been in conflict for a number of decades, and that, in all of these conflicts, women and children have been the worst casualties. Since the mid 1980's, there have been numerous ethnic conflicts, armed conflicts, conflicts over land and forest, inter-boundary disputes, conflict of political aspirations and ideology, etc., and it has been a highly militarised state.

Along similar lines, Manipuri lawyer and women's rights activist Vrinda Grover stated that a police officer in the area confirmed that a zero First Information Report (FIR) was registered on May 18, days after a grotesque video showcasing three Kuki women being paraded naked and sexually assaulted, allegedly came to light. Surprisingly, the video was only made public as late as the 19th of July, 2023. It was only after the horrors of this video surfaced that the State was prompted to break its silence on the latest ethnic strife in the northeastern state that had begun on the 3rd of May.

This was, however, not an isolated incident in the strife-torn northeastern state as was casually accepted by Manipur's Chief Minister N Biren Singh, who defended the delay in action against the perpetrators by claiming that "hundreds" of such incidents happened on the ground.¹⁶ Throughout



history, whether it be wars, communal upheavals, civil discord, or caste clashes, the female body has repeatedly become a site of violence. This reaffirms that weaponization of women's bodies is a deliberate, age-old practice - proving effective since the impact is more lasting. The dominant instinct of men in such conflict-ridden situations is to seek vengeance, often to be successfully achieved by defiling the 'enemy women.' The act of 'polluting' the women of the other community is considered to bring 'dishonor' to the enemy. Not only is the woman's bodily autonomy violated; she continues to live with the haunting memories of the injustice meted out to her people. This phenomenon can be traced to an overlap between gender identity and the identity of the community. Mothers, wives and daughters become icons of the larger macrocosm, and desexualized and virtuous women signal the purity of not only their own family, but also the larger community.

Rape, as a phenomenon, is usually considered to be a more of a societal crime. It is often delegated to the private realm of affairs, with its impacts being immediately felt by the 'victim' per se, and her immediate family. War time rape, however, becomes more difficult to categorise, since it is considered to be a deliberate, conscious 'attack' against the other community. In doing so, a woman's personal grievances and mental agony are somehow appropriated to the larger society of which she is a member. She is no longer the only victim in the eyes of the heteronormative patriarchal society - her community has been 'dishonored.' The weaponization of women's bodies therefore becomes possible through their dehumanization and 'commodification' - women's bodies become personifications of the community, thereby, bearers of the brunt of retaliation and vengeance.

"The instrumental use of sexual violence is driven by 'runaway norms' that legitimize rape. Negative attitudes such as stereotyping, dehumanization and zero-sum thinking can become the subject of norms."¹⁷ War-time rape as a subject has therefore garnered more attention than peace-time rape, since it spills over into the public domain. The lines between the public-private divide are seemingly blurry when it comes to sexual violence during armed conflicts. However, the "sensitivity" surrounding the issue has resulted in it being much less spoken of than desirable.

The term used in such instances is that of "sexual terrorism"¹⁵ - a tool wielded by the patriarchal society to 'silence' women and subjugate them through the systematic use of sexual violence and the constant threat of violence. Sexual terrorism has been argued to be a part of the larger political agenda that hinges on the complete/absolute appropriation of women's bodies. This terrorism, an intrinsic aspect of male dominance, is established not only through acts of physical aggression, but also via inculcating allied constructs of shame, guilt, chastity, honor, morality, virtue, virginity, consent and the like. This pattern of targeted sexual violence on women during conflict is an ongoing

concern across the world. Citing multiple United Nations (UN) reports, the publication Think Global Health points out, "Sexual violence during conflict can be divided into three overarching categories: a war tactic, widely committed with an intentional purpose; tolerated, but not specifically ordered, by leaders; and committed independently by individuals when the opportunity arises."¹⁸

It took a violent and gory video of a naked woman being assaulted by a group of men in broad daylight for the Prime Minister to break his silence on the strife in Manipur. However, he also directed his outrage towards the Opposition's own failure in working towards the crimes against women in their own states. Even in rightfully condemning the incident, the terminology used for these aggrieved women was the "daughters of Manipur", a familiar narrative which ties the woman's identity to her community.¹⁹

"CONSPICUOUS IDENTITY" IN THE MANIPUR CONFLICT

The Manipur Crisis is a culmination of multidimensional factors, including unaddressed ethnic tensions, minority grievances, government neglect, etc. which only widened the historic ethno-religious differences resulting in the politicization of identity and failure to democratize the Manipuri citizens - with no singular solution. However, the crisis is as much structural as it is organic. The irreproachable divide between the two communities has become a classic case of ethnic outbidding²⁰, lacking common ground for compromise, with the conflict having taken on new elements of politicized identity, competition for state resources and opportunities and physical conflicts for agency and space, or a "conspicuous conflict"⁶. Thus, the violence is both the cause and outcome of mutual alienation between the two communities, coming of otherization, - blaming each other for miseries of two communities. Partha Chatterjee's contemplation of Indian nationalism placed the woman as the center of ethno-cultural identity, thereby a domain of sovereign private culture,²¹ the very fact that women have become a contested field of attack, domination, and violence, points towards the readily ethno-centric nature and therefore the centrality of identity and identity perpetrated violence in the Manipur conflict.

Thus, the Manipur Conflict is a conflict of identities rather than of issues. While a conflict borne out of issues, could be addressed through policy alone, a conflict of issues requires a process of reconciliation. Not so far removed from sub-Saharan armed conflicts, the violence is an eerie recalling back to partition bloodshed, and a concern to be agreed now and with good will of all concerned stakeholders. An independent judicial inquiry is necessary, in singling out the perpetrators and instigators of the crime, and also to set facts straight. A false dichotomy has been created, overtime and engrained, where violence has become both the means and



the ends.

However, this must not cascade into a Yugoslavian experience, but be diagnosed quickly and with greatest certainty, by the Indian government, to reinvent an integrated economic ecosystem. A well connected Manipur, will disincentivize violent group conflict, and pluralist government formation. While Manipur may not be a major electoral issue, or a populist talking-point, it is a human issue affecting countless of those now under siege of fear, for their neighbors 'might be of a different tribe'. Peacebuilding in Manipur calls for inclusive dialogue among all stakeholders including the state and central government; restoration of displaced persons; rehabilitation of victims; disarmament and reintegration of militant groups into mainstream society and politics; impartial and inclusive investigative commission on the perpetrators of violence; more cautioned use of AFSPA provisions; all round development and encourage civic participation for depending democracy.

CONCLUSION: CONFLICT AND PEACEBUILDING IN MANIPUR

The ethnic tensions between the Meiteis and Kuki have historical roots. Political, economic and geographic factors along with arbitrary functioning of the government have been fracturing the relations between the two communities. However, the demand of the Meiteis for the ST status further aggravated the situation and deepened the strife. Efforts are being undertaken to curb violence, but with limited success. This issue has also received attention from international actors like the Human Rights Watch has alleged that state authorities in Manipur have fueled the conflict. Despite having limited reliable information from Manipur, reports depict a continuing war zone, with heavily armed militants on the move, villagers taking up arms and citizens declining trust in the authorities. Social media posts that bypass the internet blackout frequently convey hate, division, and despair.²²

Nevertheless, re-establishing the democratic process is an essential first step in ending the ethnic strife in Manipur, with an urgent need to re-inspire trust of the people from all sides of the conflict in the Indian model of constitutional governance and peaceful dissent rather than armed conflict. The ethnic conflict is an outcome of divides that have created a zero-sum game, a problem that can be tracked through sustained economic development and a participative democracy. Reinstating democratic processes will be merely procedural if the Indian government fails to substantiate that with human development and social justice. The thrust cannot simply lay on maintaining security in the region, but also a complete transformation of relations. This requires a reconciliation between the communities in the state who have suffered through communal violence. The de-essentialization of identity is crucial in building fraternity and retaining long term internal peace in the

region, while at the same time limiting intervention from external powers in India's domestic politics. Peace is essential to economic growth, while harboring fraternity with local autonomy is crucial to the trust building exercise. Democracy and development have therefore become the Indian government's foremost cures to the ethnic conflict. With the future of these two promises, kept or unkept, determining peace in the region.

The Manipur Crisis is a cause of weary Indian territorial integrity and national security. The recent escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan over terrorism in Kashmir, as well as on and off tensions between India and China has already stretched the Indian military on two fronts. Territorial conflicts with Pakistan over Pak-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and with China over occupied Aksai Chin and claims over Arunachal Pradesh in India have already been a concern for New Delhi, an unstable North-East has further burdened the Indian military to play peacemaker. Over-reliance on the Indian military, which has been engaged for the last two years in peacebuilding is typical to South Asian states in their patent reactions to communal conflicts - military response to political problems.

The deepening resentment against the Manipur state government has finally resulted in the invocation of Article 356 ("President's Rule" over a state due to breakdown of constitutional machinery) to impose central control over the State and dissolution of the BJP government in Manipur. The hesitance of the BJP government at the center to respond with emergency powers in the state may have been an outcome of the Modi government's calculated reaction to deescalate tensions through localized mediation between rival ethnic leaderships rather than steer towards heavy-handed centralization, especially so given the given BJP's electoral interests in the North-East, where the party has been expanding rapidly in the last decade. The implementation of Article 365 however may not be a cut-and-dry solution, with past inculcations in the region having resulted in escalating insurgencies due to the heavy-hand of New Delhi.

The Manipur crisis continues to pose a spillover risk, reigniting ethnic tensions amongst the diverse ethnic composition in North-East India, a region with a history of insurgencies and counter-insurgencies. With certain tribes having cross-state (Naga tribes in Manipur with Naga tribes in Nagaland, India) and even cross-border kinship affinities (Meithei with Arakan communities in Myanmar), the conflict within the state has the potential to destabilize the entire region. The 2021 coup d'état in Myanmar and subsequent Tatmadaw military action against militia insurgencies by dissident ethnic minorities in north-west Myanmar has resulted in an influx of refugees into India. While the Meiteis have contended against this influx due to affinities with the Kukis and Nagas, the Indian government has responded by deporting the refugees, so as



to avoid adversarial relations with the Tatmadaw and prevent further flaring of ethnic conflict. Especially as the region falls within the Golden Triangle, with porous international borders for illegal narcotics and arms trafficking, which has for long been a source of revenue for cross-border insurgencies.

A classic case of ethnic outbidding, it is continuous group struggle driven by scarcity of social resources that has culminated into a vicious cycle of violence. The relative deprivation of the hill tribes under Meithei majoritarianism, deepening alienation and breeding antagonism, has finally culminated into an intra-state conflict. India's solution to the Manipur conflict needs to be multi-pronged, with an emphasis on addressing the underlying factors of Meithei majoritarianism, relative socio-economic inequality and political marginalization, with solutions beyond military responses. These responses cannot be isolated but complemented by regional diplomacy to counterbalance against cross-border conflicts. Sustainable peacebuilding must be established on the pillars of sustained economic development and a participative democracy.²³

Reinstating democratic processes will be mere procedural if not complemented by human development and social justice. There is merit in re-establishing democratic processes in Manipur, with an urgent need to re-inspire trust of all ethnic groups in the Indian government.¹⁴ The emphasis cannot simply be on maintaining security in the region, but also a complete transformation of relations between ethnic groups, with reconciliation and reintegration of the communities and preventing further ghettoization. This requires a reconciliation.²⁴ Military responses would only serve to further the divide. Prioritizing dialogue among the communities over military intervention shall be a more pertinent manner of addressing the conflict. The strife has permeated to all levels of society, with the police, civil society organizations, and insurgent groups divided by ethnicity. Not only must a peace committee be formed to mediate, but also a fact-finding committee under the supervision of the Supreme Court of India, to find perpetrators of violence, with both committees devoted to a policy of inclusion, representation and a consensus-based plan of action. The Indian government should provide financial assistance to people who have been displaced due to conflict, side-by-side assuring security to all, irrespective of ethnicity. The de-essentialization of ethnic identity is crucial in any undertaking for long-term integration. Herein, local autonomy is crucial to the trust building exercise providing more agency to citizens. Thus, democracy and development are the primary cures to the crisis of identity and violence.

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