

ETHNIC CONFLICT IN NORTH-EAST INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MANIPUR

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Abstract

Ethnic conflict has consistently been a sorrowful aspect of human history and continues to persist in the current context. The north eastern states of India possess unique historical and cultural characteristics that set them apart from the rest of India. Despite being considered a miniature Asia due to its distinctiveness, the region faces challenges such as ethnic conflicts and political instability. Manipur, in particular, stands out as the most conflict-ridden state, where the facade of democracy coexists with the denial of citizens' rights, leading to ongoing tensions and political uncertainties. This paper will address the causes of conflicts between Meitei and Kuki tribes in Manipur and also emphasizing on providing key solutions to resolve them.

Keywords: Ethnic conflict, Northeast India, Manipur

INTRODUCTION

There is hardly any country in the world that does not struggle with ethnic conflict, thus the problem of ethnic conflict is extremely global. Conflict in the Rwanda, Iraq, Sri Lanka, India, Gaza Strip are among the best known examples. North Eastern region of India is the land of diverse cultures, ethnicity, religion, communities and linguistic groups. Therefore, this region is highly vulnerable to ethnic conflicts. These conflicts have shattered the peace and tranquillity in the region and violated all norms of humanity killing and torturing innocent people. Such violence has led to the loss of lives of innumerable people and destruction of properties.

Conflict, according to the Advanced English Dictionary, is a circumstance in which there are opposite ideas, opinions feelings or wishes. It also denotes a situation where individuals, groups or nations contributed in a serious disagreements or arguments. Sometimes it involves more united violent action of an ethnic group against some other ethnic groups to focus its dissatisfaction. Therefore, ethnic conflict denotes dispute or disagreement between opposing groups who identify themselves largely in terms of collective rights. Ethnic conflict is a repetitive phenomena.

In the Northeast, the whole problem of ethnicity has become a complex issue. Though there are circumstantial differences in terms of the nature of conflicts, there is no state amongst the seven sisters that does not face the complications of ethnic conflict. This region has frequently been consider as a boiling cauldron by many academicians and journalists because of various problems

perpetrating the region. Although there are numerous aspects responsible for ethnic conflict in this region, yet the main factors related to it are yet to be explained adequately.

AREA OF THE STUDY

Eight states comprise India's northeast-Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura and Sikkim. The region is characterized by extraordinary ethnic, cultural, religious diversity, with more than 160 Scheduled Tribes belonging to five different ethnic groups, and a diverse non-tribal people as well. The term 'Northeast' was formalized through the British colonial administration.

Since their integration into the Indian federal state in the 1950s, the various ethnic groups in India's north eastern states have consistently sought increased autonomy or complete independence from India. Towards the close of the 20th century, the Northeast Indian territories were reorganized into distinct states. Following India's independence from British rule in 1947, the north eastern region of British India comprised Assam and the princely states of Tripura Kingdom and Manipur Kingdom. Subsequently, Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Arunachal Pradesh (1975), and Mizoram (1987) were carved out of the extensive Assam territory. Manipur and Tripura functioned as Union Territories of India from 1956 until 1972, when they achieved full-fledged statehood. Sikkim became the eighth North Eastern Council State in 2002. The formation of these north eastern states primarily centered on ethnic and tribal identities.

Over the years this region have witnessed various conflicts which often involve demands for greater autonomy, border issues, identity crisis etc. The recent Manipur issue is the example of violence and conflicts as a result of ethnic disparity.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To understand the causes of conflicts between Kuki and Meitei tribe,
2. To examine the impact of ethnic conflict on various socio-cultural aspects,
3. To offer some suggestions or recommendations to solve the ethnic violence in Manipur

METHODOLOGY

This research paper is based on secondary sources and data has been purely collected from the published sources like journals, books, periodicals, newspapers and news reports, research papers etc.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In the North East, cultural harmony between the various ethnic groups can be observed. However, brutal conflict has also frequently arisen to some extent. Ethnic conflict often involves violation of human rights and injustice as well as hindering the development process by creating an unstable environment. This study can help to identify some factors that contribute to tension between various cultural groups and academic understanding of ethnic conflict, nature of ethnic relationship and peacebuilding strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The complexity in the ethno-demographic situation is studied in the article "*Patterns of ethnic conflict in the North East: A study of Manipur*" (2003) by Bhagat Oinam. In the valley, the Meitei make up 65% of the population, however, they only occupy 10% of the land. In contrast,

the tribal population is less, but they occupy 90% of the land area. Ethnic conflict in Manipur is usually started by the dominant ethnic group. The state's ongoing ethnic warfare has made it possible for tribes to identify as a group. In Manipur, ethnic conflict has increased as a result of each ethnic group realizing and acknowledging that land is the only long-term, dependable capital for growth.

In the article "*Emergent ethnic crisis: A study of Naga Kuki conflict in Manipur*" (2004), M. Banerjee and R.P. Attaparia, asserts that ethnic conflict in Manipur stem from the fear of losing identity, prompting smaller tribes like the Nagas and the Kuki-Chin-Mizo to realign for survival. While the Nagas have a defined territory, the Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes are dispersed in the state. The struggle for superiority over neighbouring tribes further fuels ongoing ethnic conflicts and violence in Manipur.

In his study paper "*Education and conflict: A perspective of Manipur*" (2009), Kashung Zingran Kengoo stated that conflicts and bloodshed are inevitable in a state that is multiethnic, multilingual and multireligious. Every ethnic group in Manipur appears to be experiencing linguistic crisis and identity crisis. The minority tribals of the hills, have long battled against the majority Meitei of the valley for social, economic and political equality. The lives of ordinary people have severely affected by insurgency and violence in Manipur.

In his book "*Conflicts in Manipur*", M. Amarjeet Singh (2010) states that Manipur is economically underdeveloped and socially unstable. Manipur is a state of diverse ethnic groups and all the ethnic groups has political aspirations which unfortunately does not converge but are confined to their respective groups. Manipur's politics and society are sharply divided along ethnic lines and the local populace controls the government. Insurgency and ethnic conflicts in the state viewed as purely law and order issues, resulting in militarization. Despite significant development funds from New Delhi intended for peace and development, these resources often end up in the hands of militant groups, perpetuating conflict rather than progress.

Songthan Hookip in the article "*The Kuki National Assembly: Historicity and Evolution*" (2011), discussed the significant transformation that occurred among the hill tribes in Manipur, particularly the Kuki tribes, due to the introduction of British influence and Christianity. The desire for recognition, value, and preservation of tribal identity has led to tumultuous and polarized relationships among the different communities. Each tribe in Manipur is ethnically oriented, fostering the formation of insurgent groups with distinct goals. Kuki organizations, like those of other tribes were established to safeguard and uphold their identity. The Kukis have consistently believed that their entitlement to govern has been refused, leading to increased feelings of exclusion and marginalization.

DISCUSSION

Manipur, a verdant and mountainous state sharing its border with Myanmar, has a lengthy history of enduring civil conflicts. The region is home to a variety of ethnically distinct Sino-Tibetan communities, each possessing its own distinct language, culture, and geographical area.

The ethnic tensions in Manipur have deep roots in a historical conflict between the Meitei community, primarily residing in the Imphal valley, and the hill tribes, notably the Kukis and

Nagas. Manipur serves as a multicultural nexus, hosting diverse ethnicities, each dedicated to preserving its cultural heritage, territory, and rights. The predominant religious affiliation is Hinduism among the Meiteis, while the Kukis and Nagas predominantly adhere to Christianity.

The origins of violence in Manipur can be traced back to the colonial era when the British implemented a classification system dividing the population into 'Hills' and 'Valley,' each governed by distinct laws. This classification exacerbated the sense of differentiation between the Meiteis, predominantly residing in the valley region, and the tribal communities in the hills, such as the Nagas and the Kukis. Following India's independence, this demarcation manifested in a political structure that granted Schedule Tribe (ST) status to the hill tribes but not to the Meiteis. This status entails certain benefits, including reservations in government jobs and educational institutions, sparking significant contention between the groups.

Since 2012, the Scheduled Tribes Demand Committee of Manipur (STDCM) has consistently advocated for granting Schedule Tribe status to the Meitei community. The Meitei Tribe Union filed a petition before the Manipur High Court, asserting that the Meitei Community was acknowledged as a 'tribe' before the merger of the princely state of Manipur with the Union of India in 1949, losing its tribal identity after the merger. The petitioners argued that extending ST status to the community is crucial to preserving their identity, safeguarding their land, tradition, culture, and language.

On April 19, 2023, the Manipur High Court directed the Manipur government to present a recommendation from a decade ago to the Union Tribal Affairs Ministry proposing the inclusion of the Meitei community in the Scheduled Tribes (ST) list within a four-week timeframe. The High Court cited a letter from the Union Tribal Ministry to the state government in May 2013, which had requested recommendations along with the latest socio-economic survey and ethnographic report.

Opposition to the demand for ST status for the Meitei community has been voiced by other tribal groups in the state. These groups argue that individuals from the Meitei community already enjoy demographic and political advantages and are academically and otherwise more advanced than the other tribal groups. According to various tribal organizations, granting ST status to the Meiteis could lead to a loss of employment opportunities and enable Meiteis to acquire land in the hills, potentially displacing tribal populations. Additionally, groups such as the All Tribal Students' Union of Manipur contend that the Manipuri language of the Meiteis is already included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, and various sections of the community already benefit from Scheduled Castes (SC) or Other Backward Classes (OBC) status.

Meanwhile, another point of contention is the current land imbalance between indigenous communities: Meiteis cannot buy lands in the hill regions but Kukis and other tribal communities can buy lands in the valley. Additionally, the influx of refugees following the 2021 military coup in neighbouring Myanmar-particularly those from Sagaing region, who have strong ties with kukis has also created a greater sense of insecurity for the Meitei indigenous community. Though the real decision making in the conflict lies with those who control the guns, drugs and politics, the ones most affected in the both the communities are women and children.

Following the April 19th directives of the Manipur High Court, the All-Tribal Students' Union of Manipur (ATSUM) called for a "Tribal Solidarity March". The March was organised in protest against the demand for the inclusion of the Meitei community in the ST category. However, violent clashes broke out at various places during the march. The situation in Manipur turned extreme and violent which saw the deployment of Indian Army and other central police forces.

The majority of the violence was initially perpetrated by Meitei groups against the Kuki villages and communities. As the clashes spread, villages were burned down and more than 250 churches belonging to the Kuki community, who are Christian, were destroyed. As fake news and misinformation circulated, claiming that Meitei women had been raped and killed by Kukis, Kukis began to be systematically targeted in revenge attacks, which include rape, torture and assault. There have also been several reports of beheadings. Much of the violence has been fought with thousands of weapons stolen from police and army barracks. So far, more than 140 people have died in the violence and 60,000 have been displaced. The internet remains shut down in large parts of the state.

Tension escalated in Manipur's hills as a video of May 4 emerged on social media, showing men from one community parading two women naked from the opposite side. The Indigenous Tribal leaders' Forum, which condemned the incident, claims that the women belonged to Kuki-Zo tribe while the mob, which molested them were Meiteis. According to the local media, the attack in May came after fake reports of a Meitei woman had been raped by Kuki militiamen. Even as the violence escalated, the response from the Central Government was notably muted. The BJP state government dominated by Meitei community has been accused of being complicit in the violence against the Kuki minority by allowing Meitei gangs to carry out violence with impunity. Prime Minister Narendra Modi maintained a months-long public silence on the conflict and it was after the viral video of two Kuki women being raped which caused outrage across the country that Modi commented on the issue. India's Home Minister Amit Shah, visited Manipur at the end of the May, but he failed to bring about a ceasefire between the groups or bring the two parties together for negotiation.

Delhi Commission for Women (DCW) chief Swati Maliwal visited Manipur, a day after the state government allegedly denied her permission to visit. She had alleged that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in Manipur had refused to let her visit to the state to interact with the survivors of sexual violence. She met the two women whose abuse was captured on a video went viral and also visited relief camps and other parts of the city that were affected.

SUGGESTIONS

Here are some recommendations to promote peace in Manipur:

- Enhance surveillance along border areas to thwart the infiltration of migrants from Myanmar.
- Promote increased involvement of the local population in the decision-making process to nurture a sense of ownership and belonging.
- Extend financial assistance to all victims, regardless of their community affiliation.

- The central government should put aside political considerations and implement President's rule in Manipur. This step would automatically place all security forces under New Delhi's command and lead to the dismissal of the state government, while still upholding citizens' fundamental rights.
- Give priority to addressing the pervasive issue of sexual violence as a paramount concern for the central government.
- Guarantee relief measures and security for all victims through government intervention.

CONCLUSION

Civil unrest has persisted in Manipur for nearly three months. Indian mainstream media initially overlooked the Manipur conflict, only providing coverage after an online viral video gained attention. Significant newspapers and broadcast media, both in Manipur and the rest of India, have refrained from reporting on the violence faced by the Christian-majority Kukis, while emphasizing violence perpetrated by Kuki militants. Media attention has been primarily occupied with debates and discussions on religion and politics, hindering critical analysis of the situations in Manipur. The government's neutral stance on the Manipur crisis has raised questions about its roles and responsibilities. By considering all the outcomes that are resulted from the conflicts of Manipur and the ignorance of Central government in this regard, one can assure the fact that 'The centre treats North-East India as a step daughter' is not untrue.

India's North-eastern region has been experiencing ethnic violence ever since the independence of the country and it is because of ethnicity and extremism that is prevails in this particular region. It is crucial for both groups and the general populace to recognize that these challenges can be resolved through peaceful dialogues. The primary responsibility lies with both the Central and State governments, which must collaborate to promote peace and harmony in the region. Stability in Northeast India can only be achieved through peaceful discussions and cooperation between the people and the governments involved.

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