



ETHNIC QUAGMIRE IN MANIPUR

A CAUCUS RESEARCH REPORT

**Caucus: The Discussion Forum
Hindu College, University of Delhi**



About Us

Caucus is the discussion forum of Hindu College, University of Delhi. It was formed in 2007 as a college society with the aim to discuss and deliberate on a wide array of issues ranging from politics, philosophy, economics etc. The role of discussions has paramount importance in the process of learning and unlearning. Caucus aims at facilitating by providing a platform to freely express their opinions. Over the years, it has furthered its primary goal of pursuing intellectual excellence.

The society provides its members with numerous avenues to grow and explore through various events such as Hindu Policy Talks, International Hindu Model United Nations, Roundtable Discussions with dignitaries and society's Annual Speaker Conclave- Compass in collaboration with IQAC. We also encourage our members to indulge in research and provide them with all the necessary support regarding publication. Such conversations aim to tickle the intellect of our members and invoke opinions from across the spectrum.

Given the competitive environment of Delhi University, Caucus attempts to stride further ahead and give its members an edge over their fellow companions. It is in this direction that the society encourages its members to express their opinions on issues of policy, international relations, and domestic and international developments among others in the form of the written word. Caucus' blog provides a platform to members as well as serves the wider prospective audience by providing perspectives on various subjects. Caucus publishes a non-partisan monthly magazine "The Probe" with an ambition to promote writing & reporting among the students and enable them to engage in a learning experience with experts & working professionals.

Names of the current office bearers:

1. President - Milind Shekhar Singh
2. Vice President- Gaurvi Saluja
3. General Secretaries - Ameya Dwivedi, Anirudh Mehta and Lokesh Chaudhary

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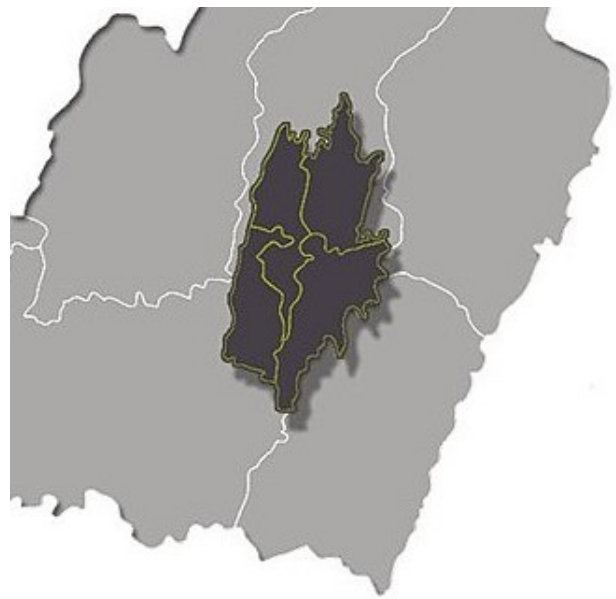
The Jewel of India, Manipur, made it to the headlines of various national level newspapers on 4th May. The reasons were anything but sparkling; Manipur saw a tremendous upsurge of violence that persists to date. The immediate reason for the present violence is the High court's 27th March 2023 judgement directing the state government to consider the inclusion of Meitei community in the Scheduled Tribes list within four weeks and send a recommendation to Union Government for its consideration. The conflict turned violent after the All India Tribal Student Union of Manipur (ATSUM) organised a solidarity march on 3rd May. At least 70 people were killed in violent clashes. Let us proceed to understand the history of this conflict, briefly.



Members of the Meitei Community

Historical Significance

Historians trace the origins of the earliest kingdom of Manipur, "Kangleipak" to 33 AD. Ancient Kangleipak is a rather obscure civilisation, concentrated along the central plains of modern day Kangleipak (Manipur). Kangla (Imphal) served as the foremost capital city of this realm from the 1st century AD to the late 19th century AD. Hinduism made its way to Manipur in the 15th century and gradually assimilated the earlier practices and traditions of indigenous Sanmahi polytheism. Vaishnavism took root in the sixteenth century as a result of the immigration of Bengali monks who fled the rule of the sultan and integrated into Manipuri society. Later, the British annexed Manipur in 1891. The colonial rulers provided it with the privileges of a princely state under its dominion, as was the case with other territorial monarchies in the subcontinent.



Ancient Kangleipak; Central Plains of Modern Manipur





Members of the Kuki Community

The British Colonial regime practiced a general hands-off approach as far as cultural transformations were concerned. Christian missionaries however, worked consistently to convert the animistic tribes of the region into Christianity. This increased the cultural differences between the Meitei community on one hand, which is predominantly Vaishnav, and rival groups such as the Kukis and Nagas, which are predominantly Christian. These burgeoning cultural differences have contributed to, and shaped the ethnic quagmire that we are witnessing today. The aspirations of the political and economically dominant Meiteis to revive their lost glory and identity remains at the heart of continuing tensions in Manipur.

Reasons For The Conflict



Physical Map of Manipur

Geography and ethnicity plays a crucial role in the societal and political dynamics of Manipur. The Meitei people, also known as the Manipuri people, are the predominant ethnic group of Manipur. They speak the Meitei language, one of the 22 official languages of the Republic of India. They are mainly settled in the Imphal valley region. The total geographical area of Manipur is 22,327 square kilometres which is divided into the hills and the valley. The valley accounts for only 2000 square kilometres nearly and is populated by 57% of the total population. On the other hand, the hills account for 90% of the geographical area but are populated by only 40% of the population. We must note here that the valley is the centre of political and economic activities in the State. The hills have been constantly neglected in the developmental projects of the state; a look at the budgets from 2017- 2021 makes it clear.





Manipur shares a long border with Myanmar. After the military takeover of Myanmar, opium cultivation has seen a magnificent rise. Only 10 per cent of the 400-km international border that lies in Manipur is fenced, leaving it wide open to act as a transit route for drug trafficking to Northeast India from the "Golden Triangle", the Tri-junction of the Myanmar, Laos and Thailand borders.



The Golden Triangle

The recent crackdown of the state government led by N Biren Singh on the opium cultivation has resulted in the loss of livelihoods hill people. This has enraged local Kuki-Naga tribes. The opposition by the tribal communities to include Meiteis in the Schedule Tribe list can be understood by analysing the predominance of Meiteis in state politics. The Meitei community comprises more than half of the population and yields 40 out of 60 state MLAs. On the other hand, tribal groups comprise 40% of population but have only 20 MLAs in the state assembly.

Tribal groups argue that the Meiteis have a demographic, as well as political advantage. They fear fewer job opportunities and the ultimate loss of land. The Meiteis make the counterclaim, that the status is necessary to preserve their ancient language, culture and traditions.

A Timeline of Events

March 27- The High Court of Manipur announced a judgement, ordering the Manipur State Government to consider the demand of Meiteis to be included in the list of Scheduled Tribes.

April 27- A day before Biren Singh's visit to Churachandpur, a gym was set on fire.

April 28- Section 144 was imposed, along with a five day long suspension of internet facilities.

May 3- Thousands turned up for a solidarity March called by ATSUM (All Tribal Students Union of Manipur). 70 people died in the violent conflict that ensued.

May 4- Fresh incident of violence, more vandalism destruction. The rapid action force was deployed along with the army, CRPF, Assam rifles and state police to contain the violence.

May 5 and 6- There was an influx of displaced residents to the neighbouring states of Assam and Mizoram. More than 80,000 people had to take shelter.

May 17- Supreme Court criticised the High Court order directing the state government to consider giving the ST status to Meiteis.





Stakeholders and Conflict of Interests

It becomes clear then that there are two major stakeholders in this scenario.

The Meiteis

The Meiteis want to be recognised under the Schedule Tribes (ST) category of the constitution. They want certain privileges, protecting their land, language, culture and so forth. They indict the Kukis for giving shelter to illegal immigrants from across the border, due to sympathy that stems from cultural similarities between the Kukis and Meiteis.

The Kukis

The Kukis do not want the Meiteis to get recognised under the Schedule Tribes (ST) list of the Constitution. They do not wish to share the benefits of reservations, since they argue that the Meiteis are the dominant ethnicity within Manipur; accusing them of holding a majority of the political power in the state for decades.

These conflict of interests gave rise to such a grave situation, that the central government had to impose Article 355 in Manipur, a power which is invoked in the rarest of rare instances. This is especially astounding, since the state is governed by the same party as the centre. Post invoking the aforementioned article, the Centre took over the control of the state to ensure the re-establishment of peace and an effective law-and-order situation.

Way Ahead

The only way ahead in this scenario is going to be through a series of deliberations and dialogue. Violence, under any circumstance whatsoever, is not going to lead to a solution. What then becomes important on the part of the Centre or the state is to initiate a series of conversations wherein different interests of different stakeholders are not just taken into account but also addressed effectively. The central government also initiated a step in the same direction by declaring themselves open for any sort of conversation with the stakeholders and asking them to stop violence and rather discuss the issues that they face. Given the fact that the Schedule Tribes category comes with certain specific protections such as that of linguistic nature or cultural nature which is something that the Meiteis want for themselves but the larger question, however, becomes if it is the only way according to our constitution by which a community can be guaranteed protections like these which will help them to feel culturally safe and allow them to come at peace with cultural insecurities.



*WE HOPE THAT PEACE IS RESTORED AT THE
EARLIEST*

