

Review Article

Ethnic Stereotypes of the Meitei-Kuki Conflict in Manipur

N. Pautunthang

Population Research Centre, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Karnataka, India.

Corresponding Author : naulakzomi@googlemail.com

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Abstract - This paper examines the ongoing Meitei-Kuki clash in Manipur, focusing on the popular media portrayal of poppy cultivation, forest encroachment, illegal immigration, accusations of narco-terrorism and derogatory remarks. The study highlights the complexities surrounding these issues by analysing media reports, government notifications, and community press releases. Results underscore the crucial role of government neutrality in creating an environment conducive to dialogue, reconciliation, and peaceful resolution of grievances. By refraining from taking sides and actively promoting inclusive approaches to conflict resolution, the government can mitigate the risk of further escalation and promote long-term peace and stability in Manipur. The paper concludes by emphasising the importance of government neutrality as a foundational principle for building trust, fostering cooperation, and addressing the root causes of the Meitei-Kuki clash.

Keywords - Manipur, Poppy cultivation, Illegal immigration, Narco-Terrorism, Derogatory remarks.

1. Introduction

The state of Manipur is situated in the northeastern region of India. It shared borders with Myanmar to the east and south. Its landscape, comprising the Imphal Valley and surrounding hills, is a habitat for several ethnic communities. The Imphal valley covers around 10 per cent of the total area of the state but is home to 57 per cent of its inhabitants [1]. Most valley inhabitants are Meitei, primarily adherents of Hinduism, with smaller populations of Muslims and followers of Sanamahism, a native religion.

Conversely, the hills encircling the Imphal Valley include 90 per cent of its total geographical area. The hills accommodate 43 per cent of its population, consisting of thirty-four distinct ethnic groups that can be broadly classified as Nagas and Kukis. The Nagas are the primary inhabitants of the state's northern region, whereas the Kukis are the primary inhabitants of the southern region [1]. The tribal communities are identified as Scheduled Tribe (ST). At the same time, the Meitei people are classified as Other Backward Classes (OBC), with some segments recognised as Scheduled Caste (SC) in specific regions.

2. Significance of the Study

Amidst this cultural mosaic, a critical research gap emerges concerning the escalating ethnic tensions. On 3rd May 2023, ethnic conflict broke out between the majority Meitei of the Imphal valley and the minority Kuki tribal from the surrounding hills, signalling a profound societal fissure.

As of 15th September 2023, government data indicates that 175 individuals have lost their lives in the violence, while 1,108 others have sustained injuries and thirty-two have been reported as missing. Furthermore, a total of 4,786 residences were set on fire, while 386 religious edifices, such as temples and churches, were vandalised [1]. The violence has resulted in the displacement of more than 70,000 people from their homes, with unofficial figures indicating even much higher numbers.

This study delves into the root causes and dynamics of the Meitei-Kuki conflict in Manipur with a novel perspective. While previous works have provided valuable insights into the historical, cultural, and political dimension of ethnic tension in the region, this paper uniquely focuses on exploring the role of ethnic stereotypes in exacerbating inter-community discord.

3. Materials and Methods

The study primarily relies on content analysis of media reports, a method for systematically studying communication. It involves quantitatively measuring variables to examine media representations objectively. The aim is to critically examine the media portrayal of the ethnic clash between Meiteis and Kukis since 3rd May 2023. The study analysed news items, headlines, editorials, and opinions published in various media. The news contents were categorised into different thematic areas, with each paragraph of the news items serving as a unit of analysis.



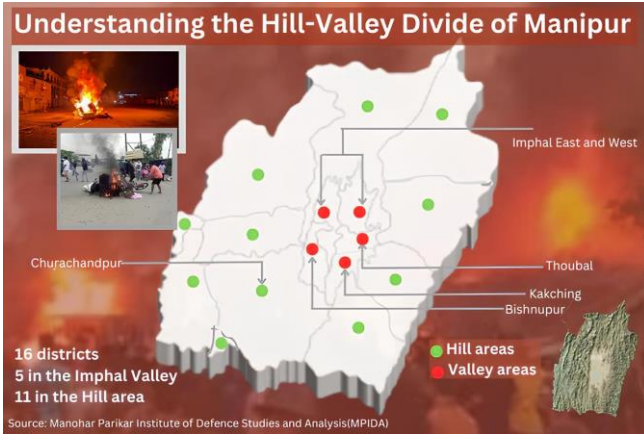


Fig. 1 Map of manipur showing hills and valleys

Source: Manohar Parikar Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Narratives and Counter-Narratives

Ethnic tensions between the majority of Meiteis and the Kuki tribals heavily influence the media landscape in Manipur. Notably, most media outlets are predominantly owned by the Meiteis. The Imphal valley is significantly more developed and hosts more daily newspapers, television channels and digital platforms than the hill districts of the state [2]. Most newspapers and news channels in the valley appeared to align with directives from the Manipur Chief Minister's Office. The blame for the violence was consistently attributed to the Kuki tribals. Following the 3rd May 2023 violence, multiple narratives have surfaced from the majority Meitei community.

There are only a handful of English newspapers in the hills, and most publications are in tribal dialects such as Thadou, Paite, and Hmar. Many of these newspapers are limited to one-page leaflets that cater to the diverse ethnic tribal communities dispersed throughout the hills. The tribal media serve as counter-narratives, debunking all the narratives that have emerged from the Meitei society.

4.1.1. Poppy Plantation

On 26th June 2018, the Chief Minister of Manipur launched the "War on Drugs" campaign, employing a mix of coercive and non-coercive tactics. These strategies include offering alternative livelihoods to poppy farmers, providing incentives for drug seizures, and conducting forced eradication drives. Additionally, non-governmental organisations and civil bodies were joined in efforts to raise awareness among the population, mainly aimed at discouraging poppy cultivation. On 25th February 2021, representatives from 33 communities in Manipur collectively pledged to cease poppy cultivation, uniting under the banner of the "All Communities Convention for a Pledge Against Illegal Poppy Plantation". This action responded to the Chief Minister's appeal for assistance in the "War on Drugs" initiative.

Despite this, Meitei Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) endorsed the Manipur Chief Minister, portrayed Kuki communities as "poppy cultivators", and declared war against them [3].

The Manipur Against Poppy Farming (MAPC) movement, organised by a group of intellectuals, social and political thinkers, young individuals, and legal experts, acknowledges the Chief Minister's endeavours in addressing poppy cultivation [4]. However, MAPC emphasises the need to be cautious and not target any particular community in this endeavour.

The hill tribals expressed their opposition to poppy cultivation, but they criticised the government for targeting the hill tribes under the pretext of eradicating poppy cultivation. The tribals agree that the drug problem poses a severe threat to Manipur society. It should be addressed collaboratively, with all communities working together. Simply blaming one community will not successfully tackle the problem [4].

Meitei communities are also engaging in poppy cultivation. Manipur has 2,340 acres of poppy cultivation, primarily in Naga-dominated areas and 35 acres in other areas. Between 2017 and 2023, 1,083 Muslims, 873 Kukis, 381 Meiteis, and 181 other communities were arrested under the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act [5].

In 2018, Additional Superintendent of Police Thounaojam Brinda made a high-profile arrest that garnered significant attention. Despite being arrested, the state police quickly released the accused. According to the Police Officer, the decision to release the alleged drug lord followed strict instructions from the state Chief Minister [6].

Brinda courageously expressed in an interview that the Manipur Chief Minister is not combating the illicit drug trade but rather is involved in it, serving as a patron and protector of the drug mafia.

On 22nd November 2019, Reza Borhani, a fifty-year-old Australian citizen, was detained by police in Bandra, Mumbai, in possession of a large quantity of LSD, a psychedelic substance worth 1.8 crore rupees. Subsequent investigations by Frontier Manipur unveiled that the Manipur Chief Minister allegedly handed Borhani a licence to import cannabis seeds, blooms and leaves from Manipur [7].

On 19th May 2023, MLA Kh Raghmani Singh wrote a letter to the Union Home Minister on the seizure of 50 kg of opium from two Meiteis by Delhi Police in February 2019 [8]. In his communication, Singh expressed concerns about the involvement of "well-connected families and powerful political families" in the drug trade within Manipur.

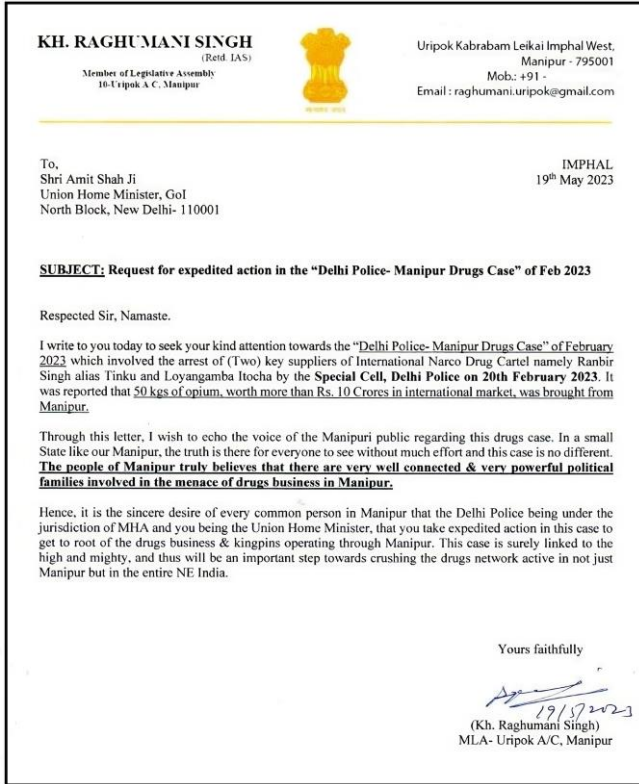


Fig. 2 Kh. Raghmani Singh's Letter to Shri Amit Shah

Source: Raghmani's Facebook Wall Post

On 21st February 2023, The Times of India reported allegations against the Chief Minister of Manipur regarding his involvement in drug smuggling. According to the report, the Delhi Police Special Cell seized 50 kgs of opium valued at ten crore rupees in a car near Sarita Vihar in the Badarpur border area. On the same day, Delhi Police apprehended two individuals, Ranbir Singh and Loyangamba Itocha, who were Manipur Chief Minister's drug agents. A drug dealer agency known as the "Itocha International Drug Cartel" is accused of cultivating poppy crops, supported by Meitei capitalist groups and the Manipur Chief Minister. According to the Narcotics and Border Affairs website of Manipur Police, the majority of opium manufacturing laboratories are located in the Imphal Valley [9].

The Kuki Civil Society organisations and churches have taken a firm stance against poppy plantations, imposing severe penalties for those found guilty. The Kuki National Organisation (KNO) issued Shoot-at-Sight orders (No. ZG/KC12-6/08, Manmasi, 16th January 2023), warning people to cease poppy cultivation in Kuki Hills. It is deemed unacceptable to label the entire Kukis community as being involved in poppy cultivation.

Poppy planting has been prevalent in Manipur due to the vicinity of the "Golden Triangle" and a lack of alternative sources of income for the hill people, including Kukis,

Nagas, and other communities [10]. However, targeting solely the poorest growers would be ineffectual in combating the problem. Social Scientists such as Dhanabir Laishram contend that focusing simply on cultivators will not solve the problem. He emphasises that the problem affects numerous actors, including transporters and dealers. Furthermore, he points out that a wealthy segment of the Meitei community plays a significant role in sponsoring poppy cultivation [11].

4.1.2. Forest Encroachment

The state Chief minister from the Meitei community alleges that the Kukis are encroaching on increasing forest land. Meiteis attributed the growth of new villages in the hills to illegal immigrants and refugees.

On 7th November 2022, the Manipur government issued an order that nullified previous directives from the 1970s and 1980s that excluded specific communities from the projected Churachandpur-Khoupum protected forest [1]. This decision effectively categorised 38 ancestral villages in the Churachandpur district as encroachments. In February 2023, the BJP-led state government launched an eviction campaign in the districts of Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, and Tengenoupal, referring to the local residents as encroachers [1]. A committee established by the state government chaired by the Chief Secretary on 3rd April 2023 cancelled all land and property documents pertaining to village recognition within designated reserved and protected forest areas. Notably, these actions were taken without any accompanying plan for the rehabilitation of the displaced tribal population.

What stands out is that the forest surveys, enquiries, evictions, and demolitions were conducted solely in Kuki-dominated areas, reinforcing the perception among the Kuki community that they were being unfairly targeted. On 6th December 2022, a surprise eviction drive took place in Kangchup, Kangpokpi district, leading to a violent confrontation and injuries of many people, including one police officer. On 20th February 2023, the government demolished all houses in K. Songjang village, Henglep Sub-Division, as part of an eviction drive, citing the area as Khoupum Protected Forest. These actions sparked outrage among the Kuki communities.

The state government declined to legalise tribal churches despite having regularised 188 Meitei Hindu Temples since 2010. This raises concern about the fairness and equality of treatment regarding religious institutions. Three tribal churches in the Tribal Colony, Imphal, namely Evangelical Baptist Convention Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church Manipur and Catholic Holy Spirit Church, were evicted and demolished at night on 11th April 2023, violating the law that prohibits demolition before sunrise or after sunset.

Kuki culture mandates the next-in-line sibling to lead new villages when the community's population reaches a

certain threshold, resulting in new villages in similar geographical areas. Moreover, during the Naga-Kuki clash in 1993, many Kukis from Naga-dominated areas fled and established new villages in the Kuki-dominated areas. The assumption that illegal immigrants or refugees inhabit these villages is incorrect. Meiteis' labelling of Kukis as illegal immigrants stems from a lack of understanding of their socio-economic lifestyle, disregarding their cultural significance.

The state government does not possess "Khas Land" (waste land) in tribal hill areas, which are owned by tribal communities or village heads and are not subject to cadastral surveys. Article 371C requires the state to engage with village administrations, district councils, and the Hill Areas Committee (HAC) before declaring certain areas as Protected Forests [12].

4.1.3. *Illegal Immigration*

In March 2023, leaders of several student clubs representing the Meitei community protested outside the Manipur Chief Minister's home, claiming that "illegal immigrants from Myanmar, Nepal, and Bangladesh" were marginalising the "Indigenous people of Manipur." They demanded the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and forming a Population Commission. The Meitei groups asserted that there has been an unnatural increase in population in the hill areas. Kukis have repeatedly been accused of being "immigrants" or "foreigners," meaning that they came from Myanmar and are not indigenous to Manipur [4].

Anti-Kuki sentiments intensified further when several Myanmar refugees, mainly belonging to the Chin group and sharing ethnic origins with several tribes residing in the hills of Manipur and Mizoram, sought asylum in these states following the crackdown by the military junta [4]. The Mizos perceive the Chins fleeing the military crackdown in Myanmar as kin and have provided them with assistance, including food, shelter, and education, as they seek refuge. The Kukis of Manipur share an ethnic tie with the Chins fleeing the violence.

The Meitei communities contend that new villages are forming in restricted forest grounds, and they argue that the influx of people is causing poppy fields to spread into previously undisturbed areas [4]. Manipur Chief Minister has claimed that Myanmar immigrants are responsible for deforestation, poppy planting, and the proliferation of the drug problem in the state. He even formed a cabinet sub-committee to identify illegal immigrants and establish temporary shelters to help them return to their home country [13].

The Kuki settlements in India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh predate the British administration. In 1894,

British colonists absorbed the Kukis and their area into British India and British Burma without their consent. In 1947, East Pakistan was separated from British India. It is important to note that the Kukis did not migrate into Manipur Territory; rather, Kuki indigeneity in the hills predates the establishment of the Manipur state [11].

The Kukis argued that Myanmar's military coup resulted in only a small number of refugees crossing the border, which does not explain the population increase in hill districts. The Meiteis should not create animosity or label the entire community as illegal immigrants, as there is a distinction between refugees and illegal immigrants. They emphasise that the state has the legal authority to address the consequences of the refugee issue and take appropriate action. Additionally, the Kuki people, proud Indian citizens, have significantly contributed to India's freedom movement, independence, and nation-building.

During the India Today Conclave East 2018 session titled "Long Road to Recovery: Putting Manipur Back on the Map", the Manipur Chief Minister stated that there are no illegal infiltrators in Manipur [14]. Additionally, according to the 2010 publication "Mnaipur Ke Awas Hind Ek Shradhanjali" (Hindi version) and "Manipur Gi Indian National Army (INA) Freedom Fighters Singda Katba Shradhanjali" (Meitei Version) by the Department of Art and Culture, Government of Manipur, it is documented that 79 Kuki Freedom Fighters were among the 112 from Manipur. These records serve as evidence that Kukis actively participated in freedom fighting, debunking any notion that they were foreigners.

Table 1. Freedom fighters from different communities in manipur

Sl.No.	Community	No. of Freedom Fighters
1	Kuki	79
2	Meitei/Manipuri	27
3	Bengali/Chowdhury	03
4	Punjabi/Marwari	01
5	Tangkhol Naga	01
Total		112

Source: *Only Total Separation*, Page No.22

There is no extraordinary rise in the Kuki population in Manipur. The population of Manipur was 2,84,488 according to the 1901 census, with the Kuki community accounting for 41,262 people, or 14.5 per cent of the population of the state at that time. According to the 2011 census, the Kuki population is 4,48,214, while the state's total population is 28,55,794. The Kuki population has grown at less than 2 per cent each year for the past 110 years [11].

4.1.4. *Narco-Terrorism*

The narrative from Imphal suggested that the riots were orchestrated by the Suspension of Operations (SOO) groups.

On 10th March 2023, the Manipur government made a surprising cabinet decision to withdraw from the tripartite Suspension of Operation (SOO) agreement with the Kuki insurgent groups, namely the Kuki National Army (KNA) and United Peoples' Front (UPF), despite the Union government's desire for peaceful negotiations with these groups [15].

On 24th March 2023, the state government selectively removed the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), restricting its revocation to the Imphal valley. This decision was made despite ongoing peace talks between the Kuki insurgent groups and the Centre, while the Meitei insurgents active in the Imphal valley were not engaged in any peace negotiations. In hindsight, this action was viewed by the Kuki tribals as a biased manoeuvre, seemingly laying the groundwork for violence against the Kukis, which subsequently unfolded a few months later. The Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI), the top body of Meitei civil society organisations, declared a "national war against the Kuki narco-terrorists" at its public meeting on 7th June 2023 [16].

According to the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), there are currently eight terrorist or unlawful organisations operating in Manipur, all affiliated with the Meitei community. Many of these organisations operate camps in Myanmar, namely the Peoples' Liberation Organisation (PLA) and Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL), and have developed informal alliances with the Myanmar Military. These terrorist organisations are advocating for independence from India and have been engaged in armed conflict against the Indian state, primarily targeting the Indian army. The insurgency originating in the valley itself has resulted in over 2,500 casualties over the past three decades alone.

The Kuki Armed groups have consistently maintained a non-violent stance towards Indian security forces and have adhered to the laws of the nation. When the Indian government offered the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement approximately two decades ago, the Kuki group was among the first to sign it, and they have remained in their designated camps ever since. The Kuki SoO groups have refrained from attacking security forces and have confined themselves to their designated camps as per the agreement.

Table 2. Unlawful organisation in manipur

Sl. No.	Name of Organisation
1	Kangleipak Communist Party
2	Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup
3	Manipur Peoples' Liberation Front
4	Peoples Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak
5	People's Liberation Army
6	United Nations Liberation Front

Source: <http://www.mha.gov.in/en/banned-organisations>

The Suspension of Operations (SOO) agreement mandates that insurgents must store their weapons in locked storage at designated Camps, with regular monitoring conducted by the Joint Monitoring Group (JMG). There is no convincing evidence that the Kuki militants under the SOO have broken any ground rules. The State Chief Minister has explicitly stated that all arms of the Kuki militants under the suspension of operations are intact in their authorised camps [17]. Army sources have refuted reports claiming that two camps of insurgent groups, which had signed a tripartite ceasefire agreement with the Centre and the Manipur government, were found utterly empty in the India-Myanmar border districts of Tengnoupal and Chandel. "These two SOO-designated camps are being regularly checked. It is confirmed that these camps remain occupied as of the current date", army sources informed the NDTV. They stated that reports claiming the SOO camps were found empty were largely rumours spread on social media and propagated by vested interest on the ground.

The Kukis did not launch retaliatory attacks until 24 hours after the violence began in Churachandpur. Volunteers from the afflicted villages took up arms against the Meitei crowd, believing that the police were unable to protect their community and offered no assistance. Concurrently, Kuki houses were set ablaze [18].

4.1.5. Derogatory Remarks

The Meitei community used derogatory terms such as "hao", "hao-thu", "hao-macha", and "minai" to refer to the hill people, which were offensive and demeaning [19]. These terms implied that the hill people were viewed as slaves, untouchable, unclean and uncivilised. In a recent speech, the Manipur Chief Minister reportedly made derogatory remarks about the Kuki community. According to sources, during the concluding programme of Nari Shakti Vandhan held at the state BJP office in Imphal on 6th March 2024, the Manipur Chief Minister allegedly referred to the Meitei people being forced out of Moreh, Kangpokpi and Churachandpur by derogatory term "Monkey", implying the Kuki community.

The Committee on tribal Unity (COTU), representing the Kuki community, strongly condemned the derogatory remarks made by the Manipur Chief Minister towards the Kuki group. COTU denounce the Manipur Chief Minister as the "most communal Chief Minister" among all Indian states. COTU expressed disbelief at the Chief Minister's comparison of the Kuki people to Monkeys, labelling it as absurd and immature behaviour that was unbecoming of a leader in his position. COTU emphasised that such disrespectful remarks violate human rights and undermine the Chief Minister's role as the head of the state. COTU criticised the unsound nature of the Chief Minister's words and actions, highlighting that they are unacceptable for someone holding the position of Chief Minister.

4.2. From the Neutral Point of View

All media houses in Imphal are owned by influential members of the Meitei community, with none owned by Kukis. Following the outbreak of riots, these media outlets began portraying the Meitei community as victims, contrary to the actual situation. The sensationalised reporting of news and events incited the public, who were previously passive, to develop animosity towards the Kuki community. Politicians and other leaders swiftly capitalised on these narratives to fuel hatred. Fake narratives are rampant and widely circulated, exacerbating tensions across the region.

Initially, all of the so-called national media were taking news from the valley-based media. Consequently, mainland India tends to believe the narratives of the Meitei community, as the voices of tribals from Manipur did not effectively reach mainland India. However, the narrative shifted after a viral video of two Kuki women naked paraded gained widespread attention across the country. Journalists from various parts of the country arrived in Manipur, and mainstream media coverage significantly improved as both sides of the conflict welcomed reporters.

The National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) and Editors Guild of India (EGI) fact-finding teams are neutral entities and are neither affiliated with the Meitei nor Kuki community. The fact-finding report has deeply upset the Meiteis as it presents a position that contradicts what the Meitei want people to believe about the current ethnic conflict. The report refuted the ongoing efforts of the Meitei media to endorse arguments and narratives advocated by Meitei civil organisation leaders, the Manipur government, and its allies [20].

The visit of the NFIW team and their subsequent fact-finding report prompted L. Liben Singh of Imphal to file a complaint against them with the police. The Station House Officer of Imphal Police Station in West Imphal district registered an FIR on 8th July 2023. The Manipur Government, the All Manipur Working Journalists Union (AMWJU), and the Editors' Guild of Manipur (EGM) have also filed an FIR against EGI's fact-finding team members. Furthermore, the International Meetei Forum (IMF) filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) against the EGI members at the Manipur High Court, attempting to 'quash' the EGI's fact-finding report [21]. Ultimately, the mainstream media were reluctant to send their correspondents to report from Manipur. Only a few media dispatched their correspondents during the ongoing violence, resulting in less media attention on the Manipur violence.

According to the data, over 90 per cent of all casualties were Kukis; they account for more than 80 per cent of the displaced people [22]. The disparity underscores the creation of false narratives to favour the interest of one particular group. The data unequivocally indicates that Kukis has

suffered the brunt of human casualties and property loss. Mobs have destroyed numerous Kuki houses in Imphal and its surrounding areas, and looting of properties abandoned by fleeing Kuki people in Imphal continues [23].

It is the duty of the police force guarding the armoury to protect it at all costs if there is an attempt to loot it. However, in Manipur, most of the police force comprises Meitei individuals who openly prioritise the interest of their community over their duty to the nation. Over 4,000 sophisticated guns and five lakh rounds of ammunition have been looted from the armoury. However, the police did not resist, indicating a clear bias in the actions of the Manipur police. When directed to halt the Kuki mob, they fired viciously; when told to stop the Meitei mob, they abandoned their positions, allowing the rioters to do whatever they wanted [22].

5. Summary and Conclusion

The ongoing issues emerged after Biren Singh secured his second term as Manipur Chief Minister. From the onset of his political career, he has been recognised for his consistent use of "anti-Kuki" rhetoric. He frequently uses terms such as "foreigner", "illegal immigrants", "poppy cultivators", and even "monkeys", often accompanied by threats directed towards the Kuki tribal community.

The Meiteis have been demanding Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for their community. Biren Singh has expressed support for this cause, and the Manipur High Court has ordered the administration to expedite the process. The Manipur High Court delivered an extraordinary ruling on 27th March 2024, asking the administration to recommend including the Meitei group on the ST list to the Centre [24]. Both Naga and Kuki tribals perceived this move as an attempt by the Meitei community to encroach upon their land. If the Meiteis were granted ST status, they could purchase land in the hills, which is presently prohibited.

Various intricate factors collectively fuelled ethnic tensions between the Meitei and Kuki communities until they reached a boiling point on 3rd May 2023. On that day, the All-Tribal Students' Union of Manipur (ATSUM) held a solidarity rally in opposition to the demand for ST status by Meiteis in all Hills districts [25]. In response, Meiteis blocked all roads leading to the Hill districts. After the rally over in the afternoon, some Meitei individuals had set fire to the Anglo-Kuki War Centenary Memorial Gate, prompting Kuki tribals to rush to the site. This incident catalysed the outbreak of violence between the two communities.

Following the outbreak of violence in Manipur on 3rd May 2023, authorities implemented internet suspension measures to curb the spread of disinformation and false rumours through social media platforms. Most journalists in Imphal still operate from the government media centre,

which enables internet access. Broadband services were partially restored on 25th July 2023, affecting only 3 per cent of the internet users in the state. The ban on mobile internet services has persisted well beyond 100 days.

The Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) deemed this internet ban unlawful and a violation of the Supreme Court's judgement in the Anuradha Bhasin case, stipulating a maximum ban duration of 15 days. A sizeable segment of the Kuki population saw the internet shutdown as a ploy to disguise the state's inability to protect the lives and property of Kuki civilians in the heart of Imphal City [26].

The political leadership of Manipur exhibited a bias towards a particular community before and during the riot. The state government appeared to exacerbate the anger of the Meitei towards the Kukis through various statements and policy measures that seemed biased. Amid the turmoil, the ruling party suspended all Kuki police and administrative authorities, including the DGP, from active duty. However, they take no measures to prevent Meitei officers from accompanying the rioters. This reveals a deliberate effort to target and undermine one particular community [22].

Instead of trying to stop the violence, the Meitei leaders declared war against the Kukis. Govindas Konhoujam, Minister of PWD, stated, "Meiteis were warriors, we cannot stay silent; I am also in the field; time to teach the Kukis by Manipuri Forces and Youths" (Source: AIR Sangai Channel, 6th June 2023). Pramod Singh, the President of Meitei Leepun, has threatened to blow up Kangpokpi and Churachandpur to eliminate Kukis [27].

The level of violence and brutality inflicted by both Meiteis and Kukis upon each other raises questions about the presence of humanity in Manipur. It is disheartening that both groups have entrenched themselves in a victimhood

mentality, perceiving their people as victims while disregarding the sufferings of the other community. This lack of empathy extends even to heinous offences, highlighting the deep divide between the two communities.

Despite the portrayal by valley-based media outlets attributing the conflict to issues such as poppy cultivation, forest encroachment, illegal immigration, and narco-terrorism, it is noteworthy that among the casualties, no one is from poppy planters, illegal immigrants, or terrorists. Most of the victims were innocent tribals who were butchered in Imphal City. The Meitei community already benefits from reservations under Other Backward Classes (OBC), Scheduled Caste (SC) and Economically Weaker Sections (EWS). Their desire to become an ST may not solely be for job reservation purposes. Therefore, it becomes evident that the root cause of the conflict primarily concerns land-related issues.

In conclusion, the ongoing Meitei-Kuki clash in Manipur underscores land issues that contribute to ethnic tension. Amidst this turmoil, the government needs to adopt a neutral stance to facilitate peaceful resolution and prevent further escalation of the conflict. Government neutrality will ensure impartiality in addressing grievances from both sides and upholding the principles of justice and equality. By refraining from taking sides and actively promoting dialogue and reconciliation, the government can create an environment conducive to peaceful coexistence and sustainable conflict resolution. Maintaining neutrality is crucial for building trust among the conflicting parties and fostering long-term stability and harmony in Manipur.

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