

## **Ethnic Violence and Human Rights Violation in Manipur in 2023: A Scrutiny of Majority-Minority Model of Conflict**

*Niranjan Mohapatra<sup>1</sup> and Debasish Das<sup>2</sup>*

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### **Abstract**

The year 2023 witnessed a distressing surge in violence within the north-eastern Indian state of Manipur leading to a grave escalation of human rights violation. The crisis, the Manipur violence of 2023 erupted following Manipur High Court's decision on granting Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the Meitei community. Residents of Hills, the Kuki and Naga ST Communities protested against the decision of the Court apprehending sharing and encroaching upon the privileges they are enjoying. On 03 May 2023, these tribes took out a protest procession under the banner of All Tribal Students Union Manipur (ATSUM) which triggered reaction from the Mieteis. This crisis led to human rights violations, displacement, property destruction, and communal breakdown. The government's response to the violence came under scrutiny as allegations of excessive use of force, lack of accountability, and a disproportionate militarised approach emerged. These responses led to a vicious cycle of violence and counter-violence, further worsening the human rights of citizens. Concern was compounded by the fact that the violence forced many civilians to flee their homes, making it difficult for them to have access to basic amenities like healthcare and education. In this paper an attempt is made to evaluate the causes and consequences of Manipur violence in 2023, as well as the larger implications of Manipur violence in terms of international human rights, norms, and obligations. In this paper an attempt is made to examine the broader implications of the Manipur violence of 2023 within the context of international human rights, norms, and obligations. An attempt is also made to examine whether the violence can be analysed using the conflict model of the majority and minority.

**Keywords:** Manipur violence, Meitei community, Human rights violations, Scheduled Tribe

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Dept. of Political Science, Assam University, Silchar, (Diphu Campus), Karbi Anglong, Diphu, Assam, India.

<sup>2</sup> Ph.D. Scholar (UGC-NET), Dept. of Political Science, Assam University, Silchar, (Diphu Campus), Karbi Anglong, Diphu, Assam, India.

**Corresponding author's email:** [niranjanmohapatra@redeiffmail.com](mailto:niranjanmohapatra@redeiffmail.com)

## **1.0 Introduction**

The north-eastern Indian state of Manipur shares borders with Myanmar to the east and south. The state is divided into a valley in the centre and hills on either side. The hills are home to 33 recognised tribes by the Constitution (STs) Order, 1950 (The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950). The hills are administratively divided into five districts and six autonomous district councils (Haokip 2015). It makes up around 90% of the state's overall land area and accommodates 35.4% of the total population. The Meiteis and Meitei Pangals (a group of Meitei Muslims) who together make up 64.6% of the state's total population, live primarily in the Imphal valley, which makes up roughly 10% of the state's total landmass. The hills-valley divide is so wide that Manipur is currently on the verge of collapsing and peaceful cooperation and stability are a long way off. The Meitei, who are valley-dwellers, control the political system. Of the 60 Assembly seats, the valley holds 40 and the hill tribes 20.

## **2.0 Objectives of the study**

This paper has the following objectives:

1. To study the causes and consequences of ethnic riots in Manipur
2. To examine the nature and extent of human rights violation due to ethnic conflict
3. To examine the role of the state/ government in controlling the riots
4. To find out the consequences of the riots.

## **3.0 Methodology**

The methodology for the present study is based on historical, descriptive, analytical, and interpretative methods. Data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consist of government documents. The secondary sources for this study consist of books, articles, journals, newspapers, magazines, websites, etc.

## **4.0 Background of the study**

Meitei people make up the largest ethnic group in Manipur, and they practise Hinduism. They dominate Imphal and the neighbouring valleys, while Hill districts surrounding the Imphal valley are primarily inhabited by Christian Kuki-Zo, Naga, and other tribes. The Kuki have long been recognised as a Scheduled Tribe under the provisions of the Constitution of India, which ensure them access to state-run educational institutions, government jobs, and protections like the exclusive right to buy and own land in designated tribal areas and elsewhere including Imphal valley. The Meitei, on the other hand, benefit from being classified as a 'socially and economically backward class,' with a small section among them being recognised as Scheduled Caste. However, the Meiteis have been pushing for tribal status, arguing that it is essential to preserve their community and protect their ancestral land, traditions, culture, and language—a demand that has gained momentum in recent years (Donthi 2023).

The Kuki argue that the larger Meitei community is already advantaged. They fear that with ST status the Meitei would dominate reserved government jobs and acquire land in the hills hitherto denied, displacing the Kuki and other tribal groups. The wave of protests in 2023,

which escalated into clashes and incidents of sexual violence, was triggered by the Manipur high court ruling in favour of the Meitei's demand. Although the court's decision was made in late March, it became widely known only on 19 April 2023 when the judgment was published on the court's website. The Manipur High Court ordered the state administration in March 2023 to consider giving the Meitei community Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. Following this, tensions began to build up, which have since been made worse by problems including migration and poppy cultivation in the state (Saikia 2023). Violence in Manipur has been fuelled by polarising narratives that blame specific ethnic groups for the drug trade and migration from neighbouring states. On 3 May 2023 hills tribes, primarily representing the Kuki community, expressed their concerns through a peaceful protest against the proposal to grant the ST status to the Meitei community. This event was the spark for the beginning of conflict between the two ethnic communities. The ST status is an affirmative action strategy to grant the Meitei group a protected space in terms of quotas in public jobs and educational institutions in addition to other special rights, like the ability to purchase land in the protected tribal hill regions. Tribal organisations disagree with awarding Meiteis this privilege which they will be entitled after enjoying ST status because the former believe the latter already have a numerical advantage and are comparatively wealthy. In contrary, Meitei groups argue that ST status is essential to 'save the ancestral land, tradition, culture, and language' (Baruah 2023).

#### ***4.1 Status of Meitei during the colonial period?***

The Meitei community was recognised as a tribal group during the British rule in India. However, this status was dropped in 1951 by the newly established Republic of India (Khumancha & Khumancha 2020). This change prevented the Meitei community from purchasing land in hill areas of the state while hill inhabitants could purchase land in Meitei inhabited areas. As a result, they have been advocating for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for more than a decade, arguing that this recognition is essential to protect their distinct identity, culture, and land.

#### ***4.2 Historical and religious context of violence in Manipur***

The violence in Manipur has deep roots in the region's history, culture, and religion. As a multicultural hub, Manipur hosts a variety of ethnic groups, each zealously protecting its cultural heritage, land, and rights. The Meiteis, who are predominantly Hindu, and the Kukis and Nagas, who are largely Christian, illustrate a religious divide that often corresponds to ethnic divisions, intensifying inter-community rivalries (Sidhu 2023). Attacks on places of worship underscore the sectarian nature of this conflict.

The historical origins of violence in Manipur may be traced back to the colonial era, when the British divided the people into 'Hills' and 'Valleys,' each regulated by separate laws (Sidhu 2023). This categorisation highlighted the distinctions between the Meiteis, who resided predominantly in the valley, and tribal populations such as the Nagas and Kukis, who dwelt in the hills. Post-independence, this distinction manifested in a political structure that granted Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the hill tribes but denied to the Meiteis who were counted as a

tribe during colonial period. ST status provides benefits like reservations in government jobs and educational institutions, a significant point of contention between the groups.

The Meiteis' desire for ST status threatens to undermine the other groups' financial benefits and could impact the political environment. Given the Meiteis' large number, which accounts for more than half of Manipur's population, giving them ST status may shift political power and influence in their favour. This prospective power transfer threatens to disenfranchise the Kukis and Nagas, exacerbating ethnic conflicts.

## **5.0 Causes behind the conflict**

The immediate trigger for the ethnic unrest appears to be the Meitei community's demand to be included in the Scheduled Tribes (ST) list. The Meitei make up about 65% of Manipur's population and primarily reside in the Manipur Valley. However, the population majority and valley dwelling are not the causes of violence. The High Court decision is the immediate cause of violence in 2023. What is more significant which triggered the violence is the government's crackdown on reserved and protected forests in the State's hill areas dominated by tribal communities.

N. Biren Singh, the Chief Minister of Manipur belongs to the Bharatiya Janata Party which is also ruling at the centre, Besides, he also belongs to Meitei community. Stringent measures against what he terms encroachment on reserved and protected forest areas by tribal communities are driven by various factors. One reason is the significant amount of land in the hills being used for poppy cultivation. The government views its crackdown on these forest areas as part of a broader war on drugs. However, it has also been criticised for using the term 'drug lords' to broadly label all Kuki people.

Additionally, the Kukis feel persecuted. Many Chin people, ethnically related to the Kukis, have fled violence and persecution in Myanmar and entered India (Sadokpam 2023). The government's strict stance against these so-called illegal immigrants has further angered the Kukis. Ethnic affinity overtook the national identity. Additionally, there is intense pressure on land in Manipur. As rural tribal populations grow, they expand into surrounding forest areas. This practice is contested by the government. Meanwhile, the Meitei, who reside in the valleys, are frustrated because they are not permitted to settle or buy land in the hill areas, while tribal people have no legal binding for buying land in the valleys.

### ***5.1 Meitei's demand for ST status***

The demand for inclusion of Meitei in the ST list by the Meitei community has existed for quite some time. The demand first came up in 1981 when the then Chief Minister of Manipur, Rishang Keishing raised the matter in the State Legislative Assembly. The discussions on the issue did not lead anywhere as there were dissenting voices within the Meitei community against getting ST status. In 1995, the Meitei community was given the status of Other Backward Class (OBC). Two groups within the Meitei community—Chakpas (previously known as Lois) and Thoubal Khunous (previously Yaithibis)—were already identified as Scheduled Castes (SC) in 1956.

Nevertheless, the Meitei community intensified its demand for ST status with the formation of the Scheduled Tribes Demand Committee of Manipur Valley (STDCM). The Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur (STDCM) stands as a collective entity established by the Meitei community. The Committee presents Meiteis as an indigenous group within Manipur (Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur (STDCM 2023). Operating as a non-political and secular organisation, it represents the aspirations of the Meitei people. Led by retired civil servants and former military personnel, this independent organisation serves as a voice for the Meitei society, advocating for their rights and interests. The STDCM submitted a memorandum to Governor Gurbachan Jagat in November 2012 and also met the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in July 2013 to reiterate their demand for ST status (Das 2023). The Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur (STDCM) has been actively advocating for the recognition of Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for the Meiteis community since late 2012. The STDCM reported that it had received assurance from the Indian prime minister in July 2013 regarding the examination of their demand provided Manipur state cabinet approves the committee's demand (Haokip 2015). In response to the STDCM's demand, Manipur lawmaker Irengbam Ibohalbi introduced a Calling Attention Motion in the State Assembly on 25 February 2014 and was assured by the deputy Chief minister Gaikhangam Gangmei, who also holds the Tribal Affairs and Hills portfolio, of a discussion with the Central Government after a comprehensive study (Haokip 2015).

The STDCM contended that the Meiteis' mongoloid physical traits, practice of animism (*Sanamahi* beliefs) by the majority of community members, and their partial Hinduisation, and being the earliest settler of the Imphal valley meet the requirements for being categorised as ST (Haokip, 2015). It accused the Government of India for the current rift and misunderstanding between the hills and valley people, which resulted from the recognition of hills people as tribes and the Meiteis as a primarily general category, and emphasised that there was no adversarial conflict prior to India's independence. Their demand is to restore the cohesive, harmonious, and tranquil society that existed prior to Manipur's incorporation into India on 21 September 1949 (Haokip, 2015). They stressed the necessity of listing themselves as STs under the President's authority granted by Article 342(1) of the Indian Constitution in order to save their threatened culture and identity. Nevertheless, the STDCM primarily manifests itself through the dissemination of periodic press releases, rather than engaging in street protests, mass mobilisation, or any form of violent activities. The STDCM believes that granting ST status to the Meiteis will help to preserve the integrity of the state by bridging the gap between hill and valley dwellers.

### **5.1.1 Procedure for Inclusion under List of Scheduled Tribes**

The process for a community to be recognised as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) by the Government of India begins with a recommendation from the respective State government to the Registrar General of India (RGI). If the RGI concurs with the State's recommendation, it is then forwarded to the Central Government of India (Khumancha & Khumancha 2020). The Central Government passes the recommendation to the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, which evaluates the merits based on criteria such as primitive lifestyle, habitation in remote and inaccessible areas, distinct culture, social isolation, and general backwardness.

If the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes finds the community eligible, it submits its report to the Central Government. The Central Government then drafts a bill and requests the President of India to officially recognise the community as a Scheduled Tribe. The President, under the authority granted by Articles 366(25) and 342 of the Indian Constitution, grants this recognition (The Hindu 2023, 15 March). This means that the designation of a community as a Scheduled Tribe is determined by the Registrar General of India and the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, both of which are appointed by the Central Government (idid.). However, the Kukis oppose this move, arguing that the Meitei community already wields significant political power in the state legislature and enjoys certain privileges. These conflicting demands have consequently heightened mutual suspicions.

### ***5.1.2 The Meitei's Argument for ST Status***

The Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur (STDCM) initiated the demand for ST status for the Meiteis in 2012, citing historical and cultural reasons. Historically, the Meiteis were recognised as a tribe before Manipur's merger with India in 1949. The ST status is seen as crucial for preserving the community's ancestral land, traditions, culture, and language.

The transition of Manipur from a union territory to the 19th state of India in 1972 brought about significant changes. The Meiteis argue that constitutional safeguards are necessary to protect their interests against external influences. They contend that while tribal people can purchase land in the Imphal Valley, the Meiteis are excluded from the hills, exacerbating their sense of marginalisation.

Over the years, the Hindu Meiteis have witnessed a demographic decline, with their population dropping from 59% of Manipur's total in 1951 to 44% in 2011. This demographic shift has fuelled Meitei nationalism, particularly in response to Naga and Kuki movements, which sparked concerns about the erosion of traditional Meitei areas.

The demand for an Inner Line Permit (ILP) between 2006 and 2012 aimed to restrict outsider entry, reflecting fears of demographic changes exacerbated by the free movement of Kuki-Zomi across Manipur's porous Myanmar border. The abolition of the permit system led to a population growth surge, intensifying these concerns.

In addition, the Meiteis feel disadvantaged by the ST reservation in government jobs, as the government is Manipur's largest employer. The prospect of infrastructure development, such as expanded railway networks, heightens their insecurities about losing their cultural and territorial integrity.

### ***5.2 Demands of the Hills people***

The tribes of Manipur's hills believe that the Meiteis are only trying to gain ST categories so that they can receive preferential treatment when applying for jobs. Besides, Hill tribes also maintain that the Meiteis in places such as Sekmai, Phayeng, Khurkhul, Koutruk, Laimaram, Kwatha, Laimaram Khunou and Andro, and some weaker sections from among them have already been given Scheduled Caste (SC) and Other Backward Class (OBC) statuses.

Moreover, they suggested that the general category of Meiteis in order to garner their desired benefits of reservations can demand for SC or OBC status (Haokip 2015). Hindu Meiteis account for approximately 80% of the total Meitei population, with the remainder primarily comprising Meitei Pangal/Muslims (approximately 19%) and a negligible Sanamahi population. The Meitei Pangal and Meiteis of the Sanamahi religion are already classified as OBC. Again, it is self-defeating to assert that Meiteis require ST status to safeguard their culture and identity. The Meiteis dominate the state and its apparatuses as a dominant group. Their cultural, political, and economic rights have been safeguarded by the state. Therefore, Hill tribes maintain that their culture and identity are not in any way threatened.

The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act of 1960 restrict the transfer of tribal land to non-tribals without special permission, prohibiting the expansion of the Meitei and other groups into the hill districts (The Manipur Land Revenue And Land Reforms Act, n.d.). As a result, Hills perceived that granting ST status to Meiteis would automatically eliminate this prohibition, allowing them to acquire lands in the hills with their sheer purchasing power. This allows them to take over more land beyond of the Imphal valley. This attempt may be seen in the deliberate administrative expansions of the Imphal districts towards the foothills of Sadar Hills.

The demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status by the Meitei community in Manipur has generated following significant debate and concern among the state's tribal groups, primarily due to its potential implications on job opportunities, land ownership, cultural identity, and political representation.

- Economic and Employment Concerns
  - Job Opportunities: Tribal groups fear that granting ST status to the Meiteis would lead to a loss of job opportunities reserved for STs. The competition for government jobs and educational seats, which are limited, would increase, potentially disadvantaging the current ST communities.
  - Dilution of Benefits: There is a significant concern that the limited resources and reservations available to the ST communities could be further divided, diluting the benefits they currently receive. This could affect their representation and access to various government schemes aimed at uplifting their socio-economic status.
- Land and Identity Concerns:
  - Land Acquisition: The Meitei community, if granted ST status, might gain the right to acquire land in the hill areas, which are currently protected and exclusively managed by the tribal communities. This raises fears of land dispossession and encroachment, potentially pushing tribals out of their ancestral lands.
  - Cultural Identity: The tribal groups are concerned that their distinct cultural identity could be overshadowed by the dominant Meitei culture. The inclusion of Meiteis as STs might lead to cultural assimilation pressures, eroding the unique traditions and practices of the tribal communities.

- Political Dynamics:
  - Representation: Granting ST status to the Meitei community could significantly alter the political landscape of Manipur. It might impact the representation of tribal communities in legislative bodies and local governance structures, potentially diminishing their political voice and influence. The existing balance of power, which provides a degree of autonomy and representation to tribal areas, could be disrupted.
  - Strategic Concerns: The demand for ST status by the Meiteis is seen by some as a strategic move to counterbalance the political demands of the Kukis and Nagas, and to extend the influence of the dominant valley dwellers into the hill areas. This could lead to increased tensions and conflicts between the different ethnic groups in the state. The Meitei community already enjoys certain benefits associated with the Scheduled Caste (SC), Other Backward Classes (OBC), or Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) status. Additionally, their language is included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, which provides them with cultural and linguistic recognition.

## **6.0 Response, Reports, and Reactions**

### ***6.1 Role of the Centre and the State Government***

The 2023 violence in Manipur, coupled with the central government's silence and failure to restore peace, underscores the BJP's apparent disinterest and lack of effectiveness in addressing issues in India's Northeast. Prime Minister Modi's minimal response to the harassment of two Kuki women by a Meitei mob in Manipur, aside from a brief mention in Parliament, exemplifies the BJP's striking silence on the situation in Manipur. Notably, on 04 May, two Kuki women were gang-raped, and despite numerous records and eyewitness accounts, the police omitted the rape from the FIR (Baig & Khan 2023). After the video circulated widely online, and over two months after the violence initially erupted, Modi finally addressed the issue. He described it as a 'shameful incident' and urged state governments to bolster their legal systems to safeguard India's 'mothers and sisters' (Ramasubramanyam 2023).

However, Modi's statement also included references to violence in opposition-ruled states which failed to condemn the broader issue of violence. Despite the Parliament being in session since 20 July, the Prime Minister took long to discuss the situation in Manipur. Many of India's political leaders remained conspicuously silent or engaged in whataboutism. When Smriti Irani, the Minister of Women and Child Development, was questioned in Parliament about the violence against women in Manipur, she deflected responsibility by pointing to violence in states governed by the opposition.

The likely reason for the BJP's silence is the upcoming 2024 general elections. PM Modi appears to be aiming to secure the majority vote from the Meitei community, carefully navigating the situation without taking decisive action to address the violence (Baig & Khan 2023).

After the initial outbreak of violence on 03 May last year, Union Home Minister Amit Shah announced the formation of a committee comprising representatives from various ethnicities, political parties, and civil society to initiate the healing process (The Indian Express 2024). However, the committee quickly encountered internal disagreements, largely due to the complex nature of Manipur's society. The situation is further complicated by landholding patterns and the lingering effects of colonial policies that segregated the state's tribal-dominated hill areas from the Meitei-dominant Imphal Valley. Over the past year, Chief Minister Singh's government did little to reassure communities, particularly the hill tribes, that his administration transcends the identity politics that have brought the state to the brink. Instead, his regime has exacerbated tensions and deepened divisions by continually invoking the insider-outsider narrative.

The state government's response has largely mirrored the strategies India has previously used during unrest in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. These measures have included imposing military curfews, suspending internet services, and deploying around 17,000 troops and paramilitary forces with orders to shoot on sight in 'extreme cases' (Nepram & Schuchert 2023). While the Manipur government has effectively cracked down on drug smugglers, it continues to overlook political and administrative failures by attributing the issues to illegal migrants from Myanmar, who share an ethnicity with the Kuki-Zomis (The Indian Express 2024). As a result, efforts to improve livelihoods in Manipur, which now has the third lowest per capita income in the country—despite being the highest-ranked in the north-eastern region in the 1990s—have been neglected. Healing Manipur requires a comprehensive approach, combining economic, political, and administrative measures. The Biren Singh government would be remiss in its duties if it failed to recognise this need, especially after a year of on-going strife.

## ***6.2 Reports of Human Rights Violation in Manipur***

Violence in Manipur erupted on 03 May 2023, in Churachandpur, a town south of the state capital Imphal, after a Kuki-led tribal unity march in ten of the state's sixteen districts. As the Meitei expressed their concerns through counter-protests and blockades, tensions escalated and clashes occurred in various parts of Manipur (Donthi 2023). Although the peace rally was intended for all tribal areas of the state, it was held only in the Kuki-majority district headquarters of Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, and Tengnoupal. From the outset in Churachandpur, the rally, guarded by Kuki militants, turned violent, with forest offices being set on fire as early as 10:30 in the morning. The burning of these forest offices raises the question of whether it was an expression of anger against the state government's eviction campaign targeting illegal encroachers and immigrants in Reserved Forests (RF), Protected Forests (PF), Protected Sites, and Wildlife Sanctuaries.

Since the ethnic violence began on 03 May, over a hundred individuals have been killed and many more injured. More than 50,000 people were displaced; and 349 refugee camps were set up to shelter them (Press Trust of India 2023, 11 June). Numerous homes and properties were burnt, looted, and vandalised. This devastated and terrorised the communities.

The state government also blocked access to the internet in the wake of the unrest. Manipur was effectively divided into 'no-go' zones, which were guarded by community organisations as well as security troops (Amnesty International 2023). The Kuki people were forbidden to travel through Meitei-controlled areas of the Imphal valley, and Meitei people were also forbidden to travel to the hill regions (Raj & Alex 2023). Amnesty International interviewed a victim of violence from a hill tribe whose family was attacked by a crowd on their route to a refugee camp on 04 May. Two members of the family were killed in the attack. Other members of the family also suffered significant wounds. The victim claimed that the police were unable to reach the scene of the incident because the crowd outnumbered them and prevented them from entering the area. They were compelled to leave their home, which was subsequently ransacked and completely emptied of all of their possessions. The family has also been unable to recover their bodies and perform last rites for the deceased family members (Amnesty International 2023). Between 03 and 15 May, nearly 200 churches were burned or demolished, according to the Christians Goodwill Council of the Churachandpur area of Manipur. Members of the Kuki community claimed the police did not protect them and sometimes even joined the rioters in their attacks on the Kuki group. The police in Manipur have dismissed allegations of bias (Human Rights Watch 2023, 30 May). In addition, 17 temples were reportedly demolished, as reported by the media. One Kuki MLA and his Kuki driver were also attacked by a crowd. The MLA was taken to the hospital, but the driver died. Meitei people in Kuki-controlled territories were also the target of attacks and forced to evacuate their homes. Amnesty International talked with a victim of violence from the Meitei community in a hill district, whose family, including elderly people, were forced to abandon their homes past midnight on the night of 03-04 May. One member of the family was shot and wounded. However, victims across communities felt the effects of the government's delay and failure. One victim reportedly told Amnesty International, 'There is no government,' while another questioned, 'Don't we belong to this government?' (Amnesty International 2023).

The Manipur State government issued a 'shoot-at-sight' order to all district magistrates in the state on 04 May, in clear violation of international human rights law and standards that allow the action 'in extreme cases after all forms of persuasion, warning, reasonable force have been exhausted' and the 'situation could not be controlled' (Amnesty International, 2023). Shooting at sight constitutes intentional lethal force. Under international law and standards, law enforcement officials may only use such force when it is strictly necessary to protect against an imminent threat of death or serious injury. However, the order failed to clearly define these circumstances, effectively authorising the deliberate and arbitrary killing of people who did not pose such a threat. On 12 June, vehicles belonging to private citizens in Imphal West were vandalised by members of the Rapid Action Force (RAF), a specialised wing of the Central Reserve Police Force. The event was recorded by CCTV cameras. Amnesty International spoke with an individual whose car had been vandalised. The person confirmed the vandalism by personnel. The event apparently led to the suspension of two employees (Hindustan Times 2023, 14 June). In a separate incident, three members of the RAF were arrested for attempting to set fire to a local store (Saikia 2023, 27 May).

On 19 July, a video surfaced showing two Kuki women, one in her forties and the other in her twenties, being dragged from their homes, stripped naked in public, slapped, and sexually abused by males who appeared to be of Meitei descent. When the women tried to seek

refuge at the police station, they were forcibly removed from the building. The mob allegedly gang-raped the younger girl and murdered her father and teenage brother when they tried to intervene on her behalf. For over two months after the complaint was filed, authorities did nothing until the video surfaced. The Kuki people claim the police are taking the side of the Meitei (Maktoob Media 2023, 31 May.).

The vandalism by security employees and the ‘shoot-at-sight’ order raises serious concerns. The government of Manipur seemingly violated the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials. The use of force by law enforcement is prescribed to be minimal and reserved for only the most severe of emergencies. Except in the strictest of circumstances, lethal force should never be employed to defend life.

More than 50,000 individuals have been compelled to leave their homes and are currently residing in relief camps in Manipur and the surrounding north-eastern states. According to a survivor in Manipur, as reported by Amnesty International, the camps where their family resided were lacking sufficient housing and shelter. The survivor described the conditions as resembling a shed and expressed concerns about the lack of hygienic facilities. In the immediate aftermath of the violence, a survivor who had been stationed in a different camp claimed that they went without any food or water for two days and nights. Access to medical services and supplies is also proving to be challenging. According to Amnesty International, another activist working to coordinate relief camps in Manipur said, ‘It is a big challenge...Camps don’t have proper sanitation.’ Adding further on promises of financial assistance made by the authorities for 36 displaced persons, they stated, ‘[It] has not been implemented. These are propaganda promises. The people are not fools’ (Amnesty International 2023). These reports of inadequate housing, sanitation, food, water, and medical treatment imply that the government's attempts to uphold and defend the human rights of internally displaced people (IDPs) fall short of the requirements set forth by the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (United Nations Human Rights n.d.). According to the Guiding Principles, all internally displaced persons have the right to a minimum standard of living. Regardless of the circumstances, and without prejudice, competent authorities must provide internally displaced persons with secure access to essential food and drinkable water, basic shelter and housing, appropriate clothes, and required medical services and sanitation (ibid).

The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement also highlight the importance of states fulfilling their duty and responsibility to provide security and aid to internally displaced persons within their jurisdiction. It is important to ensure that individuals such as children, unaccompanied minors, expectant mothers, mothers with young children, female heads of household, persons with disabilities, and elderly persons receive the necessary protection, assistance, and treatment that is appropriate for their specific circumstances and considered their particular requirements.

Due to the on-going situation of unrest, there has been a temporary disruption of internet services in Manipur. The Manipur government announced an internet shutdown starting from 03 May until 10 July. Unfortunately, the people of Manipur have experienced a prolonged period without internet access, lasting for over two months. On 07 July, the Manipur High Court issued an order requesting the State government to consider partially lifting the

internet shutdown. However, the Manipur Government has, nonetheless, appealed this ruling to the Supreme Court (Sharma 2023). Manipur authorities have said that the shutdown is to 'thwart the design and activities of anti-national and anti-social elements' and to 'maintain peace and communal harmony' (Amnesty International 2023), but the shutdown violated the human rights of the people of Manipur and hindered them from receiving and sharing information, freely expressing their opinions, and contacting their loved ones. However, The United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 32/13 of 2016 'condemned unequivocally measures to intentionally prevent or disrupt information online that are in violation of international human rights law' (The United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 32/13 of 2016 n.d.). Human Rights Watch (2023, 14 June) has repeatedly urged the Indian government to end its indiscriminate, widespread internet shutdowns. The shutdowns have a detrimental impact on various fundamental rights, such as the freedom to receive and disseminate information, express political opinions, communicate with family members, obtain medical assistance, and engage in online commercial transactions, banking, and other economic activities.

In response to the Manipur violence, Amnesty International urged Indian authorities to urgently restore internet connection in Manipur. It urged authorities to collaborate with civil society organisations and community members from all ethnic groups to restore peace and security in a human rights-compliant way. It reminded that victims of violence are entitled to truth, accountability, and justice. Investigations of police misconduct and prejudice must be conducted independently and impartially. Indian state officials and local organisations should work together to provide enough shelter, safety, clothes, clean water, nourishment, and healthcare to internally displaced individuals (IDPs) who were forced to escape. Governments must provide safe rehabilitation and/or relocation in order to enable the internally displaced people's right to freely return to their homes and start again. Volker Turk, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, expressed the view that the Indian government should 'respond to the situation quickly, including by investigating and addressing root causes of the violence in line with their international human rights obligations.' (Human Rights Watch 2023, 30 May).

National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) said, 'NHRC has observed that in most of the matters relating to violation of human rights due to continued violence in the Manipur, the Action Taken Reports (ATRs) sought by it from the state government are awaited. Therefore, it becomes imperative to know what actions have been taken by the concerned authority in the series of incidents that kept on happening for a considerable period and the disturbances are continuing for a pretty long time. The authorities are directed to ensure that no further violence which result in violation of human rights, takes place' (NHRC asks Manipur government to stop violence, human rights violations, 2023). The Commission also emphasises the necessity of implementing sufficient measures to prevent communities from engaging in violent actions and to uphold peace, harmony, and unity, thereby reinforcing the principles of brotherhood as outlined in Article 51-A of the Constitution of India.

### ***6.3 Internationalisation of the Manipur issue***

In September 2023, UN experts raised alarms about severe human rights violations in Manipur, India. These included allegations of sexual violence, extrajudicial killings, home destruction, forced displacement, torture, and ill-treatment. They criticised the ‘inadequate humanitarian response’ to the dire situation following renewed conflict between the predominantly Hindu Meitei and the predominantly Christian Kuki ethnic communities, which began in May 2023.

By mid-August 2023, the conflict had reportedly resulted in the deaths of approximately 160 people, mostly from the Kuki community, and over 300 injuries. The violence also displaced tens of thousands, led to the burning of thousands of homes and hundreds of churches, and caused the destruction of farmland, loss of crops, and livelihoods. ‘We are appalled by reports and images of gender-based violence targeting hundreds of women and girls, predominantly from the Kuki ethnic minority. The alleged violence includes gang rapes, parading women naked in the streets, severe beatings leading to death, and burning victims alive or dead’, the experts stated (United Nations Human Rights 2023). ‘It is particularly concerning that the violence seems to have been preceded and incited by hateful and inflammatory speech that spread online and offline to justify the atrocities committed against the Kuki ethnic minority, particularly women, on account of their ethnicity and religious belief,’ they said. ‘We are further alarmed by the reported misuse of counterterrorism measures to legitimise acts of violence and repression against ethnic and religious minorities’ (United Nations Human Rights 2023).

The experts said events in Manipur were another tragic milestone in the steadily deteriorating situation for religious and ethnic minorities in India. ‘We have serious concerns about the apparent slow and inadequate response by the Government of India, including law enforcement, to stem physical and sexual violence and hate speech in Manipur,’ the experts said. (United Nations Human Rights 2023). The experts appreciated the fact-finding mission carried out by lawyers and human rights defenders in Manipur and the subsequent actions by the Supreme Court of India, though they noted that a more timely response would have been preferable. They urged the Supreme Court to continue overseeing the governments and other actors’ responses, emphasising justice, accountability, and reparations. ‘We are also concerned about reports of criminalisation and harassment of human rights defenders documenting these cases,’ they added. The experts called on the government to enhance relief efforts for those affected and to take strong, prompt action to investigate the violence and hold perpetrators accountable, including public officials who may have incited racial and religious hatred and violence.

Additionally, the European Parliament has urged the Indian government to ‘take urgent steps to restore calm’ amidst the tribal and religious crisis in Manipur. This resolution was a response to the violent clashes that began in May 2023. ‘ADF International welcomes the European Parliament’s resolution on Manipur and joins the EU in calling for urgent action to restore peace and ensure inclusive dialogue involving civil society and affected communities as a solution to the crisis,’ said Adina Portaru, senior counsel for ADF International in

Brussels, which actively works to protect religious freedom worldwide (Press Release of ADF International 2023).

### **7.0 Future Prospects for Peace in Manipur**

To move towards lasting peace in Manipur, it's imperative to foster meaningful dialogue among the conflicting communities. Confidence-building measures, essential to this process, can only begin once the violence ceases. The state government's political will is crucial in this endeavour. Previous efforts to engage in dialogue have yielded minimal results, hindered by deep-seated animosities. Hostile sentiments, perpetuated by community-based organisations, have stymied any platform for consensus. In this volatile environment, it is vital for academics and well-meaning individuals to step forward and initiate conversations between ethnic groups. Socially mediated conflict resolution tends to yield more enduring positive outcomes than political interventions. Disarming both militant groups and civilians involved in violence is paramount. The responsibility falls on both the state and union governments to act swiftly. Persistent violence creates a breeding ground for militant activities, enabling recruitment, financing, and operational legitimacy. Manipur, suffering from decades of violence, cannot afford continued armament among its communities. Governments must curb the illegal arms flow across borders and within the state.

The issue of competing ethnic claims over land ownership requires critical examination. Constructive debates and discussions should address the rationale behind these assertions, which often revolve around exclusionary principles. The stance of the Kukis and Nagas to restrict the Meiteis, who constitute over 50% of the population, to just 10% of the land is untenable. Similarly, the benefits of state-led development, currently skewed in favour of the Meiteis, need to be redistributed equitably.

A key step is to re-evaluate and restructure the political representation, which has long been biased towards the Meiteis. Streamlining legislative assembly constituencies would help bridge the divide between the hills and the valley. Subsequently, decentralising governance and addressing autonomy demands can focus on legitimate governance issues without being overshadowed by ethnic-specific concerns.

Promoting a sense of fraternity among ethnic groups is crucial to countering the anarchy of ethnic majoritarianism. This requires the convergence of political will and social consensus. Demands for ethnic homelands or separate territorial arrangements, driven by majoritarian principles, undermine India's democratic ethos. Power elites across ethnic communities must recognise that such demands are endless and counterproductive.

Finally, policymaking in Manipur must transcend the short-term electoral interests of incumbent regimes. Policies rooted in electoral gains have negatively impacted nation-building efforts. In an ethnically fragile state like Manipur, long-term, inclusive strategies are essential for sustainable peace and development.

## **8.0 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the recent outbreak of violence in Manipur, a north-eastern Indian state, has illuminated deeply rooted divisions and tensions that have been festering for decades. Manipur's unique geographical and ethnic landscape, with a valley dominated by the Meitei community and surrounding hills inhabited by various tribal groups, has given rise to a complex web of cultural, political, and socio-economic dynamics. The violence that erupted in May 2023 exposed the fragile fault lines in this delicate balance, threatening the social fabric and stability of the region.

The catalyst for this violence was the proposed granting of Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the Meitei community, a demand championed by the Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur (STDCM). This demand, rooted in a desire to preserve Meitei culture and identity, clashed with the concerns of hill tribes who perceived it as an attempt to secure additional benefits and encroach on tribal land. The escalating conflict brought to the surface issues of ethnic identity, economic disparities, and political power struggles that had been simmering beneath the surface.

The violence and its aftermath have been deeply troubling, with reports of human rights violations, displacement, destruction of property, and a breakdown of communal harmony. Uses of lethal force, internet shutdowns and displacement of tens of thousands of people have only exacerbated the already dire situation. International organisations, including the United Nations and Human Rights Watch (2003, 30 May), have called for urgent action to investigate and address the root causes of the violence, emphasising the need for a comprehensive and human rights-based approach to resolving the crisis. The Manipur state government's response to the violence and its handling of the situation has come under scrutiny. While some measures have been taken to restore calm, they must be evaluated in light of their impact on human rights and the long-term prospects for reconciliation. It is imperative that the authorities ensure accountability for any human rights violations and work towards rebuilding trust among communities that have been torn apart by the recent events. Moving forward, a multi-pronged approach is needed to address the complex issues at play in Manipur. Meaningful dialogue and negotiation between the different ethnic groups, involving representatives from both the valley and the hills, will be crucial. This process should aim to address the concerns of all stakeholders and find common ground for peaceful coexistence. Moreover, economic development initiatives and social welfare programmes must be targeted at bridging the existing socio-economic disparities and creating opportunities for all communities. The central government, in collaboration with state and local authorities, should work towards implementing measures that safeguard the rights and well-being of all individuals, regardless of their ethnic background. These efforts should include fostering a culture of tolerance, understanding, and respect for diversity, as well as providing mechanisms for addressing grievances and resolving conflicts through peaceful means. Ultimately, the Manipur violence of 2023 serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need to address the underlying issues those have divided communities and fuelled discord. Only through concerted and inclusive efforts can Manipur's unique blend of cultures and identities truly thrive and contribute to the larger tapestry of India's diverse heritage.

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