

## **Manipur in Turmoil: Unravelling the Impact of the BJP's Identity Politics**

**Nisar Ali\***

### **Introduction**

The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) zeal for identity politics has stoked ethnic tensions between the primarily Hindu Meitei majority and the primarily Christian Kuki tribes in India's north-eastern state of Manipur. In the violence that erupted on 3 May in BJP-ruled Manipur, more than 50 people were killed, many churches were burned down, and thousands were forced to flee their homes.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the underlying factor for the Christian-Hindu clashes is scarcely about ethnicity, it is about demographic change driven by Hindu identity through land acquisition after the state granted the Scheduled Tribes (ST) status to the Hindu Meitei community, which provides legal cover to BJP's identity politics.

### **Background**

As revealed recently by Satya Pal Malik, BJP's former governor of the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK), political and economic interests are often achieved by the BJP for its vested interest through instigating the identity card and destabilizing social cohesion.<sup>2</sup> The root cause of the Manipur crisis is no more different than dozens of other crises happening in various corners of India driven by Hindu Nationalism.

The BJP regime, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has actively propagated a nationalist agenda since coming into power. The instigation of the Meitei community in Manipur

to acquire the ST status is just another link in this chain. The BJP spokesman Nongthombam Biren Singh, in a conversation with *Reuters*, outlined the party's vision for Manipur, which is evidently focused on inciting the Hindu-majority Meitei community to obtain ST status.<sup>3</sup> This approach aligns with a pattern of persecution of Kuki tribes, as the BJP aims to encroach upon the land of the Kuki tribes in the hilly regions. Such actions raise concerns about the BJP's ulterior motives and their disregard for the rights and well-being of marginalized communities.

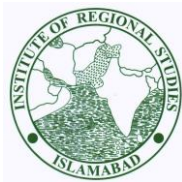
The clashes between the Meitei Hindu ethnic majority living in the developed valley and the Kuki Christian minority tribes living in the underdeveloped hilly areas have increased following the massive protest of the united Kuki tribes against the grant of the ST status to the Meiteis. Identity politics is the driving force behind the wealthy Hindu Meitei community's aspiration to become a Scheduled Tribe (ST).

### **Demographic Changes Driven by Identity Politics**

The Meitei, comprising 53% of the total population of the state are often considered wealthier than the tribal communities. The Meiteis with 40 of the state legislature's 60 seats have both demographic and political advantages.<sup>4</sup> The Kuki tribes worry that Meitei being recognized as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) would suppress them through demographic change and forced conversion to Hinduism

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\* Nisar Ali is an Intern associated with India Program at Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad.



under the slogan of 'Ghar Wapsi' which is evident from the recent history. The All Tribal Students' Union Manipur (ATSUM) argues that since the Meitei language is already included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, many Meiteis already enjoy benefits associated with the Scheduled Castes (SC), Other Backward Classes (OBC), or Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) statutes. Consequently, the demand for ST status is seen as a covert strategy by the influential Meiteis to encroach upon tribal lands in the hills.<sup>5</sup> Ten Kuki BJP Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), together with representatives from two other parties, condemned the BJP government in Manipur for giving 'tacit support' to the Meiteis, who make up the bulk of the population, as the violence unfolded on 3 May.<sup>6</sup> A separate administration for the hills was demanded by these MLAs.

### **Otherization of Kuki Tribes: Reviving the Divisive Politics in Manipur**

According to Pradip Phangjoubam, a renowned journalist from Manipur and the current editor of Imphal Review of Arts and Politics, the removal of Kukis from the Churachandpur area under the guise of reducing poppy cultivation was the primary cause of the unrest. Additionally, the authorities spread the myth that there were many drug dealers in the hills.<sup>7</sup> Despite the troubling conditions, Phangjoubam expressed optimism that the situation would quickly be brought under control. The involvement of the BJP-led government and its probable role in instigating Meiteis in Manipur violence is a clear example of identity politics.

The phrase 'Manipur is burning' brings to mind the sentence from Prime Minister

Modi's biography, *Mera Gujarat Jal Raha Hai* (My Gujarat is burning), and highlights that the BJP is again in power in another 'burning state'. As the violence spirals out of hand and puts curfews, internet shutdowns, and a full halt to regular life, Chief Minister N Biren Singh's calls for peace and harmony have been unsuccessful. The persistent reports of gunfights, the deployment of security forces and the army's involvement underscore the seriousness of the situation. In a recent instance, Vunzagin Valte, a Kuki BJP MLA, was severely attacked in Imphal and is currently in serious condition.<sup>8</sup> Following the resignation of four Kuki BJP MLAs from various posts last month over their displeasure with the Biren Singh administration, the violent clashes went out of control. The N Biren Singh government's activities, such as the forest evacuation, have widened already existing gaps between the Meiteis and the tribal people.<sup>9</sup> These changes caused grave anxiety amongst Kuki tribes about the BJP's leadership which consistently supports the Hindu Meitei community.

### **BJP's Unilateral Withdrawal from Tripartite Agreement and Suspension of Operation**

It is important to remember that three Kuki militant organizations—the Kuki National Army (KNA), Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA), and Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA)—signed a tripartite agreement and suspension of operations (SoO) in 2008 with the Government of Manipur and the Union Government.<sup>10</sup> On 10 March, the Biren Singh government, under pressure from demonstrations in the districts of Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, and Tengnoupal by Hindu Meiteis, started a crackdown on poppy



growers under the pretext of protecting forest lands and decided to withdraw from the tripartite agreement and the SoO. Many political watchers believe that this action is the root cause of the crisis.<sup>11</sup> Due to the ensuing evictions, the government ended armed operations against Kuki tribes while labelling them as terrorists, which caused tension and instability among the local population.

The Kuki and other hill tribes are gripped with fear as they worry about the potential encroachment of their land and forest rights. This apprehension has been further fuelled by the recent eviction of villagers from the reserve forest area in the Churachandpur district. The mounting pressure from the affected communities was so intense that four Kuki BJP MLAs resigned from their positions last month and travelled to Delhi to meet the party's leadership, demanding the removal of Biren Singh from the government.<sup>12</sup> This critical situation highlights deep concerns and dissatisfaction among the Kuki population, leading to a significant rift within the ruling party.

The BJP government in Manipur labels the tribal Kuki people as 'illegal immigrants' considering them refugees who left Myanmar after the military takeover in 2021. The Kukis and these refugees are both of the same ethnic heritage. According to Angshuman Choudhury, a fellow at the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi, "Kukis have a sense that both the state government and the dominant Hindu Meitei ethnic community are questioning their roots in Manipur."<sup>13</sup> The same sort of discriminatory policies and narratives were created against

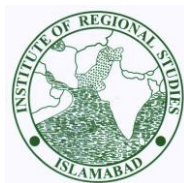
Muslim minorities in India by legislating a host of discriminatory laws, notably the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC).

## Conclusion

Deep-rooted ethnic and tribal conflicts in Manipur are the cause of the ongoing violence, which has drawn attention from across the world. In Manipur, Christians made up more than 41% of the population in 2011, while Hindus made up about half of the state's population. The conflict on 3 May involved Christian tribal people living in Manipur's hilly areas and primarily the Hindu Meitei community living in the valley.<sup>14</sup> The affluent Meiteis' attempts to seize Kuki's land by implying constitutional manoeuvring were seen as a danger by the Christians, who were protesting to protect their tribal standing. The persistent conflicts in the area have been exacerbated by this intricate interaction of power politics, religion, and ethnicity.

The recently published 2022 US State Department report on religious freedom, issued on 15 May, pointed out that the Indian government was targeting members of religious communities in India. The report cited a Christian NGO spokesperson who characterized the plight of all minority groups as 'unprecedentedly grave'. However, the Indian authorities have dismissed the report, claiming it to be "based on misinformation and flawed understanding."<sup>15</sup> This stark disagreement highlights the contentious nature of religious freedom and raises concerns about the treatment of minority communities in India.

## Notes and References



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