

India: Understanding the Hills-Valley Divide and Meitei-Kuki Conflict in Manipur

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Abstract: This paper explores the notion of the hills-valley divide in Manipur, focusing on the divide between Meitei people and hill tribes and its consequences on ethnic conflict. It examines the hills-valley divide through secondary data such as articles, news reports, and talks. The Meiteis, the largest community, enjoy power in all aspects of life. Due to poor representation in the Legislative Assembly, tribals have a lesser voice in decision-making. Moreover, since funds are allocated by population size, dwellers have a natural advantage over hill people. The existing hills valley divide and development inequality lead to misunderstanding between the tribals and the non-tribals in Manipur. The tribals of Manipur came up with different demands for developing their respective areas and safeguarding their identity. However, their demands were never fulfilled by the Meitei-led Manipur government. The state government tried to change the law to alienate tribal land in a very well-planned manner. This creates inter-ethnic tensions, and tribal political problems have remained unresolved. This paper suggests that the state must formulate policies for Manipur's moral and emotional integration by proportionately diversifying developmental infrastructure.

Keywords: Manipur, hills-valley divide, buffer zone, ethnic clash, violence.

Introduction

Manipur, a state in northeastern India, is known as "The Jewell Land" due to its rich historical legacy. It shares borders with the Indian states of Nagaland to the North, Mizoram to the South, and Assam to the West. It also shares borders with two regions of Myanmar: Sagaing Region to the East and Chin State to the South. The state covers an area of 22,327 square kilometers.

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The fertile alluvial valley, covering 10 percent of the land, extends north-south and is surrounded by hills, covering 90 percent of the land, which form part of the eastern Himalayas. The valley has a population density of 730 persons per square kilometer, while the hills have a density of 61 persons per square kilometer (Kuki Reformation Forum [KReF], 2023).

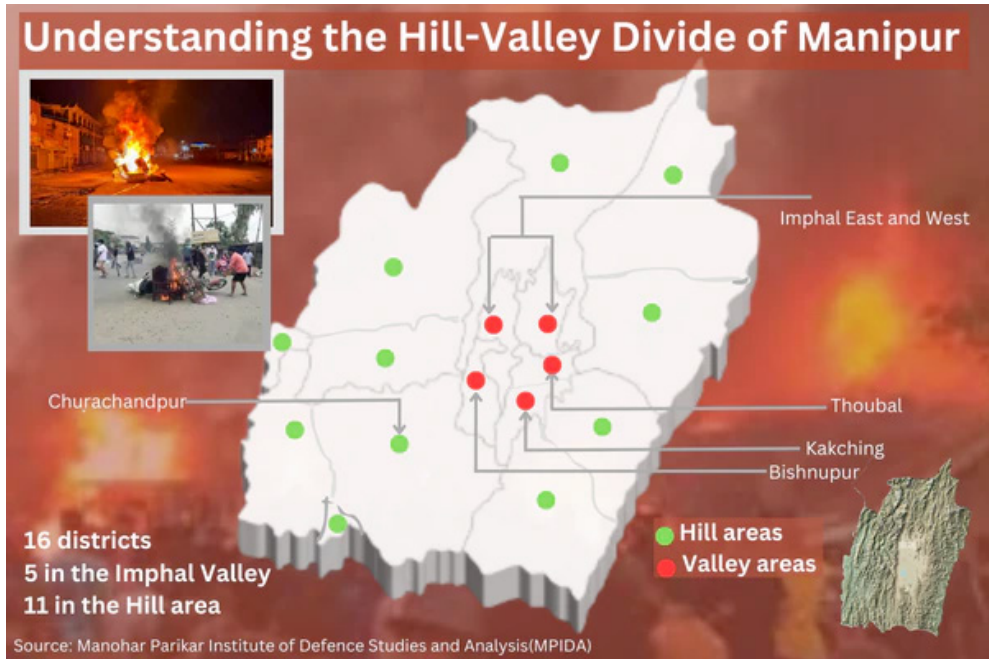


Figure 1. Hills and Valley Districts in Manipur

Source: Manohar Parikar Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (MPIDA, 2023).

Manipur has three ethnic groups: Meitei, Naga, and Kuki, and a Muslim community called “Pangals” from East Bengal and Mayang from mainland India (Kipgen, 2018). The Meiteis, a non-tribal group, are the largest ethnic community in Manipur, residing primarily in the valley, while tribal groups like Nagas and Kukis occupy the surrounding hills (Porecha, 2023). The majority of the Meiteis are Hindu, with some following the Sanamahi religion, and the Nagas and Kukis, who are predominantly Christians.

Manipur has been grappling with political turmoil for several decades. In 1992, violent clashes between Nagas and Kukis in Manipur resulted in over 1,040 deaths and numerous casualties over the years. The 1993 Manipur Riot, a violent clash between the Meitei and Pangal communities, resulted in the loss of around 130 lives. The Kuki-Zomi Conflict, a 1997–1998 ethnic conflict in Manipur’s Churachandpur district, resulted in 352 deaths, thousands of homes destruction, and over 13,000 displacements. In 2001,

the Union government signed an amended cease-fire agreement with the NSCN (IM), containing the phrase “without territorial limits”. A protest on 18th June 2001 resulted in 18 deaths, the burning of the Manipur Assembly, and an attack on the Chief Minister’s bungalow.

Manipur’s ongoing conflicts are primarily between the Meitei and Kuki groups, fuelled by long-standing animosity and state apathy, influenced by social, physical, and political distribution. It is important to remember that the Kuki terminology in this paper includes Chin-Kuki-Mizo-Zomi ethnic groups. This article delves into the historical context, geographical divide, and ongoing ethnic conflicts surrounding the Meitei-Kuki conflict in Manipur through a thorough review of the existing literature, news reports, and talks.

1. The Hills-Valley Divide

a. Historical divide

Before the British annexation, the Hills and the Valley had separate administrative systems that reflected their incredible geographical and cultural characteristics (Zomi Students’ Federation [ZSF] & Kuki Students’ Organisation [KSO], 2023). In 1891, Manipur was annexed by the British Empire, which caused the merging of the Hills and the valley under British control (Hassan, 2006). Despite their administrative merger, there were stark differences in administrative systems for the Hills and the Valley of Manipur (ZSF & KSO, 2023).

The British maintained the pre-current separate administration to varying degrees (ZSF & KSO, 2023). The separate administration for the Hills intended that the Meitei Maharaja and his Durbar no longer directly administer the affairs of the hills (Devi, 2014). Instead, British officials were appointed to manage the Hill regions and Hills affairs (Jilangamba, 2015). Administration in the hill areas was essentially a village-based autonomous self-governance, guided and governed by its customary laws and practices. It remained outside the state until the attainment of statehood in 1972.

b. The geographical divide

Geographically, Manipur comprises two sets of landmasses popularly known as the valley and the hills. The inner part is a narrow valley that forms only 10 percent of the state’s total area. The Valley is characterized by fertile agricultural land, a dense populace, and a unique set of cultural norms (Kerala Institute of Local Administration [KILA], 2022). The valley is surrounded by hills, which comprise around 90 percent of the total area of Manipur. The Hills are recognized for their rugged terrain, sparse population, and distinct cultural practices (Mungreiphy & Kapoor, 2008). Due to its hilly terrain, many of the hill districts are uninhabitable.

c. Administrative division

The essential differences in geography, demography, and sub-culture necessitated a one-of-a-kind administrative method to govern every region successfully (Hassan, 2007). Manipur can be divided into hills and valleys. Administratively, the state is divided into sixteen districts. Five are Valley districts, and the remaining eleven are Hill districts. Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal, Kakching, and Bishnupur districts comprise Manipur's valley districts. The Hills districts include Senapati, Tamenglong, Ukhrul, Chandel, Jiribam, Kamjong, Kangpokpi, Noney, Pherzawl, Tengnoupal, and Churachandpur (Kipgen, 2018). The state is divided into two Parliamentary constituencies: Inner Manipur (Valley) and Outer Manipur (Hills). The state has 60 Legislative Assembly seats, of which 40 are from the valleys and 20 are from the hills.

d. Population division

According to the 2011 census, Manipur has a population of 2,721,756. Manipur is settled by different cognate groups of people that can be divided into broad categories such as Meiteis and Tribals. The Meiteis and the hill districts predominantly inhabit the valley districts inhabited by the tribals. Around 60 percent of the Manipur population live in the valley, and the remaining 40 percent are in the hill regions. Regarding population, Meiteis are the biggest ethnic group and constitute 53 percent of the state's population. Nagas is the second largest group, constituting 24 percent of the state's population, and the Kuki group constitutes 16 percent of the state's population (Nayak, 2012; Sharma, 2016). The Nagas are the primary inhabitants of the northern districts, whereas the Kukis are the primary inhabitants of the southern regions (Wikipedia, 2024). The tribal communities hold Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, while the Meitei people are classified as Other Backward Classes (OBC), with some segments recognized as Scheduled Caste (SC) in specific regions.

e. Religious division

Most of the Meitei follow Hinduism, and the tribals are Christian by faith. Moreover, the peoples of the hills and the valley are pretty far apart regarding their dress style, language, food habits, etc. Emotionally, the hills and valley departed a long time ago. The people of Manipur have been living together without a sense of oneness for centuries, without appreciating or consulting one another. Hills and valleys do not share the same heroes or role models (Ukhrul Times, 2023). The Meiteis, who are predominantly Hindu, have historically been more integrated with the mainstream Indian lifestyle.

On the other hand, the tribals, who are all Christian, have developed distinct cultural practices and beliefs. Additionally, exclusionary castes inside the valley accentuated the divide and created social tensions (Devi, 2014; Vangamla, 2022). 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 (Khamrang, 2023). These terms implied that the hill people were viewed as slaves, untouchable, unclean, and uncivilized.

f. Linguistic differences

Manipuri (Meitei) language was added to the eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India, making it one of the Official Languages in India on 20th August 1992. Since then, Meiteis in Manipur and Bangladesh have celebrated 20th August as “Manipuri Language Day”. Soon after the language of Manipuri (Meitei) was accorded constitutional recognition, the state government tried to impose the language on the tribal people by making it the official language of the state and making it a compulsory subject in all educational institutions in the state. To popularise the Meitei script (Meitei Majek), the Meitei Erol Eyek Loinasinba Apunba Lup (MEELAL) asked all offices and shops to display sign boards in the Meitei script. The non-Meitei-speaking tribal people have seen this move of the MEELAL as an attempt to impose the script on them. The language issue has become a contention issue and further deepened the hill-valley divides.

2. Root Causes of Meitei-Kuki Conflict

a. Disproportionate representation in the State Legislative Assembly

The minority tribals comprise 40 percent of the state’s population and have only 19 seats in the State Legislative Assembly, indicating that their representation is not proportional to their population size (Telangana Today, 2023). The majority of Meiteis are sabotaging Manipur’s delimitation process to prevent increased tribal representation, a threat to their political power. The 2011 census reveals a significant geographical disparity between tribal MLAs in Manipur’s hill areas and those in the valley, comprising 56 square kilometers and 40,841 people. Despite existing institutional arrangements, tribals in Manipur continue to face obstacles and barriers that prevent them from fully participating in the state’s political affairs (Telangana Today, 2023).

Table 1. Demographic Indicators of Valley and Hills

Demographic Indicators	Valley	Hills
No. of Districts	4	5
Total Existing Assembly Constituencies	40	19+1
Total Population of District	1,633,672	1,222,122
Average Population per Constituency	40,841	61,106
Total Area of Districts (Sq.Km)	2,238	20,089
Average Area per Assembly Constituency (Sq.Km)	56	1,004

Source: The Inevitable Split (Vol. I) Page No. 6 (ZSF & KSO, 2023).

b. Imbalance in the state budget for valley and hills

The Hills and Valley receive unequal funding for development projects, with a disproportionate concentration in the Valley. The State government stopped preparing separate Hill budgets in the 1980s. Despite 90 percent of the state being hilly, the budgetary allocation for their development has never exceeded 10 percent. The Grant-in-Aid (Art. 275) intended for hill development is redirected to valley development (ZSF & KSO, 2023). The state government exacerbates budget inequality, perpetuating underdevelopment and neglecting the hill areas.

The Manipur State Budgets for four years (2017–2018 to 2020–2021) reveal significant imbalances between the valley (Inner Manipur) and the hills (Outer Manipur). Over the four years, the valley has received significant funding for constructing new hospitals, schools, and roads, improving its infrastructure and quality of life (S. J. Singh, 2023). Over 60 percent of villages in the hills lack basic healthcare and unsafe water sources, leading to high waterborne diseases. Even today, the state’s resources are concentrated in the valley. Tribals felt exclusion in resource distribution and fund allocation for development.

Table 2. Budget for the Hills and Valley

Financial Year	Total Budget (in Crores)	Valley Budget (in Crores)	Valley Budget (in Percentage)	Hills Budget (in Crores)	Hills Budget (in Percentage)
2017–18	5,000	4,892	97.84	108	2.16
2018–19	4,900	4,750	96.94	150	3.06
2019–20	5,000	4,880	97.60	120	2.40
2020–21	7,000	6,959	99.41	41	0.59
Total (Four Years)	21,900	21,481	97.94	419	2.05

Source: Only Total Separation, Page No. 39 (KReF, 2023)

c. Valley-centric development infrastructure

The Imphal Valley is home to all essential government places of work as well as prestigious educational, technical, and scientific establishments. Manipur Technical University (Takyelpat), National Sports Academy (Khuman Lampak), National Sports University (Khuman Lampak), Central Agricultural University (Lamphelpat), Central Institute of Plastics Engineering and Technology (Takyelpat), Manipur University (Canchipur), Regional Institute of Medical Sciences (Lamphelpat), Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences (Porompat), National Institute of Technology (Langol), Manipur Institute of Technology (Takyelpat), Institute of Bioresources and Sustainable Development (Takyelpat) are confined to Imphal and its outskirts, while the hill districts are neglected (Kipgen & Roy Chowdhury, 2016; ZSF & KSO, 2023). Indeed, the

regularly said declaration that the Imphal Valley is becoming increasingly congested is untrue. It is because of the ever-growing concentration of infrastructures in Imphal Valley, as well as the implementation of a legislative law that prohibits any horizontal growth in the name of agriculture, wooded area, and environmental protection, which most effectively limits their existing land region for habitation (ZSF & KSO, 2023). The people of the hills have been complaining of stepmotherly treatment by the majority of the Meitei-led Manipur government towards the development of the hill areas.

d. Neglect of transport and communication in the hills

According to a record with the help of the Manipur Transport Department, there were two hundred avenue injuries inside the hill districts in the previous year, resulting in 50 fatalities and 150 injuries. These accidents have mainly been attributed to the poor condition of the roads, which have been riddled with potholes and lack proper signage. Furthermore, a survey performed among residents of the hill districts determined that it takes a mean of 4 hours to journey from Kangpokpi to Mao Gate, the simplest 50 kilometers. This is due to the frequent roadblocks and traffic congestion caused by the terrible road conditions. These examples highlight the pressing want for improvements in transportation infrastructure in the hill districts of Manipur (Sharma, 2019).

The loss of transportation and verbal exchange facilities in the hill districts of Manipur has severe outcomes on the socio-economic improvement of the hill people. For example, unreliable roads make it challenging for college students to go back and forth to faculties and schools, mainly due to excessive dropout quotes and restrained academic possibilities. Additionally, the confined entry to healthcare facilities due to transportation bottlenecks results in higher morbidity and mortality costs for most of the hill people. Moreover, the dearth of efficient transportation hinders the boom of neighborhood agencies and impedes exchange with other regions, limiting the economic possibilities for the hill people. These socio-economic results highlight the pressing need for investment in transportation and conversation infrastructure in the hill districts of Manipur (Singh, 2014).

While it is proper that the hill districts are characterized by rugged terrain and limited assets, it is crucial to comprehend that forgetting about delivery and conversation results from each natural and man-made element. While geographically demanding situations may make infrastructure improvement more difficult, proper planning and investment can mitigate these difficulties. Moreover, different states with similar geographical constraints have efficiently progressed their transportation networks, suggesting it is not an insurmountable assignment (Sharma, 2019).

The state authorities must allocate enough funds for infrastructure improvement to cope with the hill districts' overlook of transport and communication. This should consist of street maintenance, the production of the latest roads, and funding for

telecommunications infrastructure. Additionally, it is crucial to interact with nearby communities and tribal leaders to understand their precise wishes and involve them in the decision-making process. By adopting a collaborative method and prioritizing the improvement of transportation and communication facilities, the government can pave the way for the socio-economic improvement of the hill people in Manipur (Steering Committee, 2010).

e. Discrimination in terms of employment safeguards

The tribal communities in Manipur have often complained about their poor representation in government jobs. The state legislative assembly passed the Manipur Reservation of Vacancies in Posts and Services (for SC and ST) Bill on 12th December 1976, and the Governor approved it on 21st February 1977. The rules framed and published in Gazette No. 474 (B) on 10th December 1990 '*for immediate enforcement*' were rescinded in Gazette No. 618 and 639 published by the Chief Secretary on 2nd February 1991 and 5th February 1991 stating that '*the same shall be treated as to have not been issued and existed*'. But it was introduced in the state legislative assembly, and the Manipur Reservation of Vacancies in Posts and Services (for SC and ST) Act 2007 was passed on 19th May 2007. However, the state government has not yet prepared the rules for its implementation, despite repeated complaints from the All-Tribal Students' Union Manipur (ATSUM). The existing reservation policy for tribals in the public sector is 31 percent compared to their population proportion above 37 percent.

Discrimination in employment safeguards is a considerable issue faced by tribal communities in Manipur. Despite their population proportion exceeding 37 percent, the current reservation policy for tribals within the public sector is only 31 percent. The Manipur government has consistently failed to implement ST quota/reservation based on tribal population ratio, as seen in other Northeastern states.

The Manipur Reservation of Vacancies in Posts and Services (for SC and ST) Act 2007 was passed on 19th May 2007 to reserve scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in government jobs (ZSF & KSO, 2023). This act changed into a step toward promoting equal opportunities and illustration for marginalized groups. However, no matter the act's passage, the state authorities must prepare the rules for its implementation. This loss of action has caused repeated complaints from the All-Tribal Students' Union Manipur (ATSUM) and a persistent lack of reservation for tribal groups in the public sector (ZSF & KSO, 2023). The state government needs to prioritize implementing this act and ensure that the rights of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are blanketed and upheld (Kipgen & Roy Chowdhury, 2016).

Discrimination in employment safeguards has had a full-size impact on the illustration of tribal communities in government jobs. A cursory observe the full number of Manipur government employees "category-wise" in various departments shows the

stark under-representation of tribal groups (ZSF & KSO, 2023). This under-representation directly results from the tinkering with the reservation system and quotas in each recruitment procedure. The loss of reservation and the same opportunities in government employment has now not only affected the tribal groups' socio-economic status but also additionally perpetuated systemic discrimination and marginalization. Providing proportionate opportunities and addressing the problem of discrimination is critical for Manipur's general improvement and inclusivity (Luntinsat, 2008).

The government of Manipur has failed to increase recruitment policies and enforce reservation rules successfully. Despite repeated complaints from the All-Tribal Students' Union of Manipur (ATSUM) and the under-representation of tribal groups in authority jobs, the government has not taken sufficient motion to rectify the situation (Bhatia, 2010). Furthermore, the Manipur Reservation of Vacancies in Post and Services (for ST/SC) Act, 1976, has been deemed ineffective for various reasons (ZSF & KSO, 2023). The Manipur government has been chastised for failing to develop its recruitment rules and for failing to implement the "100-point roster" in the reservation. The Manipur government replaced the previous "200-point roster" in 2007 despite tribal protests (WikiMili, 2024). The authorities need to prioritize the development of recruitment guidelines and properly implement reservation regulations to address the problem of discrimination and promote inclusivity in employment (Rocky, 2012).

f. Rejection of the sixth scheduled demand

The Hill Areas Committee (HAC) and District Councils, established to protect tribal interests, have repeatedly been hampered in their proper functioning (TDG Network, 2023). The Manipur Legislative Assembly consistently undermines and bypasses tribal MLAs, with only 20 out of 60 focusing on scheduled matters in Hill areas. The Meiteis, who hold a majority in the Manipur Legislative Assembly, consistently impede the Hill Areas Committee and District Councils' operations. According to the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act of 1971, the Manipur government can manipulate District Council provisions through arbitrary amendments that are merely cosmetic facelifts (ZSF & KSO, 2023).

Unlike other Autonomous District Councils in Northeast India, Manipur's District Councils have fundamental flaws and insufficient powers. The entity lacks legislative and judicial power and, at its best, enjoys recommending authority (ZSF & KSO, 2023). The HAC and District Councils of Manipur are lagging in protecting and developing tribals, causing challenges in their political aspirations and land rights compared to other Northeast Indian states.

In 1974, the Hill Areas Committee demanded that the Sixth Schedule be extended to Manipur's hill areas, but the Meitei-dominated state government consistently rejected their request. The Sixth Schedule demand, which gained traction among tribals, resulted

in over 20 years of election boycotts from the late 1980s to 2010. The State Cabinet recommended extending the Sixth Schedule provision in Hill Areas three times but with a local adjustment and amendment (ZSF & KSO, 2023). The government has yet to explain a new phrase that has stalled the extension.

g. Misused of Manipur Land Revenue (MLR) and Land Reforms (LR) Acts, 1975

There is tremendous pressure on land in the valley. Therefore, the valley people have been lobbying for a change in the old land laws. The state government of Manipur tries to change the law to alienate tribal land in a planned manner (Sharma, 2016). The majority community made several attempts to grab the tribal lands through various means and policies. A living example is the inclusion of many tribal villages. It lands under the police jurisdiction of valley districts on the pretext of better and more convenient administration against the wish of the tribal people, repeated amendments to the Manipur Land Revenue & Reform Act, etc (Misao, 2015).

The MLR & LR Act 1960, enacted by Parliament on 13th September 1960, applies to the entire state, excluding Hill Areas (BW Online Bureau, 2023). The 1975 amendment to the MLR and LR Acts marked a significant milestone by expanding their applicability to Hill Areas and Moreh Town. The policy permits non-tribals to occupy vast areas of Moreh, leading tribals to lose their ancestral lands. The Manipur government violated Article 371 'C' by unauthorisedly utilizing the MLR & LR (Amendment) Act, 1975, without proper legal procedures or the consent of Hill Area Committees. In 1989, the Manipur government's Sixth Amendment to the MLR & LR Act, without consulting the Hill Area Committee, led to grievances among Hill tribes.

Table 3. List of some identified Hill Villages switched into Valley by the Government of Manipur

Village Name	Village Name	Village Name
Kuraopokpi village	Ekpan Khullen village	Ekpan Khunou village
Tokpa Khul village	Thanomba village	Tumnoupokpi village
Heinou Khunou village	Malken Helkothang village	Kangoi Khullen village
Tumayon Khunou village	Tumayon Khullen village	Aimol Khullen village
Keithelmanbi village	Saitol Khunou village	Aimol Khunjai village
Khoiren Tampak village	Saitol Khullen villag	Phunan Sambum village
Torbung village	Sagang village	Purum Tampak village
Torbung Loklaphai village	Kangoi Khunou village	Mahao Tera village
Tonsen Tampak village	Tonsen Khullen village	Toupokpi village
Maring Phunal village	Mahao village	Tonsen village

Source: Only Total Separation, Page No.46 (KReF, 2023)

The Manipur government's Department of Revenue has incorporated tribal lands and villages from the periphery of the valley into valley districts, causing distress to Hill tribes. Some of the hill villages which were switched to the valley are given below:

h. Anti-tribal legislations

The Manipur conflict between hills and valleys is rooted in land rights, with legislation aimed at controlling lands in hilly areas exacerbating tensions between the tribal Meitei and tribal communities. The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reform Act of 1960 expanded state control over hill areas in Manipur, resulting in widespread tribal opposition and resentment. The Manipur Hill Areas (Acquisition of Chief's Rights) Act of 1967 significantly impacted the conflict between hills and valleys by empowering the government to acquire chiefs' land rights (Khamrang, 2023).

The Manipur legislature passed three controversial bills on 31st August 2015, namely, "the Protection of Manipur People (PMP) Bill 2015", "The Manipur Land Revenue and Reforms (Seventh Amendment) Bill 2015", and "The Manipur Shops and Establishment (Second Amendment) Bill, 2015" (Counterview Desk, 2023). Manipur's assembly session passed bills without proper discussion, violating the "Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business" and bypassing the Hill Areas Committee (ZSF & KSO, 2023). The Assembly passed all the controversial Bills as money bills, though they had nothing to do with money. It was done with the sole objective of bypassing the Hill Area Committee (HAC), composed of representatives of the Autonomous District Councils. The State Government knew the HAC would not consent to the Bills. Therefore, the Bills were presented as money bills, so a reference to the HAC became unnecessary (Gupta, 2016).

The tribal people think the bill was designed to snatch away the tribal lands. The tribal people contend that the ambiguous definition of "*Manipur People*" is restrictive and would leave many tribal living in the hill district as outsiders. The hill tribes protest against those Bills passed by the State Assembly last year, 2015, which they think are "*anti-tribal*" and discriminatory. On 1st September 2015, the police opened fire on a group of people in Churachandpur town who were protesting against the three bills passed by the State Legislature the previous day. Nine persons, including an eleven-year-old boy, were killed in police firing. After widespread anger and protest, the controversial bills were withdrawn in favor of the indigenous tribals.

i. Declaring tribal areas as Reserve Forests (RF), Protected Forests (PF), and Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS)

The state government declared large hills as "Reserved Forests", "Protected Forests", and Wildlife Sanctuaries (WLS) without following proper procedures (ZSF & KSO, 2023). The Chief Secretary of the Government of Manipur has decided to cancel all land ownership documents issued within reserved and protected areas on 3rd April 2023. The

Kuki tribes, residing in these hills for centuries, have been systematically violated by this action. The public and tribal chiefs were not provided with any public notification for claims and objections within the specified timeframe. Declaring plain portions where district headquarters towns are located as wetlands (WL) has exacerbated the wounds of tribal sentiments. The Government of Manipur's Department of Forest is systematically encroaching on the lands of the Kukis and Nagas without proper land acquisition norms or compensation.

j. Illegal immigration

In March 2023, leaders of several student clubs representing the Meitei community protested outside Biren Singh's home, claiming that "illegal immigrants from Myanmar, Nepal, and Bangladesh" were marginalizing the "Indigenous people of Manipur". They called for the introduction of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the formation of a Population Commission. The Meitei groups claim that there has been an unnatural increase in population in the hills. Kukis have repeatedly been accused of being "immigrants" or "foreigners," meaning that they came from Myanmar and are not indigenous to Manipur (Deka, 2023).

Anti-Kuki sentiments rose 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 (Deka, 2023). The Mizos view 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 connection with the Chins fleeing the violence. Biren Singh's government formed a cabinet subcommittee to identify illegal immigrants and establish temporary shelters to help them return to their home country (B. Singh, 2023).

The Kuki settlements in India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh existed prior to 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. The Kukis did not cross into Manipur Territory; rather, Kuki indigeneity in the hills predates the establishment of the Manipur state (Chongloi, 2023).

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 (India Today Conclave, 2018). According to the 2010 publication "Manipur 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. Kuki people, proud Indian citizens, have significantly contributed to India’s freedom movement, independence, and nation-building.

Table 4. Community-Wise List of Indian Freedom Fighters in Manipur

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

Source: Only Total Separation, Page No. 22 (KReF, 2023)

There is no abnormal 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 percent of the state’s population at the 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 percent each year for the past 110 years (Chongloi, 2023).

The Kukis argued that Myanmar’s military coup led to a small number of refugees crossing the border, but these do not account for the significant population increase in hill districts. The Meiteis should not create animosity or label the entire community as illegal immigrants, as it is different from refugees. The state has the legal authority to address the consequences of the refugee issue and take appropriate action.

k. Poppy cultivators

On 26th June 2018, the Chief Minister of Manipur announced the initiation of the “War on Drugs” campaign. The “War on Drugs” campaign has utilized a combination of coercive and non-coercive methods. These approaches include offering alternative livelihoods to poppy farmers, providing incentives for drug seizures, and conducting forced eradication drives. Additionally, non-governmental organizations and civil bodies were involved in efforts to raise awareness among the populace, 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 call for support in the “War on Drugs” initiative.

Despite this, Meitei Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) endorsed Biren Singh and portrayed Kuki communities as “poppy cultivators” and declared war against them (Manipur

MyGov, 2022). The Manipur Against Poppy Farming (MAPC) movement, organized by a group of intellectuals, social and political thinkers, young individuals, and legal experts, recognizes Biren Singh's endeavors in addressing poppy farming (Deka, 2023). However, MAPC urges caution against singling out any specific community in this endeavor.

The hill people stated that they, too, were against poppy cultivation, but they criticized 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 (Deka, 2023).

Meitei communities are also engaging in poppy cultivation. Manipur has 2,340 acres of poppy cultivation, primarily in Naga-dominated areas and 35 in other areas. In contrast to 1,083 Muslims, 381 Meiteis, and 181 other communities, 873 Kuki community members were arrested under the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act between 2017 and 2023 (Das, 2023).

In 2018, Additional Superintendent of Police Thounaojam Brinda made a spectacular arrest that drew widespread notice. Despite being arrested, the state police quickly freed the accused. According to the Police Officer, the decision to release the alleged drug lord followed strict instructions from the state Chief Minister Biren Singh (Roy, 2020). Brinda courageously expressed in an interview that Chief Minister Biren Singh is not combating the illicit drug trade but rather is involved in it, serving as a patron and protector of the drug mafia.

Reza Borhani, an Australian national aged fifty, 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 revealed that Chief Minister Biren Singh allegedly handed Borhani a license to import cannabis seeds, blooms, and leaves from Manipur (Laba & Chaoba, 2022).

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

On 21st February 2023, The Times of India reported that N. Biren Singh, the Chief Minister of Manipur, was involved in drug smuggling. The Delhi Police Special Cell discovered 50 kgs of opium valued at Rs. 10 crores in a car near Sarita Vihar in the Badarpur border area. Delhi Police apprehended Chief Minister N. Biren Singh's drug agents, Ranbir Singh and Loyangamba Itocha, on 21st February 2023. The "Itocha International Drug Cartel," a drug dealer agency, is accused of cultivating poppy crops, supported by Meitei capitalist groups and Manipur's Chief Minister N. Biren Singh. According to the Manipur

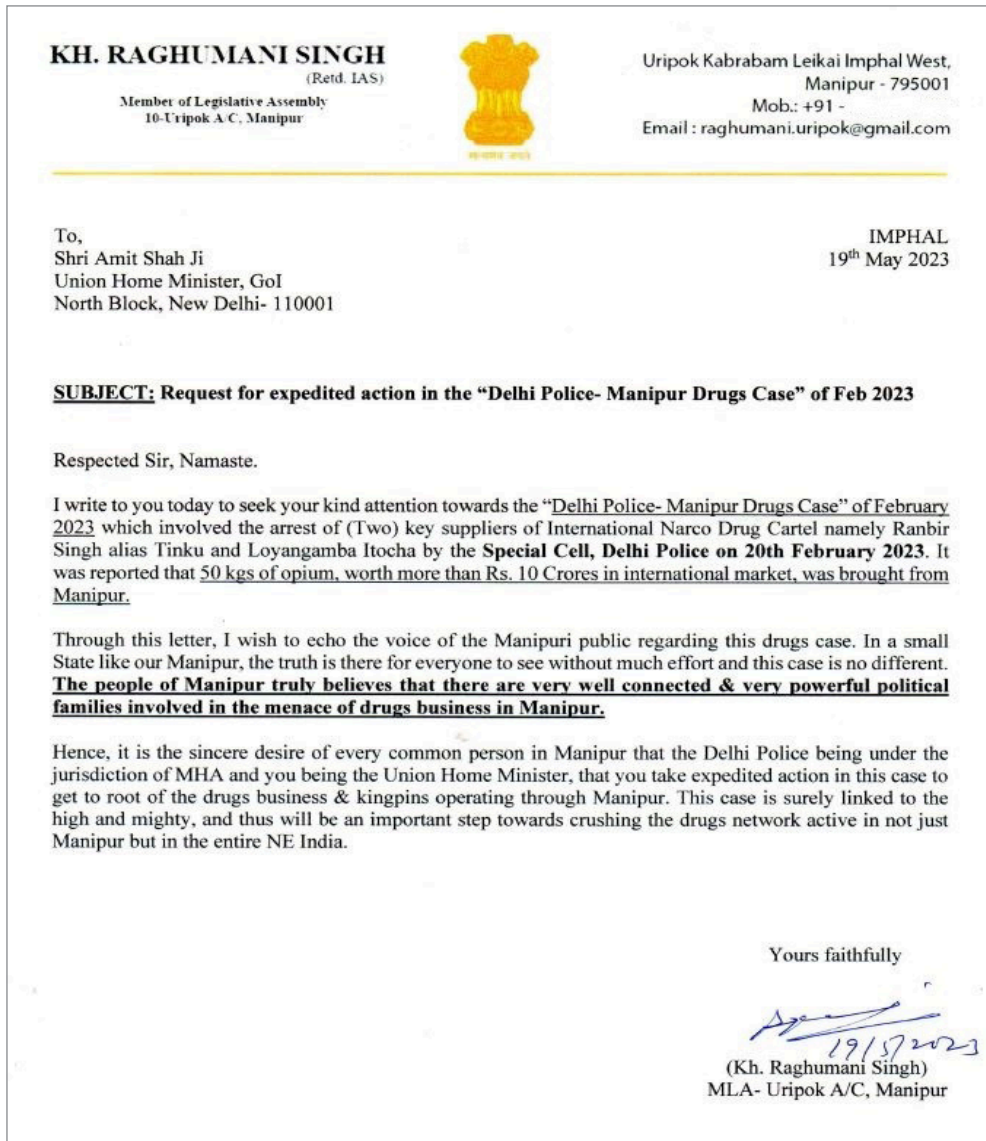


Figure 2. Kh. Raghumani Singh’s Letter to Shri Amit Shah

Source: Facebook Wall post (Raghumani for Uripok, 2023)

Police’s Narcotics and Border Affairs website, the majority of opium manufacturing laboratories are located in the Imphal Valley (ZSF & KSO, 2023).

The Kuki Civil Society organization and churches strongly opposed poppy plantations, imposing severe penalties for those found guilty. KNO issued Shoot-at-Sight orders (No. ZG/KC12-6/08, Manmasi, 16th January 2023), warning cultivators to stop poppy

cultivation in Kuki Hills. The labeling of the entire Kukis community as involved in poppy cultivation is unacceptable.

Poppy planting has been prevalent in Manipur due to the vicinity of the “Golden Triangle” and a lack of means of income for the hill people, including Kukis, Nagas, and other communities (Leth, 2023). However, targeting only 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 emphasizes that the problem affects numerous participants, including transporters and dealers. Furthermore, he points out that a wealthy segment of the Meitei community primarily sponsors poppy growth (Chongloi, 2023).

l. Narco-terrorism

The narrative from Imphal suggested that the riots were orchestrated by the Suspension of Operations (SOO) groups. On 10th March 2023, the Biren Singh 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 (Agarwala & Leivon, 2023).

On 24th March 2023, the state government selectively removed the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), limiting its revocation to the Imphal valley. Notably, this move occurred 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 maneuver, 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 organizations, proclaimed a “national war against the Kuki narco-terrorists” at its public meeting on 7th June 2023 (Kalita, 2023).

According to the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), there are currently eight terrorist or unlawful organizations operating in Manipur, all affiliated with the Meitei community. Many of these organizations 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 organizations 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 maintained a non-violent stance towards Indian security forces and have abided by 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. Despite being small in number, the Kuki SoO groups have refrained from attacking security forces and have confined themselves to their designated camps as per the agreement.

Table 5. Unlawful Organisation in Manipur

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

Source: MHA, 2015.

The Suspension of Operations (SOO) agreement mandates that insurgents must store their weapons in locked storage at designated Camps, with regular monitoring jointly conducted by the insurgents and security sources. There is no convincing evidence that the Kuki militant factions under the SOO have broken any ground rules. State Chief Minister N. Biren Singh has expressly stated that all arms of the Kuki factions under the suspension of operations are intact in their authorized camps (V. Singh, 2023). Army Sources have refuted reports claiming that two camps of insurgent groups, which had signed a tripartite cease-fire agreement with the Centre and the Manipur government, were found utterly empty in the India-Myanmar border districts of Tengenoupal 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 NDTV. They stated that reports claiming the SOO camps were found empty were largely rumors spread on social media and propagated by vested interests on the ground.

Kuki Village Volunteers 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 and the state police force, believing that the police were unable to protect their community and offered no assistance. At the same time, Kuki houses were torched (Kuthar, 2023).

m. Eviction of tribal villages and demolition of Christian churches

The state leader, Biren Singh, 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 nullifying previous directives from the 1970s and 1980s that excluded specific communities from the

projected Churachandpur-Khoupum protected forest (Wikipedia, 2024). This decision effectively categorized 38 ancestral villages in the Churachandpur district as encroachments. In February 2023, the BJP-led state government launched an eviction campaign in Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, and Tengnoupal, referring to the locals as encroachers (Wikipedia, 2024). A committee established by the state government chaired by the Chief Secretary on 3rd April 2023 canceled all land and property documents as 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, inquiries, 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 occurred 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. This sparked outrage among the Kuki communities.

The state government declined to legalize 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, 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. The assumption that illegal immigrants or refugees inhabit these villages is incorrect. Meiteis' labeling of Kukis as illegal immigrants is influenced by their lack of understanding of their socio-economic lifestyle, disregarding their cultural significance. The state government does not hold "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 Protected Forests (Kharay, 2021).

n. Illegitimate Scheduled Tribe (ST) demand

Since 2012, the Meiteis have been advocating for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, citing the economic and cultural marginalization caused by the influx of migrants from other states (Haokip, 2015). The Kukis and Nagas strongly oppose the Meiteis' request for ST status, citing concerns that it may diminish their rights and benefits. Kukis and Nagas believe that some Meitei already receive reservation benefits under the Scheduled Caste, Other

Backward Classes, and Economically Weaker Sections quotas; if the remaining Meitei want to change their caste, they should register in the said caste, not in ST (Hueiyen, 2013; ZSF & KSO, 2023). Meiteis' ST status could disrupt tribal protections, disrupt the Hill Areas Committee, and eliminate District Council approval for land acquisition. Tribals' status in the Manipur Legislative Assembly will be reduced, with Meiteis competing in all constituencies, potentially threatening their lands and existence due to state treatment of minorities.

o. The spark of the violence

The Meiteis have been advocating for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for their community. Biren Singh has expressed a willingness to help this cause, and the Manipur High Court has ordered the administration to speed up the procedure. The Manipur High Court delivered an extraordinary ruling on 27th March 2024, asking the administration to recommend including the Meitei group on the Scheduled Tribes list to the Centre (Lakshman, 2023). 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.

On 3rd May 2023, the All-Tribal Student Union of Manipur (ATSUM) held a peaceful "Tribal Solidarity March" in Manipur's Hill districts (WikiMili, 2024). Many tribal groups, including Zomi, Kuki, Naga, Hmar, and Mizo, participated in the peaceful rally. Valley-based Meitei organizations organized counter-blockades in valley areas the evening before a peaceful rally after discovering the rally (ZSF & KSO, 2023). A rally in Churachandpur ended peacefully at 1:05 p.m. after tribal civil societies and student organizations submitted a memorandum to the Indian President and Prime Minister.

Around 3:00 p.m., Meitei miscreants set fire to the pillar of the Anglo-Kuki War Centenary Gate in Leisang village. According to an eyewitness, miscreants arrived in a white Bolero and started the fire before fleeing the scene. Miscreants attacked returning rally-goers in Churachandpur district's border areas, escalating the conflict between the two communities (ZSF & KSO, 2023). The burning of houses belonging to the Kuki communities in Kangvai, 2 km from Leisang, and the killing of Pastor Sehkhohao Kipgen escalated the violence. The violence spread to Imphal City and other valley districts, and the Meitei mob committed systematic arson and extermination (ZSF & KSO, 2023).

Summary and Conclusion

Revising political representation resource distribution and addressing historical imbalances through streamlining legislative assembly constituencies and decentralization can help the existing Hills-Valley divide. Equitable policies are needed to promote peace by ensuring fair resource distribution, addressing historical injustices, and providing economic development and social integration opportunities for both communities.

It is essential to look into the root causes of every issue prevailing in the state to bring an amicable solution. The demand of the tribals, or the “Sixth Schedule,” has never been implemented in the hills. The government could try giving the Sixth Schedule Provision to the hill areas with special protection of land and land ownership without disturbing the territorial integration of the state. Another demand of the tribal is that there should be equal representation of the people living in the valley and the hills. No doubt, equal sharing of seats in the state Legislative Assembly, as recommended by the Delimitation Commission from the central government, will help the integration of the state. The hill people see the over-concentration of infrastructure for development in the valley districts as discrimination. The state has to make an accommodative policy by diversifying developmental activities proportionately.

There is a need to end valley-centric governance. There is also a need for development in favor of the hills. It is, therefore, essential for the state to formulate policies for the moral and emotional integration of Manipur. Territorial integration without emotional integration is not likely to last long. Therefore, territorial integration should be preceded by emotional integration. Both the Meiteis and tribals should be open to the possibility of finding a solution to a third idea that is different from their original claims. All communities, irrespective of tribes and non-tribes, should learn to live together within the territory with equal respect.

The Meitei-Kuki conflict requires political will from both communities, requiring genuine commitment from leaders to resolve issues and work towards peaceful coexistence. Inclusive dialogue is crucial for open and honest communication between Meiteis and Kukis representatives, fostering understanding, empathy, trust, and addressing grievances, and finding common ground. The Union and State governments must swiftly address the Meitei-Kuki conflict by adopting a balanced approach to restore democracy and equality among the Kuki and Meitei communities. The current situation requires immediate action to prevent further loss of lives in this ongoing conflict.

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