



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-XIII, Issue-I, October 2024, Page No.99-104

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

Story of Manipur

Dr. Swapan Das

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Jagannath Singh College, Udharbond, Cachar, Assam, India

Abstract:

The present-day story of North-Eastern state Manipur is deep, shocking and painful to any sensible person. What's the issue, that rises many questions to many minds especially the longevity of the violence and the question which even crosses the boundary of the state, this is undesirable and unacceptable. The day-by-day violent incidences and its continuity in the small state of Manipur has not only given birth of questions but also gave birth of new questions which also turned to an environment of requestion and confusion. The issue is that two communities in Manipur have been pitted against each other in an atmosphere of war of ethnic violence that has really been seen in the country in the past few decades. Two ethnic groups armed to the teeth, a buffer zone between, where hill cannot go to valley and valley cannot go to hill. About sixty thousand people displaced from their home living a life of alien in their own land not from one or two months but from more than one year has created a situation of Topsy-Turvey not confined in Manipur only. All these happenings in Manipur are a crime against humanity and this is the harsh reality that humanity will face in future. Apparently, it seems that most of the questions raised from different sections of the society are political in nature, where there is no finality. But the biggest question stuck is that what are the larger agenda behind the violence of Manipur? Manipur violence is mainly happening between two ethnic communities, the community of Meitei people and the community of Kuki people. To understand the violence in Manipur, through this write-up an attempt has been made to understand the differences these two communities, it is not only political and ethnic but also geographical and economical.

Keywords: Meitei, Kuki, Ethnic clash, Violence, Community.

Manipur's history begins with the Meitei people, who ruled the Manipur valley for centuries. It's said that the Meiteis came to Manipur valley from Myanmar, where they settled their kingdom. Many Meitei kings ruled Manipur and expanded their kingdom. Apart from the Meitei people, there were many hill tribes in Manipur like the Nagas and the Kuki's. These tribes lived on the mountains of Manipur and had their own culture, language and tradition. If we talked about the geography, and if we look back at the map of Manipur, then this map can be easily divided in to two parts, first Imphal valley and the second is the

hills nearby. The districts in the valley formed around 11% of Manipur's area and the districts in the hills form 89% of Manipur's area. Politically speaking, Manipur's Legislative Assembly has 60 seats. But the 89% area in the hills has only 20 seats in the Manipur Assembly and the 11% area in the valley has 40 seats in the Assembly, the reason behind this is the population. According to the census of 2011, 57% of Manipur's population resides in the valley and 43% in the hilly areas. But still the ratio of the population and the distribution of seats is vastly different. The population ratio is 57:43, 1.3 times that of the other, but the ratio of Assembly seats is 40:20, almost double. Many people criticise the disproportionate distribution of seats. Apart from this, there is an economic gap between the hill and village areas. The districts in the hills are poorer and the districts in the valley are comparatively richer. This issue has been a topic of discussion for decades. To reduce this gap government launched a campaign few years back 'Go to Hills and go to villages. The aim was to bring development to the hills. But despite this positive effort the scenery remains same.

In terms of religion and ethnicity there is another gap in Manipur. In the valley districts, where the Meitei people live, they are mostly Hindus. 'Mostly' because there are many Meitei people who follow other religion, like 16% of them follow their traditional religion Sanamahism. According to this religion, they worship nature, and they believe in their god, Lainingthou Sanamahi. There are some Meitei Hindus are there who practice some elements of Sanamahism. Apart from this, 8% of the Meiteis and Muslims, they are called Meitei Pangals and some percentage of the Meitei community follows Christianity. On the other hand, in the hills, reside the Kuki, Zomi and Naga tribal communities, these people are mostly Christian. Again 'mostly' because some percentage of these people believe in other religions like Judaism, Islam and Animism. Animism is their traditional religion, where they worship nature, spirits and their ancestors. So, seemingly the conflict between Meitei and Kuki is not a conflict between Hindus and Christians but because Meiteis are mostly Hindus and Kukis are mostly Christians. This became another point of difference there, and a common angle has been created in this conflict and that is why temples and churches were set on fire and vandalised. And due to the communal class in this ethnic conflict there is a community of people who are suffering terribly about three lakhs people who are Maitei Christians. They are fleeing to protect themselves not only from the Kuki tribal people, but also from Maitei Hindus. In Churachandpur district of Manipur Meitei Christian houses were set on fire by Kuki mobs and in the Wangjing area of the valley, a Meitei mob set fire to an institution which was run by Meitei Christians for under privileged children. But a big question arises here, even if it accepts that there are differences between these two communities, but just because of these differences the two communities will not fight. So, what was the reason for the fight between them? Some say that we need to look at their history. That we have seen many conflicts between the Meitei and the Kuki people, that's true, so let's look at history first so that it can understood better.

Historically, Meitei kings ruled over Manipur but the thing to note is that does 'Manipur' mean the whole of Manipur or the hilly area? This question led to many clashes in Manipur

history. When the kings in the valley tried to extend their authority over the entire Manipur region and the Naga Tribal people living in the hills always show themselves as free individuals. Anthropologist James C Scott wrote a book 'The Art of Not being Governed – An Anarchist History of Upland South East Asia'. In this James explains that whenever a state was formed in valley, whether the state was an empire or a government there was always a 'non-state' in the hills. The difference or rather the distinction, between a state and a non-state was called surplus. There were rivers in the valley which meant permanent settlement, people used farm and trade but life in the hills was quite different. There was minimalism in the mountains. Even today, it is observed that many people living in the jungles who live a semi-nomadic life and they practice shifting cultivation. This practice is so common that it has been given many names in the world, in North-East India it is named 'Jhum cultivation' and the people who lived such a life in the hills, did not have any surplus, they had enough food to sustain themselves. Sometimes, not even that if did not rain properly. So, with this lack of food, where could they go? They went toward the valley. The people in the valley had their permanent farmers and their permanent homes. So, what used to happen was that, the peoples from the hills historically, used to raid the people of the valley for their survival. Joseph Proudhon remarked that "Property is Theft" and the Indian wisdom "All the lands belong to God". But in the world, throughout the history it has been seen that governance is not done through rational, intellectual or spiritual discourse rather it is done through greed and power struggle. The kings and emperors in the valley used to enter into deals with the people living in the hills, a kind of social contract, where they agreed not to fight, and they acknowledged the food scarcities faced by them, and agreed to give them some food, and in return, they wanted to exist peacefully with each other. In North-East India, this is called the Posa system. It means an allowance paid to certain hill tribes to check their habit of raids and outrages against plains people for commodities. So, throughout different times in history, there was peace between these communities too. Lot of historical records which tells us that the Naga tribals used to serve Ahom army, especially under Lachit Barphukan, the great Ahom General who defeated the Mughal army. This situation was more or less maintained till the early 1800s, after which came the Burmese and the British.

There is a story of three brothers who were Meitei royals from the Ningthouja Dynasty. These three brothers were Marjit Singh, Chonuajit Singh and Gombhir Singh. These three brothers were fighting among themselves for the throne. This was a typical game of Throne story. One brother took the help of a king from the surrounding areas. The second brother took the help of the Burmese and later becoming a puppet in the hands of the Burmese. And was then thrown out of power by the same people. The same methods employed by the East India Company. In same way the other brother also took help from the Burmese and the British. Several alliances were formed and broken in this typical game of Throne fashion. It is also relevant here that between 1819-1826, Manipur was under Burmese occupation. Meitei royal Gambhir Singh raised an army with the help of British in 1824 known as

Manipur Levy. And between these two forces the first Anglo Burmese war took place. In this war Manipur Levy recaptured the Manipur Valley.

The Burmese were push back and prince Gambhir Singh became King Gambhir Singh. Later peace treaty was signed between Burmese and the British. Between these games of Thrones, The Naga tribal people living in the hills were still there. So, what happened to them? It is said that a British political agent in Manipur brought Kuki-Zomi people from the Kuki-Chin region in Burma to protect the valley from the Naga people. There were many tribes living in the hills, Koki-Zomi was one such tribe. On the other hand, around 200 years ago Kuki people were brought from the hills in Myanmar to the hills in Manipur which may call small distance migration. It's because like the Naga tribal people, the Kuki tribes are also good warriors. A Meitei king gave them land on the sides of the hills, the area where the hills and valleys converge in to each other, so that those areas could work as a buffer for the Imphal Valley. Another Meitei king Maharaj Buddhachandra appointed Kuki people as his personal security, some kings had called the kukis to protect the Meiteis which is quite ironic looking at the conflict today.

During the first World war, The British demanded that the king of Manipur provide 2,000 men for the labour crops. These are the people who make roads for the British or carry the goods. The king of Manipur wanted to send the Kukis with the British but the Kukis refused it, instead they declare war against the British. These happened in 1947 and is called The Great Kuki Rebellion or the Anglo-Kuki War. It took the British two years to suppress tis war. But even before this, in the 1800s, number of times Kuki people revolted against the Britishers. In the late 1800s, the population of the Meitei in the valleys was governed by them. But the Kukis in the hills were not governed by them. One reason behind this was that the British could not establish their dominance in the hilly areas. But the second reason was that the attitude of the British people towards the tribal people was that the tribals were very savage. Since they considered themselves to be civilised, they did not want to make them a part of their country. Some areas were marked as ungovernable by the British, and due to this, they demarcated an Inner Line in Assam. This line separates the jungles of the tribal people in the hills lived in 'Unadministered' areas. These Unadministered areas were given many names by the British. Such as Backward Tracts, Excluded Areas, or Partially Excluded Areas. In 1891, the British implemented a similar system in Manipur. An Inner Line was to be marked to keep the Kukis on the other side. In 2006, the Indian Government made a draft national policy which increased the positive perception about tribal people, their indigenous identity, culture, vocations, taboos etc. The policy directly speaks that we need to protect these tribal people without destroying their distinct character. Following this policy, a measure adopted by the government was that the Inner Line Permit in seen in states like Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. According to this, the indigenous people living in the jungle will be kept protected and their local tribal culture will be maintained. But when it came to Manipur, it was not that simple. Many Meitei people protested against the implementation of this Inner Line Permit. They believed that many migrants were coming to their local markets and shops from other states

and their local culture was in danger. The then Central government tried to pass three laws. The Protection of Manipur Peoples Bill 2015 and two other bills related to land and shops. With the help of these three bills, effectively, Manipur could have got an Inner Line Permit too. But the tribal people living in the hills, the Kuki people thought that the bill discriminates against them. In May 2016, President Pranab Mukharjee rejected this Protection of Manipur Peoples Bill. He said that the way this bill was trying to define Manipuris was wrong. Thus, the government drafted a new version and sent it to the constitutional experts. There were many rounds of discussions between the Manipur Government, Kukis and Nagas. And because of this, the Manipur Peoples Protection Bill was passed in 2018 in Manipur Assembly. In July 2018 and at this time, the new union government assumed power at the centre. This Inner Line Permit System came to effect in Manipur from 1st January 2020. This meant that non-Manipuris living in other Indian states would need a permit to go to Manipur.

Here, a very common question is there in the minds of the people that how is this possible? In the same country, a state is making its own laws and the people from the rest of the country would need a permit to visit the state. Does the Indian Constitution allow this? The answer to this, to some extent, is yes. The sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution, under Article 244 (2) and Article 275 (1), according to this, self-governance and dispute resolution are allowed under tribal areas with respect to customary laws. This is done by making autonomous administrative units in tribal areas which is called Autonomous District Council (ADC). And these ADCs have the right to make such laws like, outsiders not being allowed to buy tribal land. The sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution applied in ASSAM, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. Since 1947, the tribal communities in Manipur have been demanding that the sixth schedule be extended to the hilly region of Manipur too. But this has not been done yet. But a somewhat similar thing has been done in Manipur. A Manipur District Council Act 1971 has been enacted which led to 6 ADCs being established in Manipur in February 1972. This was the same year when Manipur became a separate state.

However, the story of Manipur is complex and today's ethnic violence is deep rooted and conflicts between ethnic groups are not new in Manipur. But the violence in 2023 was shocking for the sheer viciousness on display. Any effort to find explanations to this conflict only throws up more questions.

References:

- 1) Haksar Nandita, 2023, Shooting the Sun, New Delhi, Speaking Tiger Books LLP.
- 2) Sengupta Sarthak, 2008, Peoples of North East India (edited) New Delhi, Gyan Publishing.

- 3) Brown, R, 1873, Statical Account of Manipur, Calcutta.
- 4) Ahmed, Jesmine. Saikia, Rita. Mohapatra Nirranjan. 2020, Emerging Issues and Challenges in North-East India, Delhi, Kalpaz Publications.
- 5) Misra, Udayan, 2023, Indias North-East, Identity Movements, State, and Civil Society, New Delhi, Oxford University Press.
- 6) Gill, Preeti and Samrat, 2018, Insider Outsider, Belonging and Unbelonging in North-East India, New Delhi, Manjul Publishing House.
- 7) Laisram, Rina, 2009, Early Meitei History, Religion, Society and the Manipur Payas, New Delhi, Akansha Publishing.