

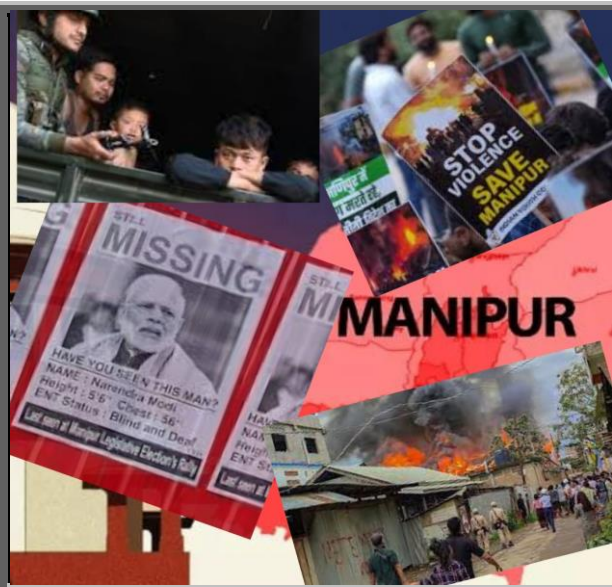
## MANIPUR CRISIS: WHY BJP IS FAILING TO RESOLVE IT?

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



It has been three months since violence in Manipur started on May 03, when Kukis and Nagas organized a “Tribal Solidarity March” in coordination with All Tribal Student Union Manipur (ATSUM) in ten of the sixteen districts.<sup>1</sup> The protests were staged against the Manipur court orders to grant to the Meiteis ‘Scheduled Tribes’ (ST) status, referring the case to the Central government. In return, Meiteis organized protests and blockades, resulting in conflicts between the two communities. So far, the conflict has resulted in more than 130 deaths, 400 wounded, and 55,000 displaced.<sup>2</sup> The Union government adopted a deplorable silence when churches and homes were vandalized in the state. There are reasons and similarities in the patterns that are followed in Manipur and in violence carried in other states from history as happened in Gujarat, that need to be analyzed.

Manipur is a vast state with around 3.2 million population. Hindus are the majority comprising 41 per cent, while Christians make up 40 per cent of the population.<sup>3</sup> The state is divided into two major ethnic groups: Meiteis, living in Imphal Valley; and Kukis, with Nagas, in the hilly areas

<sup>1</sup> Graeme Baker, “Manipur Violence: What is Happening and Why,” *BBC News*, July 20, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-66260730>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “Manipur Hindu Muslim Population,” Population Census, <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/religion/state/14-manipur.html>.

surrounding the Valley. Meiteis are mostly Hindus, while Kukis are mostly Christians.<sup>4</sup> Most of the events like burning churches and targeting religious sites have religious motivations behind, besides the issue being of social and ethnic in nature. As the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rules in Manipur, 'Hindutva' backed forces are becoming active in recent violence.

Ten years back, Meiteis had requested the Central government to grant them the 'Scheduled Tribes' status. According to the Indian constitution's Article 342, the President can determine which group should be regarded as Scheduled Tribes.<sup>5</sup> The Manipur High Court approved the request of Meiteis and forwarded the matter to the President.

Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are the *Avarna* communities that do not belong to the main hierarchy in the Indian society based on four *Savarnas* as Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra.<sup>6</sup> These are untouchables and 'broken people' as mentioned by Dr. Ambedkar.<sup>7</sup> Throughout history, these communities have been facing social discrimination, political marginalization, and economic deprivation. They are also known as Dalits, untouchables, and Harijans. It was in 1935 when the British government implemented the Government of India Act and classified these scheduled communities. That was followed by the Constitution Order in 1950 by the Indian government.<sup>8</sup> The Order identified different communities in all states to be included in Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes lists. Those who did not fall under these categories were recognized as Other Backward Classes (OBC). Meiteis now claim to be granted the status of Scheduled Tribe as was recognized by the Britishers for them. But the reality is, even in 1956 when the list was modified, the majority of the Meiteis excluded themselves from Scheduled Tribes, and that is the reason some sections of the community have Scheduled Caste status while the other have OBC status.<sup>9</sup>

Since 2013, Meiteis have been trying to secure ST status to get mainstreamed because the Indian constitution has special provisions like Articles 46, 243 D, 243 T, 330, 332, 338 A, and 164 that look

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<sup>4</sup> Thomson Reuters, "Here's Why India's Manipur State has been Gripped by Months of Violence," *CBC*, July 20, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/india-manipur-state-ethnic-tensions-1.6912775>.

<sup>5</sup> Krishnadas Rajagopal, "A High Court does not have Power to Direct changes in Scheduled Tribes list: CJI," *The Hindu*, May 3, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/a-high-court-does-not-have-power-to-direct-changes-in-scheduled-tribes-list-cji/article66827501.ece>.

<sup>6</sup> Vishnu Gopinath, "Who are the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs and EBCs?" *The Quint*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.thequint.com/explainers/scheduled-caste-scheduled-tribe-obc-ebc-sc-st-prevention-of-atrocities-act-explainer#read-more>.

<sup>7</sup> Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables* (Gyan Books, 2017)

<sup>8</sup> "National Portal of India," National Portal of India, accessed August 1, 2023, <https://www.india.gov.in/gsearch?s=1950+schduded+tribe&op=Search>.

<sup>9</sup> There is a fine difference between Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. SC comes under the provision of Article 341 and is more related to social differences. The communities that do not fall under *Savarnas* are Scheduled Castes. On the other side, STs are mostly marginalized because of their geographical isolation. However, multiple constitutional provisions ensure protection of their rights under one category.

after the rights of these communities.<sup>10</sup> And that is why it concerns Kukis because if Meiteis get ST status, it will further marginalize the former in the state's political and economic sphere. It is the government's responsibility to resolve the matter as it is one such incident when people are using arms against each other so vehemently. But Prime Minister Modi, who was spearheading the elections campaign in Karnataka in the same month, remained quiet in the face of such a tragedy unfolding in Manipur. Although he briefly broke his silence when he condemned a video of two Kuki women paraded naked and molested publicly by Meiteis, the way analysts had expected from BJP to respond to the situation, has not come true.<sup>11</sup> There are two major reasons behind BJP's silence over the bloody conflict.

Firstly, Meiteis are the dominant Hindu majority group. On the other side are the Kukis who migrated mainly from Myanmar.<sup>12</sup> Never in BJP's history, since its inception in 1980, has a minority non-Hindu group been prioritized over Hindus. From Babri Mosque to Gujarat to Manipur to Haryana, Hindus have had the BJP government machinery at their back. The State government has even called Kukis illegal migrants who set up villages on Government's land in Manipur. People from some of these villages are evicted. Besides, neither the Union nor the State government has taken any significant step to halt the conflict. When Home Minister Amit Shah visited Manipur, he promised to establish a ceasefire between the groups,<sup>13</sup> but no such initiative has been taken so far. Instead, the government sent 40,000 troops to curtail the situation. Curfew was imposed, shoot on sight order was implemented, but besides all the flag carrying marches, the Army deployment has not yielded any relief or peace to Manipur.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, from the 1980s, BJP, in Manipur could neither score well in the Lok Sabha elections nor the Vidhan Sabha elections.<sup>15</sup> It was in 2019 when the BJP grabbed one seat in Lok Sabha, and 2022 when the party secured majority in the Vidhan Sabha elections. Manipur is not significant politically

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<sup>10</sup> Esha Roy, "In 10 Years of Meitei ST Demand, Repeated Pleas to State, Centre," *The Indian Express*, June 27, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-politics/manipur-violence-in-10-years-of-meitei-st-demand-repeated-pleas-to-state-centre-8687601/>.

<sup>11</sup> Mujib Mashal and Suhasini Raj, "Could Ethnic Conflict in India Become an Issue Modi Cannot Ignore?," *The New York Times*, July 31, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/30/world/asia/india-manipur-modi.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Aanya Niharika Schoetz, "When Did Kukis Reach Manipur and How the Past is Shaping the State's Present," *India Today*, August 4, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/history-of-it/story/manipur-violence-when-did-kukis-reach-manipur-and-how-past-is-shaping-states-present-2416215-2023-08-04>.

<sup>13</sup> Banjot Kaur, "A Month Since Amit Shah's Visit to Manipur, People he met say HM hasn't kept his Promises," *The Wire*, June 28, 2023, <https://thewire.in/rights/amit-shah-manipur-promises-betrayed>.

<sup>14</sup> Pradip R. Sagar, "How the Army is Caught in the Middle of Manipur Ethnic Violence," *India Today*, June 28, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/how-the-army-is-caught-in-the-middle-of-manipur-ethnic-violence-2399284-2023-06-28>.

<sup>15</sup> "India Votes AC: Manipur 1980," accessed August 2, 2023, <https://www.indiavotes.com/vidhan-sabha/1980/manipur/34/24>.

for BJP, as it only has two seats in Lok Sabha; but amidst a tough competition with the Indian National Congress (INC), every seat, and every state matters. Despite evidence of BJP chief minister Biren Singh having close links with ultra-nationalist militants groups in Manipur Arabai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun, he was not ousted from office. In an interview with *The Wire*, Ramachandra Guha, well-known Indian intellectual and prolific author, said that the persisting Manipur tragedy is much related to what happened in Gujarat two decades ago.<sup>16</sup> There in Gujarat Muslims were killed by Hindus just for Modi's political career and here in Manipur, Christians are discriminated against severely by Hindus for Biren Singh's political career. In both cases, Hindus are the aggressor, and minorities whether religious or ethnic have been suffering because the government is on the 'other' side.

To conclude, Manipur is primarily paying the price of being led by an ultra-nationalist BJP government. It is in the party's roots to exploit ethnicity and religion for its political cause. In 1992, people in the name of 'Hindutva' were motivated to demolish the Babri Mosque; in 2002, Hindus killed nearly 2000 people mostly Muslims; and in 2023, Hindu Meiteis are trying hard to ostracize Kukis from the social structure in Manipur.<sup>17</sup> The state will keep burning until the government responds with strict actions against the aggressors. If BJP continues to remain focused on just the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, then the people might have still more to pay.

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<sup>16</sup> Karan Thapar, "Full Text | 'Modi Is a Coward, Afraid to Face Parliament on Manipur:' Ramachandra Guha," *The Wire*, July 31, 2023, <https://thewire.in/communalism/full-text-pm-modi-coward-manipur-ramachandra-guha>.

<sup>17</sup> "A Decade on, Gujarat Justice Incomplete," Human Rights Watch, February 23, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/02/24/india-decade-gujarat-justice-incomplete>.