

MANIPUR CRISIS—A CASE STUDY OF THE BJP'S FAILED RESPONSE

By
Tauqeer Hamza
Intern
India Study Centre (ISC), ISSI

Supervised by
Muhammad Ahmad Khan

August 27, 2024

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



Introduction

For the past 14 months, Manipur has witnessed a bloody ethnic clash between the dominant Meitei community and the minority Kuki and other tribal hill communities. The Indian government and Manipur's state government, both led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have failed to end the violence and displacement, leading to human rights violations and the marginalization of minorities.

Since May 3, 2023, at least 220 people have been killed and more than 60,000 displaced.¹ Homes, businesses, villages, and places of worship have been destroyed. Media coverage is restricted due to government constraints, and fear of harassment by *Hindutva* zealots. The government's inability to halt abuses and hold criminals accountable has left the region devastated. Opposition leaders, particularly Rahul Gandhi, have frequently accused Prime Minister Modi of indifference. In August 2023, opposition parties initiated a vote of no-confidence against PM Modi, However, due to BJP's solid majority in the Center at the time, he successfully survived it.

¹ 'High Security in India's Manipur on Anniversary of Ethnic Clashes | Reuters', accessed 25 July 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/high-security-indias-manipur-anniversary-ethnic-clashes-2024-05-03/>.

Background

Manipur, located in north-eastern India, borders Myanmar, Assam, Mizoram, and Nagaland. It has a complex history of ethnic conflict and political instability, marked by ethnic diversity, colonial legacies, and post-independence dynamics. The major ethnic groups in Manipur are the Meitei, Kuki, and Naga. The Meitei, mostly Hindu, live in the Imphal Valley, while the Kuki and Naga, primarily Christian, live in the hills surrounding the valley.² The recent violence stems from the Manipur High Court's ruling on May 3, 2023, recommending the Center to consider the Meitei's demand to be categorized as a 'Scheduled Tribe'.³ This would grant them resources and opportunities, and allow them to purchase land in the hills. In response, the Kuki community organized a tribal solidarity march across ten districts of Manipur, with the help of the All Tribal Student Union Manipur, which was met with protests and blockades by the Meitei, sparking a brutal conflict. The violence has caused significant destruction, displacement, sexual abuse against women, and dire economic effects.

Government Response

The BJP government's response to the crisis has been inadequate and delayed. Action was minimal until a video of an assault on Kuki women went viral, sparking domestic and international outrage.⁴ PM Modi's actions were seen as ineffective and his condemnation of the violence was too late. Curfews and internet shutdowns were enforced by the government in an attempt to control the situation, rather than addressing the root cause of the issue. This was done to maintain narrative control and make the situation seem normal. Over 50,000 security forces were dispatched to Manipur, but combat continued with many human rights violations reported by both government forces and militant groups. Instances of sexual violence, arson, and looting were rampant, with security personnel unable to protect vulnerable persons. The lack of accountability and transparency has drawn criticism, with many violent offenders going unpunished.

The BJP's handling of the crisis has been criticized for being biased towards the Hindu Meitei and against the Christian Kuki minority. This perceived bias has heightened tensions and complicated

² Harsh Mander | The Wire, 'Manipur: A Land of Settled Grief - by Harsh Mander', genocidewatch, 4 May 2024, <https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/manipur-a-land-of-settled-grief-by-harsh-mander>.

³ 'Manipur Violence: What Was the High Court Order That Triggered Massive Unrest in the State? | Explained', India Today, 4 June 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/law/story/manipur-violence-high-court-order-triggered-massive-unrest-in-the-state-explained-2388615-2023-06-04>.

⁴ 'Indian Government Finally Responds to Violence in Manipur | Human Rights Watch', accessed 25 July 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/21/indian-government-finally-responds-violence-manipur>.

⁵ 'Authorities "Missing-in-Action" in Manipur, India', accessed 25 July 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/india-authorities-missing-in-action-amid-ongoing-violence-and-impunity-in-manipur-state-new-testimonies/>.

conflict resolution. Accusations of media control and suppression of dissent against the Modi government have hindered impartial investigations and decreased public awareness of the situation. As of July 2024, the violence continues despite official actions, and trust in the government is at an all-time low. The state is divided into exclusive ethnic zones, and there is no viable sign of a resolution. The most recent instance of violence occurred in the Jiribam⁶ district when the Kuki-Zo gang set fire to Lamtai Khunou and two other Meitei villages after the local militia, Arambai Tenggol, had put on fire the Kuki village Vengnuam. Peace negotiations have ceased, the state is essentially split into exclusive ethnic zones, and there is no indication that a resolution is imminent.

The government's reluctance to resolve these issues is deliberate and calculated for political objectives. The BJP is accused of exploiting the controversy to gain support among the Meitei, a crucial support base in elections.⁷ The Meitei, a Hindu majority, make up more than 54% of the total population. The Kukis and Naga, largely Christian, are minority groups who historically had limited access to welfare and political representation within the state. Meitei people comprise the majority of Manipur's legislative assembly, with 40 of the 60 seats. Chief Minister Biren Singh, a Meitei, has been accused of neglecting the harassment of Kukis and Nagas and is reported to be involved with militant Hindu nationalist groups of Meitei. The BJP supports the Meitei's desire for Scheduled Tribe status to gain votes, alienating the Kukis.

The BJP's silence may also have been influenced by the 2024 general elections. PM Modi desired to secure a majority vote from the Meitei by avoiding confrontation. Manipur contributes two Lok Sabha seats and 60 Vidhan Sabha seats. The BJP cannot afford to lose any seats amidst a tough challenge from the Indian National Congress and the INDIA alliance at large.

Residents of the affected state of Manipur expressed dissatisfaction with Modi and the BJP, claiming they failed to bring peace to the state.⁸ In the recent Lok Sabha elections Congress candidates defeated BJP competitors in both Meitei-dominated and Kuki-Naga-dominated constituencies.

One of the main reasons Modi remained silent about the Manipur crisis was because he cherished the national image more than accountability. The government's strategy of delayed and subdued

6 'Peace Eludes India's Manipur Even after Defeating BJP over Ethnic Violence | India Election 2024 News | Al Jazeera', accessed 25 July 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/12/peace-eludes-indias-manipur-even-after-defeating-bjp-over-ethnic-violence>.

7 Zohran Baig Khan Muhammad Ahmad, 'Exploring the BJP's Role in the Manipur Conflict', South Asian Voices, 29 August 2023, <https://southasianvoices.org/exploring-the-bjps-role-in-the-manipur-conflict/>.

8 Tora Agarwala, 'India's Manipur State Rejects Modi's BJP after Year-Long Ethnic Clashes', Reuters, 5 June 2024, sec. India, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indias-manipur-state-rejects-modis-bjp-after-year-long-ethnic-clashes-2024-06-05/>.

responses failed, resulting in widespread condemnation.⁹ Their reluctance to conduct impartial inquiries into the violence and human rights violations prioritised narrative control over justice. This focus on image maintenance contributed to the continued silence on the Manipur crisis.

Opposition parties have criticized Modi's handling of the Manipur conflict. Key opposition politicians, including Rahul Gandhi, have called for urgent measures to end the bloodshed.¹⁰ In July 2023, a 21-member delegation from the opposition bloc I.N.D.I.A. visited Manipur, inspecting relief camps and meeting with Kuki and Meitei populations. They saw deplorable conditions and criticized the state and federal governments. In August 2023, opposition parties initiated a vote of no confidence, which Modi survived due to BJP's majority. Recently elected Manipur MP from INC, Angomcha Bimol Akoijam, condemned the BJP's handling of the violence, comparing the displacement to the 1947 partition.¹¹ The opposition has repeatedly called on Modi to address both chambers of Parliament and implement tangible measures to address the problem.

Conclusion

The Manipur crisis highlights deep governance flaws under the BJP. Delayed responses, politicization of the conflict, human rights breaches, and suppression of opposition have undermined the government's credibility. To restore peace in Manipur, the government must take a proactive and objective approach, emphasizing dialogue, justice, and equitable development. The current situation is dire, with persistent violence and escalating hostility. Addressing the issue will require strong political will, institutional reforms, and a commitment to human rights and justice for all affected groups.

⁹ Sushant Singh, 'Modi's Silence on Manipur Has Destroyed the State's Credibility', Deccan Herald, accessed 25 July 2024, <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/modi-s-silence-on-manipur-has-destroyed-the-state-s-credibility-1228736.html>.

¹⁰ 'In Debut Speech as LoP, Rahul Gandhi Tears into Modi Govt over Manipur Crisis, Agnipath Scheme, NEET Row & MSP Issue', accessed 25 July 2024, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/in-debut-speech-as-lop-rahul-gandhi-tears-into-modi-govt-over-manipur-crisis-agnipath-scheme-neet-row-msp-issue-3088487>.

¹¹ The Hindu Bureau, 'WATCH: Manipur Facing Civil War-like Situation, but PM Has Not Spoken a Word, Says Congress MP', The Hindu, 2 July 2024, sec. India, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/watch-congress-mp-bimol-akoijams-speech-in-parliament-on-manipur-issue/article68359313.ece>.