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## Understanding the Failure of Peace Initiatives in the Meetei-Kuki Conflict

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### ABSTRACT

This study evaluates peace efforts taken up in the Meetei-Kuki conflict in Manipur, India. The Meetei-Kuki conflict, marked by conflicting aspirations and violent clashes, presents a complex case for conflict resolution. This study analyses various peace efforts undertaken by the government, numerous organisations, civil societies, communities, and religious and political leaders. Through qualitative examination of significant events and secondary data, the paper aims to evaluate these peace efforts and identify why peace initiatives fails to yield positive outcomes. The paper highlights the possible key reasons, including deep-rooted mistrust, political challenges, persistent violence, superficial approaches that overlook historical and ethnic complexities, and the inability of those involved to act at the right time under favourable conditions

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### Introduction:

Manipur, a beautiful charming state in northeastern India, is a land of stunning landscapes, exquisite art, and a rich culture. Despite its size, Manipur has made a name for itself globally, producing world-class sportspersons and contributing significantly to the nation's cultural and athletic heritage.



Known as the “Jewel of India,” it offers a unique experience of diverse ethnic communities, where hills and valleys, along with their various traditions, languages, and customs come together to create a vibrant cultural legacy.

Manipur is home to three major ethnic groups—the Meetei, Nagas, and Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes. Geographically, the state is divided into two distinct regions: the valley and the hills. The valley accounts for about 10% of the total geographical area, while the hills cover 90%. The Meetei, the largest ethnic group, primarily inhabit the valley, whereas the hills are home to numerous tribes. The people in the hills are broadly categorized into two major ethnic groups: the Nagas and the Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes. Historically, these three communities largely coexisted harmoniously, engaging in close interactions that shaped their cultures and lifestyles.

However, over time, these groups have developed their socio-political aspirations, which are inherently conflicting. For instance, the Meeteis seek to preserve the state's territorial integrity. At the same time, the Nagas demand the integration of Naga-inhabited areas into a unified political entity. Meanwhile, the Kuki-Chin-Mizo groups advocate for a separate administration. These demands are conflicting because a single tribe or group of tribes exclusively inhabits none of the hill areas in the state. Obviously, the Naga demand for integrating Naga-inhabited areas into a political unit raises concerns among the Kuki-Zo-Mizo tribes living in those Naga-dominated areas. Similarly, the Naga aspiration for a larger political entity affects the Meetei concern for maintaining the unity and integrity of the state. These conflicting aspirations have strained inter-ethnic relationships among them.

Ethnic conflicts often arise in societies characterized by multi-ethnicity. Manipur, a highly divided society with multiple ethnic groups, is particularly vulnerable to such conflicts. The last decade of the twentieth century is best remembered in Manipur for a series of violent ethnic clashes. The first major conflict was the Naga-Kuki clash, which began in 1992 and continued until 1998. Clashes between the Meeteis and Muslims occurred in 1993. In 1995, a conflict erupted between the Kukis and Tamils in Moreh, and the Kuki-Paite clashes took place in 1997–1998 (Singh, 2006). The most recent ethnic conflict in the state was the Meetei-Kuki clash of 2023.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to evaluate the peace initiatives undertaken by the government, numerous organisations, civil societies, and leaders from the community, religious and political spheres in the Meetei-Kuki conflict. It also seeks to assess the effectiveness of current peace efforts and identify the factors behind unsuccessful peace initiatives



## Methodology

The research methodology for understanding peace initiatives in the Meetei-Kuki conflict employs qualitative methods to gain in-depth insights into the conflict dynamics and peace initiatives. The study examines the key events and analyses various peace efforts undertaken by the government, numerous organisations, civil societies, communities, and religious and political leaders. A thorough examination of secondary data sources accompanies the event analysis. These include the sources in authored and edited books, scholarly articles, media coverage, etc.

Furthermore, secondary data informs the context and background of the conflict, which allows a deeper understanding of the conflict. By integrating multiple data sources, this methodology provides a comprehensive evaluation of peace efforts in the Meetei-Kuki conflict.

## Why are peace efforts necessary to further guide the conflict toward resolution?

Peace efforts are essential because they create opportunities for dialogue, where mutual recognition is an important prerequisite, help build trust between conflicting groups, and address the root causes of violence. Such efforts can provide sustainable solution, without them, conflicts often remain unresolved or worsen over time.

This aligns with Peter Wallensteen's (2018) view, where he emphasizes the importance of mutual recognition and sustainable solutions in resolving conflicts instead of one-sided victories that often lead to further tensions. In this context, the paper emphasizes the importance of mutuality in conflict resolution, a particularly relevant concept when examining peace initiatives in the Meetei-Kuki conflict.

## Meetei and Kuki ethnic Conflict

On May 3, 2023, a violent ethnic conflict erupted in Manipur between the Meetei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo communities in the Churachandpur district. The clash occurred during a solidarity march organized by the All-Tribal Students' Union Manipur (ATSUM), a tribal student organization. The march was organised in response to the Manipur High Court's directive to the state government, urging it to send a recommendation to the central government regarding the Meetei community's demand for a Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. The protest was against the Meetei community's demand for ST status. The march quickly turned violent in Churachandpur district when participants began targeting Meeteis and their homes, and individuals in combat dress carrying sophisticated weapons were also seen in the so-called peace rally. When news of Meetei houses and people being targeted spread, the Meetei retaliated. Since then, the conflict has escalated, with both sides resorting to violence and targeting one another. The conflict resulted in significant loss of life and forced many people to flee their homes. The violence caused widespread destruction, with thousands of houses set on fire and temples and churches burned and



vandalized. Many individuals were injured, and several went missing. According to Shimrah, this clash was the most horrific violence she had ever witnessed in her lifetime. She further stated that the violence seemed to be a manifestation of the profoundly deep-rooted hatred between the two communities. (Shimrah, 2023)

### **Peace Efforts and Reconciliation Initiatives in Manipur**

Following the outbreak of ethnic violence, the Governor of Manipur called on all community members to uphold peace, harmony, and coexistence while encouraging dialogue to restore normalcy. Similarly, the All-Manipur Christian Organisation (AMCO), a key Christian body, appealed to people to avoid violence, including the destruction of religious sites. Political leaders, including six Naga MLAs and civil society organisation the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SOREPA) Kangleipak also called for calm and urged collective efforts toward peace. Additionally, several individuals and organizations—including Lok Sabha MP Dr. Lorho Pfoze, MLAs, the United Naga Council (UNC), the Manipur Baptist Convention (MBC), and the Naga Women’s Union (NMU)—made strong appeals to end the cycle of violence (The Sangai Express, 2023a). Meanwhile, the Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI) stressed the importance of avoiding violence in favor of constructive dialogue. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, the Manipur Government arranged an all-party meeting, where it was resolved to form peace committees in every Assembly Constituency. These committees, chaired by MLAs, were tasked with implementing peace initiatives at the grassroots level and assisting displaced families. In support of these efforts, COCOMI further encouraged cooperation between communities in the hills and valleys, stressing the importance of peaceful resolution through dialogue. In another significant move, the United Naga Council (UNC) took the initiative to establish a peace committee focused on the urgent restoration of normalcy. Meanwhile, the Naga Students’ Association, Manipur (ANSAM) urged the state government to take concrete steps to defuse tensions and promote social harmony. On June 10, 2023, the Indian government formed a peace committee in Manipur led by Governor Anusuiya Uikey. The committee includes the Chief Minister, some state government ministers, MPs, MLAs, and leaders from various political parties. Its goal is to promote peace among Manipur’s ethnic groups by encouraging dialogue and negotiations between conflicting communities. The committee aims to foster social unity, mutual understanding, and positive communication among these groups (The Sangai Express, 2023b). Civil society organizations such as the Rongmei Naga Council Manipur, Longmai Laungrian, and Inpui Naga Union appealed for restraint and peaceful resolution. At the state level, a significant step toward peace was taken during the National Convention on Peace in Manipur, where ten political parties—including AAP, AIFB, AITC, CPI, CPI(M), INC, JD(U), NCP,



RSP, and Shiv Sena (UBT)—agreed to collaborate in restoring peace across the state. Internationally, the crisis also drew attention. The European Parliament strongly condemned the violence and urged all parties to exercise restraint. At the same time, Zeliangrong organizations appealed to both Meetei and Kuki communities to end hostilities. They called on the state and central governments to impartially fulfil their responsibilities in restoring peace.

Furthermore, regional student bodies, including the North East Students' Organisation (NESO), demanded an immediate end to the violence and urged the government to take stronger protective measures. Additionally, the Manipur Baptist Convention (MBC) initiated a significant interfaith peace effort, which convened a historic three-day gathering where church leaders from Meetei, Naga, and Kuki-Zo communities united in prayer for peace and justice. These collective efforts reflect a strong and widespread commitment among various political, religious, and civil society groups to end the conflict and restore lasting harmony in Manipur.

Efforts toward peace in the Meetei-Kuki conflict have focused on ending violence and building bridges between the communities. Political parties, communities, religious leaders, and organizations have adopted diverse methods to address the situation. These include government-led talks, appeal for calm and dialogue, condemnations of violence, and calls for collective action toward reconciliation. At the same time, civil society actions have been launched to rebuild stability and encourage peaceful cohabitation.

### **Setbacks in Peace Efforts in Manipur**

Despite numerous peace efforts from various angles, the results have been disappointing. Violence has persisted despite repeated appeals and condemnations urging an end to the conflict and a return to harmony. For instance, a significant setback occurred just days after the Indian government formed a peace committee under the chairmanship of Manipur Governor Anusuiya Uikey. The committee faced failure when COCOMI (Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity), a key Meetei civil society organization, withdrew its participation. Additionally, two prominent Kuki organizations—the Kuki Inpi Manipur and the Committee on Tribal Unity Sadar Hills—strongly opposed the formation of the peace committee, further complicating efforts to foster dialogue and reconciliation. ("Meetei, Kuki bodies slam 'peace committee'," 2023).

Another example of an effort that yielded no tangible results occurred when MLAs from the Meetei, Kuki, and Naga communities convened for the first time in 17 months since the violence erupted to find a peaceful resolution to the ongoing conflict. The meeting unanimously resolved to appeal to the



people of the state, urging all communities to shun violence so that no more innocent lives are lost. While the MLAs discussed potential next steps and strategies for the coming days, no concrete outcomes were achieved. (Manipur peace efforts, 2024)

The main explanations for why peace efforts in the Meetei-Kuki conflict have so far failed to achieve a meaningful outcome could be deep-rooted mistrust, combined with political difficulties and persistent violence, which obstructs the attainment of long-term peace. Both parties have also failed to acknowledge the high cost of the conflict and do not perceive the possibility of reconciliation. The failure could further be attributed to the superficial approach of various peace initiatives, which lacked deep reflection on historical ethnic differences and underlying causes. Lastly, the failure of peace initiatives could also be explained by the inability to seize the right time and favourable conditions necessary for a successful resolution by those undertaking the peace efforts.

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