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## Decoding the Kuki-Meitei Communal Conflict in Manipur through Socio-Political Lenses

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### ABSTRACT

The violent struggle between different communities of people sharing the same territorial location organized on the basis of ethnicity, language, religion and identity on the grounds of resource ownership, historical dissatisfaction due to the feeling of age-old discrimination divides the countrymen into stringent enemies thereby raising questions on nation building and national development. Manipur, one of the states of India has been battling the struggle against communal conflicts between the two major communities of the state for a prolonged period of time. The paper tries to understand the prevailing situation of the state thereby suggesting alternative remedies to address the disbalance witnessed herein and thereby open avenue for researchers to study the universe.

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### Introduction

The northeastern state of Manipur, nestled amidst lush green hills and verdant valleys, is known for its rich cultural tapestry and diverse ethnic communities. However, beneath its serene facade lies a history marred by communal tensions and conflict. "The British colonial policy of settling the Kukis in the hills of Manipur as a buffer against the Naga tribes fundamentally altered the traditional dynamics between the Meiteis and the Kukis. This move not only disrupted the socio-cultural fabric of the region but also created new tensions over land and resources. The Kukis, who were historically semi-nomadic, found themselves in fixed positions of strategic military importance, which often brought them into conflict with the Meiteis in the valley. These colonial interventions laid the groundwork for the modern-day ethnic tensions that continue to plague Manipur." One of the most enduring and complex conflicts in



Manipur is the strife between the Kuki and Meitei communities, which exploded into a full-blown violent conflict on 03 May 2023, leading to deaths and destruction on both sides.

### **Historical Context**

To comprehend the roots of the Kuki-Meitei conflict, it is essential to delve into the historical backdrop of Manipur. Manipur has been inhabited by various ethnic groups for centuries, each with its distinct identity, culture, and customs. Among these groups, the Kukis, Meiteis, and Nagas are prominent.

The Meiteis, predominantly inhabiting the valley regions of Manipur, trace their origins to the ancient kingdom of Manipur, which flourished from the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD onwards. The Kukis, on the other hand, are a collection of several, mostly historically nomadic, tribes residing in the hill areas surrounding the Manipuri valley. According to the Gazetteer of Manipur (1886), there were about 8,000 'Old Kukis,' who traditionally lived in the state, and about 17,000 "New Kukis," who migrated from Lushai Hills during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 'New Kukis' are said to have been brought and settled in strategic locations surrounding the Manipur valley by the British in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, where they served as mercenaries. They were used as buffer to protect the valley from the regular raids by the Naga tribes.

According to U.A. Shimray, "The historical relationship between the Meiteis and the Kukis has been marked by a complex interplay of cooperation and conflict. While there have been periods of mutual support, such as during times of external threats, the competition over land, political influence, and cultural dominance has often led to tensions. The British colonial strategy of employing the Kukis as a buffer against the Nagas and other hill tribes further complicated these dynamics, as it introduced new layers of political and social restructuring that intensified rivalries and distrust among these ethnic groups."

Historically, the relationship between the Meiteis and Kukis has been characterized by periods of cooperation, as well as conflicts over territory, resources, and influence. But the current violent conflict between the two communities is unprecedented in terms of duration, scale and scope.

### **Causes of Conflict**

1. *Land and Resource Disputes:* One of the primary drivers of the conflict is competition over land and natural resources. The Meiteis, concentrated in the fertile valley regions, have been deprived of any land rights in the hills of the state. So the Meiteis, despite being the majority community, remain



confined in the small valley areas of the state. Whereas the Kukis and also the Nagas enjoy exclusive rights in all the hills of Manipur in terms of land natural resources and land ownership.

2. *Kuki Population Explosion*: There is also the sensitive issue of unusual population growth in the Kuki community. Indeed, the Meiteis arguably suspect that the Kukis are deliberately seeking to bring about a demographic upheaval in Manipur by allowing Kukis from Myanmar to enter Manipur illegally and settle there by setting up new villages.
3. *Political Marginalization*: The Kuki community has long felt marginalized within the political landscape of Manipur. They perceive the Meitei-dominated state government as neglectful of their interests and aspirations, exacerbating feelings of alienation and resentment.
4. *Cultural and Ethnic Identity*: Differences in cultural practices, language, and identity further fuel the conflict. The Meiteis, with their distinct language (Meiteilon) and cultural traditions, view themselves as the indigenous inhabitants of Manipur, while the Kukis claim to have their own unique identity and heritage.
5. *Historical Grievances*: Historical grievances, including past conflicts and perceived injustices, continue to shape inter-community relations. Memories of past clashes, displacement, and atrocities in places like Moreh and Churachandpur fuel distrust and animosity between the two communities, thus perpetuating a cycle of vengeance. But when the Kuki-Naga conflict erupted in the early 1990s, the Meitei community didn't take sides. Instead, it was the Meitei community that sheltered and fed the displaced Kukis.

### **Escalation of Conflict**

The Kuki-Meitei conflict has witnessed several escalations over the years, marked by sporadic outbreaks of violence and bloodshed. In the 1990s, the conflict reached a peak with the emergence of armed insurgent groups representing both communities. These groups engaged in acts of terrorism, extortion, and targeted killings, plunging Manipur into a state of turmoil and insecurity.

The escalation of conflict led to widespread displacement, loss of lives, and a breakdown of social cohesion. Civilians, particularly those residing in remote and vulnerable areas, bore the brunt of the violence, facing threats from both state security forces and insurgent groups.

Relentless Deforestation in Kuki-Dominated Hills of Manipur: The Immediate Trigger of the Ongoing Kuki-Meitei Conflict



The ongoing conflict between the Kuki and Meitei communities in Manipur is fueled by a complex interplay of historical grievances, socio-economic disparities and identity politics. However, one immediate trigger that exacerbates tensions and perpetuates the conflict is reportedly the relentless deforestation for poppy plantation. Indeed, Manipur has experienced significant deforestation over the last 15 years. According to the India State of Forest Report (ISFR) 2021, Manipur lost around 499 square kilometers of forest cover from 2011 to 2021. If we consider the earlier periods within the last 15 years, the total loss could be higher. The deforestation is primarily due to poppy plantation, and, of course, also due to shifting cultivation, illegal logging, and infrastructure development. Mr. Guite writes "The large-scale deforestation in the hill areas of Manipur, driven by economic activities such as poppy cultivation and illegal logging, has profound socio-political implications. It has not only led to environmental degradation but also exacerbated existing ethnic tensions by altering traditional land use patterns and intensifying competition over resources. This environmental degradation is both a symptom and a cause of the ongoing conflict, reflecting the broader struggles over identity, territory, and economic survival in Manipur."

Deforestation for poppy cultivation serves as a catalyst for the Kuki-Meitei conflict by exacerbating existing socio-economic disparities and territorial disputes. It has been said that the Kuki-dominated hills of Manipur have been subjected to extensive deforestation driven by the lucrative opium trade. Poppy cultivation provides a source of income for Kuki farmers in these remote areas, where alternative livelihood options are limited. However, the expansion of poppy cultivation encroaches upon Meitei-inhabited valley regions, leading to conflicts over land and resources.

The environmental degradation resulting from deforestation further intensifies tensions between the Kuki and Meitei communities. Loss of forest cover leads to soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, and disruption of ecosystem services, posing long-term challenges for agricultural productivity and environmental sustainability. Moreover, deforestation exacerbates climate change, contributing to erratic weather patterns and exacerbating vulnerabilities in both communities.

The illegal nature of poppy cultivation also fosters social instability and criminal activities, exacerbating tensions between the Kuki and Meitei communities. Poppy cultivation is often controlled by criminal syndicates involved in the illicit drug trade, leading to violence, exploitation, and social disintegration in affected areas. The influx of illicit drugs further compounds social problems, including addiction, crime, cross-border migration and even community breakdown.



The Kuki-Meitei conflict is further fueled by perceptions of injustice and marginalization. The Meitei community perceives the expansion of poppy cultivation into their ancestral lands as a threat to their livelihoods, cultural identity, and territorial integrity. Conversely, the Kuki community feels marginalized by government policies and perceives the Meitei-dominated state government as neglectful of their interests and aspirations.

Addressing the root causes of the Kuki-Meitei conflict requires a comprehensive approach that addresses underlying socio-economic disparities, environmental degradation, and governance challenges. Promoting sustainable land use practices, alternative livelihood options, and community-based natural resource management can mitigate the drivers of deforestation and foster socio-economic development in both communities. Additionally, fostering dialogue, reconciliation, and conflict resolution mechanisms are essential for building trust, fostering understanding, and promoting peaceful coexistence between the Kuki and Meitei communities.

Indeed, the relentless deforestation in the Kuki-dominated hills of Manipur for poppy plantation served as the immediate trigger of the ongoing Kuki-Meitei conflict. Addressing deforestation and its socio-economic and environmental impacts is crucial for promoting peace, stability, and sustainable development in Manipur. By addressing the root causes of conflict and fostering dialogue and cooperation between communities, lasting peace and reconciliation can be achieved in the region.

### **Peace Initiatives and Challenges**

Despite the entrenched nature of the conflict, efforts have been made to foster reconciliation and peacebuilding between the Kuki and Meitei communities. But civil society organizations, religious leaders, and peace activists remain confronted with numerous challenges, including lack of understanding and unity among themselves, in facilitating dialogue and promoting understanding between the two groups.

Hence, peace initiatives often get derailed by those challenges, including deep-seated mistrust, the proliferation of arms, and the lack of political will to address the underlying grievances. Moreover, the socio-political landscape of Manipur, characterized by ethno-nationalist movements and competing demands for autonomy, complicates efforts to achieve a lasting resolution to the conflict.



## The Way Forward

Resolving the Kuki-Meitei conflict requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both the immediate causes of tension and the underlying structural issues. Key steps include:

1. *Dialogue and Reconciliation*: Engaging in sustained dialogue and reconciliation processes aimed at building trust, fostering understanding, and addressing grievances on both sides.
2. *Resource Sharing and Development*: Implementing equitable policies for land and resource allocation to ensure that both communities benefit from the state's natural wealth.
3. *Ethnic Balance in Political and Administrative Arenas*: The Meiteis believe the Kuki officers to have dominance and the upper hierarchy of the primary administrative wings like the police due to reservation policy for Scheduled Tribes thereby creating a lot of dissatisfaction. Hence, steps should be taken to bring about a balance in political and administrative arenas among all the ethnic groups of Manipur.
4. *Cultural Exchange and Education*: Encouraging cultural exchange programs and educational initiatives to promote inter-community harmony, tolerance, and mutual respect.
5. *Conflict Resolution Mechanisms*: Establishing robust conflict resolution mechanisms at the local, regional, and national levels to address grievances and prevent the escalation of violence.
6. *Socio-economic Development*: Investing in socio-economic development projects aimed at uplifting marginalized communities and reducing disparities in wealth and opportunity.
7. *National Mediation*: Seeking assistance from national mediators to facilitate dialogue and negotiation between conflicting parties and garner support for peacebuilding efforts.
8. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*: Establishing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate past atrocities, provide a platform for victims to share their experiences, and promote healing and reconciliation.

## Conclusion

The Kuki-Meitei communal conflict in Manipur is a complex and deeply rooted issue that requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders to achieve sustainable peace and reconciliation. By addressing the underlying causes of tension and promoting dialogue, understanding, and inclusivity, Manipur can pave the way for a future where its diverse communities coexist in harmony and prosperity. In his book "The Anatomy of Peace: Resolving the Heart of Conflict," Arbinger Institute's founder, C. Terry Warner, underscores the significance of shifting from a mindset of seeing others as objects or obstacles to understanding their perspectives and humanity. Just as in Manipur, where historical grievances and



misunderstandings fuel tensions, Warner emphasizes the importance of recognizing the humanity of all parties involved in conflict resolution efforts. This shift in perspective, coupled with genuine dialogue and efforts towards inclusivity, can foster the reconciliation necessary for sustainable peace. By embracing such principles, Manipur can work towards a future where its diverse communities coexist harmoniously and thrive together.

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