



Contested Identities and Ethnic Polarisation in Manipur: A Study of the 2023–2025 Conflict

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Abstract

The study presented in this paper examines the recent ethnic conflict that has deeply fractured the social and political fabric of Manipur, a northeastern state in India. This ethnic unrest has pitted communities against one another, leading to widespread displacement, violence, and a breakdown of institutional governance. Focusing on the period from 2023 to 2025, the study critically examines the roots, escalation, and implications of the violence primarily between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities. It explores how historical grievances, identity politics, land rights, and state policies have collectively intensified ethnic polarisation. Special attention is given to the role of social media in shaping narratives, fuelling misinformation, and amplifying divisions. The paper also reflects on the roles played by ethnic based organisations and state responses, assessing both their failures and potential pathways for reconciliation. By situating the unravelling of communal harmony, the paper seeks to understand the complexities of coexistence in a multi-ethnic society and proposes a framework for conflict resolution. The findings aim to contribute to policy discourses for inclusive governance and peacebuilding efforts in ethnically sensitive regions.

Keywords: Ethnic Conflict, Identity Politics, State Fragility, and Governance

1. Introduction

Manipur, a Northeastern state in India, is a mosaic of diverse ethnic identities, renowned for its rich cultural heritage, but also marked by recurrent inter-community tensions. The ethnic violence that unfolded during the period 2023 represented a profound rupture in the state's socio-political landscape. It deepened the divide between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities, while simultaneously exposing the limitations of the existing governance structures, conflict resolution mechanisms, and models of communal coexistence. The violence resulted in the loss of lives, widespread displacement, targeted attacks, destruction of homes and institutions, and a significant erosion of public trust, triggering a prolonged humanitarian and political crisis.

While the contentious issues of Scheduled Tribe status are the immediate cause of the conflict, the core of the unrest is deeply embedded in a complex interplay of historical grievances, competing ethnic aspirations, claims over land, identity politics, and policies of the state that have inadvertently or otherwise contributed to ethnic polarisation. The demographic anxieties and disproportionate development have all intersected in ways that have mobilised communities against one another. Alongside exploring ground-level realities, the paper also examines the critical role of social media as a tool for both mobilisation and division. In an age of instantaneous communication, misinformation and inflammatory rhetoric have escalated the conflict far beyond physical boundaries. Social media platforms have become potent arenas where narratives are contested, identities are politicized, and historical grievances are frequently resurfaced, resulting in serious repercussions for communal harmony.

The study further reflects the responses of civil society organisations, armed groups, and government agencies in shaping the course of the conflict. By situating the crisis within the broader theoretical perspectives on ethnic conflict, state fragility, and peacebuilding, this paper aims to contribute meaningfully to the discourse on navigating diversity and conflict in plural societies. It emphasises the importance of reimagining governance in ways that are more inclusive, locally grounded, and responsive to the aspirations of all communities. The study seeks not only to understand the recent conflict in Manipur but also to propose viable pathways for dialogue, reconciliation, and sustainable pathways that may hold relevance for other ethnically sensitive and politically fragile regions.

2. Ethnic Identification

Broadly, the population of Manipur can be categorised into three major ethnic groups: the Meiteis, who predominantly inhabit the central valley; the Naga and Kuki-Zo tribes, who reside in the surrounding hill districts. The Meiteis, who constitute the majority, are predominantly Hindus, with a long history of organised kingship, rich classical traditions, and a well-developed script and literature. They are considered the dominant group politically and demographically. In contrast, the Naga and Kuki-Zo communities are largely Christian, comprising numerous tribes with their own dialects, customary laws, and clan-based social structures. Recognised as Scheduled Tribes, these hill tribes have historically sought greater autonomy to preserve their distinct identities, often expressing these aspirations and advocating for self-governance and stronger political representation. Today, a harmonious existence of the state is being threatened as the interests of one group clash with those of another. Ethnic identification in Manipur is not merely cultural but deeply political as it influences land rights, access to state resources, and representation in governance structures. Over the years, the assertion of ethnic identities has grown more pronounced, driven by the perception of political marginalisation and partly owing to the prominent role ethnicity plays in the state's governance and institutional arrangements. Tensions often arise from overlapping territorial claims and the contestation of historical narratives, exacerbating ethnic polarisation. Thus, ethnic identification in Manipur is a complex and evolving phenomenon that not only shapes social cohesion but also influences the political landscape, governance, and inter-community relations. It is both a marker of cultural pride and

a source of political contestation, underscoring the need for inclusive governance that respects and accommodates Manipur's rich ethnic tapestry.

3. Triggers of the 2023–2025 Unrest

The outbreak of violence in Manipur in 2023 was not a spontaneous or isolated incident, but rather the result of a complex interplay between historical and structural contexts. The conflict was driven by a confluence of enduring ethnic tensions, long-standing grievances, and entrenched socio-economic disparities that have characterised the region. The following are key triggers that led to the escalation of the ethnic unrest.

i) Scheduled Tribe (ST) Status Demand

Following the Manipur High Court's directive to the state government to submit recommendations to the Union government for the inclusion of the Meitei/Meetei community in the Scheduled Tribe (ST) list, widespread protests erupted among the tribal communities. The All Tribal Students' Union Manipur (ATSUM) organized a solidarity march on May 3 in the hill districts to oppose the court's move. However, tensions quickly escalated, and violent clashes broke out between the Meitei and Kuki communities. This plunged the state into a period of unrest and direct ethnic conflict. At the heart of the controversy lies the Meitei community's standing demand for ST status. This demand is rooted in a desire to safeguard their ancestral lands, cultural heritage, and indigenous identity. Amid mounting pressures from demographic shifts, economic challenges, and political uncertainties, Meiteis view that constitutional recognition as a Scheduled Tribe is essential and would provide necessary legal and institutional safeguards. They contend that being granted ST status would help arrest the decline of their indigenous rights and prevent further encroachment by non-locals. However, this demand has been met with strong resistance from the hill tribes, particularly the Kukis and Nagas, who already enjoy ST status. These groups perceive the Meitei demand as a potential encroachment on their constitutional protections. From the hill tribes' perspective, granting ST status to the Meiteis, who already constitute the majority population in the valley and wield significant socio-political and economic influence, could upset the existing balance. There is a prevailing fear that Meiteis, once recognized as STs, could become eligible for reserved quotas in government jobs, educational institutions, and, more critically, could acquire land in hill areas, which is currently restricted to protect tribal land rights. The Kukis, in particular, interpret the Meitei demand as a strategic move to expand their influence into the hills, a region that has historically been safeguarded for tribal communities. They worry that such inclusion would dilute the special protections designed to preserve the distinct identity and autonomy of the hill tribes, potentially leading to land alienation and cultural marginalization. Thus, what is framed by the Meiteis as a step toward protection and preservation is seen by the hill communities as a direct threat to their identity, land rights, and established administrative and political safeguards.

ii) Historical Grievances

Historical grievances have been a persistent and deeply embedded factor triggering ethnic unrest in Manipur, arising from decades of contestation over identity, land, and state policies. Central to the grievances lies the politics of identity, where different ethnic communities, notably the Meiteis, Nagas, and Kuki-Zo, pursue distinct political aspirations. The aspirations, often framed through demands for recognition and autonomy, are often reflected in constitutional safeguards for preserving their unique social, cultural, and political identities. However, these overlapping and often conflicting interests have brought the communities into direct confrontation with one another, as the pursuit of one group's goals is frequently perceived as a threat to the rights and aspirations of the others. This mutually exclusive dynamic has deepened mistrust and intensified competition, making ethnic conflict an enduring feature of the region's political landscape.

Equally contentious are issues related to forest and land rights, which remain central to the livelihood and identity of tribal communities. The state policy-driven initiatives, such as land surveys, forest conservation campaigns, and eviction drives, have often been carried out in the hill areas with minimal or no consultation with tribal stakeholders. These actions are widely viewed as encroachments on customary land ownership and traditional governance systems, thereby heightening fears of cultural erosion and the loss of ancestral lands. It sparked strong resistance from the Kuki-Zo communities, who view them as a biased initiative posing a threat to their existence and way of life. In contrast, the government often presents these measures as part of a broader developmental agenda aimed at promoting environmental conservation, infrastructure expansion, and administrative regulation in the region.

The other most significant historical grievances fuelling the recent ethnic unrest in Manipur are the longstanding perception of bias and exclusion embedded in state policies. For decades, communities in the hill regions, especially the Kuki-Zo and Naga tribes, have felt politically and economically marginalized by a system that they perceive as being more responsive to the needs and interests of the valley areas. This imbalance is most visibly reflected in disparities in infrastructure, public services, educational institutions, and access to government employment. While the valley regions benefit from greater state investment, administrative attention, and connectivity, the hill districts remain underdeveloped, lacking inclusive governance and development. This chronic neglect has deepened feelings of structural inequality and abandonment.

Over time, such unresolved grievances have solidified into collective memories of historical injustice, fostering a sense of victimhood and persistent resistance. The cumulative impact has been the entrenchment of ethnic divisions, the erosion of a shared civic identity, and the emergence of a deeply polarized political environment prone to conflict and unrest. Given this context, the state government must exercise greater vigilance and sensitivity in formulating policies and addressing the region's complex social fabric.

4. Role of Social Media and Misinformation

During the recent ethnic crisis in Manipur, social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter (now X) played a significant and complex role. Both the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities used these platforms to share updates, raise awareness, and document incidents of violence. This helped keep people informed, facilitated community coordination, and drew national and international attention to the unfolding situation. However, as tensions escalated, these platforms became channels for spreading misinformation and communal hostility. Unverified and misleading audiovisual contents, often lacking context, were widely circulated, showing alleged acts of violence or desecration. Such content stirred fear, anger, and suspicion across communities. Hate speech, inflammatory language, and ethnic insults spread rapidly, often unchecked. In some instances, provocative messages and false claims were shared that incited revenge and deepened the mistrust between the two sides. The unchecked flow of such harmful content, combined with limited fact-checking and moderation, directly worsened the situation on the ground. Instead of fostering dialogue or mutual understanding, social media often reinforced one-sided views, with users mostly encountering content that supported their own perspectives. This online separation of viewpoints further deepened the divisions between communities. In response, the state government imposed several internet shutdowns in an attempt to curb the spread of violence and restore order. The crisis underscored the urgent need for responsible digital conduct, stronger regulation of online platforms, and effective measures to counter fake news and online incitement to violence during times of conflict.

5. Implications of the Ethnic Unrest in Manipur

The 2023 ethnic unrest in Manipur has left devastating and far-reaching consequences, altering the state's social, political, and human landscape in profound ways. The most visible and tragic implication has been the loss of life. The violence claimed over several lives, including children and the elderly, under horrific circumstances. This result reveals the deep ethnic hatred and the absence of effective law enforcement. The scale and brutality of the killings have inflicted collective trauma, the psychological scars of which will linger across generations.

Another implication of the violence was the massive internal displacement of people from both communities. Over 70,000 people from both the Kuki-Zo and Meitei communities were displaced from their homes. Families were forced into overcrowded relief camps with limited access to clean water, food, healthcare, and sanitation. Many have remained in these camps for months, with little clarity on when or whether they can safely return. The displacement has not only caused immediate humanitarian suffering but also long-term instability, as people are now estranged from their homes, lands, and livelihoods. The destruction of homes, religious institutions, and cultural symbols further deepened the divide. Many villages were burned down from both sides. Several churches and temples were also desecrated or destroyed, turning the conflict into not just a political or territorial dispute, but a cultural and religious one. This targeted destruction has deepened mistrust and hardened ethnic identities, making future reconciliation more difficult.

The education sector has also borne the brunt of the conflict. Schools and colleges remained shut for prolonged periods in affected areas. Students preparing for board exams or competitive tests faced interruptions, lost access to teachers, and experienced stress and anxiety, especially those in displacement camps. A generation of youth has been pushed into academic uncertainty, with many unable to resume studies due to trauma, relocation, or financial constraints. On the other hand, livelihoods and the local economy have suffered significantly. Shops, markets, and agricultural activities came to a halt. Daily wage earners lost their incomes, while farmers were unable to tend to their fields due to fear and insecurity. The supply chains for goods and essentials broke down, driving up prices and making life more difficult for ordinary citizens.

In the wake of this widespread destruction and human suffering, there has been a significant erosion of public trust in democratic institutions, which has further aggravated the communal divide. The perceived inaction, bias, or selective intervention by law enforcement agencies during the peak of the violence has left many communities feeling betrayed and unprotected. The lack of timely justice, transparent investigations, or accountability has weakened faith in the rule of law and the impartiality of the state. As trust in institutions eroded, ethnic allegiance began to overshadow civic unity, leading to the rise of local vigilante groups and community-based organizations that stepped in to fill the governance void. This shift toward ethnically defined spaces and leadership has deepened societal fragmentation, replacing once-shared interdependence with growing mistrust and suspicion. Mixed localities have been emptied, everyday inter-community interactions have vanished, and deep-seated fears have taken root. What was once a multi-ethnic social fabric has been torn into parallel, distrustful existences, indicating a troubling shift towards sustained ethnic separation and deepening political polarisation in the State.

6. Pathways to Peacebuilding

In the aftermath of the ethnic conflict in Manipur, both Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the state government undertook crucial efforts to restore peace and normalcy across the region. CSOs played an indispensable role on the ground, providing immediate humanitarian relief to displaced communities and supporting those most affected by the violence. Nevertheless, the sustainability of peace remains contingent upon the establishment of an effective ceasefire and the collective disarmament of all parties involved in the conflict. The events of 2023 were marked by a concerning escalation in the deployment of sophisticated weaponry, including handguns and the reported use of drones. Large numbers of youth across different communities were mobilised and armed under the justification of self-defence, contributing to an increasingly militarised and unstable security environment.

The government must take the lead in implementing a structured process of disarmament and demilitarization, enabling young people to return home, resume their education, and rebuild their futures. Equally vital is the creation of platforms for dialogue between the conflicting communities. Genuine reconciliation cannot take place behind closed doors or through negotiations limited to armed groups. It requires inclusive and transparent peace talks that

actively involve civil society, especially grassroots voices. Any reconciliation mechanism must function with complete transparency and mutual accountability, serving as a crucial tool to restore trust between communities that once lived together in harmony but are now deeply divided.

Despite the deep scars left by the conflict, hope persists through the resilience of the people of Manipur. Both the state and central governments must affirm and protect the rights of indigenous communities to live in peace and dignity. Lasting peace in Manipur demands a participatory, inclusive, and justice-oriented approach that can only be achieved when every community comes together with shared purpose and commitment to rebuilding harmony.

8. Conclusion

The ethnic unrest that gripped Manipur from May 2023 reveals the profound consequences of unresolved historical grievances, deepening ethnic divisions, and the failure of institutions to uphold equitable governance. Far from being a mere law-and-order issue, the conflict underscores the fragility of peace in a region where identity, land, and autonomy remain intensely contested. The violence has left lasting scars displacement of communities, loss of lives, erosion of trust, and the breakdown of communal relations.

The findings underscore the extent to which systemic neglect, uneven state responses, and polarizing narratives have contributed to the escalation of hostilities. As a multi-ethnic state, Manipur's diversity is both its strength and a challenge, demanding inclusive and participatory governance that respects the aspirations of all communities. It also highlights that, despite their limitations, civil society organizations and local peace initiatives have played vital roles in easing tensions and promoting dialogue. However, there remains little indication of meaningful or lasting change in Manipur's conflict landscape. A durable and just resolution demands a model of peaceful coexistence, a reimagining of governance rooted in inclusivity, mutual recognition, and respect for the diverse ethnic aspirations that define Manipur. Policies must be shaped through meaningful consultation with all communities, ensuring that the voices of marginalized groups are not only heard but also integrated into decision-making processes. Ultimately, peace in Manipur will depend on the political will to address structural inequalities, the moral courage to confront difficult truths, and the collective commitment of both the state and society to rebuild broken relationships. The lessons from this period must serve not as fleeting memories but as a catalyst for lasting change toward a future where coexistence is not enforced by force, but nurtured through justice, empathy, and shared hope.

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