



- The communal riots which erupted in Manipur since the evening of May 3, between the Meiteis and Kuki-Hmar-Zomi communities, have unleashed unprecedented human displacement, a tragic loss of lives and destruction of property, and show no signs of closure.
- As the nature and character of the riots transform from one of ethnic cleansing to genocidal attacks across the divide – armed groups from either side continue to expand the theatre of these riots to the peripheral areas, with more virulence.
- The large-scale deployment of paramilitary forces, predominantly in urban areas, is clearly not sufficient to maintain ‘law and order’ in the State’s peripheries.
- The meeting of the tribal students organisations was called following a High Court order of 19 April 2023, wherein a single bench judge, after hearing a petition by eight people representing the Meitei Tribe Union (MTU), directed the Manipur government to submit its recommendation on the inclusion of the Meitei community in the ST list, preferably within a period four weeks
- The order has since been stayed by the Supreme Court which termed it as a “factually wrong judgement.
- The demand for inclusion of Meitei in the ST list by the Meitei community first came up in 1981 when the then Chief Minister of Manipur, Rishang Keishing raised the matter in the State Legislative Assembly.
- The discussions on the issue did not lead anywhere as there were dissenting voices within the Meitei community against getting ST status.
- In 1995, the Meitei community was given the status of Other Backward Class (OBC).
- Two groups within the Meitei community—Chakpas (lois) and Thoubal Khunous (previously Yaithibis)—were already identified as Scheduled Castes (SC) in 1956.
- Nevertheless, the Meitei community intensified its demand for ST status with the formation of the Scheduled Tribes Demand Committee of Manipur Valley (STDCM).
- The STDCM submitted a memorandum to Governor Gurbachan Jagat in November 2012, and also met the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in July 2013 to reiterate their demand for a ST status.
- In April 2022, the MTU once again submitted a representation to the Union
- Tribal Affairs Ministry to consider inclusion of Meitei community in the ST list. The Ministry, on its part, forwarded the letter to the Manipur government in May 2022. Once again, the state government did not respond to the letter.
- In 2023, Mutum Churamani and seven others of the MTU filed a writ petition in the High Court urging the Hon’ble Court to issue a writ mandamus to the Manipur government to reply to the letter of Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs. The High Court order was issued in response to this writ petition.
- Kuki-Zomi-dominated Churachandpur was the epicentre of the violence located 65 kilometres south of Imphal.
- Here, the rubble of Meitei homes lies at the fringes of some villages where the residents are predominantly Kuki-Zomi.
- Meiteis living in the hill districts continue to flee to the valley and the Kuki-Zomi people who had settled in Imphal are making their way to the hill districts.
- Manipur has always had a majority of Meiteis, who were initially the rulers of the Manipur Kingdom.
- Leishemba Sanajaoba, elected to the Rajya Sabha on a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ticket in 2020, is the titular Maharaja of the Manipur Kingdom. The Meiteis comprise about 53% of the population (2011 Census).
- Most of them are Hindu or Sanamahis; a minority is Muslim. They have mostly lived in the Imphal valley.
- Around 41% of the State’s population are Scheduled Tribes (ST), comprising Naga and Kuki-Zomi clans, who mostly follow Christianity and occupy the hill districts.
- As 90% of the State’s landmass comprises the hill districts, less than 10% is occupied by the majority of the population residing in the valley.
- Most Meiteis fall under the General category. A small section of them belongs to either the Scheduled Castes (SC) or Other Backward Classes (OBC).
- The Meiteis allege that the Kuki-Zomis have been trying to “increase their population” by facilitating illegal immigrants from Myanmar.
- A fringe group within the Meiteis, demanding for separating the ‘Old Kukis’ from the ‘New Kukis,’ who they claim are the illegal immigrants.
- On the other hand, Kuki-Zomi organisations and leaders maintain that they have always been accorded step-motherly treatment.
- There are 40 Meitei MLAs in the State and only 20 tribal MLAs representing the hill districts. Of the 20, only 10 are Kukis.
- On the back of this grievance, the demand for a separate Kuki-Zomi administration has once again

come to the fore. It is being pushed by 10 Kuki MLAs, seven of whom are from the ruling BJP.

- In Churachandpur, the residents have crossed out 'Manipur' from State government offices and rechristened landmarks as 'Lamka.' This was what the area was called before it was named after Maharaja Churachand of Manipur.

THE IMMEDIATE REASONS

- A week after the Manipur High Court order on ST status for the Meitei people.
- Kuki-Zomi outfits gathered in the district to protest against the government's survey on reserved forests and the eviction of the Kuki-Zomi people from these forests. The protests turned violent. The government imposed Section 144 and suspended Internet services for five days.
- A horde of Meitei youth in black T-shirts, part of an outfit called the Armabai Tenggol, waited at the border of the district. The outfit claims to protect Meitei culture and the indigenous customs of Sanamahism, and preserve the State's forest heritage.
- After the April 27 protest, the All Tribal Students' Union Manipur called for a solidarity march on May 3 opposing the ST demand of the Meiteis.
- As the rally concluded on May 3 in Churachandpur, reports of attacks on Meitei homes on the borders of the district trickled in.
- Then news followed of Meitei mobs trying to burn down the arch of the Anglo-Kuki war memorial. Following this, the rally in Churachandpur, too, turned violent.
- The first targets of arson were the offices of the Forest Department and Transport Commissioner. Within half an hour, as Meitei and Kuki-Zomi mobs clashed in Churachandpur, Meitei mobs, suspected to be of Arambai Tenggol, began wreaking havoc in the tribal neighbourhoods of Imphal.
- Usually, the villagers in hill districts own licensed rifles. District magistrates in the State had directed all the villagers to submit their weapons to the government.
- Amidst this, the Naga tribes in Manipur have been conspicuously silent. Some Naga MLAs have even distanced themselves from their Kuki counterparts.
- Kuki MLAs have questioned this lack of support saying the Nagas were on their side in opposing the Meiteis' demand for ST status.
- In a multi-ethnic national or provincial setting, the accommodation of differences in a way that bestows socio-cultural recognition of identities while striving for constitutional unity and equality through governance is a must for progress.
- The conditions for a conflict arise when identities tighten up and become exclusivist, leading to grievances over perceived neglect of one group.
- But good governance that focuses on accommodation and dialogue helps stem the

possibilities of a deterioration of such conditions into violence.

- The spurt of violence in Manipur that led to mass displacement, the loss of lives, vandalism of houses, churches, temples besides arson across five districts, might have been a consequence of a long-standing hill-valley identity divide in the State, but it was also avoidable.
- While the grievance that according to ST status would eat into the reservation pie for the hill tribal communities seems to be somewhat valid, their raging concern that this will compromise traditional land ownership is not entirely born out of reason and has been used by tribal leaders to whip up hysteric anti-valley sentiments.
- The conflagration was also the consequence of brewing discontent against what tribal groups perceived as the State government's biased actions.
- In its over-zealousness in a "war against drugs", the government had indulged in eviction drives which included one that had affected a Kuki village and had prompted some of the BJP's tribal MLAs to raise this issue of a perceived bias in governance and seek a change in the party's State leadership
- Evictions ostensibly done for forest protection & in the name of removing "outsiders" tend to cause discontentment among people dependent upon the hills for a livelihood; doing so without recourse to resettlement and compensation only heightens a sense of injustice among those affected.
- With the Union government taking charge of security, a tamping down of the violence should follow, but State government must convene an all-party mechanism to reach out to the people across ethnic divides.
- The Mantripukhri raid by NAB (Narcotics & affairs of borders) shows that the State government was doubling down on narcotics even in the middle of a serious law-and-order situation where more than 35,000 persons were displaced.
- Such actions are premised on a detailed note prepared by the State government on "unnatural growth in the number of villages and new settlements in some districts of Manipur."
- Sharing data and satellite images, a top source in the Manipur government said that in 1969, there were 587 villages in the Imphal valley, which is dominated by the non-tribal Meiteis. That dropped to 544 villages in 2021. On the other hand, in the hill districts — which are inhabited mostly by 34 Scheduled Tribes including the Kukis and the Nagas — there were 1,370 settlements and villages in 1969. By 2021, however, this had shot up to 2,244 villages, the source said.

VALLEY URBANISATION

- One of the possible explanations for the drop in the number of villages in the valley is the rapid urbanisation, compared to the hills.

- It cannot be determined whether the growth in settlements in the hills is commensurate with a growth in population, as the 2021 census is yet to be conducted.
- Churachandpur — a hill district with a majority population of Kukis which was one of the main hotspots violence — had 282 villages in 1969, which almost doubled to 544 in 2021.
- Paolienlal Haokip, the BJP MLA from Saikot in Churachandpur district, explained that, according to Kuki traditions, whenever a clan grows they are given permission to settle another village in the same area — explains the increase in the number of villages in Kuki areas, he said.
- To say that these settlements are all illegal migrants from Myanmar is simply not true. It is true that after the junta (military rule) took over Myanmar [in 2021], some people fled to Manipur. But that number would be in hundreds, they have not set up any villages,” Mr. Haokip told
- He added that the increase in settlements in Kuki areas is also due to the ethnic tensions with the Nagas between 1992 & 1997.
- In a press conference in Delhi on May 9, the group insisted that the violence that erupted on May 3 was rooted in the Kukis’ opposition to the government’s “war on drugs”.
- The Manipur government source also said that the current wave of tensions between the majority Meitei community and the Kukis lies in the actions taken since 2017-18 against illegal poppy cultivation in the hill districts.
- The source said that since 2017-18, over 18,664 acres of poppy cultivation have been destroyed by the authorities, mostly in hill districts, compared to just 1,889 acres of poppy destroyed between 2013 and 2016.
- Mr. Haokip pointed out that there is no church or civil society organisation in the hills that endorses poppy cultivation. “All groups have issued advisories against such cultivation. It is the big investors from the valley who are the kingpins of this trade,”
- More than a year since an ethnic conflagration flared up, resulting in 221 deaths and the displacement of nearly 50,000 people, something remains rotten in the State of Manipur.

DEMOGRAPHIC POLITICS

- In 2016, Manipur had nine districts: Imphal West, Imphal East, Thoubal and Bishnupur in the valley; and Senapati, Ukhrul, Churachandpur, Chandel and Tamenglong in the hills.
- In December 2016, the Congress-led O. Ibobi Singh government carved out seven new districts — Jiribam, Kamjong, Kakching, Tengnoupal, Noney, Pherzawl and Kangpokpi — by splitting the five original hill districts, thereby taking the total number of districts to 16.
- The valley, with 10% of Manipur’s landmass, is dominated by the non-tribal Meiteis, most of whom are Hindus, who account for more than 64% of the population of the State and yield 40 of the State’s 60 MLAs.
- The hills comprise 90% of the State’s area, but send only 20 members to the Assembly.
- According to the website of the Ministry of Development of Northeastern Region (DoNER), there was an increase of 0.9% in the State’s Scheduled Tribe between the 2001 and 2011 censuses. The 2021 census is yet to be conducted, so the current population is not known. The 2011 census put the State’s population at 27.21 lakh, with a decadal population growth rate of 18.65%.
- The People’s Alliance for Peace & Progress Manipur (PAPPM), an influential Manipur-based civil society group, said in a statement on May 8 that “the Myanmar-origin Kuki immigrants occupying sensitive high positions of Indian government offices sustain uninterrupted entry of illegal Kuki migrants into Manipur. Both these are threat to national security of India.”
- The conflict has now spread to hitherto peaceful districts such as Jiribam even as the Imphal valley and other areas have seen rising extortion and abductions.
- The increase in armed militias in both the valley and hill areas, who are armed with weapons looted from constabularies
- In the latest meeting with a host of security and administrative officials, the Chief Minister was not invited.
- The Union government’s indecisive vacillation & the State government’s inability to rise above its leadership’s ethnic biases have ensured that the Manipur conflict remains on a slow burn even as the electorate in the State has already given a strong message on this situation
- The persistence of the status quo is doing little to resolve the conflict and is only furthering the ethnic divide.
- The Centre has invoked Article 355 of the Constitution, which is a part of emergency provisions. It empowers the Centre to take necessary steps to protect a State against external aggression or internal disturbances.
- Meitei community, which accounts for 53 per cent of Manipur’s population
- Several Chin, people of the same ethnic group from across the border in Myanmar, have entered India, fleeing violence and persecution, and the government’s tough stance against these so-called illegal immigrants has angered the Kukis, whose kin they are.
- There is a serious pressure on land in Manipur. As populations increase in the tribal villages, they tend

to spread out into surrounding forest areas, which they consider their historical and ancestral right

- Simultaneously, the Meitei, who live in the valleys, are angry because they are not allowed to settle or buy land in the hill areas, while tribal people can buy land in the valleys.
- The government has no real policy about how it plans to recognise new villages. Nor is there any transparent forest policy in Manipur. This has led to resentment even within its own party.
- On April 12, Paolienlal Haokip, a BJP MLA, questioned the sudden revenue and forest survey undertaken in the Churachandpur-Khoupum Protected Forest in Churachandpur district, which was designated a protected forest in 1966.
- In a letter dated April 12 addressed to Biswajit Singh, Minister for Power, Forest, Environment, and Climate Change, Haokip, who represents the 59 Saikot Assembly constituency reserved for STs, described the forest survey as a matter of great public anguish and perceived injustice
- Haokip said that he had recently pointed out in the Assembly that the State government's nullification of the orders of an earlier Assistant Settlement Officer (ASO) excluding certain villages from proposed protected forest areas was wrong.
- He wanted to know how the State government could nullify the orders of an ASO, the statutory authority under the Indian Forest Act of 1927 to settle any claims of pre-existing rights on land in the absence of a Forest Section Officer (FSO), a post that is currently vacant.
- Haokip said that the delay in processing claims, cited as a reason, was the fault of the authorities concerned and not of the landowners.
- He added that it cannot be a reason for annulling any order that excludes lands claimed by the forum of tribal chiefs from the protected forest area
- Haokip pointed out that if there were no survey records with the State government, it would only prove that the Gazette declaring the Churachandpur-Khoupum forest area as a protected area was flawed and therefore void.
- He went on to request that further surveys be stopped until there is clarification in the issue
- Despite Haokip's and other tribal people's protests, Biren Singh remained unfazed, and has stridently pushed back against the tribal people's protests against expanding reserved forests.
- It has been reported that Singh said that his government uses satellite mapping to learn about changes in forest compositions in the hill districts. And that it takes encroachments very seriously and would deal with it accordingly.
- According to Singh, anybody who protests against this goes against the Constitutional provisions, which provide for protecting forest lands.

- The Kuki Inpi Manipur or KIM, the apex body of the Kukis in Manipur, alleged that Biren Singh's statement about the issue was false and intended to divert attention from the dissent of the tribal communities against the "authoritarian rule" in Manipur.
- During a recent visit to Manipur, Bhupender Yadav, Union Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, asserted that the 1927 Forest Act became a State subject after Independence but that after the 1976 Amendment, forest land came under the jurisdiction of both the State and Central governments.
- The Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF), a recently formed conglomerate of tribal groups, which includes the Kukis, had called for the rallies.
- On March 11, the State government retaliated by withdrawing from the ongoing tripartite talks. It withdrew the Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement with two armed political groups, the Kuki National Army and the Zomi Revolutionary Army, accusing them of inciting protesters during the rallies.
- The SoO agreement is a ceasefire agreement that the Central and State government signed with the two conglomerates of tribal armed outfits in the hills, the United People's Front and the Kuki National Organisation, in 2008.
- The Kuki National Army and the Zomi Revolutionary Army are both part of the Kuki National Organisation. These are all armed organisations.
- KIM had asserted that the rallies were a result of public discontent over the "extreme disregard" by the government of the Scheduled Hill areas and of Articles 370 and 371 C of the Constitution, which applied to Manipur
- Their history asserts to the Meiteis being a settled agricultural community for over 2,000 years
- The excessive build-up of security forces in the State, purportedly in response to the violence, might be indicative of a larger game plan that is more likely related to Manipur's status as a border State.

KUKI TRIBES

- In 1870, Captain T.H. Lewin, the Deputy Commissioner of the Chittagong Hill Tracts at the time, described the Kukis as a "powerful and independent" people who "touch the borders" of the Hill Tracts.
- "They extended in numberless hordes North and Northeast until they reach Cachar (Assam) on one hand and the frontiers of Burma on the other,"
- Other accounts of Kuki origins also describe the Kukis as groups inhabiting "both sides of the mountains dividing Assam & Bengal from Burma".
- The records point to the traditional Kuki patterns of moving through large tracts of land as land ownership was passed on only to the eldest son of

the village chief, leading to expansion, dispersion, and formation of new pastures by other men in the family.

- The Kukis are an ethnic group including multiple tribes originally inhabiting the Northeastern States of India, including Manipur, Mizoram and Assam; parts of Burma (now Myanmar), and Sylhet district and Chittagong hill tracts of Bangladesh.
- A look at the ethnic background of the Kukis reveals that the Kuki-Zomi-Mizo-Chin people migrated from inner Asia or mainland China. Interestingly, multiple Anthropologists, including Edmund Leach, trace to China, the origins of the other two prominent communities in Manipur (Nagas and Meiteis), both having had their share of conflicts with the Kukis.
- Yet today, with sharpened ethnic differences, all three prominent groups in the State are vying for exclusivity, land, and political representation.
- This can in part be traced back to the fact that the concretisation of tribal identities and nomenclatures in the region happened during the time of the British, who did so for administrative convenience and to fit groups into the distinctions of “civilised” and “uncivilised”.
- Notably, Kuki is not a term coined by the ethnic group itself, the tribes associated with it came to be generically called Kuki under the colonial rule, and were further divided by the British into ‘old Kukis’ and ‘new Kukis’.

SETTLEMENT PATTERN

- Over time, the ethnic communities forged through generations adopted their own, often conflicting, patterns of settlement, livelihoods, and land ownership — with the Nagas engaging in territorial agriculture in the hills, the Kukis engaging in shifting or Jhum cultivation resulting in their expansion through the forested tracts, and the Meiteis choosing to live in the cultivated valley area.
- Meiteis and Nagas have also objected to the intermingling of Kuki settlements in areas dominated by them. The communal conflicts in Manipur in the instances of ethnic cleansing and driving out of communities from regions predominantly inhabited by the other.
- The recent conflict saw Kukis being driven out of parts of the Imphal valley, while Meities were forced to leave the tribal-dominated Churachandpur district.
- The Kukis & their strong kinship patterns have often resulted in the tribe giving shelter to their extended kin from the other side of the border as seen this time in the case of Myanmar Kukis entering the State in the wake of the junta takeover of 2021.
- Given rise to claims by the State government that Kuki-Zomis are illegal immigrants and outsiders.

This coincided with the increasing integration and assertion of the Hindu nationalist identity by the Meiteis, also seen as partly backed by the ruling administration.

- The divide between the hills & the valley region of Manipur. The State is like a football stadium with the Imphal Valley representing the playfield at the centre and the surrounding hills.
- While most of the Meiteis are Hindu or Sanamahi and a minority is Muslim, the Naga and Kuki-Zomi clans mostly follow Christianity.
- Those living in hilly regions have relatively poor access to basic facilities, are poorly represented in public sector jobs, and very few of them work in industries and don’t earn a sufficient income from tourism. Meanwhile, the Meiteis, who are strapped for land in the valley want the right to buy land in the hills just like tribes can do in the valley.

HILL- VALLEY DIVIDE

- The better educated, Manipuri-speaking urban dwellers, comprising mainly Hindus and a significant share of Muslims, live in the State’s valley, which is not covered by forests. They have better access to good quality drinking water, clean cooking fuel, and hospitals.
- The population in the valley dominates public sector jobs, and the economy of the region is propped up by tourists, who, for the most part, stay in the valley. A higher share of industries, which provide better employment opportunities, can also be found in the valley
- On the other, the relatively less educated tribal people live in the rural areas. A majority of them speak the Tangkhul, Thado, Kabui or the Mao language. Close to 90% of them are Christians.
- They live in hilly regions, which are covered mostly by forests and have relatively poor access to basic facilities. This population is poorly represented in public sector jobs. Very few of them work in industries and don’t earn a sufficient income from tourism.
- The population with Manipuri as its mother tongue dominates the valley districts — Imphal West, Imphal East, Thoubal and Bishnupur — and forms 85-99% of each district’s population.
- On the other hand, in the hill districts — Senapati, Churachandpur, Ukhrul, Chandel and Tamenglong — the Manipuri-speaking population is less than 4%.
- Tangkhul in Ukhrul district, Mao in Senapati district, Kabui in Tamenglong district, and Thado across most hill districts are the dominant mother tongues.

| Type | District | Religion (2011) | | | Dominant mother tongue (2011) | | | | Rural population (2011) | Forest cover (2019) | ST share (2011) |
|--------|---------------|-----------------|-----------|--------|-------------------------------|-------|----------|-------|-------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| | | Hindu | Christian | Muslim | Tangkhol | Thado | Manipuri | Mao | | | |
| Hill | Senapati | 9.1% | 89.1% | 0.3% | 2.4% | 17.1% | 0.4% | 46.5% | 98.4% | 65.3% | 87.5% |
| Hill | Churachandpur | 4.4% | 93.0% | 1.1% | 0.2% | 27.1% | 2.9% | 0.0% | 93.3% | 85.8% | 92.9% |
| Hill | Ukhrul | 4.1% | 94.6% | 0.6% | 88.9% | 3.3% | 0.4% | 0.0% | 85.2% | 80.7% | 94.4% |
| Hill | Chandel | 7.5% | 89.5% | 2.1% | 0.9% | 30.3% | 3.2% | 0.0% | 88.3% | 86.4% | 89.0% |
| Hill | Tamenglong | 2.1% | 95.8% | 0.4% | 0.0% | 3.3% | 0.2% | 0.4% | 86.2% | 87.6% | 95.7% |
| Valley | Imphal West | 74.8% | 4.5% | 4.7% | 0.3% | 0.4% | 90.9% | 0.1% | 37.7% | 10.0% | 4.7% |
| Valley | Imphal East | 60.3% | 6.0% | 17.6% | 0.9% | 0.6% | 85.2% | 0.1% | 59.8% | 38.7% | 6.1% |
| Valley | Thoubal | 63.3% | 1.0% | 25.4% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 98.7% | 0.0% | 64.2% | 13.8% | 0.4% |
| Valley | Bishnupur | 73.8% | 1.8% | 7.9% | 0.0% | 0.2% | 97.6% | 0.0% | 63.1% | 4.3% | 1.4% |

- In the hill districts, 89-96% of the population is Christian, while in the valley their share is marginal. In the valley, 60-75% is Hindu, with the Imphal East and Thoubal districts having a significantly high Muslim population.
- The grievance of the hill tribal people that according to ST status to the Meiteis will eat into their share of reservation seems to be borne out by data
- People from the hills held 35% of public sector jobs while they formed close to 43% of the population, whereas those from the valley held about 65% of such jobs. Also, close to 90% of foreign and 75% of domestic tourists restrict themselves to the valley.
- In the valley, 73-90% of households had access to better quality water compared to 51-69% in the hill districts. In the valley, 70-90% of households had access to clean cooking fuel, compared to 23-62% in the hills. In the valley, 67-76% of births were institutional, compared to 39-67% in the hills.
- Chief Justice Chandrachud orally said a High Court does not have the power to direct changes in the Scheduled Tribes List. "It is a Presidential power to designate a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe," the Chief Justice observed.
- Article 342(1) of the Constitution is clear. The power is entirely that of the President.
- It is not open to State governments or courts or tribunals or any other authority to modify, amend or alter the list of Scheduled Tribes specified in the notification issued under clause (1) of Article 342," the Constitution Bench in State of Maharashtra versus Milind had held in November 2000.
- The Constitution Bench had held that a notification issued under clause (1) of Article 342, specifying Scheduled Tribes, can be amended only by law to be made by Parliament.
- In other words, any tribe or tribal community or part of or group within any tribe can be included or excluded from the list of Scheduled Tribes issued under clause (1) of Article 342 only by Parliament by law and by no other authority," the five-judge Bench had laid down the law.
- The Scheduled Tribes Order must be read as it is. It is not even permissible to say that a tribe, sub-tribe, part of or group of any tribe or tribal community is synonymous to the one mentioned in the Scheduled Tribes Order if they are not so specifically mentioned in it," the Constitution Bench had drawn the line.