

## **Manipur Conflict: Genesis- Reasons- Suffering- Healing**

- 1. How and why the distancing of communities started and its consequences now**
  - a. Manipur is an ancient kingdom which merged with Dominion of India in 1949. The fertile alluvial central valley is inhabited by the Meitei, while the surrounding forested hills are inhabited by tribes broadly categorized as Naga and Kuki conglomerates. They have been living peacefully from time immemorial.
  - b. The Meitei community is predominantly followers of Hinduism and indigenous Sanamahi faith even though there is a sizeable Muslim and Christian population too. Whereas the Nagas and Kukis are mostly Christian.
  - c. Eight valley based armed groups are banned under the UAPA for their demand for restoration of Manipur's independence. The Naga groups are in a ceasefire agreement with the Government since the 1990s and awaiting a final solution having worked out a framework agreement. Whereas the armed Kuki groups, who cooperated with the central forces in containing the Naga and Meitei insurgencies, are also having a Suspension of Operation agreement since 2005 and have started a political dialogue for devolution of more power and autonomy with the Government ever since the BJP came to power in Manipur in 2017.
  - d. A section of the Meitei is demanding inclusion of Meitei in the Schedule Tribe (ST) list of the Constitution. This is opposed by the Nagas and Kuki, who are already in the ST list, fearing the loss of their share in the government jobs, doing away with the prohibition of Meitei from acquiring land in the hills and sharing the other perks, privilege and protections they enjoy as an enlisted tribal community.
  - e. Meiteis and Naga claimed that they are indigenous people of Manipur whereas Kuki are "illegal immigration" from Myanmar who are constantly expanding their settlements in their ancestral domain. The open and unadministered Indo-Myanmar border with trans-border population where Free Movement Regime has been in operation is held responsible for this "democratic aggression" by the authority.
  - f. The sudden explosion in the volume of the narcotic trade and the large scale poppy cultivation in the hills, mostly in the Kuki inhabited areas, exacerbated the conflict. It is estimated that the narco economy is almost double the official annual budget of Manipur.
  - g. On May 3, the Tribal Solidarity March held by the All Tribal Students' Union, Manipur triggered a violent clash in Churanchandpur. It spiraled out into targeted attacks, displacements, destruction of homes and religious sites and institutions. Meitei settlements in the Kuki area are razed to ground and Kuki population in the valley are attacked and cleansed.
  - h. The presence of organised armed groups on both sides and large scale "looting" of arms from the police armouries by these groups and the possible supply of arms from across the border rapidly escalated the violence to the scale of a "civil war-like" situation. Spread of inflammatory messages and misinformation on social media constantly demonizing the other community as the aggressor added more fuel to fire.

- i. The communities are now segregated. Kukis in the hills cannot come to the valley and Meities cannot go to the hills. Villages once featuring both communities are now fragmented.
- j. The inability or unwillingness of the state government and the central govt to contain the violence or to de-escalate the tension through mediation or to find any effective response to the conflict only prolonged and worsened the situation.

## **2. Sufferings of the people since May 2023**

- a. At least 258 persons are killed, 4786 houses were set on fire and 386 religious structures are vandalised, some 60,000 Internally Displaced Persons are suffering in camps in the hills and valley for the last 19 months.
- b. The local economy is brought to a grinding halt. The key economic sectors of agriculture, trade and tourism have badly suffered due to insecurity and lack of cooperation. Inflation is highest in India. The Highways which are the only life-line to bring in supplies from the rest of India are constantly blocked and disturbed.
- c. Education is badly disrupted for the children in IDP camps, for those recruited to join their village protection forces, for those who cannot access internet due to the constant internet ban and also for those living in constant fear and constantly fed by hatred and “war propaganda”.
- d. Hatred and brutality have left a deep scar. The collective trauma and the deep social polarization will take a long time to heal and mend.

## **3. Initiatives for Support and Healing**

- a. Help build a peace building narrative where the pain and suffering on both sides of the conflict are heard, respected and acted upon; where the demonizations and hatred of the other side is replaced by compassion and understanding of the other side.
- b. Call for immediate de-escalation and cessation of violence. Violence is not the solution of any of the grievances. We all need to realize that what is possible through non-violence is not possible through violence.
- c. The IDPs relief and rehabilitation of families needs to be at the centre of all the humanitarian response, including their mental health.
- d. Robust and inclusive peacebuilding initiatives should be rolled out for Manipur involving the victims, the community leaders, political leaders and the armed groups to reimagine a new Manipur where each and every community, big or small, of all the religion or ethnicity can live harmoniously with dignity and prosper together.