



## **Manipur Ethnic Conflict: Causes, Trajectory and Way Forward** **Uday Chakraborty**

*Independent Researcher, West Bengal, India*

Received: 11.03.2026; Accepted: 13.03.2026; Available online: 31.03.2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Scholar Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

### **Abstract**

*In Recent Years, Ethnic Conflicts have emerged as a central concern in both academic discourse and policy debates, reflecting their growing intensity and complexity across diverse regions. India has also seen such a conflict in the recent past, namely the Kuki–Meitei conflict in Manipur. This Paper seeks to analyze the major causes of the conflict, such as the Demand for ST status by the Meitei community, the cleansing of unjust encroachment, and it attempts to focus deeply on the subsided matter of illegal drug trafficking and its contribution to the conflict. The Paper also discusses the possible solutions, including inclusive dialogue, alternative strategies, and the need for economic rebuilding and reconstruction for a sustainable future in India's North-Eastern Region. All the information used in this paper are based on the data available up to 2024.*

**Keywords:** - Conflict, Ethnicity, Identity Crisis, Kuki–Meitei, Manipur.

### **Introduction:**

Nations are often divided by ethnicity. And Ethnicity in itself is a mystery. The term originated from the Greek word Ethnos, meaning people, nation, tribe. Sociologist Max Weber in his book Economy and Society defined Ethnicity as “Those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of their physical type or customs or both”. In common parlance, Ethnicity is defined as a large group of people with shared culture, history, tradition, etc. India is home to a wide variety of ethnic diversity, with a number of 2000 to 3000 distinct ethnic groups. And this statement is well reflected if we look at the North-Eastern Region of India. Manipur a state of North East

India is also home to a couple of ethnic groups but the dominant ethnic groups are the Meitei, the Kuki and the Nagas and they are engaged in constant ethnic conflict with each other the reason of the ethnic conflict are many and varied ranging from competition of resources, identity, self-autonomy and self-determination etc. This paper seeks to examine the recent Kuki-Meitei conflict, focusing on the demand for ST status, unlawful encroachment, and illicit drug trafficking, while also exploring potential pathways for resolution.

### **History Of Kuki - Meitei in Manipur:**

Manipur is called the “Jewel of India “or the “Land of Jewels, but today this jewel is threatened by an ethnic conflict between the two communities, the Kuki and the Meitei. Understanding the cause of the conflict would require revisiting the complex history and

the demographic changes that took place along the course of history in Manipur. The “Chetharol Kukamba” - The Court Chronicle of Manipur (written in 33 CE) talks about the Ancient Meitei Monarchs; they were polytheistic and followed the religion of Sanamahism (First Post, 2023). During this period, there was another tribe that lived in the hills called the Nagas, and from time to time, they used to raid the Meitei. Moving forward in time, Raja Jaisingh of Manipur signed an agreement with the British in 1762. He needed British help to defend against Myanmar and also to counter the Naga raids; therefore, they resettled the tribals from the Kuki Chin Hills of Myanmar in the foothills of Manipur (FirstPost,2023). Thus, completing the triad, Meitei, Nagas, and Kukis. Today Meitei comprises of 51 % of the population but resides only in the 10% of the land, and the Kukis and Nagas comprises of 40% of the population but resides in the 90% of the land, and there is perceived illegal migration which not only caused demographic changes but also has led to the belief that Meitei’s culture was threatened and it ultimately culminated into the ST demand by the Meitei Community (Rathore, 2023)

### **Meitei Community and Their Demand Over St Status:**

ST stands for Schedule Tribes. Scheduled Tribes (STs) are communities recognized in Article 342 of the Indian Constitution as socially and economically disadvantaged. The President, in consultation with state Governors, declares STs for each state individually. Though the Constitution doesn't define them, STs are identified based on primitive traits, cultural distinctiveness, geographical isolation, and social backwardness (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013). They are entitled to reservations in education, jobs, and political participation under Articles 15(4), 16(4), 46, 330, and 332 Historically, the Meiteis were said to possess tribal characteristics before the introduction of Hinduism and political reclassification following the integration of Manipur into India in 1949. Presently, the Meitei community is pressing for ST status due to spatial limitations, cultural preservation, economic security, and upliftment. The legitimacy of the ST demand is quite contested. The Registrar General of India stated that the Meitei community does not appear to possess the tribal characteristics required under Article 342” These criteria include geographical isolation, distinct culture, primitive traits, and economic backwardness. The Manipur State Government rejected the claim in 2001 by stating that they already possess an OBC Status and don't qualify under ST. Again, their claim over ST status was denied in 2013 and 2019 respectively. Scholars like Baruah (2020) and Xaxa (2005) highlight the Meiteis are the ' dominant demographic and political group and they argue that granting ST status to a socially and educationally advanced group could undermine affirmative action meant for genuinely marginalized tribes. The legitimacy of the claim of Meitei being included comes from the fact that their exclusion was a colonial and post-colonial oversight and they have own distinct religion script and culture which needs to be protected. A close observation would highlight that there was a considerable denial of Meitei ‘s claim over ST status, but the demand became sought of a reality over the incorrect interpretation of the judgments of the Manipur High Court. The High Court had instructed the Manipur State Government to consider the inclusion of Meitei in the list of Schedule Tribes on March 27, 2023. This direction was one of the main triggers of the ongoing conflict between the Kuki and Meitei. The Kuki, fraction opposed this decision by stating that Meitei’s are already granted the Scheduled Caste status and Other Backward Class status and by granting them ST status would give them unfair

advantage over the job opportunities and others facilities (Bag,2023). This was not the only trigger of the conflict; the other reasons were as follows

### **Unjust Encroachment and Eviction:**

Encroachment means setting or using land without legal permission, especially in protected areas like forests. In Manipur, tensions escalated when the state government, in 2022, cancelled earlier permissions granted to 38 tribal villages – mostly Kuki-Zo inhabited – within the Churachandpur- Khoupum Protected Forest, suddenly labeling them as illegal encroachments. This move led to eviction drives, including the demolition of K. Songjang village in February 2023, which the government claimed was illegally built. The evictions were carried out without consulting the Hill Areas Committee, ignoring constitutional provisions under Article 371(C) meant to protect tribal interests. The Kukis saw this as an attack on their ancestral rights. These actions were viewed as attempts to displace the Kukis, whom some state groups branded as outsiders or drug peddlers.

### **The Fight Against Drug Trade:**

In the year 2018, Chief Minister of Manipur N. Biren Singh launched his campaign “War on Drugs. His major objective was to stop the poppy cultivation, which took place along the international borders of Myanmar. The Opium Poppy belongs to the family of Papaveraceae and is an annual medicinal herb. It contains many alkaloids that are frequently used as analgesics, anti-tussives, and anti-spasmodics in modern medicine. (Cbn, nd) The latex (a white milky substance) is harvested and often sold in the International Market as narcotics. India is the only country which is authorized by the United Nations Convention of Narcotics Drugs to produce Gum Opium, but it is highly regulated for instance only 3 states are permitted to produce opium poppy these are Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh and that too it can be cultivated only in the selected tracts and the licensed farmers could cultivate it. (Cbn, nd). In Manipur, though the poppy cultivation is illegal, it is usually done in the economically deprived households as it provides off-farming season employment where a cultivator can earn Rs 300- Rs 400 per day, which is a decent amount of income in Rural Manipur. It also works as a substitute for the payment problems of MGNREGA job card holders (Kipgen, 2019). According to a survey conducted by Ngamjahao Kipgen in the three hill districts (Kangpokpi, Churachandpur, and Tengnoupal), including a total of 60 households in 2019, the survey found that poverty, joblessness, and lack of other income sources accounted for 56.9% of responses. Around 20.9% said they needed money for their children’s education, while 10.8% were driven by the desire to afford material goods like phones or motorcycles. Another 10.5% turned to poppy farming to repay existing debts. Another set of reasons for poppy cultivation is that it can be cultivated anywhere, and it has an assured market with low transportation costs; therefore, the economically poor families rely on poppy cultivation.

It is not only the legal issue of Poppy Cultivation in India, but it also has grievous security imperatives as well. Manipur lies in close proximity to the famous “Golden Triangle” comprising Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Yunnan Province of China; it is the world's second largest source of opium cultivation. Manipur became an alternative route in the 1970s and 1980s. Heroin from Myanmar is transported from the town of Thampu (located in Myanmar) to the border region of Mo reh (located in Manipur) (Singh & Nunnes,2013). Subir Bhowmick points out that there are threefold threat increased by the illicit drug trafficking in the northeastern region one the increase in the local consumption has risen the HIV cases,

two the assured quick money not only has lured locals in the region but also the bureaucrats, politicians and paramilitary officials and three many ethnic separatist takes the protection of the drug cartels and also uses it as a mechanism to raise quick fund to fuel their separatist tendencies as well. Illicit drugs are also transferred by these routes from Manipur to Myanmar as well. For instance, in 2019, a heroin lab was busted in Kangkokpi with 41 kg of heroin worth 165.172 crore. Three of the six drug labs destroyed in 2019 were in the Thoubal district. Between 2020 and 2022, security forces busted four more labs in the Thoubal district of Manipur (Banarjee,2024). Besides health imperatives, the major security concern of drug trafficking is that the same routes which are used to transport drugs are used in the transportation of arms and ammunition, and terrorists as well.

Chief Minister N Biren Singh's "War on Drugs" targeted this illicit poppy cultivation. Singh said that in 2021-2022, a total area of 28,598.91 acres of illegal poppy cultivation was detected in the state, and it was reduced to 11,288.07 acres in 2023-2024. And this was another reason fueling the Kuki Meitei Conflict in 2023 (Ngangom,2024). This move by the state government was perceived as a move against the Kuki Community in Manipur.

### **Unfolding of The Conflict:**

The riot broke out on May 3rd, 2023, after a rally of the All-India Students' Union got violent at the Torbung area of Churachandpur District. The rally was held to protest the inclusion of the Meitei Community in the ST list. The Violence escalated from burning of the Anglo-Kuki War Memorial to destroying homes, displacing 5000 people within 48 hours, and in 2 months, the number of displaced people reached 60,000, and the death toll reached 70, and a considerable amount of infrastructure was reduced to ashes (Oinam & Lhaskyabs, 2024). The fueling of the conflict was done by fake news and misinformation. Additionally, there was also the looting of weapons from the Police and State armouries. Though there were no official records of the number of weapons stolen, a certain publicly available FIR of Manipur Police Training College states that 157 Insas rifles, 54 SLRs, 34 9mm carbines, 22 Insas LMGs, 9mm pistols, several magazines, AK-47s, and .303 rifles were stolen (Kaur,2023). Seeing the scale of the conflict, the Governor Anusuiya Uikey issued an order on Thursday authorizing magistrates to shoot protesters "in extreme cases where warnings and reasonable force don't work". (Aljazeera ,2023). 55 Columns of the Assam Rifles and the Indian Army were deployed in the region by 4th May 2023, and to further control the situation, the Internet was banned in many areas, along with the imposition of Article 355 of the Indian Constitution. By the end of May 2023, the union home minister visited Manipur for 3 days and called for a 51-member peace committee, but both the Kukis and the Meiteis refused to join. In August, as a constructive measure the Union government decided to suspend the Free Movement Regime along with India and Myanmar and also to put up a fence over the Indo Myanmar border however the Meitei welcomed the decision on the condition that no amount of land should be lost but the Kuki and Nagas opposed it (The Print,2024). Despite Several diplomatic actions and both the state and central police force deployed there, they failed to reach an amicable solution, and the conflict continued throughout 2023.

Throughout the Year 2024, there was violence and diplomatic efforts, and it was not until 2025 that President's Rule was imposed on Manipur. The President Rule was the need of the hour, and it was also observed in a conflict between tribal peoples. Sophisticated modern weapons were used, such as drones and RPG Rocket launchers, suggesting that foreign aid

to the conflict was provided, so an iron hand was required to restore law and order in the state. But the conflict continues, and a solution needs to be reached.

### **The Probable Solutions of Kuki-Meitei Conflict**

According to a Press Release by the union home minister, more than 170 people were killed in the conflict, with 70 percent of deaths occurring in the first 15 days. And 60,000 people were displaced in the present-day conflict. An amicable and sustainable solution is the need of the hour because the conflict in the state tarnishes our international reputation, puts a question mark in our governance system, and it gives an opportunity to the hostile neighboring countries to launch an attack on us. Some of the potential solutions: -

- According to a piece written by Dr RK Nimai, a retired IAS, the probable solution is to give ST status to the Meitei Community as they fulfil all the criteria laid by the Lokur Committee. He also stated that the fear of the existing ST communities would be minimized if a sub-quota formula is introduced when the question is for reservation in jobs, education, etc (Shimray, 2023).
- Although the Satellite Image from the Manipur Remote Sensing Application Centre shows that there has been a considerable decrease in the illicit opium poppy cultivation. But forced reduction is not an answer. We need a sustainable substitute for the poppy, which is less dangerous. Kiwi, Passion Fruit, Turmeric, and Ginger are a few substitutes for poppy. Peh Village in Urkul District has already destroyed its poppy cultivation and taken up alternatives like maize and ginger (Sharma, 2022)
- To tackle the problem of illegal immigrants and unlawful encroachments, the government of Manipur has launched document verification, eviction drives, and detained or deported hundreds of illegal immigrants. And times without number, the government has denied it to be against one particular community.
- According to Manipur Vision 2030, which is a part of the government's North East Vision 2030. The Central Government is planning for economic development in the region by developing inclusive, sustainable, region-specific strategies aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. It also aims to shift the focus from an agriculturally dominant economy to a more service-based economy with a focus on MSMEs, especially through cluster-based development of local products like bamboo, spices, and handicrafts, and employment generation through skill development and public-private employment.

### **Conclusion:**

The Conflict had been waging for way too long and it stands in direct contradiction with the democratic ethos of India. Though after the revocation of Manipur High Court judgment and the imposition of President Rule the situation had subsided little but it is not a permanent solution because after more than 2 years people are still in relief camps and they need to be restored to their original place. And the delay of ST Status to the Meitei

Community along with the continuation of illicit drug trafficking is also not judicious. The above stated potential way forwards could be the initial steps along with that we need a renewed focus on economic rebuilding and revival of sustainable future in the North East Region of India

## **References:**

1. Aljazeera. (2023, May 4). "Shoot-at-sight" orders issued after violence in India's Manipur. Al Jazeera.  
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/4/shoot-at-sight-orders-issued-after-violence-in-indias-manipur>
2. Bag, A. (2023, May 19). Violence over ST Status. Economic and Political Weekly, 58 (20). <https://www.epw.in/journal/2023/20/letters/violence-over-st-status.html>
3. Banerjee, S. (2024). From Poppy Fields to Black Markets: Understanding the Drug Trade Across India and Myanmar. Orfonline.org.  
<https://doi.org/1004110142.jpg?1731967127>
4. CBN. (2013). Overview, Opium Cultivation. Cbn.nic.in.  
<http://cbn.nic.in/en/opium/overview/>
5. Firstpost. (2023, July 1). Why Manipur's History is Crucial to Understand its Conflict | Flashback with Palki Sharma. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLYXuJ-VnI0>
6. Kaur, B. (2023, June 19). Manipur: FIRs Show the Type and Quantity of Weapons Taken from Police Armouries - The Wire. The Wire.  
<https://thewire.in/security/manipur-looted-weaponry-yet-to-return-to-police-armouries-cm-appeals-afresh-for-surrender>