

Meitei-Kuki Conflict and Its Impact on the Internally Displaced Persons of the Kukis (IDPK) and a Way to Peace: An Explanatory Investigation

Dr. Jangkholum Mate

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Churachandpur College, Manipur

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the causes of Meitei-Kuki conflict and the impact of the conflict on the Kuki IDPs. The scope of the study included all the Kuki IDPs of Manipur. The sample of the study included 25 persons who were selected using purposive sampling technique. The sample was composed of persons who were knowledgeable and had first hand experiences during conflict. An interview schedule was administered to the sample for collecting primary data. Secondary data, mainly consisted of research articles, were collected using Desk research method or documentary survey/review methods. The study used qualitative methods to analyse the collected data. The main finding is (1) the main causes of the conflict were land and geographical divide, ST status dispute, power monopolization, Unfounded Fear Psychosis over immigration, etc. (2) The conflict impacted all aspects of life, including resources, health, education, economics, etc.

Keyword: Meitei, Kuki, Conflict, IDP,

1. Introduction

Manipur, a picturesque frontier state in Northeast India, is a land of distinct geographical and cultural contrasts. Known as the "Jewel of India," its unique terrain features a fertile central valley entirely encircled by rugged, pine-covered hills. This geographic divide mirrors its rich demographic tapestry, being home to the valley-dwelling Meitei community and the diverse Naga and Kuki tribal groups inhabiting the highlands. Celebrated globally as the birthplace of modern polo and the habitat of the endangered Sangai "dancing deer" on the world's only floating national park, Manipur balances a deeply rooted cultural heritage—famous for its classical dance and handloom weaving—with a reputation as India's premier sporting powerhouse.

The demographic structure of Manipur is defined by a distinct separation between its central valley and the surrounding hills. This geographical division directly reflects the state's ethnic, religious, and population distribution.

1.1. The Valley vs. Hills Divide

The starkest demographic feature of Manipur is the inverse relationship between land area and population density:

Table 1: Showing demographic feature of Manipur

Region	Land Area %	Population %	Key Inhabitants	Density
Imphal Valley	10%	57.2% to 58.9%	Meitei, Meitei Pangals (Muslims)	Very High (629 people/km ²)
Surrounding Hills	90%	41.1% to 42.8%	Naga Tribes, Kuki Tribes	Very Low (60 people/km ²)

1.2. Major Ethnic Communities

Manipur's overall population of roughly 2.85 million (per the baseline Census) is broadly distributed among three main ethnic umbrellas:

- The Meiteis: Representing about 53% of the state's total population, they are the largest and dominant ethnic group. They primarily inhabit the fertile Imphal Valley and speak Meiteilon (Manipuri).
- The Naga Tribes: Making up around 20% of the population, they live predominantly in the northern hill districts (such as Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong, and Kamjong). Prominent tribes include the Tangkhul, Poumai, Mao, and Rongmei.
- The Kuki Tribes: Accounting for roughly 16% of the population, they predominantly inhabit the southern hill districts (such as Churachandpur, Pherzawl, and Kangpokpi). Major tribes under this group include the Thadou, Paite, Hmar, and Zou.

- Meitei Pangals: Making up about 8.4% of the population, they are Manipuri Muslims who live alongside the Meitei community in the valley regions.

1.3. Background of the conflict

The protracted Meitei-Kuki conflict, which erupted in May 2023, has resulted in over 260 deaths and the displacement of roughly 60,000 people. Tens of thousands of Kuki-Zo Internally Displaced Persons (IDPK) face severe humanitarian crises, restricted living conditions in relief camps, loss of property, and an arduous journey toward sustainable peace and rehabilitation.

On 3 May 2023, ethnic violence erupted in India's north-eastern state of Manipur between the Meitei people, a majority that lives in the Imphal Valley, and the Kuki tribal community from the surrounding hills. According to government figures, as of 22 November 2024, 258 people have been killed in the violence and 60,000 people have been displaced. Earlier figures also mentioned over 1,000 injured, and 32 missing. 4,786 houses were burnt and 386 religious structures were vandalised, including temples and churches. Unofficial figures are higher.

The proximate cause of the violence was a row over an affirmative action measure. On 14 April 2023, the Manipur High Court passed an order that seemingly recommended a Scheduled Tribe status for the dominant Meitei community, a decision later criticised by the Supreme Court. On 3 May, the tribal communities held protest rallies against the Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe status, while the Meitei community held counter-rallies and counter-blockades. After one of these rallies, clashes broke out between Kuki and Meitei groups near the mutual border of the Churachandpur and Bishnupur districts, followed by house burning.

Once initiated, the violence quickly spread to the Kuki-dominated Churachandpur town and the Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley, targeting the minority community in each area. While the Kukis limited themselves to house-burning, the Meitei mobs in the valley, mobilising in thousands, engaged in wanton killing of Kuki civilians living amongst them, including students, officials, soldiers and even legislators. According to Reuters, 77 Kukis and 10 Meiteis died within the first week.

On 18 May, the 10 elected legislators belonging to the Kuki community unanimously demanded a separate administration for Kukis, claiming that the Kukis could no longer live amongst the Meiteis. A month later, the influential Meitei civil body COCOMI declared a "Manipuri national war" against "Chin-Kuki narco-terrorists", essentially pitting the two communities against each other. By this time, the situation had already taken the shape of a civil war with both the communities arming themselves, some with licensed guns and some with advanced weapons, and setting up bunkers to defend themselves. Meitei militias led mobs of civilians to raid state police armouries and loot sophisticated arms matching those of Kukis, whose militant groups

were presumed to supply arms to civilians. By October, 6,000 arms and 600,000 rounds of ammunition were said to have been looted, in addition to mortars, grenades, bullet-proof vests, police uniforms etc.

2. Objectives

1. To study the causes of the Meitei-Kuki conflict.
2. To investigate the impact of the Meitei-Kuki conflict on the Internally Displaced Persons belonging to the Kuki tribes.
3. To recommend measures for restoring normalcy and peace.

3. Research questions

1. What were the causes of the Meitei-Kuki conflict?
2. What was the impact of the Meitei-Kuki conflict on the Internally Displaced Persons belonging to the Kuki tribes?
3. What measures can be taken up to restore normalcy and sustainable peace?

4. Methodology

4.1. Universe of the study

The universe of the study included all Kuki IDPs of the Meitei-Kuki conflict from Imphal West, Imphal East, Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, Chandel and Tengnoupal districts.

4.2. Sample

25 samples of people who were selected using purposive sampling technique. The sample consisted of individuals who were knowledgeable and had first hand experiences during conflict.

4.3. Tools

A self-developed interview schedule was used for obtaining primary data. Secondary data were collected using Desk research method or documentary survey/review methods

4.4. Analysis

The study used qualitative methods were used to analyse the interview responses (evaluating interview responses, text, meaning, or themes) to answer the research questions of the study.

5. Results:

5.1. Research question 1: What were the causes of the Meitei-Kuki conflict?

The conflict between the Meitei and Kuki communities is driven by five deeply intertwined historical, geographical, and political factors:

5.1.1 The Land and Geography Divide

- **The Valley:** The Imphal Valley accounts for just 10% of Manipur's land but holds roughly 60% of the population, mostly Meiteis.
- **The Hills:** The surrounding hills make up 90% of the land but house only 40% of the population, primarily Kuki and Naga tribes.
- **The Law:** Constitutional provisions protect the hills. Non-tribals (including Meiteis) are legally barred from buying land there.
- **The Friction:** Meiteis feel confined by population pressure in the valley. Kukis view any attempt to alter these laws as an existential threat to their ancestral land.

5.1.2. The Scheduled Tribe (ST) Status Dispute

- **The Trigger:** The immediate catalyst for the violence was a court directive to consider giving the Meitei community ST status.
- **Meitei Argument:** They argue they need ST status to preserve their culture, secure jobs, and gain the right to buy land in the hills.
- **Kuki Argument:** Kuki communities fear that granting ST status to the wealthy, politically dominant Meiteis will allow them to buy up hill lands and take over reserved government jobs and university seats.

5.1.3. Political Imbalance

- **Assembly Seats:** Out of 60 seats in the Manipur Legislative Assembly, 40 are allocated to the Meitei-dominated valley and only 20 to the tribal hills.
- **Power Monopolization:** Tribal groups perceived themselves politically marginalized, arguing that state funds and infrastructure projects are heavily concentrated in the valley while the hills are systematically neglected.

5.1.4. Unfounded Fear Psychosis over the “Demographics and Illegal Immigration”

- **The Myanmar Influx:** Following the 2021 military coup in neighbouring Myanmar, thousands of Chin refugees crossed into Manipur. They share close ethnic and cultural ties with the Kuki.
- **Meitei Fears:** The Meitei community fears this influx is permanently altering the state's demography and diluting their political power.
- **Kuki Position:** Kukis argue that the state government uses the influx as a pretext for "ethnic profiling," falsely labelling indigenous Kuki citizens as illegal immigrants.

5.1.5. Government Policies ("War on Drugs" and Forest Evictions)

- **The Crackdown:** The state government launched a major crackdown on illegal poppy cultivation and cleared settlements in protected state forests.
- **The Backlash:** Because many of these forest areas and poppy fields were located in Kuki-dominated hills, the Kuki community perceived the evictions and anti-drug campaigns as a targeted, state-sponsored attack on their livelihood and villages.

5.2. Research question 2: What was the impact of the Meitei-Kuki conflict on the Internally Displaced Persons belonging to the Kuki tribes?

Impact on Internally Displaced Persons belonging to the Kukis

The ethnic violence in Manipur has created a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, with Kuki-Zo communities bearing a massive share of the displacement. Over 41,000 Kuki Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are living in highly precarious conditions across makeshift camps in the hill districts (like Churachandpur and Kangpokpi) or have fled to neighboring states like Mizoram, Nagaland, and Assam.

The prolonged displacement has severely impacted Kuki IDPs across multiple critical dimensions:

5.2.1. Severe Infrastructure and Resource Deficits

- **Substandard Housing:** Most Kuki IDPs reside in makeshift camps set up in churches, schools, and community halls. These spaces lack proper insulation, privacy, and basic comfort.
- **Poor Sanitation:** Camps suffer from overcrowding and highly inadequate, gender-insensitive sanitation facilities. This significantly increases the risk of waterborne disease outbreaks.

- **Aid Dependence:** Displaced families rely entirely on erratic government food rations, unpredictable cash transfers, and community-driven philanthropic support. The irregularity of aid creates a constant state of insecurity for families.

5.2.2. The Health and Medical Crisis

- **Geographical Isolation:** Because the capital city of Imphal (the valley) is entirely segregated from Kuki-dominated areas, Kuki IDPs have zero access to major state healthcare infrastructure and tertiary hospitals.
- **Fragile Lifelines:** The hills rely on long, unpaved supply routes. These routes regularly experience blockades or become entirely impassable during the monsoon season, cutting off life-saving medical supplies.

5.2.3. Severe Mental Health Trauma

- **High PTSD Rates:** Cross-sectional psychological studies reveal that over 65% of the displaced population suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), alongside high rates of severe anxiety and depression.
- **Witnessed Atrocities:** This trauma is driven by the fact that many IDPs personally witnessed the burning of their homes, the destruction of village churches, and the brutal killings of family members before fleeing.

5.2.4. Complete Loss of Livelihood and Education

- **Economic Collapse:** Kuki IDPs have been completely cut off from their agricultural lands, businesses, and government jobs. Armed non-state actors and buffer zone security restrictions prevent them from farming or accessing local markets.
- **Disrupted Futures:** Thousands of displaced Kuki children have lost access to formal education. While some small-scale NGO weaving or craft programs offer minor daily wages to adults, they are insufficient to sustain households.

5.2.5. Deep Geopolitical Division and the Demand for Separation

- **Permanent Segregation:** Buffer zones manned by federal security forces act as hard de facto borders. Kuki IDPs feel it is entirely unsafe to ever return to their former homes in the Meitei-dominated valley.
- **Political Ultimatum:** Consequently, civil societies and Kuki IDPs strongly refuse standard resettlement plans. They state that a Separate Administration or total territorial separation

from the Manipur state government is the only condition under which they can safely rebuild their lives.

5.3. Research question 3: What measures can be taken up to restore normalcy and sustainable peace?

The measures for restoring normalcy and peace in Manipur involve a combination of political restructuring, demilitarization, diplomatic policy changes, and direct inter-community engagement. Following the resignation of former Chief Minister N. Biren Singh and a period of central control under President's Rule, had led to robust active state-backed reconciliation framework.

The concrete measures currently being implemented to end the conflict include:

5.3.1. Structured Multi-Tiered Dialogue

- **Icebreaking Engagements:** Direct high-level political engagement commenced with a landmark closed-door meeting between the Manipur government and leaders from eight distinct tribes representing the Kuki Council in Guwahati.
- **Engaging Valley Stakeholders:** Simultaneously, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has held comprehensive peace process rounds with major Meitei and non-Meitei civil groups—including the Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI)—to align valley community priorities.
- **Insurgent Mainstreaming:** The Indian government is holding formal political negotiations with historical valley insurgent groups, such as the United Liberation Front (UNLF), under active ceasefire frameworks to permanently end armed militancy in the region.
- **Religious and Local Mediators:** Due to localized hostage situations and flare-ups, local church leaders and community development committees have stepped in as neutral mediators to broker peace agreements between Kuki and neighbouring Naga factions.

5.3.2. Buffer Zone Management and Security Standardization

- **Neutral Federal Deployment:** Federal security forces continue to maintain heavily guarded physical buffer zones between the valley and hill peripheries to enforce a cessation of active hostilities.
- **Securing National Highways:** Security personnel are heavily monitoring the state's main national highways to lift illegal trade blockades, ensuring that essential medical supplies, food, and commercial goods travel unhindered to both hill and valley populations.

- **Disarmament Drives:** Through the office of the Governor, the state is facilitating coordinated arms-surrender programs to recover the thousands of weapons looted from state armories.

5.3.3. International Border Hardening

- **Scrapping the Free Movement Regime (FMR):** To stop the cross-border flow of sophisticated weapons, drugs, and external insurgent support, the Central Government has officially abolished the FMR, which previously allowed visa-free travel within 16 km of the India-Myanmar border.
- **Border Fencing:** Accelerated structural construction is underway to completely fence the porous international boundary with Myanmar, cutting off the logistical networks fueling ethnic armed groups.

5.3.4. Staged Rehabilitation and Balanced Infrastructure Development

- **Phased IDP Repatriation:** The government is using a phased resettlement framework that prioritizes returning internally displaced persons (IDPs) to less volatile peripheral regions before attempting resettlement in hostile majority areas. Prefabricated housing is being deployed to accommodate returnees.
- **Hill Development Funds:** Recognizing decades of resource imbalances as a root cause of the divide, the administration has pledged targeted infrastructure budgets and development programs directly to the long-neglected hill districts.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Manipur conflict is a profound humanitarian and political crisis rooted in deep-seated geographical, legal, and structural disparities between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities. The immediate trigger of the Scheduled Tribe status dispute exposed long-standing friction over land rights, political representation, and demographic anxieties, which quickly spiraled into severe ethnic segregation. This violence inflicted a catastrophic toll on Kuki Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), who continue to endure substandard living conditions, severe mental trauma, a complete loss of livelihood, and a total cutoff from essential healthcare and education. While the deployment of federal buffer zones and border-hardening measures have contained active combat, lasting normalcy relies entirely on the political and administrative resets initiated by the current government. Rebuilding Manipur requires moving beyond a fragile ceasefire toward a comprehensive reconciliation framework—one that addresses the historical

underdevelopment of the hill districts, restores the severe trust deficit, and guarantees the safety, rights, and dignity of both communities.

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