

Ethnic Conflict and the Entrenchment of the Hills-Valley Divide in Manipur

Md. Abdul Gaffar

The hill–valley divide is often emphasised in both academic and public discussions, debates not only as a geographical boundary but also as a symbol of how history, law, and policy have unevenly distributed power and resources across regions. The divide in Manipur reflects a deeply-rooted, historically layered set of social, political, economic, and administrative divisions that influence identity, power, and resources throughout the state. After the violence in May 2023, Manipur’s demographic landscape is sharply divided by a ‘Buffer Zone’ between the Imphal valley, mainly inhabited by the Meitei, Muslims, and other communities—which is fertile, urbanised, and politically dominant—and the rest of the state. The surrounding hills—vast in area but sparsely populated—are traditionally home to the Kuki-Zo and Naga groups (along with several other hill tribes), each with distinct customary land systems, governance structures, and legal statuses. This spatial separation has shaped political institutions, economic development, cultural identities, and patterns of conflict. Since 2023, the violence has clearly revealed the symbolic and material effects of the hill-valley faultline, indicating that no Kuki-Zo person can safely enter the Imphal valley, just as no Meitei dares to enter Kuki-Zo-dominated hill areas. This paper traces the origins and development of the divide, analyses its mechanisms and impacts, and explores how recent unrest has merely uncovered longstanding issues that have simmered beneath the surface for years. It critiques current policy responses and proposes pathways towards a more equitable and stable future.

Keywords: Hill-valley divide, Manipur, Administrative divisions, Identity, Imphal Valley, Meitei community, Kuki-Zo, Naga groups

Introduction

On 4th February 2026, after 356 days of President’s Rule in the Indian state of Manipur due to ongoing violence and ethnic conflict, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Yumnam Khemchand Singh was sworn in as the 13th Chief Minister. BJP MLA Nemcha Kipgen, a member of the Kuki community, was appointed as one of the Deputy Chief Ministers, alongside two other legislators from the Kuki-Zo and Hmar communities, L.M. Khaute and N. Sanate, who supported her. Losii Dikho, a legislator from the BJP’s ally, the Naga People’s Front, also took oath as Deputy Chief Minister of Manipur. On 5th February 2026, Kuki-Zo tribal bodies enforced a “total shutdown” in the Churachandpur

Dr. Md. Abdul Gaffar is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, Dhanamanjuri University, Imphal, Manipur - 795001, India. [Email: ab4ghaffar@gmail.com]

district, while protesters staged rallies in Kangpokpi and Tengenoupal districts, accusing the three Kuki-Zo-Hmar MLAs of betraying their community. The Kuki-Zo Council (KZC), the principal body of the tribal community, “strongly and unequivocally” condemned the participation of certain Kuki-Zo MLAs in forming the Manipur government, describing it as a gross violation of a Lungthu Resolution adopted on 13th January 2026. The resolution was unanimously endorsed by the Suspension of Operation (SoO) groups, Kuki-Zo MLAs, and the Council, which resolved not to partake in forming the Manipur government without a written political commitment from both the Central and State governments to support a negotiated political settlement—a Union Territory with Legislature—under the Constitution. The apex tribal body accused the concerned MLAs of betraying the collective political stance and sentiments of the Kuki-Zo people by joining what it called a “Meitei-dominated government.” On 5th February, the KZC declared a social boycott of all Kuki-Zo MLAs involved in its formation at any social, customary, or public capacity. The Kuki-Zo groups have been demanding a separate administration for themselves, as the violence that erupted in May 2023 has profoundly divided the state along ethnic lines, with members of the two communities avoiding each other’s areas. Restive Manipur has been under President’s Rule since 13th February 2025.

Although these measures were taken to prevent the extension of President’s Rule beyond a year, which would have required introducing a Constitution Amendment Bill in Parliament, they also allow the ruling BJP to appear to uphold democratic governance. This manoeuvre aims to help it regain public support during the final year of the Assembly’s term, ending in February 2027. Restoring the popular mandate by lifting President’s Rule and paving the way for an elected government signals to the people that their concerns are being acknowledged and that the Centre is prepared to recognise any mistakes that led to the resignation of then Chief Minister Biren Singh, a Meitei leader accused of fomenting violence. During President’s Rule, imposed after N. Biren Singh’s resignation as Chief Minister on 9th February 2025, Manipur’s Assembly was in suspended animation—inactive but not officially dissolved.

Yumnam Khemchand, 62, a Taekwondo master, is regarded as an old-school liberal with an organised image and is often admired for his skills within the BJP. He is now being called upon to help reduce distrust of the central government to facilitate peace talks. He is also seen as a non-polarising figure accepted across various party factions during a political transition. Although yet to be tested in practice, he is considered a stable administrative choice amid political uncertainty; he might unify the organisation, promote discipline, and exercise understated authority rather than rely on mass rhetoric (Choudhury & Achom, 2026). The new Chief Minister, from the majority Meitei community, also indicated his intention to work towards reconciliation between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities by visiting a Kuki-Zo relief camp displaced from their homes in Imphal valley during the May 2023 ethnic violence in the Naga-dominated Ukhrul and Kamjong districts on 8th December 2025. The selection of the Chief Minister and, more importantly, the Deputy Chief Ministers clearly demonstrates the ruling BJP’s effort to organise itself effectively. Although carefully crafted as a political settlement, this move has raised questions about whether it seeks to accommodate voices that could dilute demands for a Union Territory for the Hill districts, with potential repercussions in areas such as Churachandpur. It remains a compelling narrative that the demand for a separate Union Territory for the Kuki-Zo communities

in the ethnically divided state of Manipur stems from the recent ethnic conflict and persists.

What led to Manipur's Crisis?

The violent ethnic conflict ongoing between the predominantly Hindu Meitei community and the mainly Christian tribal Kuki-Zo groups, which began on 3rd May 2023, has devastated India's state of Manipur for three years. The violence has resulted in over 260 deaths, destroyed more than 300 religious buildings, and displaced over 60,000 people—some living in relief camps, others seeking temporary shelter, and many forced to leave the state entirely. While there are several grievances from tribal communities against the government, the immediate trigger of the deadly violence was a 19th April 2023 directive from the High Court of Manipur, which ordered the Manipur Government to submit its recommendation for including Meitei/Meetei in the Scheduled Tribes (ST) list to the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs and to review the case within four weeks. The demand by the dominant Meitei group for Scheduled Tribe status under affirmative action policies reserved for tribal communities, such as the Kuki-Zo and the Nagas, aims to recognise them as a constitutionally recognised tribal ethnic group, thereby opening pathways to opportunities and resources. This status would also enable the Meitei people to purchase land or settle primarily in the hills where the Nagas and Kukis reside. However, the Nagas and Kukis oppose this demand. The Meitei community's call for ST status has heightened concerns among tribal groups, raising fears of encroachment on their land rights and protections. This demand is labelled an "illegitimate demand" and faces strong opposition from Manipur's existing Scheduled Tribe communities (Pautunthang, 2024, pp. 89-90). To oppose the High Court's directive, the All-Tribal Students Union of Manipur (ATSUM) organised a solidarity march across ten of the sixteen district council areas of Manipur on 3rd May 2023. In response, the Meitei community also held protests and blockades to oppose the Kukis and other allied groups. At the end of the march, clashes erupted between the Meitei and Kuki communities.

Since the mass rally organised by ATSUM, which represents all tribal bodies in Manipur and opposes the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe status, a lingering question remains: why did the conflict mainly occur between the Kukis and the Meiteis? This tension can be traced back to the simmering hostility and increasing anticipation of violence that preceded the events of 3rd May 2023. In many respects, it was not entirely surprising that the conflict between the Kukis and the Meiteis escalated. Even before the violence erupted on 3rd May, tribal communities, especially the Kuki community, had been actively protesting against the state, if not directly against the Meitei people. The "war on drugs," reserved forest drive, which displaced many Kuki families, and the eviction notices that led to the demolition of several churches sparked deep anger and resentment towards the BJP-led state government. The alleged illegal migration from Myanmar is also another source of tensions. Over time, this growing frustration shifted from the state apparatus to the broader Meitei community, particularly given the perception that the valley-based administration primarily represented Meitei interests. This became especially evident during the 12-hour shutdown called by tribal bodies on 29th April 2023, the very day Chief Minister N. Biren Singh was scheduled to visit Churachandpur (Kumar, 2023). This paper addresses all the narratives that have led to the clashes between the Meitei and Kuki-

Zo communities, which have resulted in their complete segregation in the state.

Besides the ongoing ethnic turmoil that physically divides the state, Manipur has a long-standing, sharp sense of division, segregated socially, politically, and geographically. The ongoing ethnic strife has worsened pre-existing divisions along lines of identity, eventually engulfing the entire state in conflict, with the people of the hills perceiving little, if anything, to do with the valley's history—and therefore governance (Kikon, 2010). The governance of the Imphal valley rarely reaches the state's hill areas. For example, the frequent bandhs and general strikes initiated by valley-based groups tend to have little to no effect in the hill areas. Conversely, when tribal organisations such as the ATSUM call for similar protests, they often have limited impact on daily life. However, the key difference is that when valley-based groups call for such actions, the state authorities respond promptly. In contrast, when hill-based tribal groups organise similar initiatives, even routine law enforcement activities, such as police patrols, are significantly reduced in the area. This uneven response highlights the deep-rooted divisions in administrative authority and public support between the hill and valley regions, reflecting broader patterns of political and social fragmentation.

There is also a long-standing demand for Nagalim—a greater Naga homeland that includes Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and even Myanmar. The Naga movement inspired the Kukis to form 'Zougam', 'Zalen'gam', or 'Kukiland' by uniting the Kuki-Chin tribes across Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. Supporters of Nagalim and Kukiland or Zalen'gam' have been spreading hostility and discontent for over 60 and 30 years, respectively (Singh, 2024). Their ongoing demands and movements have also deepened the divide between the hills and the valley. They highlight what they perceive as the "brutish" dominance of the Meitei community throughout the state. The state has effectively been split into two ethnic zones separated by buffer zones with police outposts and security force patrols. To understand these tensions, it is crucial to examine the geography of the state.

Manipur, a hilly state in northeastern India, lies east of Bangladesh and shares a border with Myanmar. Generally, based on its physical topography, the state can be classified as either a hilly or a valley region. The total area of the state is 22,347 square kilometres, with 90% designated as hilly areas and the remaining 10% as valleys. The state is divided into 16 administrative districts. The six districts of Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal, Bishnupur, Kakching, and Jiribam form the valley regions. The ten hill districts include Chandel, Churachandpur, Kamjong, Noney, Pherzawl, Sadar Hills, Senapati, Tamenglong, Tengnoupal, and Ukhrul. The estimated population is 2.86 million. In Manipur, various ethnic groups live in proximity to one another. The major communities are the Meitei (43.82%), the Nagas (23.59%), the Kuki-Zo (15.69%), and Muslims (8.40%). Currently, the state recognises constitutionally defined Scheduled Tribes, which are further categorised into two broad ethnic groups: the Nagas and the Kukis (Kuki-Mizo-Zomi), and acknowledges their disadvantaged socio-economic status. However, the Meitei and Muslims are not. Despite coexistence, a clear spatial division exists between the Imphal Valley—a narrow lowland basin housing the state capital, dense agricultural settlements, and the Meitei community—and the surrounding hills, where ethnolinguistically diverse tribal groups (mainly Kuki-Zo and Naga clans) maintain traditional governance systems and scattered livelihoods.

The Hills-Valley Conundrum in Manipur

The extent and influence of the Manipur kingdom over its surrounding hill areas have long been debated, especially concerning the hill-valley divide in Manipur. This subject frequently appeared in the writings of early British officials, particularly in reports by Political Agents. For example, Hodson (1911, 17) noted that “we know from the chronicles of Manipur that the raids and reprisals marked the relation of the hill villages with the people of the valley from the earliest times.” The then Governor of Assam, Robert Reid (1997, 87), also observed that “the boundaries of the state do not enclose a cultural unit, but rather a mixture of the limit up to which the Manipuris of the valley were in the past effectively able to extract tribute from the hillmen.” Even more telling is Reid’s assertion that the hill tribes were “controlled by periodical massacre” (ibid. 88) to solicit and obtain tributes from them. This suggests that most of the hill regions in present-day Manipur were not directly governed by the kingdom.

Alexander Mackenzie recounts a British expedition to the Naga regions in 1840, during which it was observed that the Nagas were “avowedly hostile to Manipur, and not tributary as had been given out by that state” (Mackenzie, 2017, p. 106). “The only traces of Manipuri occupation were the charred beams of Naga huts” (Elwin, 1969, p. 153). E.W. Dunn, in his *Gazetteer of Manipur*, notes that the Meitei king often subdued the tribes living in the hills adjoining the Imphal valley. However, those hills further from the valley were mainly left to themselves. He also further shared that: “The name Manipur is only applicable, properly speaking, to the Hindu dwellers of the plains. The wild tribes are divided generically into the two classes of Naga and Kuki” (Dunn, 1992, p. 13).

One of the more well-known political agents in Manipur, William McCulloh (1980, p. 49), also observed that:

With the internal government of the Koupooses or any of the hill tribes, the Munnipore Government does not interfere, they are left entirely to themselves and looking at them casually they appear individually to be under no control. . . each village has become a small republic, the safety of which, experience has taught members, is only to be gained by strictly observing the rights of person and property, individuals infringing the laws or usages of the community are punished, or even expelled.

In the context of literature that highlights the ambiguous territorial boundaries of the Manipuri kingdom, Bhagat Oinam has observed that the Meitei kings did not pursue territorial expansion or settle in the hill areas; instead, they subdued and controlled the hill tribes mainly through military defeat. He argues that the “idea of territorial control is measured in terms of battles fought and subjecting others to accept defeat” (2003, 2035), citing the practice of ‘*loipotkaba*’¹ as evidence. Describing the nature of territorial expansion undertaken by the Meitei kingdom over time, Kamei (2007, 156) states that once the Meitei forces withdrew after raids, the tribal villages remained independent in their hills, and their way of life was not disturbed by the Meiteis. The state levied tributes on certain villages along trade routes. Consequently, the Meitei state practised non-interference in the affairs of the hill tribes, including their governance, lifestyles, and economic activities. A similar view is shared by Shimray (2007, p. 57), who suggests that

prior to the advent of the colonial intervention, there was little interaction between the valley and hill areas. There were occasional raids by the Meitei in the hills, and vice versa. However, such occasional raids literally did not present territorial expansion or invasion.

Neither did they carry out regular administration nor imposed tax except occasional tribute.

Although their control over the hill areas was sporadic and limited, a strong social, cultural, and political alliance existed between the two entities. Records include intermarriage between kings and women from the hills, as well as stories of royal princes seeking refuge there. Additionally, festivals such as the *Mera Haochongba* and ceremonial rituals like the king's coronation involved participation by the Naga tribes (Shaw, 1929; McCulloch, 1980; TC Hudson, 1911). Colonial accounts also report that the hill tribes often provided military support to the Meitei kings. For instance, the Kuki raids on Cachar in 1868-69 were a diversionary tactic by the Meitei prince Kanhai Singh as he sought to reclaim the throne (Guite, 2014, p. 1192).

However, it has also been suggested that this somewhat symbiotic relationship between the hills and the valley underwent a significant change from the eighteenth century onwards as the Meitei monarchs embraced Vaishnavite Hinduism and declared it the state religion in 1714. The introduction of Hinduism among the valley communities is often regarded as a key historical moment that contributed to the development of social divides between the hill and valley peoples, with the adoption of Hindu caste norms establishing a hierarchical social order that had not previously existed in the region. This shift disrupted the Meitei-tribal relations, making their interactions increasingly strained. The imposition of caste-based stratification undermined the mutual respect and social parity that had once characterised their coexistence. Kamei (2007, p. 157) explains that "Hinduism created cleavage between the hill tribes and Meitei plainsmen. With the conversion of the ruling families and the people to Hinduism ... the non Hindu tribes were looked down upon by the Kshatriya Meiteis as they were outside the Hindu Varna system. The liberal social policy of the ancient Meitei Kings was abandoned and was replaced by orthodox caste oriented attitude towards the hill tribes".

Nag (2002, p. 40) also makes a similar claim, noting that, as "a result of Hinduisation, the Meiteis kept the Nagas outside the social system as outcastes and considered them inferior." The rising hostilities can perhaps be seen with the imposition of *Lallup* on the tribal villages along the trade routes in 1735 by King Garibniwaz, the Meitei monarch. Kamei explains that the *Lallup* system "was the personal loyalty of the subjects expressed in the form of service rendered to the state... It was also a revenue service as people did not pay taxes in cash but in kind, in the form of paddy" (Kamei, 2024, p. 80). The tribes along such routes did not take kindly to the imposition of the *Lallup* system, and the relationship grew increasingly strained. This tension was further intensified by the introduction of colonial governmentality practices after the British entry into Manipur following the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26).

After the Treaty of Yandabo was signed between the East India Company and the King of Ava in 1826, in which the King of Ava renounced all claims and agreed to abstain from interfering in the principality of Assam and its neighbouring regions, as well as recognising and returning the rajah of Manipur, the British gradually extended their control over these territories. During Maharaja Chandrakirti Singh's 35-year reign (1850-1886), Manipur realised that its decisions and prosperity heavily depended on loyalty to the British Government. Consequently, the Maharaja firmly supported the British during the Naga War of 1879. A force of 2,000 Manipuris, led by Colonel Johnstone and supplied by the Maharaja, broke the Nagas' siege of Kohima and prevented a major disaster. Although the Nagas fought bravely, British control was ultimately established over the Naga Hills District in 1879 following the battle at

Khonoma (Elwin, 1969, p. 579; Keen, 2015, p. 14). To the Nagas, the alliance between the British and the Meiteis was a bitter betrayal that shattered the long-standing bond of friendship and brotherhood they had shared with the Meiteis. However, British influence in the hill areas, especially Manipur, was ‘extremely limited’ apart from ‘simple acknowledgement of the supremacy of Government by paying trifling tribute’ (Barooah, 2015, p. 54). They remained largely as unadministered territories because they were so far friendly to the British government (Reid, 1997, p. 79) until the Kuki uprising of 1917-1919, which ended with the Kukis’ defeat.

After suppressing the Kukis in what was described as the ‘largest series of military operations’ on India’s northeastern frontier, the British recognised the need for formal administrative control by implementing the 1919 Administrative Reform Rules. As a result, “the hill people were for the first time brought under the intensified political and administrative control of an imperial power” (Dena, 1991, p. 134). These rules stipulated that the Maharaja should be consulted on major decisions concerning hill administration; however, in practice, he held little real authority and had limited knowledge of hill affairs. The president (a British officer) of the durbar issued all boundary documents in his own name to the tribal chiefs. Furthermore, the administration of the hill regions was divided into three subdivisions, each overseen by a Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO): the southwest at Churachanpur, the northwest at Tamenglong, and the northeast at Ukhrul. Under this new administrative framework, the Maharaja and the state durbar were effectively sidelined from governing the hills, and the tribal peoples appeared to have their rights and livelihoods protected under British Manipur.

James C. Scott’s concept of the hill areas of Southeast Asia in *The Art of Not Being Governed* as ‘non-governed spaces’—strategically inhabited by communities that preferred to avoid and escape valley-based pre-modern states—has significantly influenced a new body of work on deliberate state evasion (Scott, 2009, p. 23). This anarchist approach by Scott brought about a paradigm shift in understanding the lifeworld of upland people in Southeast Asia and the Northeast India massif, which had hitherto been seen as ‘uncivilized’, ‘barbaric’, or ‘savage’. Confronting the ‘foundational claims’ of the hill-valley binary, Jilangamba (2015, p. 216) highlights “that this binary of hill and valley is not a constructive category either historically or in the contemporary,” and that “[t]he government of Manipur is often referred to as a “communal government” that serves only the interests of the Meetei population” by the hill communities (Jilangamba, 2015, pp. 217–218). While “those that uphold the territorial integrity of Manipur would insist on a shared history and co-existence, whereas those who advocate different “ethnic homelands” tend to emphasise antagonism between the two,” he argues that there is a possibility of understanding “the past(s) of the hill and valley peoples by moving beyond the binary of looking at one and the other as either autochthonous or antagonistic groups” (Jilangamba, 2015, p. 289).

The issue of hill administration remained controversial when deciding the management of hill tribes under the 1935 Hill Administrative Reforms, which were based on the principle of federation; however, the Political Agent, including the Governor of Assam and AC Lothian, the Viceroy’s special representative, took a firm stance that no changes to the internal arrangements should be made on behalf of the state for the administration of the hill areas as a result of federating (Dena & Pudaite, 2023). This further reinforced the exclusion of the hill administration from the state of Manipur,

with the Maharaja, though, setting conditions for consent to federal terms. However, the British refused to accept those terms and accepted the Governor of Assam's view that the hill administration need not necessarily be handed over to the Maharaja, thereby effectively separating the hill areas from the rest of Manipur (Chisti, 2005, pp. 69-79).

The stand for the British was rooted in historical reasons related to the division of hill-valley administration. Since time immemorial, the hillsmen relied on the administration of the valley, where the Hindu Meiteis formed the majority. They never believed that the Manipuris would act in the best interests of the tribals. The boundaries were never clearly defined. There was no cultural unity between the hillsmen and the Manipuris (the valley). To the Meiteis, all the tribals were perceived as "a hillman is on altogether a lower plane of human life" (Chisti, 1979, p. 105). They also regarded all hillsmen as inferior, suitable only for carrying loads, paying revenue, and performing menial tasks. The relationship between the hill tribes and the Meitei kingdom was predominantly characterised by hostility and confrontation (Shakespeare, 1907, p. 34). Whenever the ruler sought to extract tribute from the hillsmen, he did so. If anyone failed to pay taxes, the ruler would sometimes arm another village to suppress the defaulters. Occasionally, the rulers even advised villagers to kill non-tax payers (Chisti, 2005, p. 71).

The British government saw no reason to relinquish control of the hill areas in favour of the Maharaja. Doing so would be tantamount to betraying the tribal people. It was understood that the Maharaja had amassed a considerable sum of money from the hill inhabitants until 1891. After the Kuki rebellion of 1917-19, the hill administration was taken over by the British and placed under the supervision of a British officer (Chisti, 2005, pp. 71-72). It was also evident that, even after the uprising of 1891, there were no proper provisions for the hills in the state budget. Only one-quarter of the total amount extracted from them was spent on their upkeep. Analysing the historical relationship between Manipur and the tribals, the Governor of Assam decided that British control over the hills should not be loosened in any way. "It is fact, if a regrettable one, that neither His Highness nor his Durbar is interested in the good government of the hill tribes, while they grudge the expenditure of money on them" (Chisti, 2005, p. 72).

Furthermore, when the hill subdivisions were abolished, a conflict arose between the Nagas and the Kukis. This subsequently led to unrest in the hill regions of Manipur, including the Naga Hills, during the 1930s. Nevertheless, prompt intervention by the state governments prevented a disastrous outcome for Manipur. The British practice of delineating the hill-valley boundary for administrative purposes in Manipur was most clearly illustrated in the correspondence from the Hill Areas Secretary to the Governor of Assam on 22nd April 1937, in which he states that:

History shows that the Manipuris cannot and will not give the hills an administration of the standard to which they are both entitled and now accustomed and that it can only be maintained by the control now exercised. We are under an obligation to the hill tribes to maintain to them to a decent administration. The consequences of unrest and rebellion among might be most dangerous for those portions of British India and Burma which lie along Manipur's boundaries (Reid, 1997, p. 89).

The creation of hills and valleys in Manipur during colonial rule fostered divisions among the people, whether they came from the hills or the valleys. The selective

interpretation of history, myths, folklore, and cultural practices by colonial officials, along with their exaggeration of differences rather than similarities between the two communities, contributed to an ethnic rift that persists to this day. The ‘othering’ was constructed through the application of a civilisational hierarchy, where tribes were deemed backward and in need of “a combination of the autocratic and patriarchal, — an essentially Personal as distinguished from a Departmental Government... [T]hey need an intelligent ‘Chief’ over them, rather than a department and one not changed for every frivolous pretext” (Peal 1879, pp. 26-27 cited in Jilangamba 2015, p. 286). The valley areas thus represented civilisational zones of high culture, in contrast to the hill areas, which were considered uncivilised zones. The prejudice and intolerance of the majority community towards the hill people—rooted in religious and social differences—also significantly contribute to fostering feelings of division and hostility, including perceptions of labels such as “unclean” and “uncivilised,” even akin to slaves—a stark denigration of their equal human dignity. These attitudes are not merely harmless banter; they actively reinforce social divisions. Each derogatory term establishes a mental “us vs them” boundary (Singh, 2025).

The formation of the Naga Club in 1918 by some Naga members of the British Labour Corps who had served in Europe during World War I evolved into a pioneering political organisation in 1946, known as the Naga National Council (NNC), to represent the Naga people in Northeast India. As Britain’s impending departure from India approached, aspirations for independence in the Naga Hills grew stronger. The rise of Naga nationalism was not confined to the Naga Hills; it was also evident in Manipur, where Mao and Maram Nagas, led by Athikho Daiho, promoted secession and went underground to pursue it. The Tangkhuls were resolute that they would not be handed over to the Maharaja of Manipur (Dev & Lahiri, 1987, p. 68). Tribal leaders such as Athikho Daiho, R. Suisa, and Teba Kilong called for the integration of the Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur with the Naga Hills, most notably under the auspices of the Naga National League (NNL) (Shimray, 2007, p. 83). Similar developments also took place among the Kuki tribes, such as the Hmars, who aligned with the Mizo Union and advocated a merger with the Lushai Hills district of Assam.

Meanwhile, in the Imphal Valley, local political unrest forced the reigning king, Maharaja Bodhachandra Singh, to establish a Constitution-Making Committee (CMC) with the Political Agent, F.F. Pearson, acting as its chairman. The CMC included 16 members, five of whom represented the valley regions and five represented the hill regions. The Manipur State Constitution Act 1947 was enacted on 8 May 1947 and came into force on 26 July 1947. This Act transformed Manipur into a constitutional monarchy with an elected legislative assembly. The assembly comprised 53 members, with 18 seats reserved for the hill regions (Kamei, 2007, p. 181). However, even after the adoption of the Constitution, efforts to integrate the Naga-inhabited areas continued. Mao Naga boycotted the first legislative assembly elections in Manipur and launched a ‘No Taxation Campaign’ in 1948. As an act of defiance, the Mao Nagas paid house tax to the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills (Manchanda & Bose, 2011, p. 57). This campaign was marginalised following Manipur’s union with India on 15 October 1949, but it continued to enjoy active support and popularity.

Following Manipur’s merger with the Indian Union, it was designated as a Part C state and governed by the President through the office of the Chief Commissioner of Assam. In 1956, it was declared a Union Territory, and it ultimately became a full-fledged state in 1972 under the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971.

Additionally, the Constitution (Twenty Seventh Amendment) Act, 1971, was incorporated into the Constitution, with Article 371-C added as a special provision for the hill areas of Manipur. With the insertion of Article 371-C, the Hill Standing Committee previously in place during Manipur's status as a Union Territory was replaced by a Hill Areas Committee (HAC), consisting of all the MLAs elected from the hill areas of the state.

Institutional Mechanisms that Produce Inequality

Although a longstanding hill-valley divide exists in the state, the intensity of ethnic tensions and disruptions to peaceful coexistence among different communities increased after the formation of the BJP-led government in 2022 (Touhang, 2022, pp. 111-120). Since the BJP came to power in Manipur in 2017, it has promoted its Hindu-majoritarian ideology by supporting the Hindu Meitei (Ganguly, 2024). The violence that erupted in Manipur was a manifestation of decades-old ethnic tensions, worsened by Biren Singh's divisive ethnic politics. However, a less-noticed aspect of Manipur's history is how years of systemic repression by the state machinery, designed to silence dissent and marginalise minority communities, fuelled those tensions in an effort to consolidate power (Hangsing, 2025). It has been alleged that Biren's administration, including the police, allegedly protected Meitei vigilante groups such as the Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun, which have looted weapons from state armouries and engaged in mob attacks. Nonetheless, Biren Singh denied these allegations (Ganguly, 2024; HRW, 2025). Although the violent clashes first erupted in May 2023, tensions had long fractured harmony among Manipur's ethnic communities.

In 2021, amid increasing tensions towards violence, the Joint Committee on Inner Line Permit System (JCILPS) called for the implementation of an Inner Line Permit (ILP) system in Manipur, which would require visitors from outside the state to obtain special permission and documentation to stay within the area for a specified period. After a series of intense protests involving bandhs, public marches, and demonstrations, the JCILPS protests eventually led to an agreement signed on 25th August 2015 with the state government, then led by Congress and Okram Ibobi Singh. At that time, the Meitei demanded amendments to land laws to secure the same protections as those granted to tribal groups in the hills. They sought to prevent non-Meitei, including tribal communities, from acquiring land in the Imphal valley. To bolster his pro-Meitei reputation ahead of the 2017 state elections, the elected chief minister, Okram Ibobi Singh, agreed to JCILPS's demands. As a result, the Manipur Legislative Assembly unanimously passed three contentious bills on 31st August 2015. These included the Protection of Manipur Peoples Bill, 2015; the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms (Seventh Amendment) Bill, 2015; and the Manipur Shops and Establishments (Second Amendment) Bill, 2015. The hill tribes of Manipur opposed not only these bills but also the manner in which they were passed, which completely disregarded the "Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business" in the Manipur Legislative Assembly [Section 4(2)]. To give the bills the appearance of a Money Bill, a 'Financial Memorandum' was attached to the bills introduced in the Manipur Land Revenue and Reforms (Seventh Amendment) Bill 2015 and the Manipur Shops and Establishments (Second Amendment) Bill 2015—an act widely regarded as a strategic move to exclude the HAC, which represents the Autonomous District Councils, and as a breach of Article 371-C of the Indian Constitution (e-pao.net, 2015). This procedural move deepened the tribal communities' sense of alienation and reinforced the view that their rights and voices were being systematically sidelined.

The tribal people viewed the bills as designed to seize their lands and resources under the guise of protecting Manipur's indigenous population. They argue that the vague definition of the term "Manipur people" is restrictive and could lead to disputes over the status of many tribal groups, especially the Kuki-Zo community, as natives of Manipur, particularly since the Meitei have previously branded them as foreigners (ICG, 2025, p. 4). The tribes protested against these bills, condemning them as "anti-tribal" and prejudiced. Furthermore, the hill tribes claimed that the state government was considering another anti-tribal law, the Manipur Regulation of Non-Local People Bill, 2016 (Gupta, 2016). Within weeks, protests erupted, and police shot dead nine Kuki-Zo protesters in Churachandpur, the main town of the Kuki-Zo community. From 2015 to 2017, the Joint Action Committee Against Anti-Tribal Bills (JACAATB) refused to bury the dead for 632 days, ultimately forcing the government to withdraw the bills (Siddiqui, 2017). The predominantly tribal southern district of Churachandpur became the centre of this unrest.

Beyond these contentious bills, perhaps the most significant factor fueling the ongoing divide between the hills and the valley is concern about administration and governance. Of the 60 electoral constituencies in Manipur, only 19 are reserved for Scheduled Tribes; each MLA represents an area of 1004.45 sq km with a population of 44,107. In contrast, each valley MLA covers just 56 sq km with a population of 35,294. These figures are important because funding and resource allocations depend on population size. Research shows that although the valley region in Manipur makes up only 10% of the state's land area, it has historically received larger budget allocations than the hills. This disparity is often cited as a main reason for the slower development of the hills (Pautunthang, 2024, p. 77). Furthermore, a stark difference exists between the proposed budget and actual expenditure across all departments in the hills and the valley, with the proposed budget exceeding actual spending in the hills. For example, in the Department of Forests and Environment, the proposal for 2017-18 was Rs. 40.85 crore for the hills and Rs. 70.90 crore for the valley. The actual expenditure was Rs. 19 crores for the hills and Rs. 66 crores for the valley. This department encompasses more than 90 per cent of the forests in the hills. On average, all budgets allocated to the hills accounted for less than 50% of actual spending (Haokip, 2024, p. 36).

To address proportional representation in the state assembly, the planned delimitation exercise of 2007, under the Delimitation Act of 2002, was postponed when the then Delimitation Commission accepted the Chief Minister's argument that the 2001 Census of Manipur, covering 15 subdivisions in the state, was flawed. The hill tribes demanded the implementation of the Delimitation Commission's recommendation to increase the number of seats in the hill areas with a corresponding reduction of the same number of seats in the valley, as they were underrepresented in the state assembly, holding only 19 seats out of 60, despite comprising 40.45% of the state population according to the Census 2011. Had delimitation proceeded, it would have created three additional constituencies in five hill districts and reduced three in the valley districts. It also created disparities in political power and autonomy, particularly regarding financial independence, between the valley and the hills (Kamei, 2024, p. 90).

In India, small and hilly states such as Manipur, which are categorised as 'special category states' by the National Development Council, receive up to 90% of their funds as grants from the central government due to their unviable financial situation. This classification mainly depends on challenging terrain, low population density, a

significant tribal population, strategic border location, and economic and infrastructural backwardness (Bhattacharjee, 2016, p. 3). In such financially dependent and culturally diverse sub-national states, the state is seen as a resource (Haokip, 2022, p. 11). The criteria for granting ‘special category’ status to Manipur are primarily based on its unique hill area features. Nonetheless, central government grants are chiefly concentrated in the valley, especially in the two districts of Imphal—Imphal East and Imphal West—because resources are allocated based on the number of assembly constituencies (Haokip, 2022, p. 181). An underlying effort by the valley population aims to preserve existing power structures, leading to an unequal distribution of political, economic, cultural, and other benefits.

Furthermore, the demand for provisions under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution has been a contentious issue since the formation of the state. In line with British policies towards hill tribes, the framers of the Constitution recognised the situation. They took the initiative to implement certain safeguards, given concerns that the hill tribes might face discrimination from the dominant communities. For tribes in North East India, the Sixth Schedule was established in the erstwhile undivided Assam and was later extended to Tripura in 1985. The HAC on 5 March 1978 passed a resolution calling for the extension of the Sixth Schedule provisions to the hill areas of Manipur, reaffirming its previous resolutions on 8 June 1978, 18 July 1990, 5 March 2000, and again in 2003. Starting in 1978, district council elections were initially boycotted, and the Sixth Schedule Demand Committee (SSDC) was subsequently formed to pursue this demand with the slogan ‘No Sixth Schedule, No Council Elections’. The boycott lasted for two decades, from 1987 to 2010 (Bhatia, 2010, p. 41). However, the Manipur government made several amendments to the 1971 Act in 2000, 2006, and 2008, and even held elections in 2010 (Hausing, 2015, p. 79). Nevertheless, tribes in Manipur are still not covered by the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

There is a fear of even conceding minor autonomy, as such a concession could ultimately lead to greater demands that threaten the territorial integrity of the state. The reluctance to grant internal autonomy causes more harm than is often acknowledged. The ATSUM and many other tribal organisations supported the SSDC and submitted several memoranda to the central government, demanding that the constitutional provisions be extended to the state (Haokip, 2022, p. 191). Although the state government agreed to implement the Sixth Schedule on 13th May 1991, it only formed a cabinet sub-committee in 2002 to address the demand. This was seen as a ‘delaying tactic’ (Haokip, 2022, p. 192). The Government of India sent several reminders to the Government of Manipur, requesting a response on this issue. However, the matter remains unresolved, and the Ministry of Home Affairs (Northeast Division) again wrote to the Chief Secretary of Manipur on 7th May 2015, urging them to provide details of local arrangements or revised proposals to date. Additionally, a ‘reply to the Government of Manipur to this Ministry’s letter dated 21st September 2001 and 17th October 2001 is required’ (Haokip, 2022, p. 192). The Home Ministry’s correspondence indicates the state government’s apparent disregard for this matter, possibly reflecting its reluctance to grant internal autonomy. This deliberate exclusion is seen as a politically motivated act to prevent the extension of the Sixth Schedule to the hill areas of Manipur (Piang, 2019, p. 58).

The tribals believe that any discussion of autonomy is met with suspicion by people in the Manipur valley. Efforts to address the imbalance between the hills and the valley reveal how majoritarianism functions and how Manipur has become

entrenched in 'ethnocracy'. The rejection of the 2021 autonomous district councils (ADCs) bill is seen as evidence that the Manipur government, dominated by the majority Meitei legislators, is reluctant to share power (Haokip, 2022a, pp. 25-26). It is argued that the opinions of the hill communities are interpreted as representing those demanding separate states, which threaten to challenge their political dominance and could eventually lead to the creation of Kukiland and Nagalim. Despite a bill proposing to establish "internal autonomy" for hill communities within the state, the majoritarian government remains hesitant to relinquish the dominance it has held for over fifty years (Haokip, 2022a, p. 26). Kipgen and Chowdhury (2016, p. 276) also argue that "government policies have failed to respond to local problems, which have created a regional imbalance and have sharpened the hills-valley divide," resulting in "economic hardships and have become further alienated and marginalised" due to the lack of demand for internal autonomy. Such policies highlight the deep divide between the hills and the valley and serve as a significant cause of tribal grievances and ethnic hostility between hill and valley communities.

BJP Government and the Hill-Valley Divide

The longstanding grievances of the tribals, rooted in infrastructural neglect and deeply ingrained socio-cultural biases, have worsened since the BJP-led government took charge in 2017. Some initiatives by the Biren Singh government aimed at reform have actually increased tensions between the hill tribes and the government, especially with the valley-centric administration. Issues such as the declaration of reserved forests, the government's vigorous "war on drugs," and the "Go Green campaign" have often been perceived by the tribes as unfairly targeting their lands and livelihoods. The controversy over the reserved forest, which mainly impacted Kuki villages, became a significant source of resentment towards the government, which they believed favoured the valley. Between January and May 2022, the Manipur Forest Department issued numerous show-cause and eviction notices to dozens of hill villages over alleged encroachments in the Khamenlok-Gwaltabi, Dampi, and Tairenpokpi-Tamenglong reserved forests. They set strict deadlines for villagers to prove land ownership. Tribal leaders and an MLA from Churachandpur condemned these actions as divisive, arguing they bypassed the HAC and suggesting hidden motives. Meanwhile, government-led tree-planting schemes in hill regions heightened local suspicions, turning conservation efforts into flashpoints for protests (Touhang, 2022, p. 114). Again, in August 2022, the Manipur government claimed that 38 villages settled in Churachandpur, a Kuki-majority district, were "illegal immigrants" and "encroachers" on protected forest land. There is no valid basis for this egregious claim by the government (Nigam, 2023). Consequently, the Manipur Forest Department issued a series of eviction notices to village chiefs for allegedly encroaching on reserved forests, becoming a contentious issue between the government and residents of the hill areas.

Since 2017, the Biren Singh government has endeavoured to end illicit poppy cultivation and drug trafficking within the state. The "war on drugs" initiated during his first term has been continued with increased vigour in his second term. As part of this effort, he posted on his social media accounts about the arrests of drug peddlers, details of seized contraband, and the ongoing destruction of poppy cultivation sites, alongside police efforts. Furthermore, on 4th March 2023, all members of the Manipur Legislative Assembly unanimously passed a resolution declaring themselves as

“warriors” in the “war on drugs.” However, Thongkholal Haokip contested how the Biren Singh government not only notably failed to mention the Delhi drug haul case of 17 February 2023 — in which “50 kgs of opium, worth more than 10 crore in the international market, was brought from Manipur” — on social media, but also remained silent on the demand by the state Congress party for a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) inquiry into the case. Haokip (2024, p. 36) further argues.

While the war on drugs is not only anachronistic in its approach but also selective in outrage, the forest policy is mainly the re-manifestation of the old colonial interest of enclosing the commons and establishing complete state control over the forests. This renewed attempt at reservation of forests has been selective in its target, thereby engulfing the state once again into the long-drawn ethnic politics, leading to further marginalisation of the hill communities.

Linking the “war on drugs” with reserved forests, the Chief Secretary of the Government of Manipur has decided to revoke all land ownership documents issued earlier within the reserved and protected areas on 3rd April 2023. There have been numerous reports of forced evictions and property seizures, using this situation as a cover. The government has raided tribal villages to curb illegal poppy cultivation, which is considered the primary source of income for the tribes, particularly the Kukis. To exacerbate matters, sections of flat land near district headquarters were suddenly reclassified as wetlands. Meanwhile, the Forest Department has faced accusations of encroaching on Kuki and Naga lands without adhering to land acquisition laws or providing fair compensation. Regarding the effectiveness of direct compensation schemes, Sangpui and Kapngaihlian (2021, p. 7) noted that the state government “promised to provide compensation to those farmers whose crop (poppy) was destroyed during the police raid,” yet “when farmers visited the concerned office to claim the compensation, they were tagged as ‘kaani victims’.” They clarified that this stereotypical categorisation “has made them uneasy as it is offensive to them.” Over time, a binary emerged: “those who want to see the state providing alternative means of livelihood, and those who want total elimination of illicit poppy cultivation with the use of brute force.” Moreover, “such views” are now “almost neatly run along ethnic lines, thereby exacerbating division” (Haokip, 2024, p. 37). The evictions of residents from the Kuki community violated Article 371-C, which confers some administrative autonomy to the tribal-dominated hill areas of Manipur. Furthermore, these actions also breached the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, which gives tribal communities the right to utilise forest land and resources for their livelihood (Nigam, 2023).

In February 2023, acting on its claim, the state government unilaterally launched an eviction drive on the so-called protected forest land, viewed as anti-tribal. The government’s eviction of Kuki villages encroaching on the protected forest area was another factor that heightened the already tense situation. However, the immediate trigger for the protests and conflicts was the eviction and demolition of the Kuki settlement in K. Songjang village, in the Henglep subdivision of Churachandpur district, on 20 February 2023, allegedly for encroaching on protected forest land. Tribal groups argued that the eviction campaign, led by the N. Biren Singh-led BJP government, targeted legitimate residents. This event ignited a series of protests and clashes involving both the government and local populations, particularly the Kukis, over issues such as evictions, land surveys in Kuki villages, perceived discrimination based

on ethnicity, alleged biases, and underrepresentation in the legislative assembly. This caused resentment, with Paolienlal Haokip, a BJP MLA, questioning the sudden revenue and forest survey conducted in the Churachandpur-Khoupum Protected Forest, and he pointed out on 12 April that since there was no survey record with the state government, the Gazette declaring the Churachandpur-Khoupum forest areas as a protected area was flawed and thus void. He requested that further surveys be halted, since it would be seen as selective and targeted (Sadokpam, 2023). However, Biren Singh remained unfazed and vehemently retaliated against the tribal people's protests against the ongoing demolition and expansion of reserved forests.

These highly sensitive government policies created a tense, insecure, and panicked atmosphere among the Kuki-Zo people, which had already begun to intensify in Kuki-dominated areas before the 3rd May incident. That incident involved the burning of the open gym set to be inaugurated on 28th April by Chief Minister N. Biren Singh, followed by the torching of a forest office and other government properties. These acts of protest were led by the Indigenous Tribal Leaders' Forum (ITLF), mainly in opposition to a government-led land survey linked to the reserved forest issue. According to the ITLF, the protests and broader non-cooperation would continue unless the state revoked the 1966 government order designating certain tribal lands as protected or reserved forests (Jimmy, 2023). The Chief Minister, who had initially dismissed the unrest as a local constituency problem, was eventually compelled to cancel his visit (Kumar, 2023). In hindsight, the events of May 3rd did not occur without warning. A series of escalating tensions had already signalled the potential for an ethnic crisis, revealing underlying resentment beneath the surface, even if the scale and intensity of what transpired was neither fully anticipated nor desired by either community.

The violence has impacted all communities across the state, leading to significant loss of life and property, displacement, financial hardships, strain on institutions, and, most notably, strict movement restrictions between the territories of the two communities. The Kuki-Zo population was compelled to leave Imphal after Meitei mobs set fire to homes and properties. Similarly, Meitei residents in Kuki-majority districts and areas primarily inhabited by Kuki—including nearby towns—were also targeted, set ablaze, and forced to flee. Central and state forces forcibly evacuated a few remaining Kuki families living in Imphal's New Lambulane area on the night of 2 September 2023 (Ali, 2023). Approximately 5,600 weapons and 650,000 rounds of ammunition vanished from the State Armouries (Chopra, 2023). Since then, displaced individuals—whether seeking refuge in relief camps or leaving the state in search of livelihoods—have been unable to return home, and it appears unlikely they will do so in the near future. Following the forced displacement of entire communities and widespread destruction of property, crossing into each other's territories is now strictly forbidden. Despite many victims losing their lives in crossfire and other violent confrontations, the names of missing persons underscore that entering each other's territories, whether deliberately or accidentally, can be fatal. The disappearance of many individuals, with over 30 still unaccounted for, remains a stark reminder and continues to highlight the divide between the two communities (Ukhrul Times, 2024; NDTV News Desk, 2024).

Buffer Zones: De-Facto Border

Violence and arson incidents in the state continue to increase. In May 2023, during

Amit Shah's visit to Manipur, India's Home Minister established a "buffer zone" to reduce the risk of conflict. The Central Security Forces, including the Indian Army, have created kilometres of buffer zones in and around four sensitive districts where Kukis and Meiteis—the two communities involved in the conflict—reside. The buffer zones are strategically set up in areas where the Kuki and Meitei communities share borders, aiming to maintain territorial separation between the groups. The main purpose of these buffer zones is to confine Meiteis and Kukis to their villages and prevent intercommunal violence by restricting their movements within their respective territories. These zones include specific community boundaries, multiple police outposts, and regular patrols at the most sensitive locations.

The creation of these buffer zones within this small geographical state has deepened the divide between ethnic groups, worsening the ongoing ethnic crisis. Despite increasing divisions, the very measure that enlarges the gap is something that people actively support, reflecting the Kuki-Zo community's demand for a separate administration based on ethnicity. Manipur's National Highways remain divided by buffer zones and checkpoints. While fuel and goods trucks pass freely, ordinary commuters face strict ethnic separation—Meiteis are barred from entering Kuki areas and vice versa. The highway, vital to Manipur's livelihood, now symbolises a divided state, where movement is heavily restricted and the "status quo" persists at gunpoint.¹

On 7th November 2023, six months after the violence started, five Kuki individuals travelling from Churachandpur to Kangpokpi (both Kuki-majority districts) were reportedly stopped and attacked by a group of Meiteis as they entered Imphal West (a Meitei-majority district) on the border with Kangpokpi. As news of the abduction spread, armed Kuki militants indiscriminately opened fire on a group of people in the Kangchup area spanning Imphal West and Kangpokpi districts, injuring seven individuals, including two police officers and a woman (Lama & Parashar, 2023). This underscores the ongoing violence and the divide between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo territories.

While physically separating ethnic groups has reduced violence, it has not completely ended unrest. Manipur now faces a dangerous deadlock. Since the buffer zone was established, the Kuki-Zo say that the "emotional distance" that already separated the two communities has been reinforced by "physical distance" (ICG 2025, p. 10). With the two now fully segregated, the Kuki-Zo see the conflict as "a war for survival," and they are preparing by arming themselves (ICG 2025, p. 10). They are more determined than ever to pursue the goal of an autonomous administration. All ten Kuki legislators in the state assembly insist on this reform, arguing that "the state miserably failed to protect the community," and they add that living with the Meitei is "as good as death" (Singh & Lakshman, 2023). Kuki-Zo militant groups, who hold significant community influence, have now made recognition of a separate administration a precondition for resuming peace talks (ICG 2025, p. 10). The Meitei, on their part, oppose any change that threatens Manipur's territorial integrity.

The separation becomes even more evident when noting that the ethnic cleansing operation is complete, with the valley cleared of Kukis and the hills of Meiteis, including government officials and members of the Legislative Assembly. Even the central service officers posted or transferred to Manipur exclude Meitei officers, despite many serving in various roles. This is because the authorities were concerned that including Meitei officers in these transfers and postings might compromise neutrality. A senior state officer correctly reported this as follows:

Apart from geographical buffer zones, some administrative buffer zones are also created. To keep the system neutral and prevent the government machinery from being influenced by ethnic groups, officers from other states have been sent to Manipur. We are just trying to minimise internal conflicts in the administration (Das, 2023).

Similarly, all Kuki-Zo academics working in valley-based schools, colleges, and universities have had to flee either out of the state or be transferred to Kuki-concentrated hill districts. All Kuki students also had to escape from the valley. Likewise, all Meitei living in Kuki-dominated areas were compelled to vacate their homes. Even the Meitei students who gain admission to Churachandpur Medical College, a state government medical college situated in a Kuki-dominated area, are now holding classes in Imphal. Although Manipur has experienced various phases of insurgency and ethnic conflicts in the past, this is likely the first occasion on which the residents have been instructed to remain confined within their own villages.

Even the buffer zone separating the communities has claimed lives. On 21st January 2026, a Meitei man named Mayanglambam Rishikanta, also known as Ginminthang, who travelled to Churachandpur after crossing the buffer zone, was killed (Karmakar & Singh, 2026). Reports state he was shot while attempting to meet his Kuki wife. This incident has further escalated tensions amid ongoing ethnic unrest in the state. The killing occurred during a fragile peace in Manipur following the imposition of President's Rule after political turmoil in February 2025. In August 2023, three Meitei individuals were killed in Kwakta, in Manipur's Bishnupur district, after crossing the buffer zone (Goswami, 2023). Again, in September 2023, a trained group in police uniform crossed the buffer zone and shot dead three Kuki people from Ponlen Kuki village in Kangpokpi district. Likewise, another attack took place on 8th September 2023 in Kuki-majority Pallel in Tengenoupal district, where three individuals were killed (Purohit, 2023). These were the first incidents of ambushes of this kind, as attackers aimed to breach the hills inhabited by the tribal Kuki-Zo communities. These assaults occurred about 3 km within the hills of the respective districts. The fact that a safe zone could be breached indicates that suspected Meitei extremists are gaining confidence to cross over unchallenged by security forces, carry out attacks, and retreat. The central forces aptly described this situation as a security quagmire in the state.

The armed men could not have reached the Kuki-Zo-inhabited village without the complicity of the police, as they had first to cross a buffer zone, guarded by central forces and Manipur police in some patches, and then a Naga village (Ireng) to reach the area. After carrying out the operation, they returned to the Imphal valley through the same route (Purohit, 2023).

Those who inadvertently crossed the buffer zones also faced death. Mr Limkholal Mate, a resident of Motbung in Manipur's Kangpokpi district and a former Havaldar in the Assam Regiment, was beaten to death in the Meitei-dominated area of Sekmai after accidentally crossing the buffer zone in Sekmai village in Imphal West district in September 2024 (Mishra, 2024). The names of Luwangbi Linthoingambi Hijam, Phijam Hemanjit Singh, and Laishram Kamal Babu, among others, have become synonymous with the consequences faced by those who dare to cross or even venture near the buffer or security zones. Such acts of brutality are emerging even during the period of President's Rule in the state in March 2025, with one recent victim being Luwangthem Mukesh, who was reported missing and may have crossed the buffer zone.³

The harsh reality is that these buffer zones have now effectively become borders.

On paper, they appear as neutral zones; in practice, they sustain a geography of division. For the Meiteis, the valley is beginning to resemble a cage; for Kuki-Zo groups, the buffer zones serve as shields behind which their political aims are reinforced (Bobichand, 2025). Even the Lok Sabha MP (Inner) A. Bimol Akoijam, who visited a village in Bishnupur district on 6th January 2026, 40 km from the state capital Imphal, was stopped and made to stand at an imaginary buffer zone, preventing him from entering Kuki-dominated areas (Manipur update 2026). This prompted him to file an RTI application with the Ministry of Home Affairs seeking clarification on the legal basis for establishing a buffer zone in a state affected by violent conflict. A similar incident occurred earlier in June 2025, when he was prevented from visiting the Phougakchou-Ikhai market in the Bishnupur district. The market, located within his parliamentary constituency, lies within the buffer zone between Bishnupur and Churachandpur districts (Northeast Live, 2025). These buffer zones facilitate the division of all sectors, including the judicial system within the state. This was evident during the visit on 22 March 2025 by a delegation of Supreme Court judges to Manipur. Justice N. Kotiswar Singh, a member of the Meitei community, was barred from accessing Churachandpur due to objections from a local lawyers' body. Sadly, there was no clear solidarity from other Supreme Court judges with Justice N. Kotiswar Singh (Bobichand, 2025a).

The Meiteis and Kukis are now living under constant siege. The Kuki-Zo cannot access their nearest airport in Imphal due to fears of attacks in the valley. The twice-weekly helicopter service to Imphal has few takers because the Kukis fear for their lives even at Imphal airport (BBC, 2023). The Kuki tribes who do not fly out from the Imphal valley are forced to endure a gruelling 380 km (236 miles), 14-hour road journey along a long, bumpy, landslide-prone route across the hills to reach an airport in Aizawl, the capital of the neighbouring state of Mizoram. Patients with serious conditions, such as cardiac issues, face the greatest risk if they need to be taken to hospitals in another state or district.

During the President's Rule, the Government of India's decision to permit "free movement" on NH-2 in March 2025 turned violent when one Kuki individual was killed and several others, including a policeman, were injured. On 1st March, Home Minister Amit Shah had set 8th March as the deadline to ensure "free movement" on all roads, particularly on National Highways 02 and 37, which connect Manipur's Central Valley to Nagaland and Assam, respectively. However, the Kuki-Zo organisations clashed with the forces when a Manipur State Transport Corporation bus tried to enter Kangpokpi on 8th March, prompting the Centre to postpone the plan. Henlianthang Thanglet and Thangzamang, Chairman and General Secretary of the Kuki-Zo Council (KZC), an apex body of Kuki-Zo organisations, stated that:

KZC has not declared the reopening of NH-2. No free movement has been permitted on this route. As there has been no settlement or agreement yet to end the conflict between the Meitei and the Kuki communities, no one from either side must cross the buffer zone under any circumstances (Karmakar, 2025).

The Kuki-Zo groups insist that each community must uphold the status quo and respect the buffer zone to prevent the escalation of the violent conflict, which has at least been contained since President's Rule was imposed in Manipur in February 2025. Religious freedom has become caught in the crossfire. On 9 April 2025, the six Kuki-Zo tribal organisations issued a statement warning the Meiteis not to cross the buffer

zone for the Cheirao Ching Kaba (climbing Cheirao hill), an ancient traditional annual event in which the Meiteis climb Thangjing hill as part of the Cheiraoba celebrations. That year, the Meitei New Year fell on 14 April. The joint statement from the six organisations asserted that “unless and until the Government of India reaches a political settlement for the Kuki-Zo-Hmar community under the Constitution of India, no such friendly approach to the jurisdiction of Kuki-Zo-Hmar land would be allowed for the Meitei community” (Bobichand, 2025a). Putting their stance into action, hundreds of Kuki-Zo women staged sit-in protests across buffer zones in Manipur’s Churachandpur district on 13 April 2025, blocking Meitei pilgrims from accessing the sacred Thangjing hills during the annual Cheiraoba festival (Shirin, 2025). What was once a spiritual journey has now become a political standoff, with protesters declaring that no Meitei should cross into what they consider ancestral Kuki-Zo land. The symbolism was unmistakable; even prayer had taken on a territorial dimension.

In another clear sign of the entrenched divide and restrictive measures between the conflicting communities, the government’s latest effort to establish free movement between the hills and the valley, aimed at restoring the normal flow of goods, people, and vehicles, faced strong resistance from the local community. Resistance to any movement or initiative aimed at restoring normality reveals a deeper divide between the hill and valley communities. Although the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and the Central Security Forces had earlier stated that the buffer zones were never intended to define sovereignty, the Kuki-Zo groups perceive these zones as the “outer limits of their exclusive control.” For Kuki-Zo groups, buffer zones have become a political tool. By denying Meiteis access to highways, trade routes, and government facilities in the hills, they reinforce the claim that these territories belong to a different order. The Village Volunteers Coordinating Committee (VVCC) warned on September 5, 2025, that “the so-called re-opening of NH-2 is meaningless, as valley residents remain excluded. Buffer zones have turned into instruments of division, not protection” (Bobichand, 2025). This widening divide means that a temporary security measure now has the political implications of partition.

Perhaps the most poignant aspect is the emotional toll. In some areas, even the word “Manipur” has become contentious, with questions raised and banners taken down. During the Shirui Lily Festival in May 2025, a Manipur State Transport (MST) bus carrying journalists was reportedly halted at the Gwaltabi checkpoint in the Imphal East district along the Imphal-Ukhrul road, where security personnel instructed it to conceal the word “Manipur” on its windscreen. The incident ignited widespread outrage and protests, with many viewing it as a symbolic erasure of the state’s identity (Shirin, 2025a; FP News Desk, 2025). It is a quiet yet potent sign that, for many, the idea of a shared homeland is gradually disappearing.

During three years of intense violence, buffer zones have shifted from merely preventing clashes to becoming tools of political control. By banning both Meiteis and Kukis from crossing into each other’s territories, they reinforce exclusivity and limit access to highways, hospitals, schools, markets, government offices, airports, and turn government premises into fortresses. Furthermore, Kuki-Zo groups continue to demand the maintenance of buffer zones across the entire state. On 14th January 2026, thousands of people from the Kuki-Zo community held a large rally in the hill districts of Manipur, predominantly inhabited by Kuki-Zo tribes. They reiterated their demand for an immediate political solution, specifically a Union Territory with a legislature under Article 239A of the Indian Constitution, for the Kuki-Zo people,

whom they claim have suffered greatly due to ethnic conflict with the Meitei community. The rallies were organised by prominent Kuki-Zo civil society groups, including the Kuki-Zo Council (KZC), the Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF), the Committee on Tribal Unity (COTU), and several allied organisations, aiming for a definitive political resolution. Following the rally, leaders of the KZC and ITLF submitted a memorandum to the Union Home Minister, Amit Shah, through the Deputy Commissioner of Churachandpur. It asserts that a “de facto separation” already exists and warns against resettling Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from the Meitei community into the “buffer zone” or near Kuki-Zo areas (The Hindu Bureau, 2026). This aligns with the decision of ten Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) representing the Kuki-Zo communities, including seven from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who on 13th January 2026, resolved to refuse participation in forming a government in Manipur without a written, time-bound commitment to finalise their demand for the creation of a Union Territory with a legislature comprising Kuki-dominated districts before the Assembly’s tenure ends in February 2027 (Karmakar, 2026). Although Nemcha Kipgen was joined in forming the popular government as the first woman Deputy Chief Minister after a long stint under President Rule, she reiterates that the buffer zones between the Meiteis and the Kuki-Zo communities should remain for now, particularly in areas where the scars run deep, because safety comes first (Singh, 2026).

Although the buffer zones were recently established, anger and resentment have been growing for years, and it is clear that the incident of the 3rd of May was only the tip of the iceberg. This urges us to scrutinise the complex web of historical, social, and economic factors that have contributed to the hill-valley divide and to investigate the possible root causes of such persistent, even intractable, hostility between ethnic groups.

Conclusion: Beyond Binaries Towards a Plural Future

The hill-valley divide in Manipur is a persistent feature of the state’s social and political landscape, shaped by historical trajectories, geography, institutions, and narratives: it is geographical but also legal; cultural but also economic. Any credible pathway out of recurring violence must acknowledge the legitimacy of multiple claims—hill communities’ right to communal land and cultural continuity; valley communities’ claims to citizenship rights and access to development—and must develop institutions that transform plural legitimacy into governance arrangements that avoid re-creating zero-sum politics. The de jure separation of the valley and hills of Manipur remains the most complex issue, especially as it involves the Nagas and Kuki-Zo communities within the state.

The ethnic violence since May 2023 reveals how deep-rooted issues can suddenly escalate into violence when triggered by legal and political conflicts. The hills-valley divide risks becoming deeply ingrained, not only in government but also in the minds of communities on both sides. The division and hostility between generations, often ingrained in the minds of the younger generation, are concerning. The hills-valley split is not a recent division but the outcome of a long and complex history, shaped by colonial borders, disputed political arrangements, and uneven development. These historical grievances still influence current conflicts, misunderstandings, and institutional exclusion. However, while history may explain the roots of present tensions, it need not determine our future. Recognising these lived experiences without letting them dominate us is the first step towards healing. As the region faces a crucial

moment, there is a shared responsibility to look beyond fixed narratives and reimagine a future based on mutual respect, fairness, and a sense of shared belonging. Reconciliation is not just an aim; it must be a collective endeavour, gradually built through dialogue, empathy, and the courage to see each other not as enemies, but as equal partners in a shared story.

The uphill challenge facing the new government is to restore normalcy to a state that is practically divided into ethnic enclaves. The Chief Minister has yet to visit the hills mainly inhabited by the Kuki-Zo, although he met the Kuki-Zo victims of the ethnic clashes in the hill districts via virtual mode. The Kuki-Zo victims were willing to speak to Khemchand and recognised him as the state CM. At least this is a positive start, because the Kuki-Zo communities refused to acknowledge former CM Biren Singh after the clashes erupted in May 2023.

Given the level of violence and the resulting trust deficit, a comprehensive strategy is essential for the new government and the people of all communities: rebuilding trust, establishing inclusive institutions that balance customary rights with state law, investing fairly, and fostering genuine political dialogue that makes pluralism both a normative ideal and a real institutional reality. Long-term investments in reconciliation and equitable development require political bravery and ongoing commitment from the state, the Centre, and civil society. It is unlikely that either the Manipur government or the Central government will initiate any political process, whether to create a separate administration for the Kuki-Zo or to grant Scheduled Tribe status to the Meiteis. Nonetheless, the *de facto* separate administration is probably to continue as long as hatred and violence persist, which has been the case for nearly three consecutive years.

Despite all the ongoing debates about the hill-valley divide, one constant theme that emerges is the historically symbiotic relationship between the two regions. Jangkhomang Guite (2018, p. 405) accurately states:

There was a peculiar situation across the frontier regions of the Northeast region in the precolonial time, a situation of dovetailing, interpenetrating, and mutually interdependent living between the two worlds of the hills and the valleys. If the topographical friction of terrain and the difference in cultural patterns kept the divide alive, the economic interdependence and interpenetrating space of the resource conduit kept the symbiosis alive.

This demonstrates that, despite differences in geography, religion, culture, and administrative organisation in both contemporary and pre-colonial times—or before the adoption of Christianity by the hill tribes and Hinduism by the valley people—the hill and valley have never existed in isolation from each other; instead, they have maintained a continuous interdependence based on economic and social exchange. However, the state government should act in accordance with what the Indian government has done to uphold tribal autonomy, so that the tribal people do not feel alienated, as they did during the British period. Rather, it should ensure they have areas of autonomy to legislate on personal matters, such as land transfers and property rights, and the divide will persist in the years to come. India is already striving, in pursuit of the Jawaharlal Nehru—Verrier Elwin Panchsheel model, to retain as much integration as possible. However, this should not be enforced on tribals who do not wish to be part of the valley. Applying this paradigm in the context of Manipur’s ‘territorial integrity’, it should not be made compulsory, but the sentiments of both the

valley and hill people should be respected. Both groups will ultimately have to decide whether this territorial integrity remains the most urgent priority, especially given that the shared history and politics of the people inhabiting the valley and hills have gradually become segregated. Therefore, India exemplifies the idea that national integration and tribal autonomy can coexist.

Endnotes

¹ Loipotkaba is a system where the conquered tribe, mostly those near the valley who were not otherwise under the monarch's administration, was required to pay an annual tribute to the Meitei king; failure to do so often resulted in reprisals.

² The government created buffer zones in different areas in four different districts of Manipur. These zones are characterised by multiple police outposts and regular patrolling by military personnel.

³ Mukesh is a 20-year-old man from Imphal who was reported missing in March 2025. The police investigation report states that his car was observed moving on the outskirts of the Bishnupur district, near Kuki-dominated areas.

References

- Ali, Y. (2023). "The Manipur Crisis in Numbers: Four Months of Unending Violence," *The Wire*, September, <https://thewire.in/security/the-manipur-crisis-in-numbers-four-months-of-unending-violence>
- Barooah, N. K. (2015). *David Scott in North-East India*, Guwahati: Bhabani Books.
- BBC (2023), "Manipur: Murders and Mayhem Tearing Apart an Indian State," *BBC*, 13 July, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-66086142>
- Bhatia, B. (2010). "Justice Denied to Tribals in the Hill Districts of Manipur," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(31): 38–46.
- Bhattacharjee, G. (2016). *Special Category States of India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Bobichand, R. (2025). "Buffer Zones Become De Facto Borders of Manipur's Silent Separation," *Imphal Review of Arts and Politics*, September 20, <https://imphalreviews.in/buffer-zones-become-de-facto-borders-of-manipurs-silent-separation/>
- Bobichand, R. (2025a). "Creation of Buffer Zones has Encouraged Kuki-Zomi Occupation of a Swathe of Manipur as their Exclusive Territory," *Imphal Review of Arts and Politics*, April 19, <https://imphalreviews.in/creation-of-buffer-zones-has-encouraged-kuki-zomi-occupation-of-a-swathe-of-manipur-as-their-exclusive-territory/>
- Chishti, S.M.A.W. (1979). *Political Development in Manipur 1919-1949*, PhD Doctoral Thesis, Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University.
- Chishti, S.M.A.W. (2005). *Political Development in Manipur 1919-1949*, Delhi: Kalpaz Publications.
- Chopra, R. (2023). "Manipur: Almost Six Months After Clashes Began, only 25% of Looted Arms Found," *The Indian Express*, 29 October, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/manipur-almost-six-months-after-clashes-began-only-25-of-looted-arms-found-9003876/>
- Choudhury, R. and Achom, D. (2026). "President's Rule Revoked in Manipur, NDA Leaders Stake Claim," *NDTV*, February 04, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/presidents-rule-revoked-in-manipur-nda-leaders-stake-claim-to-form-government-10944647>

- Das, M. (2023). "Manipur Violence: How Govt Has Created Buffer Zones in 4 'Sensitive' Districts to Keep Kukis, Meiteis in Check," *News 18*, July 4, <https://www.news18.com/india/manipur-violence-how-govt-has-created-buffer-zones-in-4-sensitive-districts-to-keep-kukis-meiteis-in-check-8244103.html>
- Dev, Bimal J. and Dilip K. Lahiri (1987). *Manipur: Culture and Politics*, Delhi: Mittal Publications
- Dena, L. (1991). "Kuki Rebellion 1917-1920," in *History of Modern Manipur 1826-1949*, edited by Lal Dena, New Delhi: Orbit Publishers & Distributors.
- Dena, Lal, & Lal Robul Pudaite. (2023). "Colonial Divide in Manipur: Tracing the Journey of State between 1835 and 1947." *Outlook India*. September 4, 2023. <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/colonial-divide-in-manipur-tracing-the-journey-of-state-between-1835-and-1947-news-315632>.
- Dunn, E. W. (1992). *Gazetteer of Manipur*, Delhi: Manas Publications
- Elwin, V. (1969). *The Nagas in the Nineteenth Century*, Bombay: Oxford University Press.
- E-pao.net (2015), "TYCM Says Gaikhangam has Misinterpreted Meaning of Money Bills," September 23, <https://e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=22..240915.sep15>
- E-pao.net (2014), "JCILPS Conducts Survey on Non-Locals in Imphal East," E-Pao.Net, October 11, <https://e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=4..121014.oct14>
- FP News Desk. (2025). "Why Manipur's Shirui Lily Festival Has Turned into a Flashpoint over Identity." *Firstpost*. May 27, 2025. <https://www.firstpost.com/india/why-manipurs-shirui-lily-festival-has-turned-into-a-flashpoint-over-identity-13892263.html>.
- Ganguly, M. (2024). "Authorities Fail to Address Ethnic Violence in India's Manipur State," *Human Rights Watch*, November 19, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/11/19/authorities-fail-address-ethnic-violence-indias-manipur-state>
- Goswami, A. (2023). "Manipur: 3 People Killed, Houses Burnt in Fresh Violence," August 5, <https://www.newsbytesapp.com/news/india/manipur-3-people-killed-houses-burnt-in-fresh-violence/story>
- Guite, J. (2014). "Colonialism and Its Unruly? The Colonial State and Kuki Raids in Nineteenth Century Northeast India," *Modern Asian Studies*, 48(5): 1188–1232.
- Guite, J. (2018). *Against State, Against History*. Oxford University Press.
- Gupta, B. Das (2016). "Hill Tribes Feel Alienated in Manipur," *Millennium Post*, September 15, <https://www.millenniumpost.in/hill-tribes-feel-alienated-in-manipur-161422>
- Hangsing, S. (2025). "How State Repression and Deliberate Ethnic Polarisation Made Manipur Boil Over," *Progressive International*, February 21, <https://progressive.international/wire/2025-02-21-how-state-repression-and-deliberate-ethnic-polarisation-made-manipur-boil-over/en/>
- Haokip, T. (2022). "Ethnocracy in Deeply Divided Societies: The Dynamics of Ethnopolitics in Manipur," *Vernacular Politics in Northeast India: Democracy, Ethnicity, and Indigeneity*, Jelle J P Wouters (ed), New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 175-98.
- Haokip, T. (2022a). "Unwillingness to Share Power: Manipur and the ADCs Bill, 2021," *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. LVII, No. 14, April 2, 25–28.
- Haokip, T. (2024). "Selective Outrage, Selective Targeting: The Politics of Othering in Manipur," *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. LIX, No. 31, August 3, pp.36-41
- Hausing, K. Khan Suan (2015). "From Oppression to Acquiescence: The 2015 District Council Elections in Manipur," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 50(46/47): 79–83.

- HRW (2025). "India: Ethnic Clashes Restart in Manipur," *Human Rights Watch*, March 27, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/27/india-ethnic-clashes-restart-manipur>
- Hudson, T.C. (1911). *The Naga Tribes of Manipur*, London: Macmillan and Co., Limited
- ICG (2025). "Finding a Way Out of festering Conflict in India's Manipur," *International Crisis Group*, 14 February 2025, Brussels.
- Jilangamba, Y. (2015). "Beyond the Ethno-Territorial Binary: Evidencing the Hill and Valley Peoples in Manipur," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38, No. 2: 276–289.
- Jimmy, L. (2023). "What Led to the Violence in Manipur's Churachandpur before CM N Biren Singh's Visit?" *The Indian Express*. May 1, 2023. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/violence-manipur-churachandpur-biren-singh-cm-kuki-8585138/>.
- Kamei, G. (2007). *Ethnicity and Social Change: An Anthology of Essays*, New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House.
- Kamei, A. L. (2024). *Governmentality: Power and Counter Conduct in Northeast India's Manipur and Nagaland*, New York: Routledge
- Karmakar, S. (2025). "Free Movement or Not? Flip Flops Over Re-opening of NH-2 Trigger Confusion in Conflict-Torn Manipur," *Deccan Herald*, September 15, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/manipur/free-movement-or-not-flip-flops-over-re-opening-of-nh-2-trigger-confusion-in-conflict-torn-manipur-3729317>
- Karmakar, S. (2026). "Kuki MLAs Refuse to Take Part in Govt Formation in Manipur Without Written Commitment on UT Demand," *Deccan Herald*, January 13, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/manipur/kuki-mlas-refuse-to-take-part-in-govt-formation-in-manipur-without-written-commitment-on-ut-demand-3861095>
- Karmakar, R. & Vijaita Singh (2026). "Tension rises in Manipur after Meitei man's killing," *The Hindu*, 23 January, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/manipur/manipur-violence-man-shot-dead-in-churachandpur/article70536582.ece>
- Keen, C. (2015). *An Imperial Crisis in British India: The Manipur Uprising of 1891*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Kikon, D. (2010). "Valley versus hill," *Himal Southasian*, July 1, <https://www.himalmag.com/archives/valley-versus-hill>
- Kipgen, N. & Arnab Roy Chowdhury (2016). "Contested Statecraft on the Frontiers of the Indian Nation: Hills-Valley Divide and the Genealogy of Kuki Ethnic Nationalism in Manipur," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 16(2): 283–303.
- Kumar, N. (2023). "Manipur Violence: What Led to Violence in Churachandpur before CM's Visit?" *India TV News*. May 5, 2023. <https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/manipur-violence-raf-deployment-shoot-at-sight-order-what-we-know-so-far-detail-atsum-kangvai-churachandpur-phougakchao-st-christians-kukis-nagas-2023-05-05-868971>
- Lama, P. & Utpal Parashar (2023). "Soldiers' Kin Among 4 Abducted in Manipur; 7 Injured in Firing," *Hindustan Times*, November 08, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/soldiers-kin-among-4-abducted-in-manipur-7-injured-in-firing-101699383390731.html>
- Mackenzie, A. (2017). *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Manchanda, R. & Tapan Bose (2011). "Expanding the Middle Space in the Naga Peace Process," *Economic & Political Weekly*, 46 (53): 51–60.
- McCulloh, W. (1980). *Valley of Manipur*, Delhi: Gian Publications.

- Mishra, A. (2024). "Ex-Soldier Killed after Accidentally Crossing Meitei-Kuki Buffer Zone in Manipur," September 10, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/manipur-violence-ex-soldier-killed-after-accidentally-crossing-meitei-kuki-in-west-imphal-district-2597209-2024-09-10>
- Nag, S. (2002). *Contesting Marginality: Ethnicity, Insurgency and Subnationalism in North-east India*, Delhi: Manohar Publications
- NDTV News Desk. (2024). "Families of Missing People from Meitei Community Seek Closure, a Year after Manipur Violence Began." *NDTV*. May 2, 2024. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/families-of-missing-people-from-meitei-community-seek-closure-a-year-after-manipur-violence-began-5575326>.
- Nigam, A. (2023). "On the Current Turmoil in Manipur—What We Need to Know and What We Need to Do: NEFIS," *Kafila*, June 18, <https://kafila.online/2023/06/18/on-the-current-turmoil-in-manipur-what-we-need-to-know-and-what-we-need-to-do-nefis/>
- Northeast Live (2025). "Manipur MP Bimol Akoijam Barred from Visiting Market in His Own Constituency, Slams "Unconstitutional" Buffer Zone," June 30, <https://northeastlivetv.com/topnews/manipur-mp-bimol-akoijam-barred-from-visiting-market-in-his-own-constituency-slams-unconstitutional-buffer-zone/>
- Oinam, B. (2003). "Ethnic Conflict in the North-East: A Study on Manipur," *Economic & Political Weekly*, 38 (2): 2031-2037.
- Pautunthang, N. (2024). "India: Understanding the Hills-Valley Divide and Meitei-Kuki Conflict in Manipur," *Conflict Studies Quarterly*, Issue 48, July, pp.72–95.
- Peal, E. Samuel (1879). "Report on a Visit to the Nongyang Lake, on the Burmese Frontier," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, February, XLVIII, No. 1: 1–40.
- Piang, L Lam Khan (2019). "Institutional Exclusion of the Hill Tribes in Manipur," *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. LIV, No. 15: 54–61.
- Purohit, D. (2023). "Manipur: 'Trained' group in Police Uniform Crosses Buffer Zone, Kills Three Kukis in Hills," *The Telegraph*, September 13, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/north-east/manipur-trained-group-in-police-uniform-crosses-buffer-zone-kills-three-kukis-in-hills/cid/1965748>
- Reid, R. (1997). *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam from 1883-1941*, New Delhi: Spectrum
- Sadokpam, D. A. (2023). "What is really behind the violence in Manipur?," *Frontline*, May 06, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/news/what-is-really-behind-the-violence-in-manipur/article66820969.ece>
- Sangpui, L. & Jenny Kapngaihlian (2021). "The Quest to End Illicit Poppy Cultivation in Manipur: Examining the War on Drugs Campaign," *Economic & Political Weekly (Engage)*, 56(32): 1-12.
- Scott, J. C. (2009). *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Yale: Yale University Press.
- Shirin, B. (2025). "Kuki-Zo Women Block Meitei Pilgrimage Route in Manipur's Churachandpur." *India Today*. April 14, 2025. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/manipur/story/kuki-zo-women-block-meitei-pilgrimage-route-in-manipurs-churachandpur-2708533-2025-04-14>.
- Shirin, B. (2025a). "Fresh Clashes Erupt in Manipur over Erasing State Name from Buses, Shell Gas Used." *India Today*. May 25, 2025. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/manipur-state-bus-transport-name-removal-imphal-protest-coordinating-committee-manipur-integrity-shirui-festival-2730350-2025-05-25>.

- Siddiqui, F. A. (2017). "How a Manipur Town Finally Buried its Dead, 632 Days after They were Killed," *Hindustan Times*, May 28, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/how-a-manipur-town-finally-buried-its-dead-632-days-after-they-were-killed/story-2kQdEySW5sJqLk0mmca1BL.html>
- Singh, Dr Raj (2025). "Healing a Fractured State: Why Words Matter in Manipur," *The Sangai Express*, April 10, 2025, <https://epaper.thesangaiexpress.com/index.php?edition=Mpage&date=2025-04-10&page=4>
- Singh, L. (2024). "Manipur: Why did the Harmony Between Meiteis and Hill Tribes End?" *Outlook India*, January 18, <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/manipur-why-did-the-harmony-between-meiteis-and-hill-tribes-end—news-312156>
- Singh, V. (2026). "Joined Manipur Government in good faith, not for personal ambition: Deputy Chief Minister Nemcha Kipgen," *The Hindu*, 20 February, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/manipur/buffer-zones-in-manipur-may-need-to-continue-where-wounds-of-violence-remain-deep-deputy-cm-nemcha-kipgen/article70651772.ece>
- Singh, V. & Lakshman, A. (2023). "Ten Kuki MLAs from Manipur Demand 'separate administration'," *The Hindu*, May 12, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/ten-kuki-mlas-from-manipur-demand-separate-administration/article66843874.ece>
- Shaw, W. (1929). *Notes on the Thadou Kukis*, Guwahati: Spectrum Publications.
- Shimray, U.A. (2007). *Naga Population and Integration Movement*, New Delhi: Mittal Publications
- The Hindu Bureau (2026), "Kuki-Zo Council Reiterates Demand for Union Territory," *The Hindu*, January 14, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/manipur/after-rally-kuki-zos-stick-to-union-territory-demand/article70509635.ece>
- Touthang, Ngamtinlun. 2022. "Governing an Ethnically Divided Society: The Rise of BJP and Hill-Valley Divide in Manipur, Northeast India." *GUINEIS Journal*, Vol. IX, pp. 110-121.
- Ukhrul Times (2024). "28 People Still Reported Missing; at Least 1,555 People Injured in Manipur Violence" *Ukhrul Times*. March 6, 2024. <https://ukhrultimes.com/28-people-still-reported-missing-at-least-1555-people-injured-in-manipur-violence/>.