

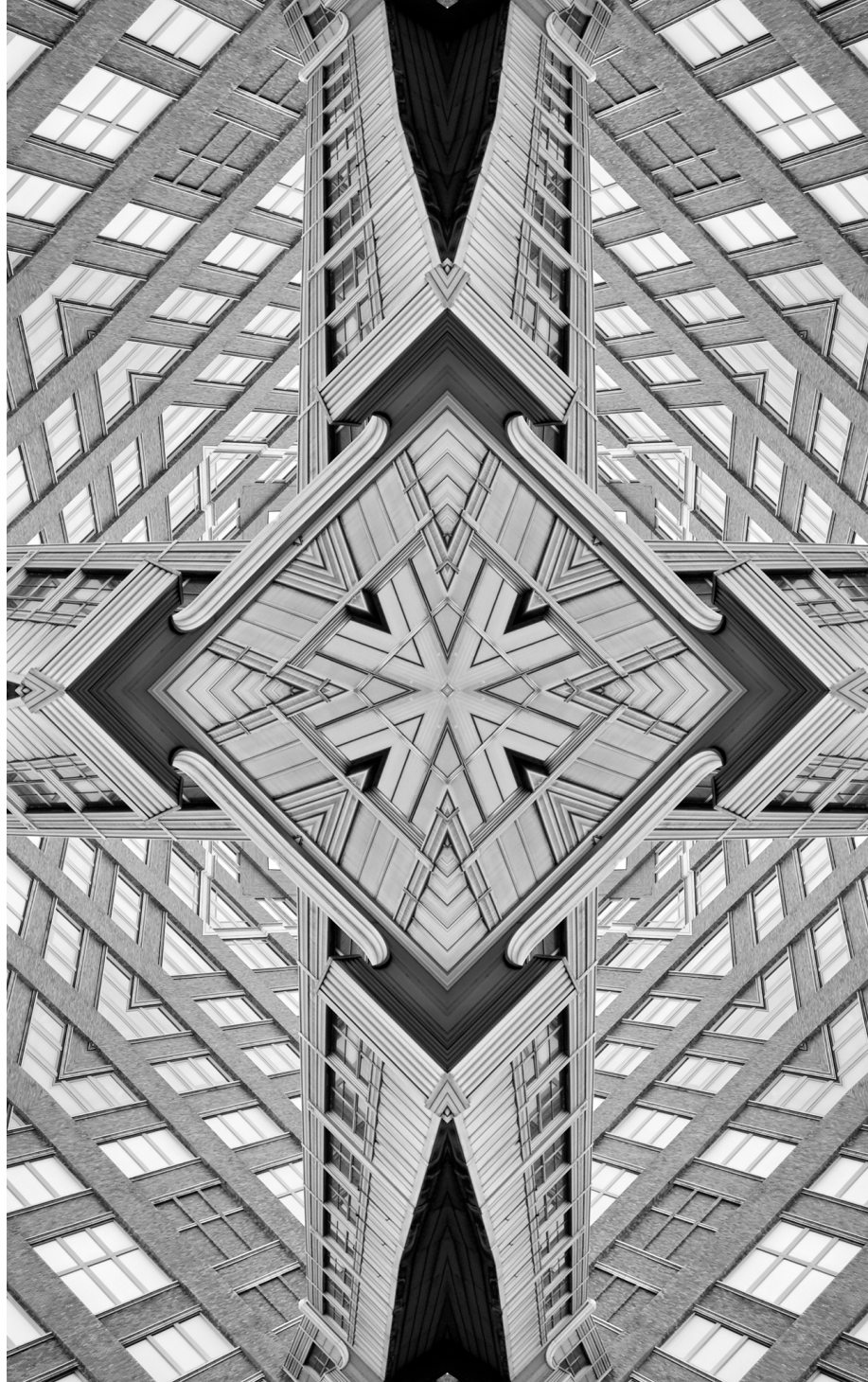
# Issue

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# Brief

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ISSUE NO. 671  
NOVEMBER 2023





# The Social and Political Dimensions of Ethnic Conflicts in Manipur

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## Abstract

The state of Manipur has been steeped in violent conflicts between ethnic groups for decades. The latest, ongoing strife between the Kukis and the Meiteis that erupted in early May has exposed the failure of state forces to contain the violence, even as it reflects the deep-rooted hostility between the two ethnic groups. This brief attempts to engage with the multifaceted, historical ethnic conflict between the Kukis and the Meiteis of Manipur. It ponders the social and political factors around the conflict, and offers a set of policy recommendations as a way towards improving the prospects for achieving peace in the state.

Beginning in May 2023, the outbreak of violence between the Meiteis and the Kukis in India’s Northeastern state of Manipur has once again brought the decades-long ethnic conflicts to the limelight.<sup>a</sup> As peace in Manipur seems like a distant dream, there are competing narratives around the genesis of the current eruption. Most media reports point to the 3 May incident in the Kuki-majority district of Churachandpur, while others say it was the Meitei groups’ act of blocking the roads in the Imphal East District.<sup>1</sup> Absent a consensus about the beginnings of this current episode, today the reality is that the Kukis have been forced to flee the Meitei-dominated areas, and the Meiteis have also moved out from the Kuki-dominated areas; there is little chance that the situation will be reversed soon.

The extent and scale of violence has been massive, if not completely unprecedented in Manipur. Officially,<sup>2</sup> as stated by the Inspector General of Police, I. K. Muivah, as of 14 September,<sup>b</sup> 175 people have been killed across the state, and 5,000 cases of arson including the torching of more than 4,700 houses have been reported. Moreover, 386 religious structures (254 churches, mostly belonging to the Kukis, and 132 temples) have been vandalised. Other sources report different figures. According to the Kuki Student Organisation,<sup>3</sup> for example, the Kukis have suffered 146 deaths; 7,000 houses and 360 churches have been burnt in their areas.

Amidst the continuing strife, the state government, led by Chief Minister N Biren Singh, has faced harsh criticism, both from the opposition and allies, for giving patronage to the Meitei groups<sup>4</sup> and being “prejudiced against the Kukis.”<sup>5</sup> Opposition parties, calling the state government to account, are demanding the imposition of ‘President’s rule’ in Manipur.<sup>c,6</sup> The Union Government has rejected demands to remove the chief minister from office and declared confidence in how his government has worked to control the situation.<sup>7</sup>

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- a The state of Manipur is composed of three major ethnic communities—the Meiteis, the Kukis, and the Nagas—along with the Muslims and the Buddhists. The Meiteis are the majority 54 percent of the population, followed by the Nagas and the Kukis constituting around 43 percent. The Hindu Meiteis mostly live in and around the Imphal valley and the Kukis and the Nagas live in the hill regions.
- b At the time of producing this brief in early November, this was the latest available data from the Manipur Police Department.
- c ‘President’s rule’, under Article 356 of the Indian Constitution, would suspend the existing state government of Manipur on the grounds of its failure to comply with the constitutional provisions. The Union government can then take direct control over the state machinery and administration in Manipur.

# Introduction

The current episodes of ethnic violence, although not completely unprecedented,<sup>d</sup> are the result of decades-long mistrust among the communities, the indifference of successive governments towards people's genuine grievances, the uneven distribution of resources, asymmetric political representation, and a massive governance deficit. Against this backdrop, this brief analyses the socio-political issues at the root of the ethnic conflicts in Manipur—in particular, that between the Kukis and the Meiteis. The brief argues that the violent clashes are extreme manifestations of decades-long conflicts between the Kukis and the Meiteis, in turn induced by social mistrust, manufactured apprehension and anxiety, the state government's lack of political will to address the grievances, and the rigid positions of the competing ethnic groups against each other. Further, the brief posits that looking for a legal solution to the conflict between the Meiteis and the Kukis would give limited results unless both communities open themselves to genuine dialogue. It outlines a set of policy recommendations to minimise the risks of ethnic conflict between the Meiteis and the Kukis.

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<sup>d</sup> Manipur has witnessed many episodes of violent ethnic conflict in the past. The seven years of strife between the Nagas and the Kukis that lasted from 1992 to 1999 claimed some 2,000 lives and left about 100,000 people displaced. In May 1993, the Meitei and the Pangal conflict claimed 130 lives in and around the Imphal area.



# The Socio-Political Roots of the Meitei-Kuki Conflict

**F**ollowing the end of colonial rule, the erstwhile princely state of Manipur merged with the Union of India in October 1949. It was made a Union Territory in 1956, and a full-fledged state in 1972. The state of Manipur comprises three ethnic groups—i.e., the Meiteis, the Nagas, and the Kukis. The Meiteis constitute the majority, inhabiting mainly the Imphal valley and surrounding areas; the Scheduled Tribes, Nagas and Kukis, live in the hilly regions.

Since the 1960s, various militant groups have emerged in Manipur, claiming to represent the various demands and grievances of their respective ethnic communities; the Kukis and the Nagas, in particular, have been fighting for their separate homeland—a struggle that naturally conflicts with the aim of the Meiteis to defend the state’s territorial integrity. Its long border with Myanmar—which is ungoverned territory—and the fraternal and other ties between the militant groups across the border, compounds the security threat on Manipur. Against this backdrop, the following paragraphs outline the most crucial issues that have birthed and fueled the ethnic conflicts in Manipur.

## **Contestation over ethnic indigeneity**

The very idea of what is “Manipur” fundamentally varies across the different ethnic communities that call the state their home.<sup>8</sup> While there is some consensus among the majority of Meiteis and the Nagas over their common roots, the Kukis are seen as outsiders. The Kukis, for their part, claim to be equally indigenous to Manipur—a claim that the Meiteis contest.<sup>9</sup> The much-cited ‘Anglo-Kuki War’<sup>10</sup> by the Kukis to claim their indigeneity to Manipur is often contested by the Meiteis.

In August 2023, an FIR was filed against the author of the book, ‘The Anglo-Kuki War 1917-19’, Vijay Chenji; the petitioner, Federation of Haomee, a Meitei organisation, called the publication a “fictional war that was being falsely disseminated widely creating an environment which disturbed the peace of the state.”<sup>11</sup>

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e The contestations over indigeneity are often fueled by grassroots organisations such as Arambai Tenggol, Meitei Leepun, The Coordinating Committee of Manipur Integrity, Kuki Innpi Manipur, Zomi Council, and the Hmar Inpui. These ethnic organisations assert their respective identity and often function through the ‘otherisation’ framework.

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## **Territorial integrity vs Demands for a separate homeland**

The contestation over indigeneity has manifested itself in the decades-long clash between the fight for Manipur's 'territorial integrity', as asserted by the Meiteis, and the demands for separate homeland by the Kukis and the Nagas. The NSCN-IM-led militancy, for one, demands the creation of Nagalim-Greater Nagaland that covers a substantial portion of the Naga-majority areas in Manipur. In June 2001, the Government of India and the NSCN-IM signed the Bangkok Agreement<sup>12</sup> that extended the three-year ceasefire including in the Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur; the agreement was not accepted by the Meitei groups, and violent clashes killed 13 people in one day alone. Similarly, the Kukis' demand for a Kukiland-*Zale'n-gam* also causes apprehensions to the Meiteis.

Indeed, the Meiteis consider themselves the custodians of Manipur. The former Home Secretary of India, G. K. Pillai once argued that conferring statehood to Nagaland before Manipur—<sup>13</sup> an extension of the provisions of the ceasefire agreement to the Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur—in many ways, legitimises the emergence and operations of the Meitei militant groups in the name of protecting the territorial integrity of Manipur.

To be sure, the Kuki organisations have recently started showing differences over the demands for a separate homeland, versus calls for separate administrative arrangements. The Kuki Innpi Manipur (KIM)—the apex body of the Kukis—along with the Indigenous Tribal Leaders' Forum (ITLF) is pitching the demand for a separate state or a Union Territory whereas the Zomi Council and the Suspension of Operation (SoO)<sup>14</sup> groups are demanding autonomy.<sup>15</sup>

## **Uneven distribution of resources**

The violent clashes between the Kukis and the Meiteis that erupted on 3 May are often attributed to the High Court's order to the Manipur state government to submit its recommendations on the Schedule Tribe (ST) status demand of the Meiteis.

The ST status would legally allow the Meiteis to have ownership over the land resources that, at present, are mostly under the control of the Nagas and the Kukis. For their part, the Nagas and the Kukis fear that granting ST status to



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the Meiteis would give the latter monopoly over the land, which in turn would further strengthen their dominance over political and economic resources. Moreover, Manipur's geographical makeup—i.e., Meiteis living in the valley and the Kukis and the Nagas living in the hills—sustains the narratives of marginalisation by the non-Meitei communities.<sup>16</sup>

Demographically, the Meiteis constitute more than 50 percent of the state's total population and fall either under the unreserved or Other Backward Class (OBC) category; the Kukis and the Nagas (who are Christians), meanwhile, are STs. The Meiteis inhabit only 10 percent of the total land cover of Manipur, whereas the Nagas and the Kukis (together constituting close to 40 percent of the population) live in the remaining 90 percent of the land.

The Meiteis are not legally permitted to buy land in and around the Kuki- and Naga-inhabited areas. Ever since Manipur joined the union of India in 1949, the collective grievances of the Meiteis have been around their lack of rights to protect their customs, land, beliefs, and livelihoods.<sup>17</sup>

The Meiteis, under the banner of the Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur (STDCM), have been demanding ST status since 2012.<sup>18</sup> The Government of India, on 29 May 2013, asked the Manipur State Government to submit a recommendation as to whether the Meiteis should be included in the ST list. The state government has failed to respond at the time of writing this brief. Once again, on 31 May 2022, the Union government asked for a recommendation.

Mutum Churamani, a Meitei, petitioned the High Court to direct the state government to submit its recommendations. A one-member bench of the High Court issued an order on 4 April 2023, directing the state government to file its response within four weeks. Any response from the state government has since been overshadowed by the eruption of clashes.

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## The Hill-Valley Divide: Uneven development and Asymmetric political representation

The Hill-Valley divide in Manipur—seen in issues such as the demand of the Meiteis for ST status and the opposition to it—is deeply rooted. Among the multiple factors that have historically wedged this divide is asymmetric development and political representation. Economic development and political power has been valley-centric, leaving the Kukis and the Nagas bereft of the benefits.

Over the years, whatever infrastructure development has been recorded in Manipur has largely been in the Valley. The unevenness is stark in the budget allocations: Between 2017 and 2020, for example, the total budget allocation for the Imphal valley was INR 21,481 crores whereas for the hills, it was a far lower INR 419 crores.<sup>19</sup>

At present, the Nagas, Kukis, and other tribal populations<sup>f</sup> living in the hills (~40 percent of the state's population) have only 19 seats in the Manipur state legislative assembly, whereas the Meiteis (50 percent of the population) have 40 seats.<sup>g,20</sup>

With such disproportionate representation, the Kukis and the Nagas are left dependent on a state assembly that is controlled by Meitei lawmakers, irrespective of party affiliation. Existing literature produced by the Kukis asserts that since the laws and the policies are mere instruments of the Meitei assertion into the tribal areas, the former cannot see any solution to the ongoing conflict under the current arrangement.<sup>21</sup>

Scholars have also reflected on the uneven development in Manipur; they argue that the marginalisation of the Kukis and Nagas is not merely because of their limited political representation but also related to their locality, ethnic status, and history.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>f</sup> The others include the minuscule minority tribal groups of Nepalis, Pangals and Buddhists.

<sup>g</sup> To illustrate: Each Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from the Kukis and Nagas represents 61,106 persons; each MLA from the Meiteis represent 40, 841 persons.



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## Governance deficit and Demands for autonomy

The issues of asymmetric political representation and development are worsened by a persisting governance deficit. As mentioned briefly earlier, insurgency movements belonging to each of the ethnic communities have established governance mechanisms parallel to the formal governance structures in Manipur. In the absence of a perceived or real governance, the informal governance structures play important roles.

Arguably, the governance deficit can be directly attributed to the faulty and ineffective decentralisation of power in Manipur, where the populations in the hill districts are often unable to obtain justice for their grievances.<sup>23</sup> As scholars have argued, the linkages between identity and discrimination in governance have driven ethnic polarisation in Manipur.<sup>24</sup>

The key issues related to decentralisation in Manipur are the formation, and the functions, of the Hill Areas Committee (HAC) and Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), as well as the demands for the Sixth Schedule status for the Hill districts. The HAC, formed under Article 371C with the legislation of the Manipur State Assembly (Hill Areas Committee Order, 1972) and the ADC through the District Council Act-1971 (enforced in 1973) aimed at protecting the rights, entitlements, and interests of the tribal populations in the hill districts. Accordingly, the six ADCs<sup>25</sup> were constituted to ensure decentralised governance for the state's tribal people. However, the ADCs of Manipur are often toothless; with their limited legislative and judiciary powers, they remain dependent on the state government for policies to be implemented. They are reduced to being mere administrative and executive bodies, creating resentment and grievances.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, such conflicts are not always limited between the valley-based majority and the hill-based minorities. Even among the tribal groups—i.e., the Nagas and the Kukis—there is no consensus on the extension of Sixth Schedule provisions in the ADC areas. The National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution, in its report of March 2002, recommended the extension of the Sixth Schedule in the Hill areas of Manipur. However, it got a cold response from the Nagas as militant groups like the NSCN-IM and the United Naga Council (the apex Naga body) found it a hindrance to their greater objective of a separate homeland, *Nagalim*.<sup>27</sup>

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Similarly, at the legislation level, the demands for more autonomy for the tribal communities in the hill regions face impediments. In a recent attempt to ensure more autonomy to the HAC and to the ADCs, the Manipur (Hill Areas) Autonomous District Council Bill, 2021 was to be introduced in the 13<sup>th</sup> Session of the 11<sup>th</sup> Manipur Legislative Assembly as a Government Bill on 20 August 2021. This was also an attempt to bring about amendments to the existing HAC Act of 1971.<sup>28</sup> Before the introduction of the Bill, the State Government accused the HAC members of attempting to divide the state into two power blocs.<sup>29</sup> Instead, the government introduced the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Amendment Bills (read without mentioning the Autonomous aspects in it) and the Kukis felt betrayed.<sup>30</sup>

## **Illegal immigration, War on drugs, and Anxiety over citizenship**

Issues emanating from certain neighbouring countries of India also contribute to the ethnic conflicts in Manipur. These include the dumping of goods from China; the illegal migration (both real and the perceived) of the Chins from Myanmar; and increasing cultivation of poppies and consequently the rising drug trade in Manipur. While the dumping of goods<sup>31</sup> from China is often seen through the prism of state security, the illegal immigration from Myanmar, and the rise of poppy cultivation and the drug trade are often linked to the Kukis of Manipur. The majority of Meiteis (and to some extent the Nagas, too) are of the view that the illegal migration of the Chins from Myanmar, following the takeover of the *junta* in 2021, threatens the ‘demographic balance’ of Manipur. Moreover, the Meiteis believe that with the illegal immigration of Chins from Myanmar, there has been a spike in poppy cultivation in and around the Kuki majority areas, leading to the rise of the drug trade in the state.<sup>32</sup> Such claims, however, are rejected by the Kukis. For the Meiteis, the Kukis are “shifting the demography” of Manipur; for the Kukis, the Meiteis are pushing their “majoritarian agenda”.<sup>33</sup>

While the competing narratives fuel the ethnic conflict, Kukis view certain policies of the Manipur state government as being targeted against them. These include the ‘war on drugs’, the conduct of surveys through the Manipur State Population Commission (MSPC) supposedly to identify ‘illegal immigrants’;<sup>34</sup> and the eviction and demolition drives in various parts of Manipur. Data from the state government belie these views, however: Of some 2,518 arrests made



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under the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act between 2017 and 2023, 1,083 were Muslims, 381 were Meiteis, 873 Kuki-Chins, and 181 were from other communities.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, during the same period, the Kuki-Chin community cultivated around 13,121 acres of land for growing poppies while the Naga community cultivated around 2,340 acres.<sup>36</sup>

Along with the government's measures to crack down on poppy cultivation and drug trade, the surveys conducted through the MSPC to identify the illegal immigrants induced by the demands from the Meiteis for the implementation of the NRC in Manipur has created fear and anxiety among the Kukis. Moreover, the implementation drives to protect the forests, since October 2022, is perceived to be biased against the Kukis. The eviction of villages, mostly belonging to the Kuki-Z-Chin communities,<sup>37</sup> the demolition of Kuki churches<sup>38</sup> and of the tribal colonies in Imphal Valley, have all fueled perceptions among the Kukis that they were being persecuted. The government rejects any alleged bias against the Kukis. Official figures say that the eviction drive between October 2015 and April 2023 has evicted 413 households from the reserved forests of Manipur. Of these, 280 households were Meiteis (143 Meitei Hindus and 137 Meitei Pangal-Muslims); 59 were Kukis; 38, Naga; and 36 were Nepali.<sup>39</sup>

It is around these claims by the Kukis being targeted, and the counterclaims by the Meiteis that the Kukis are shifting the demography by providing a safe haven to the illegal Chin migrants from Myanmar and engaging in poppy cultivation—that the ethnic conflict has worsened since erupting in early May. The ongoing violence has caused heavy losses in lives and property, to both the communities. The failure of the government in containing violence puts into question its political will in minimising the risks of ethnic conflicts in Manipur through an effective policy framework.

There is an urgent need for meaningful dialogue among the conflicting communities that could precede confidence-building measures among the ethnic groups. In turn, the only way that such confidence-building measure could be initiated is to bring an end to the violence. The political will of the state government would be key.

Earlier attempts to engage the ethnic communities in dialogue have offered little in terms of positive outcomes. The deep-rooted hostile sentiments that the communities harbour against one another have hardly left any platform for meaningful dialogue that would at least bring them to a consensus on the issues over which they are battling. Unfortunately, community-based organisations are keeping ethnic sentiments hostile against each other. In such a situation, academics and well-meaning individuals need to step forward to initiate dialogues between ethnic communities. It is important to mention that conflicts resolved through social platforms have more far-reaching positive results than the ones that are managed politically.


Disarming the militant groups (both those that are active and others who have suspended operations) and the civilians engaged in violent activities is of paramount importance, and the onus is on the state and the union government to act swiftly. Conflicts of this nature often provide fertile ground for militant groups to operate, recruit, ensure finance, and legitimise their existence and operations. The state of Manipur has been reeling under the massive ramifications of violence for decades and it can no longer afford to have its communities armed against each other. The governments need to check the illegal flow of arms across the border and their availability within the state.

The issues of competing ethnic sentiments over traditional ownership of land require a critical interrogation. Debates and discussions are required on the rationale of ethnic communities' assertion of customary ownership on land that necessarily functions around principles of 'othering'. The position of the Kukis and Nagas to limit the Meiteis, constituting more than 50 percent of the state population, to a mere 10 percent of the land makes little sense. Similarly, the patterns of state-led development benefits being concentrated among the Meiteis need to be reversed. Accordingly, the available land and other resources, socio-political status, and the benefits of development need to be equitably distributed and democratised.



A step forward would be to revisit and restructure the existing political representation, which has long been asymmetric in favour of the Meiteis. The state mechanism must streamline and bring uniformity to the legislative assembly constituencies—this would help bridge the wide gap between the hills and the valley. Thereafter, the issues of decentralised governance and demands for autonomy could rightfully be addressed, as the focus can shift to addressing the legitimate issues of governance without getting compounded by ethnic-specific sentiments.

Infusing a sense of fraternity among the ethnic groups to defeat the existing anarchy of ethnic majoritarianism needs to be prioritised. In doing so, the political will of the state mechanism and the consensus at the social level need to converge. It is important to highlight that the demands for ethnic homeland or separate territorial arrangements are necessarily driven by majoritarian principles.<sup>40</sup> Entertaining the demands for a separate homeland or the assertions of a community as the sole guardian of the territorial integrity of a state defeats the democratic ethos of India. The power elites, across the ethnic communities, should understand that there would hardly be any end to such group-based demands.

Lastly, in an ethnically fragile state such as Manipur, policymaking should rise above the electoral interests of incumbent regimes. Policies around short-term electoral interests have had negative implications on the nation-building endeavour. 

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