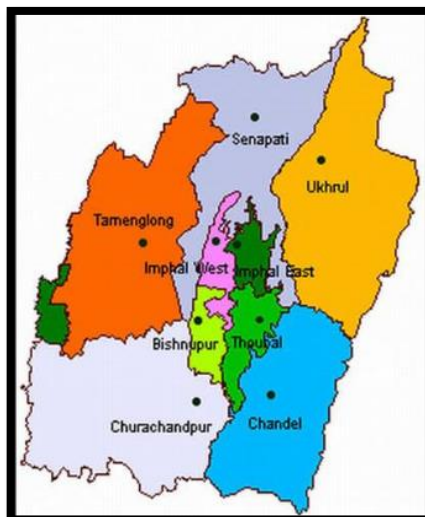


MAY 3rd 2023 ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN MANIPUR: IS THIS THE PRODUCT OF A STRATEGIC COLLUSION BETWEEN KUKI MILITANTS, ILLEGAL IMMIGANTS AND DRUG CARTELS?

Various narratives from both ends explaining the trigger behind the most recent altercation between Meitei and Kuki are largely accusatory in nature. That said, it is important to look at the history and demography of Manipur in order to properly understand the long-running internal strife, the tribal communities' vigorous resistance to Meitei demands for ST designation and the eruption of the communal violence currently taking place.

Manipur is a state in the Northeast of India which was granted its statehood on the 21st of January 1972. Earlier, it was under Union Territory after passing the **North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act, 1971**. It spans a total area of 22,327 square km and as per the [2011 Census](#) ([Manipur Population Census 2011](#), [Manipur Religion, Literacy, Sex Ratio - Census India](#)), the population of the state was estimated at 28.56 lakhs (roughly 2.87 million), whereas the distribution between Hindus and Christians, to be about 41% each. According to available source, the population of Manipur is currently 31.94 lakhs (roughly 3.2 million) as of 2022. There are 33 recognized tribes considered indigenous peoples of Manipur. To be more specific, many of these ethnic sub-tribal communities identify as either Kuki or Naga; in essence, there is no actual homogenous tribe community known as Kuki or Naga. Meiteis (mainly Hindu tribes) reside in the Imphal valley which accounts for approximately 9% of the total area while Christian tribes (mainly Kuki and Naga) reside in the Hill areas. There is no land protection for Meiteis of this meagre 9% of Manipur's overall land mass, known as the Imphal valley, which is shared by a variety of different ethnic tribes, including Muslim, as well as other non-Manipuri communities like the Marwaris, Punjabi, Bengali etc. However, none of these groups, including the Meiteis, are permitted to live in Hill areas. Moreover, once a land has been purchased and owned by tribal members in the Valley area, repurchasing and reacquiring said land from a tribal community member is an exceedingly challenging and laborious endeavor as it is protected under a special Provision regarding Schedule Tribes. Bear in mind that these numerous disadvantages faced by indigenous Meiteis to own land in their native state –largely due to this inequitable bifurcation of hill-valley laws – come in spite of the entirety of the state of Manipur state being classified as a Hill state, much like Srinagar, a valley in Jammu and Kashmir. This is following the 1965 Planning Commission, where states in India are categorized as Hill States and States with Hill areas.



The tribal communities who are protected by the constitution article 371 strongly oppose the Meitei receiving the ST status contending that they are already privileged elite Hindus, and may infringe on their rights to their share of the reservations and thus encroach their lands. Manipuri or Meitei Lon has historically been employed as a language of trade as the Meitei have traditionally controlled the Imphal valley, which served primarily as a hub for commerce and economic activity. As this is also the official language in Manipur, it seems to be a source of shared grievance among the tribal communities that there is a certain bias towards a single community – this argument needs to be reconsidered in those terms.

On the other hand, the Meitei maintain that this demand for inclusion has nothing to do with other tribes as it has been a long-standing demand that, for decades, has fallen on deaf ears and largely ignored by all governments. For their part, the Meitei contend that because of their marginalization, being socially and economically underdeveloped, they are entitled to the constitutional protection of their rich culture and heritage which would otherwise be at risk of being lost and feel that requesting the ST status is not only justified but becoming increasingly urgent. The Imphal Valley population is very diverse and reflects its multicultural and multi-ethnic makeup. In recent years, the fervor of the ST demand has been reignited with the train set to connect Manipur to the rest of the country.

The indigenous Meiteis, both those adhering to Hinduism and those following the ancient faith of Sanamahism have been safeguarding their culture and heritage, preserving sacred groves, and worshipping their native gods and goddesses for countless generations. Despite the adoption of Hinduism, Meitei Hindus have a long and steadfast tradition of performing indigenous Meitei rituals – every household has a designated corner for the "Lainingthou" (supreme God) and every locality possesses a sacred deity who watches over the sacred grove where yearly celebrations of the "Laiharaoba" take place in every neighborhood. Moreover, the majority of the tribal population is Christian, a religion introduced by European missionaries in the late 19th century. While they are also protecting their lands and traditions, much of it has been lost after the adoption of Christianity as the religion does not permit dual worship or the observance of non-Christian traditions. It is important to note that the granting of the ST status is a constitutional matter that requires a thorough examination of the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the community. The decision to grant or reject the Meiteis' demand for the ST designation ultimately rests with the Central government based on the recommendations of the committee.

In order to postulate the possibility of a common resentment toward the Meitei from these communities, particularly the Kuki, it is important to understand their narratives. The Kuki population in Manipur is estimated at 4.7 lakhs as per the 2011 census and 9.26 lakhs according to open source. If we trace the history, the Kuki immigration to Manipur began during the colonial period when the British established the Chin Hills as a separate district in 1892. The Kukis, who were then living in the Chin Hills, were displaced and pushed towards Manipur, where they settled in the Churachandpur district. The Kukis also migrated to Manipur during the Second World War, when they were recruited by the British to fight against the Japanese. In recent years, the Kukis from Myanmar have been crossing the border illegally and settling in Manipur due to various socio-political and economic reasons. Because of the government of India's absence on policies concerning refugee resettlement along with the close ethnic ties between Manipuri Kuki and Chin Kuki from Myanmar, they are able to cross over undetected and easily blend in. This is the primary concern of the government of Manipur and as such, have been in serious discussion to implement

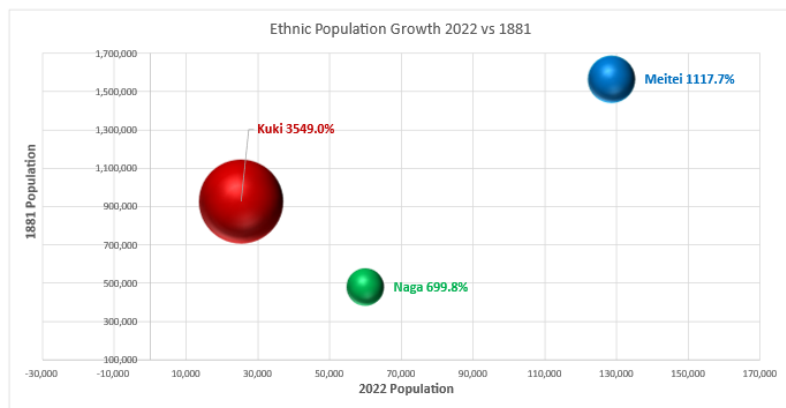


a National Register of Citizens (NRC), a register of Indian citizens in order to identify illegal immigrants. The NRC was first implemented in the state of Assam. Implementation of the NRC comes with many challenges including strong opposition, especially from the Kuki community, given their history and recent immigration. It should be noted that the NRC is a complex process that involves extensive documentation and verification, and its implementation requires significant resources and manpower.

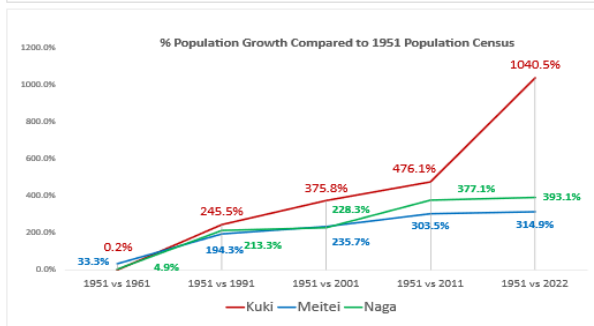
The population growth since 2001 is recorded at 24.5%, while the population of Meiteis has remained constant. The population of the Kuki in particular, has seen the most significant growth, subsequently changing the entire demographic of the state. In one study, it was found that over the decade, the Kuki-Chin population has increased by almost 230%, primarily due to the illegal immigration of Kuki-Chin into the territory. Local sources state that this growth is mainly found in five districts nearing Myanmar, namely, Churachandpur, Pherzawl, Chandel (bordering town of Moreh), Tengnoupal (enroute to Moreh) and Kangpokpi. These illegal Kuki immigrants, illegally settled in reserved forested lands, have been primarily involved in poppy plantation with the support of drug cartels **and have long been demanding an Independent Kuki Homeland**. For the most part, Meitei and Kuki have generally always coexisted peacefully as evidenced during the 1993 Kuki and Naga conflict, where the Meitei provided shelter and safe haven to thousands of Kuki. The matter in question concerns the illegal Kuki-Chin immigrants from Myanmar, who are involved in militancy, drugs and poppy cultivation.

Data indicates an explosive growth rate of the Kuki population in Manipur between 1881 and 2022

Population growth rate for Meitei and Naga communities are ~ 1117.7% and 699.8% respectively during this time period vs **3549% growth for Kukis!** The data clearly shows a declining Meitei population over the years vs an exponential growth in Kuki population.



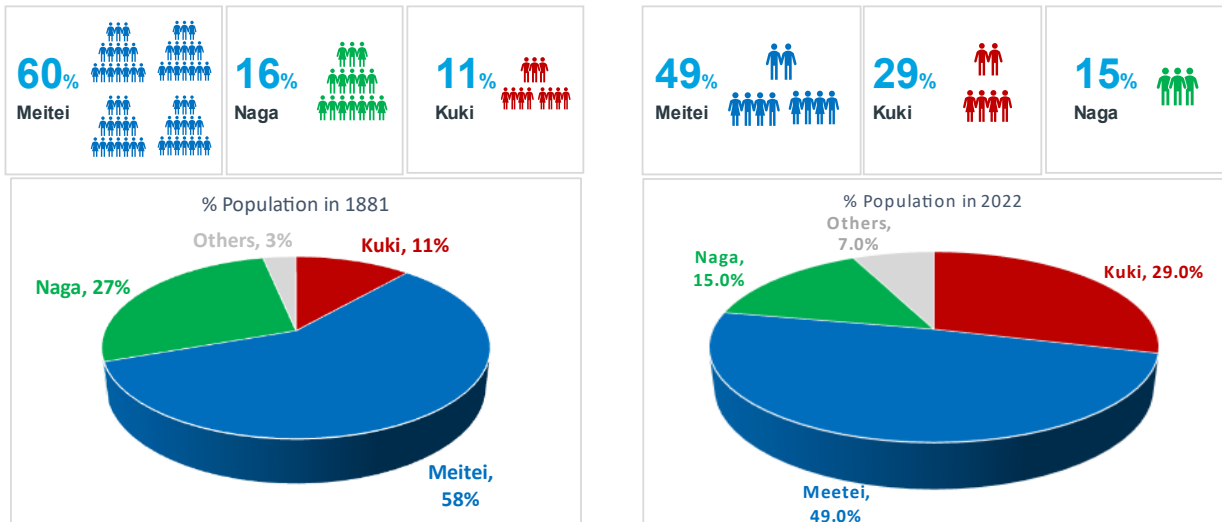
The chart below demonstrates a steadily increasing rate in the population growth of Kukis vs a declining population for Meiteis and Nagas over a 30 year period.



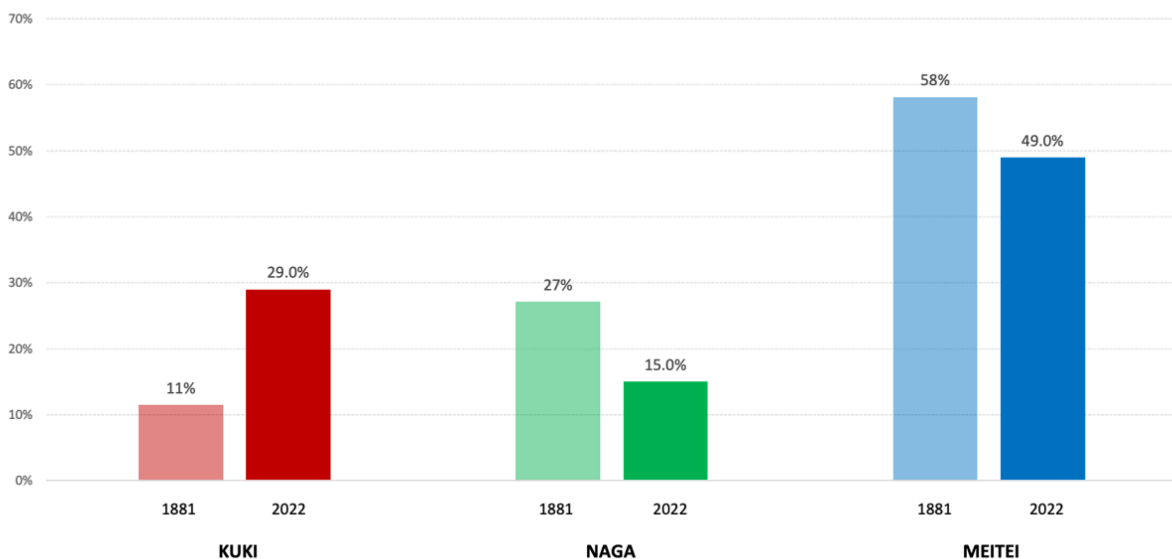
- The total Kuki population in Manipur as per 2011 census was 4,67,854. Recent estimates place the Kuki population at ~ 30% of the total Manipur population, which converts to ~ 9 lakhs.
- Instead, if we project the Kuki population for 2022 using the 2021 Manipur birth rate of 13.3, this yields ~ 5.4 lakh.
 - Even a conservative estimate shows an **abnormal excess population of 2-3 lakhs**. This abnormality can only be **attributed to illegal immigration**.

The data shows a huge demographic shift in the ethnic population happening between 1881 and 2022

The Kuki population as per 1881 data was just 11% of the total population of Manipur. ~~Jumped~~ **Jumped to an overall Kuki population of 29% by 2022 with 650+ villages**



1881 vs 2022



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Another point of contention is Poppy cultivation as a means of livelihood. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact areas of poppy cultivation in Manipur as most of it is taking place in remote and inaccessible areas, and much of it is being done illegally. However, according to the Narcotics Control Bureau, poppy cultivation in Manipur covers an estimated area of around 16,000 hectares, with the districts of Chandel, Ukhrul, and Churachandpur being the most affected. The government is fighting a war on drugs and the state police have been cracking down on poppy cultivation, with those caught being punished under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act.

Eviction drives in the reserved forests in the wake of frequent forest fires and global climate change including droughts in Manipur have been adopted by the government after a long lapse of its own machinery. This sudden drive is predominantly affecting the forest dwellers, immigrants comprised of mostly Kukis who are strongly opposed, among other tribes or communities. The Kuki believe that it is not the prerogative of the Government and instead a tactic by the Meitei community's majority to claim their land.

Another common point of discontent among the tribals is the hill-valley division in the legislature being dominated by Meitei as Chief Ministers excluding Yangmaso Shaiza and Reshang Keishing (12 yrs.). Currently, out of 60 MLAs, 40 serve the Imphal valley whereas just over 20 are reserved for tribals in the hills. However, since Manipur acquired its full statehood in 1972, this representation has been based purely on the size of the population. This needs to be reviewed in more detail which is why it is imperative to conduct the NRC. The valley has most facilities as it happens to be the capital and home to most ethnicities, thus the economic capital. This pattern of the capital always being wealthier and more affluent than the distant areas, together with significant gaps in both government efficiency and investment prospects, has persisted throughout history. Because of a markedly uneven and unbalanced division of policies between the hill and the valley, there is no consensus amongst government officials on how to deal with the reservation norms and merits of not only the Meiteis who are classified as general or OBC (Other Backward Classes), but of all ethnicities –entitlements such as ST or OBC are designations meant to uplift and provide aid to the underprivileged portions of society rather than lifelong entitlement badges to be taken advantage of which is a persisting issue. Due to a substantial lack of transparency regulating the public sphere, there is a systemic failure in the functioning of the government that consistently puts the dominant community in Imphal at a social and economic disadvantage time and again. The hill areas are administered at the district level by the Autonomous district council, empowered to maintain and manage property: movable and immovable, and institutions under their jurisdiction except reserved forests. At the state level, the Hill areas committee that includes the MLA of these areas, oversee the planning, implementation and monitoring of all development activities in these areas. If the Hill areas are a genuine casualty of underdevelopment, then the implementation of proper reforms and the amendment of inadequate policies should be reviewed in priority in order to bring more transparency and effective management within governing bodies and help connect with and efficiently serve the people from all areas, objectively, and without bias to any one group – irrespective of the hill-valley divide. A high-level committee led by the department of tribal affairs; Manipur earlier has recommended moving away from the hill-valley fund allocation system to a tribal sub-plan system. This is because the current system does not accurately capture the actual fund allocation and expenditure for the hill districts. Currently, a number of projects from the valley allocations benefit hill areas or both, such as the Tribal Research Institute, Hill Village Chiefs Guest House, Manipur



Secretariat, Inter-State Bus and Truck Terminus, among others. It is also worth mentioning here that the percentage of expenditure in hill areas has increased over the years, as reflected in the figures of 33.8% (2016-2017) and 45.75% (2020-21). The main flaws were delays and lack of precise census data for an extensive period as well as the hill-valley division of the budget.

Some developments and significant initiatives taken by the current BJP Government in Manipur led by Chief Minister Shri N. Biren Singh

1. Drug trafficking is a major transnational organized crime with the potential to undermine national security. India's proximity to the Golden Triangle is being misused by criminals for their nefarious activities and the cases has been on rise over the period. The current government has been engaged in an aggressive anti-drug campaign and as such, dismantled many poppy plantations. This, in turn, significantly impacted the poppy and drug business supply chains of the notorious Golden Triangle route. [Golden Triangle \(indianarmy.nic.in\)](https://indianarmy.nic.in) and [Drugs coming to Delhi from Myanmar via Manipur seized](#)
2. The current Government of Manipur has initiated aggressive drives against illegal encroachment across the state and not just in Kuki dominated areas. [Manipur Govt intensifies eviction drive against "illegal encroachers" | North East India News, The Indian Express.](#) The encroachment drive at K Songjang village in February of 2023 had a huge outcry mostly from Kuki communities.
3. Recommendation by State to cease Suspension of Operation (SoO) with Kuki militant groups (Kuki National Army, Kuki Revolutionary Army and Zomi Revolutionary Army) where Kuki insurgent groups have been under Suspension of Operation (SoO) since 2005, after signing an agreement for the same with the Indian Army, was last extended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government in September 2021 till February 28, 2023. This is the period where the illegal drug market thrived with poppy plantation as its main source of business. [Kuki tribe - JournalsOfIndia](#)
4. The Declaration by the Manipur Government on March 31st approving 1961 as the cut off year for the National Register of Citizens (NRC), stating that his government is ready to introduce the NRC once approval from the Centre is met. [Centre's approval required to introduce NRC in Manipur: CM Biren Singh - The Hindu](#) [Centre's approval required to implement NRC, says Manipur CM \(sakshipost.com\)](#)
5. More recently, the Manipur High Court Order dated March 27, 2023 directing the Minister of Tribal Affairs, Gol (first respondent) to consider the case of the petitioners for inclusion of the Meitei/Meitei community in the Scheduled Tribe list –expeditiously, and preferably within a period of four weeks from the date of reception of a copy of the order in terms of the averments set out in the written petition and in line with the order passed in WP(C) No. 4281 of 2002 dated 26.05.2003 by the Gauhati High Court– was a matter of contention. [Manipur: Manipur Violence: Unrest triggered after HC order to recommend quota for Meiteis - The Economic Times \(indiatimes.com\)](#)

Although the above initiatives were in favor of furthering the state's development, unfortunately, they came into conflict with the demand of an Independent Kuki Homeland by Kuki militants and

illegal migrants as well as significantly impacted the poppy plantation business run by the drug cartels and illegal Kuki-chin immigrants. Multiple Kuki Organizations, Militant groups and affected drug cartels took this opportunity to instigate the Kuki population against the government and planned for a retaliation which was further prompted by the emotional outcry following the encroachment drive at K Songjang village and the High Order on the Meiteis ST demand.

1. **April 27:** A Day before Biren Singh's visit to Churachandpur, the open gym the chief minister was scheduled to inaugurate was set on fire.
2. **April 28:** Section 144 was imposed along with a five-day suspension of internet services. Protesters and security forces clashed, with police resorting to the use of tear gas shells to disperse the mob in the district of Churachandpur.

According to sources, police forces were not removed from the district despite the Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF) agreeing to withdraw the protest. A mob gathered in the Tuibong Bazar area resorted to burning tires on the roads.

3. **May 3:** Thousands turned up for the Tribal Solidarity March called by the All-Tribal Students Union of Manipur (ATSUM) to protest against the inclusion of Meiteis in the ST category. The rally was held across all districts in Manipur and all were relatively peaceful except in Churachandpur. More than 60,000 people were estimated to have attended the rally in Churachandpur. Violence erupted during the rally in the Torbung area –a village towards Moirang– of Churachandpur. Simultaneous violence also broke out in Moreh, a town bordering Myanmar with a sizable Meitei population, where entire shops and houses of the latter community were burned.

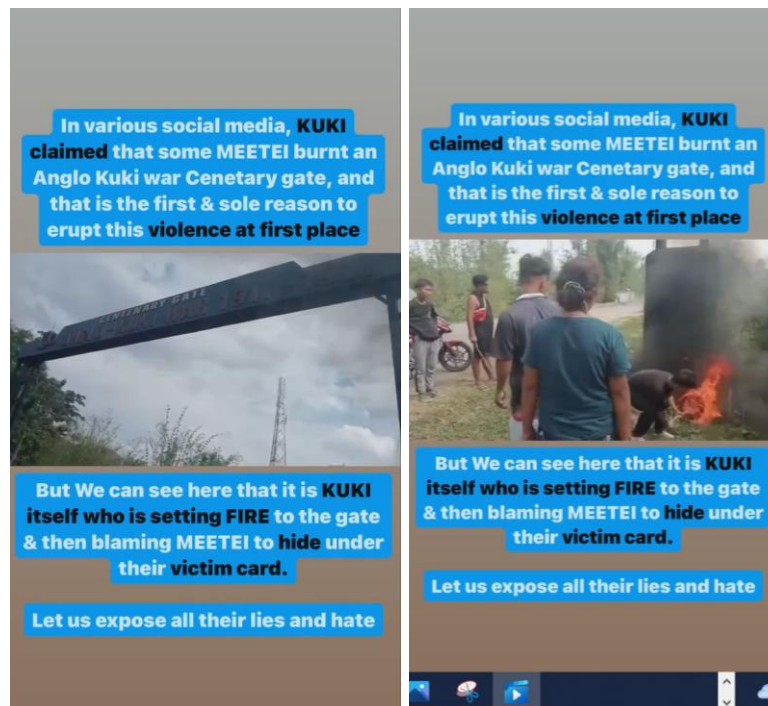
Appears that Kukis had been planning for it after some of the initiative taken up by Government well in advance, mobilizing resources and people. Thousands of participants were seen carrying sophisticated automatic weapons in full combat gear in the so-called “peace rally”.



Participant of the Peace Rally, 3rd May



This leaves no doubt that this was a premediated, deliberate and well-planned act.



The Kuki alleged that during the peace rally, Meitei vandals set fire to the Anglo Kuki War Centenary Gate, a monument with historical significance to the Kuki, and in retaliation the Kuki responded with arson, destruction of property and burning Meitei villages and settlements in Kuki dominated areas.

The Meitei reported that Kuki militants, illegal immigrants and Kuki wrongdoers set flame to many Meitei houses in Kuki dominated areas where people resorted to fleeing their homes amidst the destruction. An unfortunate casualty of these arson attacks was the death of a 2-year-old infant. Purportedly, a viral video regrettably triggered arson and vandalism in Meitei dominated areas. For the purpose of peaceful coexistence, the exact cause of this trigger begs a proper investigation with reliable figures and hard facts to get to the bottom of it.

After news of these hostilities broke out, there was retaliation in Imphal valley in late evening leading to full-fledged communal violence in some areas. Reports of burning Kuki properties and their respective places of worship came in as well. In response, armed with sophisticated automatic weapons, Kuki militant and miscreant groups further attacked Meitei settlements in the Hill and Kuki dominated areas. To defend themselves, Meiteis reportedly armed themselves with clubs and sticks, some even gathering firearms from Police stations as they were left alone to protect their children and families. [As Meitei's and protesters \(tribals\) clashed on the streets](#), state security forces rushed to the scene and prohibitory orders were imposed in eight districts.

Officials state the death toll in this rash of brutal ethnic violence currently engulfing Manipur has reached 66. Unofficial sources placed the figure at a much higher number in the neighborhood of 200 -250 dead and more than 150 injured. More than 70,000 families have been displaced. More than 1700 Meitei homes were ravaged by fire and displaced Meiteis were placed in Relief Camps with limited resources and no proper access to food or water. There are about 76 Relief camps



set up for the displaced Meitei families and a further 10 Kuki relief camps in various parts of Manipur. Many places of worship from both communities were lost to vandalism. All Meitei Hindu places of worship in 5 districts dominated by Kuki, including the Hindu Lord Shiva temple at Koubrou Leikha, Konthok Leirenbi temple at Moreh, Pakhangba Leishang, Ibudhou Thangjing Koirellai, Emorok Mahadeva mandir (Shiva Mandir) were also sabotaged by arson. All these places of worship are very sacred with significant historical background standing for millennium. In the deliberate arson attack, all Meitei home temples – situated in the courtyard, an equally sacred sanctuary worshipped in the home of every Meitei household and vital to the identity of all Meiteis– were destroyed. Some of Kuki Churches which was destroyed as per the report are New Checkon Church, Kuki Baptist Church, Zou Presbyterian Church. [Two churches torched as fresh violence erupts in Manipur – Matters India](#). Please note there was also a demolition of three illegal construction of Churches (*Catholic Holy Spirit Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church and Evangelical Baptist Convention Church*) by the Government prior the outbreak of communal Violence. [The Sangai Express ePaper | Largest Circulated NewsPaper in Manipur | English Newspaper | Manipuri Newspaper](#)

As far as the Kuki are concerned, the impacted area being limited to the Imphal valley was more or less contained, however, no news has mentioned the delay in reaching the Meitei civilians who were greatly affected in the hill areas. While the media is covering the communal violence, the heart of the crisis lies in the foothills and Hill areas in the five Kuki-dominated districts of Manipur where there are remains of destroyed Meitei settlements. Security forces are finding extremely challenging to conduct a proper rescue to evacuate the people most affected as heavy firing by Kuki militants continues from all sides with no viable escape route for safe relocation. There are alarming reports of a certain militant group controlling the peripheral areas of Manipur and the Imphal valley, and said to be blocking national highways and stopping essential supplies from reaching Imphal. Unfortunately, not a single media organization is covering this pressing issue due to lack of access and communication. There are multiple narratives and all these need to be thoroughly investigated by an independent body to demystify the truth.

On a positive note, amidst this communal clash, there are multiple reports of Kuki giving shelter to Meitei in the Hill areas as well as Meitei giving shelter to Kuki in the Valley area. Regardless of which side is right or wrong, not all are complicit in the violence. This is a message we can all learn from and need to spread in these dire times, of peace, compassion and humanity.



Meitei Village (Torbung) completely burned down in Churachandpur



A large fire is burning in a residential area, with thick black smoke rising into the sky. The fire is visible through the trees, and a small wooden structure is partially visible on the right. The foreground is a grassy field with some debris.



Another image of the Phougakchao village between Moirang and Churachandpur which was set on fire by Kuki militants and Meitei families running for safety.





From examining the sequence of events, one can conclude that the issue has nothing to do with religion or Hindus and Christians. The conflict is between two communities, Meitei and Kuki. In addition, certain Kuki Militants and Kuki-chin groups who have been significantly impacted by the previously mentioned initiatives and policies put forward by the Manipur Government set off this chain of premeditated attacks and instigated the innocent Kuki public into acts of vandalism and violence. The Judgement passed by the Manipur High Court is a legitimate order that considers the legitimacy of the Meitei to be recognized for the ST status as per the Indian Constitution, and any disagreement would have to be taken to and challenged in a Higher Court or in the Supreme Court of India, as per the Law. No reason can justify attacks on civilians, the burning of villages nor the killing of innocent people. This conflict is not about religion or one group being more privileged than the other, it is about certain novel and more hostile elements of the Kuki diaspora – namely militant outsiders and illegal immigrants – wanting to keep benefitting from protective laws that do not apply to them in the first place, being non-native to Manipur. In short, this resulting crisis is the coalescence of Kuki militants and illegal Kuki-chin immigrants demanding an Independent Kuki Homeland compounded by the Kuki feeling threatened from being excluded and discounted from the narrative with emerging new laws.

That being said, some critical questions need to be addressed and answered:

1. Why permission was given for the massive “peace rally” arranged by the Kuki-chin while continuous violence was on going and why the Government removed Section 144 which was already enforce prior to the peace rally
2. Under what circumstances the permission was given and why no adequate security arrangements were made and for the rally.
3. Why the Manipur Commando team was withdrawn on May 2nd 2023, the day before the Rally.
4. How the State Police failed us so thoroughly in this matter, and who is responsible for the loss of innocent lives.
5. How were armed Kuki militants and miscreants permitted to carry sophisticated automatic weapons in the open public. Has Manipur fallen under Taliban rule? The most important matter the Government needs to resolve is the issue related to illegal Kuki immigrants and the rise of Kuki militants (KRA, ZRA, KNA) and any underground Organization. Law and Order has to be established here. This should be the prime focus for the State and Central Government. [The Sangai Express ePaper | Largest Circulated NewsPaper in Manipur | English Newspaper | Manipuri Newspaper](#)

The Government should take up firm and punishable legal measures against all the perpetrators in order to restore the people’s belief and trust in the laws of the land. The issue should be investigated by independent agencies like NIA/CBI directly under Retd. Supreme Court Judge.

Thankfully, the Central Government has now intervened to protect Manipur from Internal and External aggression by Kuki Militant groups and illegal armed immigrants. Adequate central forces have arrived to curb the violence and restore Law and Order in the State of Manipur.