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# Manipur mayhem, a manufactured schism

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The past lives in the present, casting its dark shadow on integrity in the State

May 22, 2023 12:16 am | Updated 10:38 pm IST

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‘The carnage cannot serve the interests of those who speak of co-existence of communities and the

Manipur is no stranger to the scourge of massacres. In the infamous ‘Naga-Kuki clash’ of the 1990s, hundreds of innocents were slaughtered, not for what they did but because of who they were. In that protracted carnage amongst the ‘tribal’ communities of Manipur, places of worship and villages were razed to the ground and thousands were rendered homeless. When it came to these Christian communities, the Biblical teaching ‘love thy neighbour’ was of no use in what was politically motivated genocidal violence. That spectre of a bloodbath has returned to haunt Manipur again, this time between the ‘Kukis’ and the Meiteis.

Incidentally, the ‘Kukis’ have been involved in such clashes with their neighbours across the years. Besides the infamous clash with the Nagas in the 1990s, there have been violent conflicts with the Dimasas (2003) and the Karbis (2004) in Assam, and with the Paites (1997-98) in Manipur.

So, **what has led to this latest round of carnage involving the ‘Kukis’?** Many commentators have mentioned the demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status by the Meiteis, and the attempt of the State government to ‘survey’ forest areas and ‘evict illegal’ occupants from the ‘protected forest’ being some of the ‘sparks’. But then, for the spark(s) to be produced and to turn into an inferno, there needs to be material. That material is the manufactured divide: the ‘hill-valley divide’ in Manipur. This contrived reality has to be taken as a historical *a priori* to understand the present carnage. For, it is a past that lives in the present and to borrow from Michel Foucault, ‘cast[s] a shadow’.

## **A topographical divide**

At the root of the divide is the invented topographical dichotomy between two geographical features of a landscape (viz., ‘hill’ and ‘valley’) belonging to the same elevated mountainous fold formed by the collision between the ‘Indian plate’ and

the 'Eurasian plate'. Imphal and the districts in Manipur (Churachanpur, Ukhru, Chandel) and neighbouring States of Nagaland and Mizoram are parts of the same elevated mountainous fold, while the Brahmaputra valley is a part of the 'depression' created by the said collision.

The erstwhile Planning Commission classified States such as Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram as 'hill states' while Assam was a 'state with hill areas'. And yet, when one talks of 'Imphal valley' (790 metres) and its relationship with the 'hills' of Manipur (e.g., Churachanpur which is around 922 m), it is presented as if it is part of the same relationship that exists between the Brahmaputra valley/Guwahati (roughly 50 m) and Kohima (1,444m) or Aizwal (1,132m).

The British introduced this false topographical perspective in Manipur by extending a scheme that differentiated the Brahmaputra valley from the Naga and Lushai Hills in then Assam. However, the distinction brought about by the British was primarily in terms of 'population' rather than 'territory'. Thus, while revenues were generated from both the hills and valleys in Manipur (e.g., house tax), the people were divided and governed under different regimes of law. Indeed, informed by the colonial anthropological episteme and strategic calculation, this geographical misrepresentation was further consolidated by classifying a section of the people as 'hill tribes' who were governed by a separate set of criminal and civil laws of the State of Manipur, irrespective of whether they lived in the hills or valleys.

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## Reclassifications

The post-colonial Indian state, far from reversing the colonial schemes, has not only reproduced but also expanded these false dichotomies during the 1950s and early 1970s. Thus, the colonial category of 'hill tribes' has been re-rendered as 'scheduled tribes' (ST) and the rest as general category (later on, many of these people have been reclassified as Other Backward Classes) along with a small section, as Scheduled Castes. In fact, this has accentuated the division among the people by introducing a division of land through pieces of legislation such as the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act, 1960 and Article 371C. Even the State legislature was also divided by introducing a 'mini assembly' — ironically called 'Hill Area Committee' — within the Assembly of a 'hill State'.

Nowhere in the country, perhaps even in the entire world, have such abnormal and fabricated divisions been officially created and nurtured among a minuscule population belonging to the same ethno-linguistic family inhabiting a small and compact mountainous region. Over the years, this anomalous and concocted divide has come to shape and characterises what Charles Taylor calls 'social imaginary' — that is, 'the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit with others' in the State.

Consequently, the topographical reality of 'hills-valleys' that mark a mountainous terrain has become 'hills and valley' inhabited by 'different peoples'. Such 'social imaginary' feeds, and is fed by, a political culture that disenables the people in the State from realising and pursuing common goods.

## **The role of politics**

Moreover, the dynamics of competitive politics of electoral democracy in the State have sharpened the divide. Politicians and some social elites, particularly among the STs, have manipulated people's sentiments by creating a communal narrative that blames the Meiteis for the imagined and real differential development patterns in the State. Often comparing the district headquarters with Imphal, the capital city, whose inhabitants (36% of the entire population of the State) include tribal, non-tribal and people from outside the State, the argument of 'valley' depriving 'hill areas' has been propagated. Such communally motivated articulations have sidelined the real issues seen in matters of (under) development such as topography, demographic factors, law and order, shortcomings of a 'top down and one size fits all' model of planning, and, importantly, the cascading effects of a neo-patrimonial socio-economic structure in the State.

Such a communal narrative has been used to articulate a 'politics of redistribution' during electioneering as well as in sectarian mobilisations,

especially of an ethno-nationalist variety which is mostly based on exclusivist tribal identities. These mobilisations have a corresponding articulation of territoriality. Thus, irrespective of the fluidity these identities are, or the familiar anthropological contradiction between 'tribe' as a conceptual category and the empirical reality on the ground (on who belongs to which tribe and multiple expressions of hyphenated identities) or the shifting and arbitrary nature of the territoriality (often seen in overlapping or different cartographical representations), these mobilisations have produced genocidal violence that Manipur has seen. The violence that erupted on May 3, 2023 has all the signatures of politically motivated massacres.

Indeed, the carnage fits the description of genocidal violence — the effort to mark out a territory and cleansing the 'other' from that space. And the timing and sequence of unfolding events point to what Paul Brass called Institutionalised Riot Systems involving a preparatory phase of activities (e.g., desecration of sacred religious sites at Koubru and Thangjing to violent activities in the run-up to the eruption of violence on May 3); activation represented by the burning down of a forest office as the rally wound up and the burning of tyres at a memorial gate as a 'signal' (a likely 'false flag'); the near simultaneous burning down of houses at Torbung, Moreh, etc., hours before mobs run riot in Imphal, to the phase of explanation involving hectic efforts to 'control' the narrative of 'causes' and 'blame displacement' involving 'social scientists' in the mainstream and social media.

Orchestrated violence invariably has some beneficiaries and goal(s). The carnage cannot serve the interests of those who speak of co-existence of communities and the integrity of the State. But it can very well serve sectarian interests.

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Incidentally, even as the violence has subsided in the valley, and attacks on Meitei

villages in the periphery continue, there are demands for ‘asymmetrical federation’, ‘decentralisation’, ‘separate administration’, and talk of restricting tribal people from residing in the ‘valley’ (as articulated by a Kuki MLA in a web-portal). Only an impartial judicial inquiry headed by a sitting or a retired judge of the Supreme Court of India can find out the sequence of events and fix responsibility for the unprecedented carnage.

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