

# Violence in Manipur: The Larger Story

## I. MYTH OF THE VIOLENCE: WHAT IS GENERALLY PERCEIVED?

In the aftermath of May violence in Manipur, several narratives are in circulation. Several intellectuals and civil society organisations with vested interest have fabricated various narratives in the national and social media, and interpreted the violence as a result of clash between the tribals and the Meiteis. The objective is to corner the Meiteis and consolidate the tribal (Kuki-Chin-Mizo) voices. The other terms used are ‘Christian Tribal vs Hindu Meitei’, ‘Hills vs Valley’, etc. These binaries take away the issue far from the reality. Therefore, it is important to put across the issues in right perspective. This implies not only to put the facts in order, but also go to the genesis of the violence and reveal the larger story lying beneath.

### Protest on ST status

The violence erupted on 3 May 2023, the day the infamous “peace march” was organised by the All Tribal Students Union Manipur (ATSUM), a pro-Kuki association, with the apprehension that Scheduled Tribe (ST) status would be given to the Meiteis. While the peace rally was proposed for all the tribal areas of the State, it took place only in the Kuki dominated district headquarters of Churachandpur, Kangpokpi and Tengnoupal.

The Kuki militant guarded peaceful-rally-turned-violent right from the beginning in Churachandpur; forest offices were set on fire as early as 10:30 in the morning. Was burning of forest offices manifestation of anger against the State government’s eviction drive of illegal encroachers/immigrants from Reserved Forest (RF) and Protected Forest (PF), Protected Sites and Wild-life Sanctuaries? Still, was there any plan to destroy government records on forest areas and settlement?

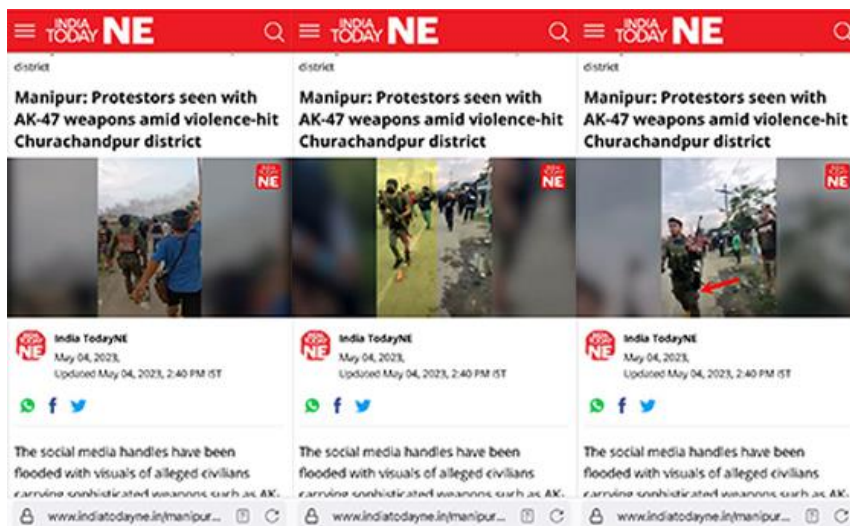
After few days, Manipur Tribal Forum filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court challenging the Manipur High Court order, which directed the State government to expedite its response on the matter of ST reservation to the Meiteis. With the Supreme Court’s intervention, Manipur High Court has deferred its own decision by one year. It is strange that Kuki civil societies did not exhaust the judicial options to address the issue, which they later did and partially succeeded. Resorting to violence while peaceful means are available shows the character, political disposition, and a larger game plan of the Kuki leadership.

It is also hard to digest that a perception of fear would generate such a wide scale violence across the Kuki dominated districts while Naga dominated districts remain totally peaceful. When such an apprehension was raised, CSOs and Kuki intellectuals made concerted effort to narrow down the triggering point of violence to an attempted burning of the Kuki Centenary Gate at Leisang Village. While further apprehension was raised, a hit-and-run vehicle driven by a Meitei driver was floated. With events that have unfolded in the last two weeks, it is clear that the anti-ST reservation rally was only a façade that hides several political agenda.

If one has to go into the nomenclature of calling a community in the Northeast as either tribe or non-tribe, there are lots of arbitrariness. On the Kukis’ objection to include Meiteis in the Scheduled Tribe list of the Indian constitution, the decision on whether Meiteis are backward or not are not to be decided by the contesting communities. There are appropriate forum and institutional bodies that will decide on the matter. Kuki CSOs have failed to abide by those democratic and constitutional means.

**Table 1: Sequence of events**

DATE	TIME	DISTRICT	PLACE OF OCCURENCE	BRIEF
03.05.2023	1030	Churachandpur	Office of Forest Beat Office, Bungmual Village.	Vandalised & burnt Forest Beat Office, Bungmual Village.
03.05.2023	1230	Churachandpur	Office of Forest Beat Office, Mata Muallam Village.	Vandalised & burnt Forest Beat Office, Mata Muallam Village.
03.05.2023	1330	Churachandpur	Office of Forest Beat Office, Saikot Village.	Vandalised & burnt Forest Beat Office, Saikot Village.
03.05.2023	1330	Bishnupur	<b>Kangbai Village</b>	2 bodies found.
03.05.2023	1440	Churachandpur	Centenary gate, Leisang Village	Unknown micreats attempted to set centenary gate on fire. Followed by burning of houses in Kangvai area and Torbung area.
03.05.2023	1500	Bishnupur	Torbung Bangla	300 houses burnt.
03.05.2023	1700	Churachandpur	Office of Forest Beat Office, Muallam Village.	Vandalised & burnt Forest Beat Office, Muallam Village.
03.05.2023	1700	Churachandpur	Office of Forest Beat Office, Singhat Mission Veng	Vandalised & burnt Forest Beat Office, Singhat Mission Veng
03.05.2023	1730	Churachandpur	Singhat PS	Arms looted.
03.05.2023	1730	Churachandpur	Khumujamba Village	Vandalised and burnt houses.
03.05.2023	1800	Churachandpur	Office of Forest Beat Office, S. Kotlian Village.	Vandalised & burnt Forest Beat Office, S. Kotlian Village.
03.05.2023	1830	Bishnupur	<b>Kangbai</b>	Truck burnt
03.05.2023	1840	Kangpokpi	Gamgiphai	One Gypsy burnt.
03.05.2023	1845	Bishnupur	Moirang area	Churches, vehicles and houses burnt.
03.05.2023	1900	Imphal West	NH-2 at <b>Kanglatongbi</b> Santipur area	500/600 persons mob gathered and damaged property.
03.05.2023	1900	Churachandpur	Forest Range Office, Henglep	Forest Office burnt
03.05.2023	1930	Imphal West	Dingku road	One shot dead.
03.05.2023	1930	Imphal West	<b>Ningthemkol (Sangaiprou)</b>	600/700 unknown persons set church, houses, vehicles, business places, and Gvt. Quarters on fire.
03.05.2023	1950	Churachandpur	Thengra Leirak	Houses burnt & 1 shot dead.
03.05.2023	2000	Imphal West	Koirengei near CMC Hospital	House of Minister set ablaze.
03.05.2023	2000	Kangpokpi	Forest Range Office Motbung	Office and vehicle burnt
03.05.2023	2000	Kangpokpi	Motbung Meitei Leikai	Houses burnt.
03.05.2023	2000	Bishnupur	Utlou Chanura Bazar	Havzel brickfield vandalised.
03.05.2023	2030	Imphal West	Koritha Ahallup	House of Ex-MLA set on fire.
03.05.2023	2030	Imphal West	Keirao Wangkhem	Church set on fire.
03.05.2023	2030	Imphal West	Sangaiprou	Church, property & vehicle destroyed
03.05.2023	2100	Churachandpur	Bijang Village	DFO office set on fire.
03.05.2023	2100	Imphal East	Heikol, Nongmaipal and Terakhul Village	houses set on fire.
03.05.2023	2100	Imphal East	Nongmeibung Seram Leirak	Official gypsy vandalised.
03.05.2023	2120	Kangpokpi	DFO Kangpokpi	Damaged the office.
03.05.2023	2120	Kangpokpi	Forest Beat office	Office burnt
03.05.2023	2120	Bishnupur	Kumbi Terakha	Church vandalised.
03.05.2023	2120	Bishnupur	Kumbi Awang Leikai	Vehicle of rifleman burnt.
03.05.2023	2130	Bishnupur	Keinou Thongkha Area	One person beaten to death.
03.05.2023	2130	Kangpokpi	S. Phailen Village	11 houses including churches destroyed.
03.05.2023	2130	Churachandpur	Behiang PS	Damage to Chivu park
03.05.2023	2135	Churachandpur	Tuiningkhal Forest Beat Office	Office burnt
03.05.2023	2140	Kangpokpi	Ekou Bazar	House burnt
03.05.2023	2140	Kangpokpi	Kangpokpi Ward no. 17	Damaged one house and burnt vehicle.
03.05.2023	2200	Kangpokpi	Koubru Leikha Mandir	Destroyed mandir
03.05.2023	2200	Kangpokpi	Happy Valley Village	24 house including church destroyed.
03.05.2023	2245	Bishnupur	Haotak Gelbung Village	13 houses burnt
03.05.2023	2250	Bishnupur	Kumbi	200/300 strong mob destroyed church.
03.05.2023	2300	Imphal West	Phainom KCC Veng and Langol Game Village	1000 persons burnt houses at Phainom KCC Veng and Langol Game Village.
03.05.2023	2310	Bishnupur	Nambol Phoijing Makhai	Damaged church property.
03.05.2023	2310	Bishnupur	Kumbi thingel Leikai	Damaged church property.
03.05.2023	2310	Thoubal	Wangjing	Church vandalised.
03.05.2023	2320	Bishnupur	Napachi	Church vandalised by 50/80 strong mob.
03.05.2023	2330	Bishnupur	Nambol Sabal Leikai	Damaged church property.
03.05.2023	2330	Churachandpur	Khuga Tampak	Clashes broke out & two died of bullet wounds.
03.05.2023	2345	Bishnupur	Ethai	Damaged church property.
03.05.2023	2350	Imphal East	New Lambulane, New Checkon etc.	Destroyed houses, church and vehicles.
03.05.2023	2350	Bishnupur	Kamong Meisnam Maning Leikai	MEBC Church damaged



**Photo:** Kuki peace march with AK-47 against giving ST status to Meiteis



**Photo:** Burning of Forest records at Forest Beat Office, Churachandpur



**Photo:** The initial burning of Meitei houses at Torbung, Bishnupur by the Kukis

### **Meitei hegemony or Kuki expansionism!**

One narrative that is doing the round is that of Meitei hegemony in the state. The argument often given is that Manipur is ruled by Meitei chief minister, and political representation of valley-and-hills is 40:20 ratio. The statement represents a fact, but the underlying spirit is not quite true.



Looking back to the history of Manipur, the spirit with which Manipur has been administered is inclusive and without the dichotomy of tribal vs. non-tribal, or hills vs. valley. The first chief minister of Manipur after statehood in 1972 was Mohammed Alimuddin who belonged to the Muslim community (Muslim population then was less than 8% of the total population). He served as chief minister of the State twice. The next chief minister was a tribal leader Shri Yangmaso Shaiza who also served as chief minister twice. And the longest serving Chief Minister of Manipur was also a tribal leader Shri Rishang Keishing. The first speaker of Manipur Assembly was Shri T.C. Tiankham, a Kuki tribe. So, the narrative of Meitei domination over political power is a white lie. This fact itself shows that Meiteis believe in plurality of identities and views. None from the majority Meitei community claims of exclusive Meitei control over the polity of the State.

As regard the valley–hills ratio it should be seen as unreserved and reserved seats. The unreserved assembly seats in the valley are 40, and lone seat in Kangpokpi (hills) district is 01. Any citizen of India can contest from these 41 unreserved seats put together. On the other hand, reserved assembly seats are 19 which are exclusively to be contested by the tribals.



**Photo:** Elderly Meitei man beaten black and blue by Kukis (earlier shown as Kuki victim by the Kuki propagandists)



**Photo:** Human chain blocking entry of Press and Media while looting and arson carried out at Meitei villages in Churachandpur (earlier shown as protecting the Meiteis of Churachandpur)

Another myth is of State funds being syphoned off to the valley, whereas hills are without any developmental works. This, too, is incorrect. A closer look at the Government of Manipur's budget allocation in the valley and hills in the last few years will set aside the propaganda.

**Table 2: Manipur Budget Allocation**

Year	Valley	Hills
2018–19	63.21%	36.79%
2019–20	56.30%	43.70%
2020–21	54.25%	45.75%

(Source: Government of Manipur Report)

Contrary to those propaganda, the above budget allocation has been made by the present BJP government, headed by a Meitei chief minister! Manipur Hill areas got 45.75% development fund in the financial year 2020–21 while the population percentage is 42.83. Therefore, discrimination of the tribals in terms of policy and programmes of development is a concocted story.

### **Migration as a cultural phenomenon; brushing aside legality!**

Many Kuki scholars have argued that migration is a fact of human reality and the idea of boundary is in the communities' cultural and mental maps. So, to the Kuki-Chin communities the international boundaries do not make sense; those are always fluid! Their idea of land is driven by cultural imagination and way of life. This is nothing but trivializing the legitimacy of the modern state and legitimize the notorious nomadic lifestyle of the Kukis. We need to distinctly separate cultural beliefs and worldviews with the legal domain of the modern state structure.

It cannot be denied that the idea of the modern state, articulated through Westphalian Treaty of 1648, is built on the sovereignty of the state and legal authority that the state possesses vis-à-vis its citizens and the other sovereign states. Weaknesses in the practices of a state cannot be the reason to nullify the presence of the state itself. If the state is weak it can prevail upon itself to become strong, even to the extent of exercising its legitimate right to assert (and prevail) over its citizens and non-citizens alike. This is the meaning of state sovereignty that even the Indian state is a practicing one since 1947. It must also be noted that defining and implementing of strict international boundary lies squarely with the Government of India. State governments can only give their inputs, requesting and sharing the concerns and problems faced by the people of the concerned states, the final decision lies with the Indian state.

**Table 3: Conflict between Kuki vs. other tribes**

<b>Warring parties</b>	<b>Year</b>
<b>Kuki – Hmar</b>	1959–1960
<b>Kuki – Paite</b>	1997–1998
<b>Kuki – Dimasha</b>	February 2003–July 2003
<b>Kuki – Karbi</b>	2003–2004
<b>Kuki – Naga</b>	1992–1997
<b>Kuki – Meitei</b>	May 2023

Kukis being nomadic do not carry much collective memory. Neither do they have respect for others' memory. For them, wherever they go becomes their land! To put it simple, their mode of production is built on shifting cultivation. Fertility of the soil shapes their migration pattern. They keep moving on from one place to another, continuously breaking themselves into smaller villages. This wandering lifestyle takes them very often closer to the habitation of other tribes/communities, thus, leading to friction. Ethnic conflicts between Kukis and other tribes/communities in Manipur and Assam can be witnessed as early as 1950s. (Today some of these warring tribes – Kuki, Hmar and Paite – have joined hands to fight and expel out Meiteis from the Kuki dominated region.)



**Photo:** *Incomplete fencing along the Indo-Myanmar border*

On the other hand, Meiteis and Nagas maintain a close affinity with the land they inhabit. Among the hill tribes, Nagas are one of the oldest indigenous communities in the Northeast. Their affinity with their land is fixed and sacred; they generally do not infringe on the land inhabited by other communities. This is the characteristic difference between the Kukis and the Nagas.

**Table 4: Meitei Deities and their associated frontiers in eight directions**

Sl. No.	Name of the deities	Associated directional frontier
1	Wangbren	South-East Frontier
2	Thangjing	South-West Frontier
3	Kouburu	North-West Frontier
4	Marjing	North-East Frontier

Meiteis's association with their land is built on a worldview that is extension of the body-self. This extension is shaped by the idea of the sacred. Meiteis believe in the 08 sacred directions marked by specific idea of space as frontier. These are also guarded and protected by the respective deities who dwell in the sacred groves. In addition, there are two more directions identified upward (*Soraren*/ether), and the point where the one stands (the self as the centre). But formidable four direction; viz. South-East, South-West, North-West, and North-East are marked both by an identified space (mountain in this case) with associated guardian spirits who protect the land and the people.

Cultural idea of space for the Meiteis are spread over the plains, the hills, and the waterbody. Invoking of the ancestral spirit in Lai Haraoba is built on these spaces. However, today, Meiteis are tight to the valley by the legal discourse of the modern state structure (e.g., MLR&R Act) forbidding them to protect their ancestral sacred sites. Their cultural sites are slowly dwindling.

On the other hand, Kukis have pushed their interest unethically without adhering to any norms. While many Kuki scholars deny the international border between India and Myanmar highlighting importance of their lived space and cultural imagination, they conveniently use Manipur Land Revenue & Reform Act to stop the Meiteis from coming and settling in the hills. They conveniently rely on the modern state structure when it soothes them, and also conveniently use cultural categories in yet another case of their interest. This contradictory political imagination only exhibits hypocrisy and double standard of the highest point.

## Attack on the churches; but what about the antecedent?

Several seminars are conducted using academic space across the country on Manipur violence. Each of these proceedings does not fail to mention about vandalizing churches in the Imphal valley. While this is an unfortunate turn of event, it was retaliatory act driven by violent mob psyche. The anger against the Kuki aggression orchestrated by Kuki militants led to retaliatory consequences that affected Kuki churches. Nevertheless, in the violent act of arsons sanity prevailed and the Naga churches (also some Kuki churches) were left largely untouched.

**Table 5: Meitei Temples destroyed by the Kukis**

Temple/Laishang	Place	Sub-Division	District
Mahadeva	Koubru Leikha	Saitu Gamphazol	Kangpokpi
Nungthong Lairembi (Goddess)	Serou	Waikhong	Kakching
Lainingthou Sanamahi	Thinungei	Bishnupur	Bishnupur
Kondong Lairembi (Goddess)	Moreh	Moreh	Tengnoupal
Langol Lairembi (Goddess)	Langol	Imphal West	Imphal West
Thongak Lairembi (Goddess)	Langol	Imphal West	Imphal West
Ima Panthoibi (Goddess)	Torbung	Moirang	Bishnupur
Ingourok Mahadeva	Leimakhong	Kangpokpi	Kangpokpi
Ireima (Goddess)	Moreh	Moreh	Tengnoupal
Maikeingakpa	Zoveng Meitei Leikai	Churachandpur	Churachandpur
Ibudhou Pakhangba	Meitei Leikai	Churachandpur	Churachandpur



**Photo:** Destruction of Shiva Temple at Koubru Leikha (Pre and post destruction)

However, these seminars do not enquire into why such unfortunate events had occurred. The antecedent to the church burning lies series of events where several Meitei places of worship in the hills (Koubru and Thangjing) were desecrated over a stretch of time. There have been cases where due to strong resistance by these migrant Kuki population, constructions of indigenous temples were stalled in the hill districts. Often these sacred places and associated indigenous practices are treated with contempt and ridicule (recent case of one Christian pastor Ramananda in various Church gathering can be cited). In addition, several armed Kuki militants have been carrying out a series of attack on the Meitei/Hindu religious shrines and symbols in the past as well as during the recent unrest. A 200-year-old Shiva temple was destroyed using bull dozer in Koubru Leikha under the Kangpokpi District administration, which is dominated by the Kuki tribes. The local administration turned a blind eye to the whole episode. Contrary to the Meitei unrest, this act shows a well-designed strategy to destroy the indigenous place of worship and the sacred sites. In addition, the seven-colour flag of the Meiteis have been desecrated by the Kuki militants.





**Photo:** Untouched Kuki church in Imphal valley

## II. THE REALITY: COMPLEX LINKAGES

The reality behind the façade of anti-reservation protest lies a web of well-crafted actions by a nexus of Kuki militants, frontal organisations, intellectuals and politicians. The fact that even after 10 days when violence broke, several Meitei houses at Torbung Bangla continued to be set on fire by Kuki militants. The reburning happened on 13 May. Even more, two houses were razed to the ground by Kuki militants in Dolaithabi, Imphal East on 20 May. These show not only the quantum of vengeance, but also a well-planned strategy to consolidate Kuki lebensraum (pace sought for occupation by a nation whose population is expanding) in several foothills of the Imphal valley and wipe out the Meiteis from these areas.

It is important to unveil the hidden agenda and the interlinkages of factors that have led to the turmoil experienced today. Nefarious design of the Kuki armed groups, political leaders, bureaucracy, and CSOs need to be unearthed.

### **Engineered anger against the forest eviction drive**

Burning down several forest offices (at Bungmaul Village, Mata Maultam Village, Saikot Village, Maullam Village, Singhat Mission Veng, Kotlian Village, and Henglep) on 3 May 2023 shows that a well-planned and targeted act of burning was engineered by certain stakeholders. Why were only the forest offices targeted? This cannot be without a reason. We cannot rule out any attempt to destroy government records on land and forest areas, as the government had started drive against forest encroachment by illegal Kuki immigrants.

Not long ago, from 2021–2022 Government of Manipur had initiated drive for eviction against encroachment on Reserved Forest (RF) and Protected Forest (PF). New constructions at the Langol Reserved Forest in Kangpokpi District were evicted during 2021–2022 in different phases. These encroachers were mostly Meiteis. Eviction of illegal encroachers from RF & PF was also undertaken in April–May 2022 at the Waithou Reserved Forest in Thoubal district in which Meitei and Meitei Pangal encroachers were evicted. In February 2023, 15 temporary Kutcha houses near the National Highway at K. Sonjang Village in Churachandpur–Khoumum Protected Forest (C-KPF) were evicted. It was met with violent resistance from the Myanmar Kuki migrants. On 10 March 2023, Kuki Student Organisation organised a rally in Kuki dominated areas of Manipur defying the CrPC 144. It was an unlawful gathering. Kuki Inpi, Manipur also echoed the voice of KSO. Later, the rally extended to New Delhi, where they appealed to the Prime Minister of India to stop eviction.



On the other hand, the State government issued a clarification stating that K. Sonjang Village was a new settlement established in 2021, much after the notification of the Protected Forest in 1966, and therefore in violation of the Protected Forest Act 1927. However, KSO responded that the notification of 1966 regarding C-KPF with “its allegedly well-defined boundary as unacceptable, illegal and arbitrary in nature as the area covered by the said well-defined boundary is not the property of the State government.” Later it was shown in the media that the drive was targeted exclusively towards the Kuki-Chin-Zo communities.

Considering the above data on the State’s eviction drive, this allegation is far from true. The State government’s drive is not targeted against any specific community. The forest land as “Protected” was declared way before the Kuki migration plagued the entire district of Churachandpur. The eviction drive was part of a larger State policy to protect the RF & PF. On 30 April 2023, Shri Bhupender Yadav, Hon’ble Minister of Labour & Employment, Environment, Forest & Climate Change, Government of India declared in connection with Manipur government’s drive that “protection of Reserved Forest and Protected Forest is a state subject and that Manipur Government is carrying out its constitutional duty”. The declaration of KSO is illegal and anti-national. Resorting to violence seems to be the new normal of the Kuki frontal organisation.

It is obvious that affected parties would grumble. However, they could have taken legal options to fight against the State. Unfortunately, many of the tribal communities project the acts of the government on ethnic line rather than arguing on the merit and demerit of the state policies. The declaration by the 10 Kuki MLAs for a separate administrative arrangement is continuation of this ethnicity-based politics. However, this nefarious design has been challenged by 38 BJP MLAs consisting of Meiteis, Meitei Pangals (Manipuri Muslims), and the Nagas. Several non-Kuki CSOs have started pouring out against the sinister designs of the Kuki militants. All Zeliangrong Organization (AZO), too, ridiculed the idea of separate administrative arrangement for the Kuki tribes.

### **Deforestation and poppy plantation**

There is serious need to address the issue of deforestation and environmental imbalances faced in the region. Due to huge quantum of deforestation (cutting down of timber) the State has witnessed irregular rainfall, change in temperature, (muddy) flash flood, etc. There is need to address the issue from the perspective of disaster management.

The scenario is further worsened with the rampant massive poppy plantation particularly in the C-KPF areas in the past few years leading to narco-forestation. As per intelligence reports, the Kuki militant groups have been bringing in Chin/Kuki migrants to India. Giving basic language classes and military training in their camps, they are settled in the old villages while the villagers of the old villages are shifted to a new village. They are also employing them in poppy fields as well as gun and drug runners.

The State government started drive against the poppy plantation by destroying the plants at the time of flowering. Since 2017, the government has been able to destroy over 18,000 acres of poppy cultivation majority of which are in the Kuki dominated districts. This has badly affected the poppy cultivation and narcotic business run by both the local and Myanmarese drug lords in Manipur. Since the poppy could not be harvested successfully this year due to the crackdown, the drug mafias and the poppy growers have faced heavy financial loss. The anger intensified with the eviction drive of the illegal encroachers from reserved and protected forests. The summation of these factors finally led to the ethnic violence. This is planned by groups of people which include the local and Myanmar-based drug lords, the ‘illegal immigrants’ from Myanmar, and the cross-border terrorist groups.

After Manipur Government launched War on Drugs since the year 2017, along with the arrest of 2518 people a total area of 15,496 acres of poppy cultivated land in the hills had been destroyed in which the Kuki-Chin community recorded significant areas of poppy cultivation,

with a total of 13,121.8 acres; the Nagas community reported 2340 acres of poppy cultivation, and other communities accounted for 35 acres only during the period 2017–2023.



**Photo:** *MLA of Saikul AC Kimneo Haokip, also KRA chief's wife romancing with Opium Poppy*



**Photo:** *Manipur Police personnels destroying Opium poppy plantation as a part of War on Drugs campaign.*



**Photo:** *Tree felling at Koubru sacred range by the Kukis for Opium Poppy plantation*

It has also been learnt that poppy plantation is also rampant in the State of Mizoram. The fact that Mizoram government is silent about it speaks a ton. It is valid to ask if there are nefarious nexus between political leadership, armed militants, and drug lords in Mizoram, too. It may also be noted that the poppy cultivators and stakeholders in Mizoram, Churachandpur, Tengenoupal, and Kangpokpi are exclusively tribes of Kuki-Chin-Mizo fraternity. An

underground, illegal, narco-economy is flourishing in this region, which needs to be unearthed and checked. This a threat to the country's economy and the national security.

### **Narco-terrorism and threat to national security**

There is enough evidence that the armed militants (KNA, ZRA and others) who are under tripartite ceasefire agreement called "Suspension of Operation" (SoO) with Government of India and Government of Manipur since 2008, have broken the truce several times. Their involvement in funding the poppy plantation and drug trafficking, threatening the villagers who do not tow their line, and inciting the CSOs to violent protests have led the Government of Manipur to unilaterally break the SoO. Both the armed militants and the migrant populations are threat to India's national security. Their involvement in the narcotic business which in turn funds the arms trade is of great concern in the entire sub-continent.

It should be noted that the Government of Manipur's War on Drug campaign could check the narcotic drug business run in the State. The state government has released comprehensive data on the arrests of illicit drug traffickers and the cultivation of poppy during the period 2017–2023. The figures below shed light on the efforts undertaken by the authorities to curb drug-related activities and safeguard the community's well-being. Arrests under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act have been categorized by community, providing insights into the extent of involvement and the collective responsibility in addressing this issue.

**Table 6: Details of the drug traffickers arrested**

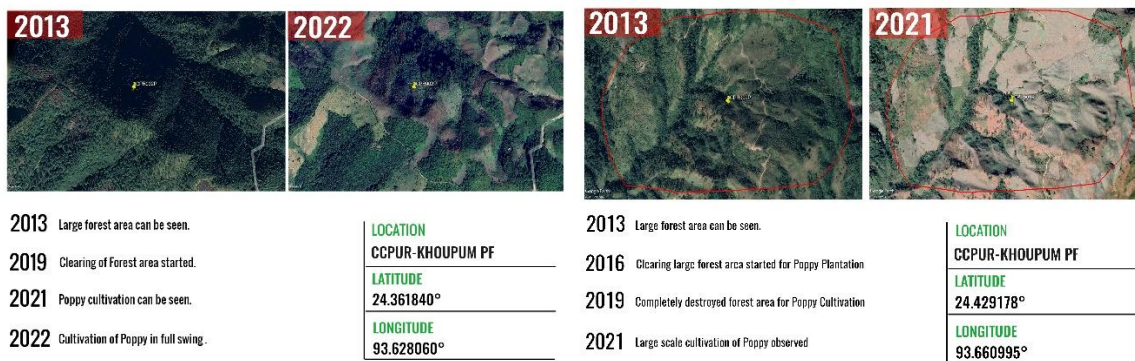
Communities Involved	Years							Total
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 as on 15 May	
Kuki-Chin	82	54	122	127	151	288	49	873
Muslim	93	223	201	177	163	210	16	1083
Meiteis	44	67	64	54	40	98	14	381
Others	12	9	47	14	36	62	1	181
Total	231	353	434	390	354	536	80	2518

Source: India Today NE (May 16, 2023, Updated May 16, 2023, 11:06 PM IST)

The fact that armed militants (ZRO/KRO) are directly involved in the poppy cultivation and drug trafficking, this is a serious threat to country's internal security. Since these groups are under SoO with the Government of India, their movement across the international border between India and Myanmar remained unchecked. There are reports that these armed militants are expelling the Nepali and Meitei locals from their own villages in Kangpokpi District, where Central para military forces remain mute spectator. Villagers in frustration have sought arms to defend themselves since the security forces are not intervening or checking the anti-people activities of the Kuki militants. In short, complete failure of law and order is witnessed in the Kuki dominated areas. Kuki militants, who are largely Myanmar nationals, are having a great time doing what they want. They have brought their baggage of nefarious lifestyle and converted Manipur into a new 'golden triangle'.

The issue of narco-terrorism and security threat should be seen as problem of the entire country and not merely the problem of Manipur Government. If left unattended, it may lead to irreparable security issue at a later stage.

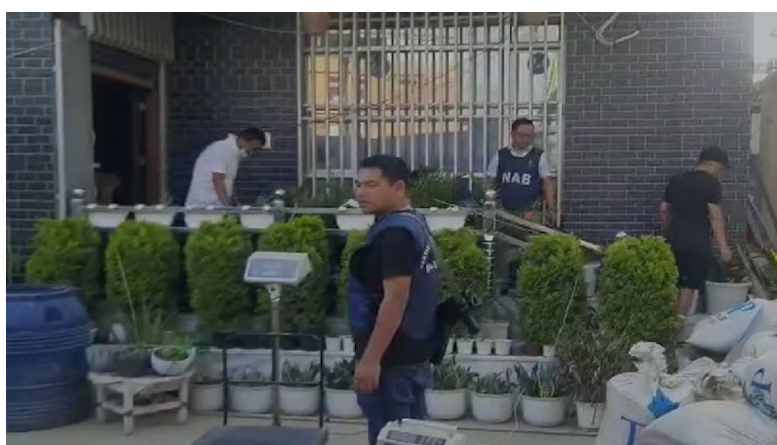




**Photo:** Google Earth imagery showing pre and post Poppy plantation in Churachandpur-Khoupum Protected Forest



**Photo:** Kuki Militants with sophisticated weapons



**Photo:** Recent Poppy seed seized from the house of a Kuki drug lord at Mantripukhri on 8 May 2023

### Aggressive ‘illegal’ migration affecting demographic equilibrium

The Kuki-Chin-Zo population of Myanmar and India, if put together, will outnumber any indigenous population of Manipur. The uninterrupted migration across the border have led to unnatural surge of Kuki-Chin-Zo population, thus leading to demographic imbalance. During the Indian census of 1951 and 2011, the number of Kuki population had risen from 80,002 to 4,48,532. The unnatural growth of Kuki population during the given period was 3,68,530, which shows almost a five-times jump in population. This incremental growth cannot be explained through increase in birth rate. Obvious factor for this unnatural growth has to be the “illegal” migration. The detection of this alarming numbers of illegal migrant in the first random survey inform that the total illegal immigrant population from Myanmar into Manipur must be significantly higher than the official figures.

Since India’s independence, there have been broadly three phases of Kuki-Chin-Zo migration into India. First phase of migration was in the late 1950s and early 1960s during civil

war in Myanmar. Some of the locations where refugee camps were set up during this time include:

- Tuibong: A town in the Churachandpur district of Manipur.
- Singhat: A town located in the Churachandpur district of Manipur.
- Senvawn: A village located in the Churachandpur district of Manipur.
- Thanlon: A town located in the Churachandpur district of Manipur.

Except for a few, majority of the refugees did not go back to Myanmar and there are official communications showing that they were resettled in Manipur by the then Congress Government at the Centre.

The second phase of migration took place before and after the 8 August 1988 uprising in Burma/Myanmar. There were widespread protests and demonstrations against the military Junta government in Myanmar and several displaced Chin-Kuki people sought refuge in neighbouring countries, including India and Bangladesh. Some of the locations where refugee camps were set up in Manipur during this time include:

- Moreh: A town located on the India-Myanmar border in then Chandel district of Manipur.
- Churachandpur: A town in the Churachandpur district of Manipur.
- Saikul: A town in the Senapati district of Manipur.

The refugees did not go back to Myanmar. The then governments of the time (Central & State) did not take any steps to deport the large population.

The third phase of migration occurred after the informal ceasefire between the Assam Rifles and Kuki militant groups in 2005, and subsequently after the tripartite Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement in 2008, where Government of Manipur, too, got involved. After the informal SoO pact in 2005, Kuki militants stopped attacking the security forces, and the Assam Rifles halted their counter-insurgency operations against the militants. The ceasefire period lasted for about six months. In 2008, 25 Kuki militant groups under two apex militant groups – Kuki National Organization (KNO) and Zomi Revolutionary Organization (ZRO) entered into a tripartite SoO pact.

The abnormal growth rate of Kuki population in Manipur is also reflected by abnormal increase of new villages in the Kuki dominated districts in Manipur, as evidence from Census of India 1961 to Census of India, 2021. For example, during the last five decades, in Kangpokpi and Churachandpur districts where the most violent narco-terrorism is occurring, newly settled villages numbered 355 in Kangpokpi and 262 in Churachandpur. On the other hand, in the Naga dominated districts of Manipur, namely Tamenglong and Senapati, only 42 and 14 new villages have sprung up. These are strong evidences of migrants from outside of Manipur, internal and external, having massively settled in Kuki dominated districts.



**Photo:** Google Earth imagery showing new settlement inside Churachandpur-Khoupum Protected Forest.

Due to the recent political crisis of coup and civil war in Myanmar, a significant number of illegal Myanmar nationals belonging to Kuki-Chin-Mizo are entering into Manipur. To

address national security, the government of Manipur formed a Cabinet Sub-Committee (CSC) led by Minister Letpao Haokip (a Kuki MLA) with other two ministers. The initial findings of the First Phase of random identification of illegal immigrants in four districts namely Tengnoupal, Chandel, Churachandpur and Kamjong exercised on 24 April 2023 shows an alarming presence of illegal migrants from Myanmar. According to survey, there were 1147 illegal immigrant from Myanmar in Tengnoupal district bordering Myanmar. Further, the drive also detected 811 illegal Myanmar migrants in Chandel district, 154 Myanmar migrants in Churachandpur district, 5 Myanmar migrants in Kamjong district. It was found that these illegal migrants established their villages engaging into different illegal activities.

### **Effect on Electoral Politics**

The new waves of Kuki-Chin-Zo migration in Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland (all with international border with Myanmar) in the last five decades has been the root-cause of the recent crisis. The unnatural population growth geared by waves of illegal migration has led to the increase of Kuki-Chin population in Manipur. It has also been learnt that many of these migrants have also come to Manipur via Mizoram and Nagaland.

Some of these Myanmar nationals procure Aadhar card, and subsequently voter ID without much difficulty. This is a serious matter. Without a clear national policy on the matter on refugees from other nations, the distinction between the ‘citizen’ and the ‘non-citizen’ becomes blur. Since the designated camps are not well-regulated, and since the migrants get support of the earlier migrants and local people, their procuring state identification proofs like Aadhar card and voter ID are often smooth. Thus, they not only avail Indian citizenship through illegal means, but also join government services cutting into the opportunities of the locals. Unconfirmed report states that many of them have got into high profile jobs in the Central government administration and services. There had been cases of such Myanmar migrants becoming member of various electoral representative bodies both in India and Myanmar. A case of former Chairman of Autonomous District Council of Manipur, who was a Myanmar national, and also a political leader in Myanmar, was very much in the local news, but did not gain attention of the Central government intelligence. Neither the State government intelligence worked on such serious matters. The link between process of migration with availing of government facilities, and even becoming elected representatives, is a serious matter to be addressed. This corroborates the linkages between foreign migrants, local politicians, money laundering, narco-terrorism, etc.

It goes without saying that these waves of illegal migration are going to affect in the process of delimitation, which is already in the process. By 2021 census, Kuki-Chin-Zo population have gone up as the second largest population in Manipur, while Nagas have been reduced to the third position. This is definitely going to affect the electoral politics. The number of unreserved electoral constituencies may get reduced whereas number of reserved constituencies in the Kuki dominated areas may increase. There are calculations that number of unreserved constituencies may reduce from 41 to 38 benefitting Kuki representation in the State assembly. This cannot be a coincidence!

### **Agenda for Kuki–Zomi Homeland**

Kuki-Zomi political imagination with a concrete territory is known by several names such as Zoram, Greater Mizoram, Zalemang and Kuki homeland. A guarded statement by Mizoram Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act 1960 interferes in the internal matter of Manipur, while talking about greater Mizoram, comes with a rider. Possibility of an ‘indirect’ intervention is not ruled out with his further statement that the hill area of Manipur, adjoining Mizoram, is inhabited by the ‘Zo’ community who share the same culture, religion, tradition and ancestry (with the Mizos). Mizo National Front, to which Zoramthanga is affiliated, fought for an independent Greater Mizoram that ended with bloodshed in 1984. Moreover, the declaration by the 10 Kuki MLAs, currently stationed in Mizoram, for a separate administrative

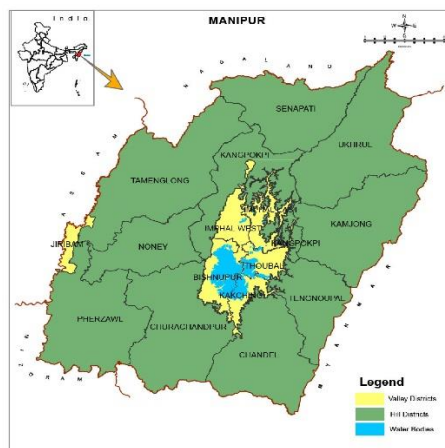


arrangement shows continuation of a politics based on ethno-nationalism and Mizo hegemony that carries potential for another round of intra-ethnic conflict within the Chin-Kuki-Mizo group. Their demand aligns with the aim of KNO and ZRO for self-determination of the Kuki people and Zomi people in the form of a defined territory running through India, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The idea of a Kuki homeland dates back to the late 1980s, the Kuki-Zomi insurgent groups, the Kuki National Organisation (KNO), came into being. The term ‘Zalengam’ was coined to aspire for a separate Kuki and Zomi homeland. Outbreak of violence in Manipur marks the resurfacing of demand for a separate Kuki administration, which had subsided following peace negotiations between the two militant groups KNO and ZRO with Indian government under SoO pact. These two illegal armed outfits have their origin in Myanmar. The leader of KNO PS Haokip is not originally a domicile of Manipur. He was born in Myanmar and brought up in Nagaland.



**Photo:** Proposed Map of Zalengam as circulated by Kuki encompassing Bangladesh, Myanmar and India (Manipur, Nagaland, Assam and Mizoram)



**Photo:** Meiteis are debarred from settling in the Green area

In 2012, influenced by the demand for a separate Telangana state, an organisation called the Kuki State Demand Committee (KSDC) was formed, and subsequently geared for a movement for Kukiland. KSDC had been calling occasional strikes and economic bandhs even earlier, blocking highways, and not letting goods enter Manipur. The Kuki’s civil society organizations and their armed outfits claim 12,958 sq km, which is more than 60% of Manipur’s 22,000 sq km area to be encompassed for the Zalengam. The claimed territory includes the Sadar Hills (which surround the Imphal valley on three sides), the Kuki-dominated Churachandpur district, Chandel district (which has a mix of Kuki and Naga populations), and even parts of Naga-dominated Tamenglong and Ukhrul. In addition, Mizoram comes as part of

their cartography. Over and above this, they also aspire to include Chittagong Hills Tract of Bangladesh, and portions of Chin and Sagaing Division of Myanmar.

Kuki homeland narrative is that the tribal areas inhabited by Kuki-Chin-Zomi “are yet to be a part of the Indian Union”. The present chain of violence targeting the Meitei settlements is part of this larger design. Right to self-determination cannot be gained by scuttling the freedom of other communities. Others too have their right to self-determination.

### **III. IS THERE A WAY FORWARD?**

1. Firefighting is the immediate need of the hour. Violence must not escalate; peace must prevail at any cost. Further loss of life and property must be arrested. Control lawlessness; police must act. Ordinary citizens must once again feel a sense of security.
2. Resettlement of communities to their original homes must be ensured. Full security cover must be provided to the victims and trouble mongers must be strictly dealt.
3. State must give compensations to all the victims on both sides.
4. Government must provide relief measures, and ensure medical facilities for all the victims.
5. Full-fledged judicial enquiry must be started under the chairmanship of a Supreme Court judge.
6. Government of India must abrogate SoO pact with all the Kuki militants, as they are freely moving with arms, and also responsible for inflicting violence to ordinary citizens of this country.
7. NRC must be immediately enacted to detect the Myanmar nationals. Special drive must be taken up to check the illegal documents they have procured. Those who helped the migrants must be booked.
8. The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act 1960 must be revisited. Revise it to frame land laws best to the interest of all the communities without comprising equal access and ownership.
9. The Union Government must prioritise border fencing and negotiate with Myanmar government on regulating cross-border movement.
10. There must be proper policy on Refugees. Designated camps must be enacted to settle the refugees. Absorption of population from the neighbouring countries due to ethnic conflicts, identity politics, or economic and livelihood crises should not be permitted.
11. Stability in Manipur can only be sustained by strong, grounded, and all-inclusive social and economic measures that preserve ethnic and demographic balances.