

# GEOGRAPHICAL THREADS OF IDENTITY: THE HILLS-VALLEY CONUNDRUM IN MANIPUR

## Abstract

Identity is a complex and dynamic concept that encompasses how an individual or a group creates an understanding of their existence on this earth and at the same time makes an assessment of their relationship with others. As a multilayered construct, it is affected by personal experiences, social interactions in the broader societal contexts and above all by the geographical factors, such as landscapes, climate, natural resources, and location. All these factors either individually or in combination determine the cultural, social and historical identities of a particular geographical locale and its residents. These factors influence various aspects of life, including traditions, customs, language, socio-economic and political structures. Identity in Northeast India is diverse and complex, with each state having its unique cultural, linguistic, and ethnic characteristics. The region is home to numerous indigenous communities, and identity plays a crucial role in shaping their social, political, and economic landscapes. Various factors such as history, geographical location and interactions with neighboring countries contribute to the complex hierarchy of identities in Northeast India. The hills-valley conundrum in Manipur is the result of this complicated geographical and cultural divide between the hilly regions and the valley areas of the state. This issue has been a significant aspect of Manipur's identity, influencing its social, political, and economic dynamics. It is in this context; the present article delves into the intricacies of this hills-valley divide in order to deconstruct the underlying factors responsible for the recent conflict in Manipur.

**Keywords:** Identity, Geography, Northeast, Manipur.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Identity is one of the most debated concepts that can affect both individuals and society in which the individual is residing. The answer to the question “Who am I?” is generally understood in the context of the economic position or the status by birth of an individual within a society. Individual identity not only introduces the person himself but also speaks volume about who that particular person is “not”. Therefore, identity is a social construct which regulates our social, economic and political relations across time and space. Individual identity is always influenced by his surroundings leading to the culmination of specific behavioural attitudes and practices. These in turn are manifested in institutions such as religion, language, morality, education, law, economic and political structures, family, kinship system and marriage [1]. As a multilayered construct, it is affected by personal experiences, social interactions in the broader societal contexts and above all by the geographical factors, such as landscapes, climate, natural resources, and location. All these factors either individually or in combination determine the cultural, social and historical identities of a particular geographical locale and its residents these factors influence various aspects of life, including traditions, customs, language, socio-economic and political structures. Identity in Northeast India is diverse and complex, with each state having its unique cultural, linguistic, and ethnic characteristics. The region is home to numerous indigenous communities, and identity plays a crucial role in shaping their social, political, and economic landscapes. Various factors such as history, geographical location and interactions with neighboring countries contribute to the complex hierarchy of identities in Northeast India. The hills-valley conundrum in Manipur is the result of this complicated interaction between the hilly regions and the valley areas of the state. This issue has been a significant aspect of Manipur's identity, influencing its social, political, and economic dynamics. It is in this context, the present article delves into the intricacies of this hills-valley divide in order to deconstruct the underlying factors responsible for the recent conflict in Manipur.

## II. DECONSTRUCTING THE HILLS-VALLEY DIVIDE

Manipur, home to a 3.7 million people belonging to myriad ethnic groups, is situated at the easternmost edge of India. It has a chequered history of ethnic clashes, insurgency and ceasefire agreement. However, the current violence that is taking place between two ethnic groups, i.e. the Kukis and the Meiteis has no prior precedent. The present upheavals has not only unleashed a reign of terror on the local polity but is also becoming a potential threat across the state borders. The state of Manipur (22,456 sq. km) is divided into hill and valley districts. According to the 2011 Census, the Meiteis (including the Pangals) although constitute the majority of 65.8% of the total population, yet they occupy only 10.02% of the state's total geographical area. On the other hand Naga and Kuki tribes together who occupy 89.98% of the total geographical area of the state, account for only 34.2% of the total population (Government of Manipur 2004). The state of Manipur comprises thirty-three recognized Scheduled Tribes, which are mostly ethnic Nagas and Kukis (Government of India 2011). The non-tribe Sanskritized and Hinduized Meitei community reside in four plains/valley districts namely –Bishnupur, Imphal East, Imphal West, and Thoubal – and are surrounded by Nagas and Kukis, who reside in the remaining five hill districts – Churachandpur, Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong, and Ukhrul. Violent clashes broke out in the state after a 'Tribal Solidarity March' was organised in the 10 hill districts on 3rd May 2023. The march was organized to stage a protest against the demand of the Meiteis for the

status of Scheduled Tribe (ST), subsequently leading to at least 54 unfortunate deaths. However, the escalation in violence runs very deep into a myriad of complex architecture inclusive of both history and geography. The rest of the article will attempt to interrogate each of these factors.

- 1. Tyrannies of British Colonialism:** Manipur was a sovereign monarch and the Meitei King controlled the entire political and administrative system of the hills. The administration was a federal structure where the village chiefs were granted freedom, in return for small tributes annually. At the same time, the rebel village chiefs were crushed from time to time [2]. The hills and the valley shared a mutually beneficial relationship. The Meiteis had helped the tribes from time to time against the excesses of the British administration. On the other hand, when Manipur was occupied by the British Empire in 1891, the defeated Meitei passed on their weapons and arms to the neighbouring hills [3]. When Churachand became the King of Manipur, the entire administration of the hills was entrusted to a single officer of the Manipur State Durbar, who was an English man appointed from the Assam Provincial Service [4]. The hilly terrains, the proximity to the neighbouring Chins and Burmans and the presence of myriad ethnic groups made the entire Northeastern region a formidable challenge to the British empire. With an objective to control and subjugate the tribes of the region, the colonial exploitation of the hill people continued in the form of imposition of land revenue, house tax, obnoxious law of free and forced labour. The British government was convinced that the Maharaja of Manipur is exploiting the hills by extracting huge amounts of money from them in the form of tax and annual tributes [5]. The Kuki rebellion of 1917-19 further triggered the takeover of the hill administration by the Englishmen and put them under the charge of a British Officer [6]. Thus, the British separated the Hills from Valley in Manipur and erased the cultural, historical and religious links between the Hill and Valley people. The seed for separate administration was sown by them and widened the Hills-Valley divide to realize their mission to gain complete control over the reins of the entire Northeastern region.
- 2. Woes of Ethno-Nationalism:** The seed for separate administration that was sowed by the British colonial rulers further fuelled the spirit of ethno-nationalism. Ethno-nationalism transcends the boundaries of state, religion, sect and class.[7] It seeks to fragment established nationalities and communities and create new ones using ethnic indicators like - life ways, religious beliefs, language, physical appearance, region of residence, traditional occupations and a history of conquest and repression by culturally different people.[8] The symbolic and cultural aspects of ethnicity often get politicised for the promotion of collective interests.[9] Most ethno-national conflicts are for a larger share of economic resources and products and for a greater part in decision-making processes.[10] Ethnic stratification of resources and domination of one group over another in controlling resources can give rise to ethnic nationalism and ethnic identities may become politicized and competitive when access to resources (both economic and political) depends on the recognition of the group digressing into violence [11]. Manipur is a perfect example exhibiting such trends and tendencies. Discriminatory use and control over land has been a crucial determinant in shaping the ethnic identities. The hills, which constitute nine-tenths of the state's area and contain 37% of its population practice shifting cultivation in the hills, while the Meiteis have settled for terraced cultivation in the valley. In Manipur, the state government is persistently accused of bias in favour of Meiteis in the allocation of facilities and funds for development. Tribal leaders complain

and point to a lack of infrastructural development, poor conditions of educational and health services, endemic poverty, and lack of employment opportunities and access to development resources. This feeling of frustration and relative deprivation have further precipitated into Kuki ethnic nationalism challenging the existing pattern of disparate distribution of economic resources and political power between Kukis, Nagas, and Meiteis. Despite the chant of Ching-tam amadani (oneness of hills and valley), Ching-tam machin manao (hills-valley brotherhood) emotionally, the hills and valley had departed long time ago; at present it is only the political boundary which forcefully binds them together.

- 3. Political and Administrative Disparity:** The underrepresentation of the hill tribes of Manipur is clear in the fact that the hill areas are represented by only 19 members in the Legislative Assembly of the state in contrast to the valley population who are overrepresented with 41 MLAs even though the valley accounts only for 10 per cent of the total geographical area of the state. Additionally, the tribal groups have often complained about insufficient manpower in government establishments in hill districts [12]. It should also be taken into account, that the hill/tribal areas in Manipur which have been subjected to the rule of both the Autonomous District Council (ADC) and the Hill Areas Committee (HAC) are neither under the Fifth Schedule (Administration of Tribal areas) nor under the Sixth Schedule (establishments of autonomous districts and regions in the tribal areas) of the Constitution of India, but centralized under the Directorate of Hills and Tribal Development at Imphal, in contravention of democratic decentralization, with only one minister in charge of all affairs [13]. Both ADCs and HAC are powerless as the state government exercises subtle decisive control and makes ADC/HAC provisions meaningless.
- 4. Impasse Created by Reservation and Unemployment:** Apart from the political and administrative disparities, the tribal communities in Manipur have often complained about their poor representation in government jobs. The state legislative assembly passed the Manipur Reservation of Vacancies in Posts and Services (for SC and ST) Bill on 12 December 1976, and the Governor approved it on 21 February 1977 [14]. The rules framed and published in Gazette No. 474 (B) on 10 December 1990 'for immediate enforcement' were rescinded in Gazette No. 618 and 639 published by the Chief Secretary on 2 February 1991 and 5 February 1991 stating that 'the same shall be treated as to have not been issued and existed' [15]. But it was introduced in the state legislative assembly and the Manipur Reservation of Vacancies in Posts and Services (for SC and ST) Act 2007 was passed on 19 May 2007 [16]. However, the state government has not prepared the rules for its implementation yet, despite repeated complaints from All Tribal Students' Union Manipur (ATSUM) [17]. According to the provisions of the bill, it is mandatory to appoint tribal persons to at least 33% of all jobs, but only a few departments have been able to meet this target – sometimes due to a shortage of adequately qualified candidates, but mostly because of the lack of political and bureaucratic commitment [18]. It is often reported that Meitei groups have always opposed tribal demands by citing dangers to Manipur's 'territorial integrity' due to the possible creation of 'states within state' [19]. Moreover, Meitei groups have resented reservations for tribal communities in jobs within the central public sector, claiming that opportunities for educated Meitei youth are limited [20]. The cycle of conflict has intensified with rising socio-economic challenges, uneven development between hills and

valleys and with the re-emergence of Kuki nationalism mainly after the 1980s. It has further politicized the issue of the hills–valley divide.

- 5. Travails of Uneven Development:** The answer as to why there is uneven development between the hills and valleys in Manipur is the cumulative product of non-implementation of Constitutional rights for the the tribals in hill areas by indulging administrative apathy as well as discriminatory policy making by those who have been controlling the affairs of the state. For instance, there is a huge disparity in fund allocation between hills and valley as there is no separate budget for the hills as enshrined in Article 371(c) [21]. The 2020-21 budget shows that out of ₹7,000 crores, merely ₹41 crores were allocated to the Hills while the Valley received ₹6,959 crores [22]. Table 1 below shows discriminatory trend in fund allocation between Hills and Valley

**Table 1**

Year	State Budget (Rupees in Crores)	To Valley (Rupees in Crores)	To Hills (Rupees in Crores)
2017-18	5000	4892	108
2018-19	4900	4750	150
2019-20	5000	4880	129
2020-21	7000	6959	41
TOTAL	21,900	21,481	419

Source: <https://manipur.gov.in/>

The inequality in development between the Hills and the Valley can be also seen in the lack of accessibility to employment opportunities, medical facilities, and infrastructure in the former. Due to lesser employment opportunities in the Hills and exclusion from development that takes place in the Valley, many tribal people resort to poppy cultivation for sustenance [23]. A 2019 field study by Ngmajahao Kipgen, Associate Professor of Sociology at IIT (Guwahati) revealed that poverty, food insecurity, and material needs are the drivers of illegal opium production in Manipur [24]. While many tribes on the Hill cultivate poppies, Kukis feel they alone are being singled out and called drug peddlers now [25]. The Manipur government's 'War on Drugs' campaign has destroyed the poppy crops before harvesting time without providing any alternative arrangements for the people, leaving them unemployed [26].

- 6. Prejudiced Policies of the State Government:** The violence that erupted in the state of Manipur on May 3 and 4 was the direct manifestation of the opposition from the tribal population to the demand of a section of the Meiteis to include them too in the Scheduled Tribes list. With the approval of the same by the Manipur high court, who directed the state government to recommend it to the Union tribal affairs ministry, fear amplified within the small tribal communities of losing their constitutional safeguards against the majority Meiteis. Another reason that intensified the present imbroglio was the show cause notice issued by the state High Court to the president of the All Tribal Students Union of Manipur (ATSUM) and the chairman of the Hill Areas Committee (HAC) of the state assembly for criticising its order. It was ATSUM that organised the tribal solidarity march in all hill districts of the state on May 3 against the granting of ST status

to the Meiteis. Violence erupted during one such march in Churachandpur district which surged into full-blown mob violence in different parts of the state, targeting one community or the other. If the tribes are scared of losing their constitutional safeguards against the Meiteis, the latter are equally scared of losing their primacy in their traditional homeland, the valley area. The fact that no Meitei can buy land in the hill districts but tribes can do so in the valley area – which is traditionally the Meitei homeland – has exacerbated anxieties. This sense of insecurity and fear of being dominated by other communities have also found expression in their demand to implement the inner line permit (ILP) in the entire state – granted by the Narendra Modi government.

Yet another point of trigger for the May 3-4 violence was the brewing anger within the Kuki-Zomi tribes over the decision of the state government led by Chief Minister N Biren Singh to withdraw the suspension of operations (SoO) agreement with their armed umbrella outfits, United People's Front (UPF) and Kuki National Organisation (KNO). It essentially implied that the state government was withdrawing itself from the ongoing tripartite peace talks between these armed groups and the Narendra Modi government through a Centre-appointed interlocutor [27]. This tripartite peace talks are significant for the Kuki-Zo communities as it has promised some form of self-governance. Therefore withdrawal of the Manipur government from the talks confirmed the conviction of the tribal groups that the majority Meitei community (the chief minister is a Meitei) is opposed to granting any self-governance to them. This was followed by a series of protests across the hill districts of Churachandpur and Tengnoupal against the Chief Minister in response to eviction notices issued by the state government, including some churches, on the basis that they were encroaching upon forest land [28]. As per news reports, three churches were demolished in an eviction drive by the state government, thus pushing the Christian-majority tribal population to suspect the state's majority community who are mostly Vaishnavaites, to have conspired against their places of worship [29]. The mob attacks on the churches is often justified as the firm determination of the state government to protect the reserved forest areas.

Further, it is often rumored that Kuki-Zomi communities in the hills are illegally giving asylum to the migrant Burmese citizens who are fleeing from their country due to civil war and seeking shelter from the hill tribes in Manipur as they share common ancestry and lineages. The Biren Singh government has been amplifying this fear, through moves that include highlighting that one of the chiefs of the armed groups of the Kukis is a Myanmar citizen and a former politician in that country, and that the Kuki militant groups are ushering in refugees from Myanmar [30]. The chief minister accused Kuki militants of indulging in poppy cultivation in the forest areas of the hill districts to justify his eviction drive [31].

### III. WAY FORWARD

At present, the biggest challenge before the Government of India is to find a long lasting and permanent solution for the state of Manipur that has succumbed to an unprecedented state of violence that has been spreading the fear of insecurity among the people and hampering the process of economic development. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which has been ruling the Manipur government for the past six years, in order to ensure its political gains through vote bank politics, seems to have created a grand narrative that includes the marginalization of the Meitei at the hands of so-called Kuki outsiders as well as

charges of Kukis engaging in drug trafficking and violating forest rights [32]. With an objective to suppress the violence, federal forces have created buffer zones manned by army and federal forces in order to segregate the areas dominated by the warring ethnic groups in the hills and valley [33]. However, the silence and seemingly indifferent attitude of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi towards the violence, that is creating havoc in the state of Manipur has raised several questions. The Central government lacks any concrete plan of how to stop the violence. On one hand, the deployment of army and federal forces is unacceptable for the Meiteis and on the other hand, the Kukis distrust the state police, which has allowed weapons and ammunition to be looted from its armories, raising concerns about a vicious cycle of violence. Moreover, there is also risk of unrest spilling over the neighbouring state of Mizoram and across the border into Myanmar since the Kuki people share common ethnic roots with the Chin people in Myanmar and with the Mizo people in the Indian state of Mizoram. This cascading violence is probably making in-ways into insurgency situations that have plagued the security architecture of the state in particular and the entire northeastern region in general, for decades. According to Professor Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyay, geography is one of the most important determinants of India's foreign policy. The present crisis of Manipur which is mostly grounded on the discrimination based on geographical location and locale specific identity is going to be instrumental in deciding upon India's vision in the region stretching from South Asia to SouthEast Asia and beyond towards Indo-Pacific. First, it will affect India's much hyped Act East policy which is focused on connecting India's northeastern region with nearby Southeast Asia through trade, culture, people-to-people contacts, and physical infrastructure. Secondly, the government of India must ensure peace and normalcy in Manipur, if India has to assume the role of Net Security Provider in the Indo-Pacific region. Third, India should remember that violence and insurgency situation in Manipur will have a rippling effect on the success of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), one of the pillars of India's Indo-Pacific strategy as China is ready to create disturbances at the borders by taking advantage of the present situation; thereby unsettling the entire geopolitical calculation of the QUAD (which Beijing sees as the potential competitor to its Belt and Road Initiative). Finally, this will also affect the burgeoning Indo-Japan collaboration and cooperation in the implementation of the connectivity projects in the northeastern region, making deeper inroads towards the Indo-Pacific. Violence and strife in Manipur need immediate intervention but not by using force and coercion, exercised by the federal forces and army. A visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the state, consoling those who have suffered from violence, providing relief, and inviting all ethnic groups to the table is the need of the hour. New Delhi should endeavor to build up bridges among the conflicting parties ensuring not just peaceful coexistence but mutual cooperation, bonding and ever-lasting peace. At the same time the state government must embark upon a long-drawn-out programme of economic emancipation, necessarily including creation of employment opportunities, industrialisation, trade promotion etc.

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