

## Salvaging the idea and reality of Manipur

**T**he communal riots which erupted in Manipur since the evening of May 3, between the Meiteis and Kuki-Hmar-Zomi communities, have unleashed unprecedented human displacement, a tragic loss of lives and destruction of property, and show no signs of closure. As the nature and character of the riots transform from one of ethnic cleansing to genocidal attacks across the divide, the precarity of law and order remains as ragtag mobs with the support of armed groups from either side continue to expand the theatre of these riots to the peripheral areas, with more virulence. The large-scale deployment of paramilitary forces, predominantly in urban areas, is clearly not sufficient to maintain 'law and order' in the State's peripheries. Even as large parts of State have turned into a Hobbesian world, where the dictum 'might is right' determines whether lives remain brutish, nasty, and short, the trails of destruction have already bruised the ideational and geopolitical foundations of Manipur beyond any immediate repair.

The delay in imposing the shoot-at-sight order for a night-and-a-day in Imphal and valley areas now appears as deliberate state complicity to allow ragtag mobs to do the job of a comprehensive targeting and erasure of lives, properties and land records (*pattas*) with precision. When this order came on the latter part of May 4, the project of ethnic cleansing of the tribals (Kuki-Zomi-Hmar) and a *de facto* erasure of their land titles that the tribals held for centuries in the valley was already accomplished. The thousands of tribals and Meiteis who are being evacuated to safety from Imphal and Lamka (and other towns) to towns inside Manipur and various Indian metros are likely to be displaced as 'refugees' for a long time. Sadly, 'encroachers', 'eviction' and 'refugees' are labels that will now no longer remain the exclusive preserve of any particular community.

The swift imposition of a shoot-at-sight order in Churachandpur district on the evening of May 3 is in stark contrast to the night-and-a-day delay in the valley areas. Yet, this has not succeeded in forestalling the sanitisation of disparate Meitei settlements across Churachandpur district and other peripheral areas across the State. Either way, extensive ethnic cleansing suggests that the geopolitical body of Manipur has been badly bruised and radically transformed beyond recognition.

For one thing, the rag-tag mobs, as marionettes of the integrationist project of the State and Meiteis, have succeeded partially in their attempt to dissolve tribal land rights in the valley areas, a major grouse the Meiteis have against the tribals in hill areas. In fact, this grouse was a major reason which set the stage for these



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conflagrations. Similar extensive counter ethnic-cleansing drives in various parts of the hills imply that considerable Meitei settlements are likely to be erased forever. The existence of multiple tribal localities in Imphal and its valley environs inhabited by the Nagas implies that the State's aggressive integrationist and majoritarian project has to contend with this asymmetrical regime on land rights where tribals, unlike the Meiteis, can own land both in the hills and the valley.

The extensive bruises to and radical transformations of the geopolitical body of Manipur caused by these riots are likely to make the task of post-conflict state building and transformation of state-society relations extremely difficult, if not impossible. Some possible and tentative blueprints are in order.

Any attempt to secure future stability and peace in ways that will help in the stable management of post-conflict situations must begin with the audacity to confess and confront the truth about the very nature of these riots and their principal cause. The State under the N. Biren Singh-led Bharatiya Janata Party government must take primary responsibility for preparing, activating and sustaining what Paul Brass, an expert on Indian politics, calls, the 'institutionalised riots system' as a first step. Given that these riots built up and happened under his watch, Mr. Biren Singh must resign so that accountability is fixed and trust in the political system restored. A judicial commission under the Supreme Court of India supervision must be set up to fix accountability immediately so that the institutionalised ecosystem of riots does not replicate in the future.

### Need for recognition and accommodation

The BJP-government and Meiteis must realise that the stability and territorial integrity of a pillarised society such as Manipur is secured not by an aggressive integrationist project and non-functional sub-State asymmetrical institutions, but by genuine recognition and substantive accommodation of territorial rights and identities, and by making these institutions work. The disintegration of the East European states in the 1990s should be a good reminder of why it is not federalism per se but the lack of democracy and the rickety functioning of federal institutions which predate disorder and state collapse. Manipur should learn from this and from the ability of deeply-divided societies such as Belgium, Canada and Switzerland to 'hold together' which is facilitated by their enduring commitment to accommodate and institutionalise differences as a valuable good.

In the post-conflict scenario, salvaging the idea and geopolitical reality of Manipur may impel a radical shifting of constitutional gear. This is

imperative if the hills and valley communities are to live together under one political roof. Minimally, this may impel a more genuine accommodation of tribal rights and identities under the Sixth Schedule and a more robust Article 371C where 'scheduled matters' on the hill areas are made inviolable by brute legislative majority. However, given the hardened positions adopted by both sides, this may be easier said than done.

As a goodwill gesture, the State must withdraw all its notifications on reserved forests, protected forests and wildlife sanctuaries. It must also stop the blanket targeting of communities as 'foreigners', 'encroachers' and 'illegal immigrants'. Future policy-decisions of the State must consistently follow the established procedure of laws.

### State-building ahead

The weak state-society model that obtains in the State suggests that an 'ethnic security dilemma' – in Barry Posen's sense – will persist in the absence of the capacity of the State to guarantee overarching security. Institutional trust and legitimacy will be critical in holding together deeply divided societies such as Manipur as a result. The state must adopt even-handedness in its dealing with diverse communities and must not cave into the pressure of the majority in the future.

Such an accommodationist framework, if it were to work and obtain trust and legitimacy from the governed, must be alive to the distinctive and historical pedigree of extant sub-State constitutional asymmetry and increasing sense of insecurity of the Meiteis under the weight of demographic pressure. The project of reviving and sustaining the idea and the geopolitical body of Manipur can be realistic only when 'dissensual communities' engage in reasoned dialogue and conversation by mutually respecting each other as equals, in a spirit of give and take. The landlocked nature of the State and the fact that it had an admixture of populations across the State – drawn from populations within and across various States – implies that any prolonged conflagrations will be mutually destructive and self-defeating.

Future state-building and accommodation of distinctive rights and identities are indeed challenging given that the sense of hate and mutual distrust has run deep across communities. Leaders of communities, the State and all-important stakeholders must confront the truth about the mutually self-destructive nature of violence. Serious and concerted inter-community reconciliation efforts must be initiated immediately if Manipur as an inclusive idea and a geopolitical space of accommodation were to be revived.