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Revisiting  
Central Government's  
Roadmap  
for  
Manipur Crisis

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# *Revisiting Central Government's Roadmap for Manipur Crisis*

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## **Abstract**

*The execution of the national government's plans to resolve the persistent Manipur situation is examined in this paper. Although initiatives such as border fencing have commenced, these measures lack the scope required to guarantee enduring stability and reconciliation. The central emphasis should focus on cultivating a substantive discourse among the state's opposing communities to attain enduring peace. A principle of equality and inclusivity in government-led dialogues is essential for tackling the root causes of resentment. By prioritizing discussion over divisive measures, the government may alleviate grievances and establish a foundation for enduring harmony. The brief underscores the urgent necessity for a proactive, inclusive policy that emphasizes reconciliation and community engagement as fundamental elements of conflict resolution in Manipur.*

**Keywords:** Manipur Crisis; Ethnic conflict; Inclusive dialogue; Border fencing; Reconciliation

## **Introduction**

The Manipur crisis has reached to an alarming level, resulting in around 250 deaths, more than 50,000 displacements and uncertainty among the communities (Baruah, 2024). As a result of this violence, the central government proposed a roadmap which broadly looked into restoring peace, delivering humanitarian assistance and establishing an inclusive dialogue among the communities to address their grievances. Ethnic communities, mainly Meiteis and Kukis continue to have differences which impede success of any plans for resolution. While the Government has adopted a planned series of actions, this article explores other measures including a genuine government led dialogue to arrest the deteriorating situation. There is a need for the government to address the genesis of differences between various factions and ethnic groups which have spiralled to the current situation. A more holistic approach will result in lasting peace and stability in the region.

## **Historical context**

The current Manipur crisis is a consequence of a long history of ethnic tensions and colonial exploitation. British colonial policies declared native lands of the northeast region as

“excluded areas”. These policies led to local self-rule traditions, rejecting control by the central authorities. After independence, the local traditions of northeast came in conflict with Indian government’s efforts to integrate the region. The conflict over land and resources between Meitei, Naga and Kuki communities has persisted for centuries exacerbated by the colonial migration patterns. These unresolved issues have fostered deep divisions, making the current crisis a complex legacy of historical conflicts over sovereignty, land, and identity (IWGIA, 2023).

The state government’s policies on indigenous land rights is at the heart of Meitei-Kuki conflict. It has fuelled resentment, particularly among the Kukis, who primarily inhabit hill areas surrounding the valley. Efforts by the government for the removal of poppy fields which is mainly falls in Kuki-dominated hill areas, have led to Kuki village evictions. It is perceived as targeting their community. Furthermore, a significant imbalance exists in land ownership rights. After the High Court’s direction, the Meitei community will be able to purchase land in the hill area which triggered Kuki community’s fear regarding their land rights and privileges (Nepram and Schuchert, 2023).

Apart from internal problems, the state of Manipur faces external threats as well. As Manipur shares its border with Myanmar, it is more vulnerable to international influences. People of Myanmar and Manipur share strong ethnic, cultural and historical ties due to migration and settlement patterns of various indigenous tribes across the border (Pant and Banerjee, 2024). Moreover, looking at the sharing socio-economic space by tribes in India and Myanmar, Indian government, post-independence, allowed the hill tribes to travel across border without any documents. This enabled the cross-border mobility for the communities to preserve their social, economic and cultural linkages.

### **Current situation of Manipur**

The long-standing ethnic rivalry was reignited when the Manipur High Court granted Meities the status of Scheduled Tribes (ST). After this decision, the Meiteis could buy land in hill areas which is occupied by the Kukis. It threatened the social and political balance of the state. This demand was rejected by the Kukis because they feared that their lands, jobs and opportunities will be taken away (Ellis-Petersen, 2023). This ethnic tension between the two communities has thrown the Indian state of Manipur into the crisis situation.

After a short period of relative peace in the state, violence resurfaced in Manipur in early September 2024, indicating a significant intensification of the extended ethnic conflict between the Kuki-Zo and Meitei communities. On September 1, a drone strike in the Imphal West region killed two people and injured nine more, sparking this comeback. Over the next few days, there were a number of violent incidents which included a rocket attack in Bishnupur in which a civilian lost his life. These incidents, which seemed to have external influence with meticulous planning, had the potential of triggering further violence (Singh, 2024).

The Indo-Myanmar border facilitates unrestricted movement of individuals and commodities impacting the cross-border surveillance and administration. The unauthorised immigration from Myanmar threatens the local population along with national security and demographic status. Villages in Tengnoupal and Chandel districts have experienced large influx of illegal immigration impacting the local lands, jobs and opportunities, threatening the cultural and social status of the state (Bureau, 2024b).

### **Central Government's Roadmap**

On 17<sup>th</sup> September 2024, the Union Home Minister of India, while addressing a press conference on completion of 100-days of National Democratic Alliance, announced that a roadmap has been finalized to restore peace in Manipur. The roadmap broadly focused on Restoration of Peace and Stability, humanitarian assistance and rehabilitation and, inclusive dialogue and long-term reconciliation. The centre has taken a meaningful step in humanitarian assistance by planning 16 new Kendriya Police Kalyan Bhandars (KPKB) in addition to previous 21 KPKB, providing essential commodities to the locals (Bureau, 2024a).

Home Minister acknowledged the importance of dialogue between the Kuki-Zo and Meitei communities. After 17 months of prevailing conflict, on 15 October 2024, the Ministry of Home affairs organized talks for several Kuki-Zo-Hamar, Meitei and Naga MLAs. Dialogue between the ethnic groups of Manipur is important for several reasons. It fosters peacebuilding by providing a platform for open communication to address grievances and reduce tensions (Lakshman and Singh, 2024).

The central government has also recognised free movement across the India and Myanmar border as the main cause of the ongoing crisis. To address this, the government has already suspended the decades old Free Movement Regime (FMR) and have undertaken a comprehensive border fencing initiative, with plans to secure the entire 1,500-kilometer border (ddnews, 2024). This initiative has been taken to stop prohibited activities like drug trafficking

and illegal immigration which also contributes to the ongoing tension. The government aims to control cross border mobility, improve surveillance and enhance the infrastructure around border areas to foster peace. Currently, only limited sections, like a 10-kilometer stretch in Moreh, Manipur, are fenced.

### **Outcome of the actions taken**

While the initiative taken by the government in humanitarian assistance and rehabilitation is effective, its action to restore peace and have an inclusive dialogue is questionable. The result of the recent meeting organized by MHA was not rewarding. The meeting held in New Delhi failed to provide solid outcomes and bridge the differences between conflicting communities. The meeting was unsuccessful on various grounds. First, multiple views with a collaborative and multi-party approach is very essential for democratic proceedings. It results in significant and meaningful dialogue. The absence of opposition MLAs and other political party representative, hence questioned the relevance of this dialogue. Second, the importance of the meeting was diminished because of the absence of major ministers like home minister and Manipur's CM. Their involvement was very necessary in taking critical decisions. Finally, the meeting was fragmented. According to reports, Kuki-Zo MLAs had a separate meeting with central leaders for longer time period when compared to the time given to Naga and Meitei group representatives. The most pragmatic approach to solve this problem was to have a joint meeting of all stakeholders. However such a meeting was never convened. The approach of meeting individual groups did not yield the desired dividends of harmony, mutual understanding, and joint resolution of problems (The Wire, 2024).

Ethnic tribes are spread across the Indo-Myanmar border who share strong ethnic and familial. Individuals across this border rely on trade of day-to-day commodities like salt, textiles, pharmaceuticals, agricultural products and herbs. This trade has persisted since the colonial times and is a part of strengthening communal ties. After the completion of the proposed fencing of the border, the traditional movement and interactions of the local tribes spread across the border would be disrupted. Such eventuality would restrict access to common marketplaces, celebrations and familial networks, weakening enduring cultural ties and affecting the social cohesiveness of these closely linked groups.

The decision to increase security personnel and implement fencing along the Indo-Myanmar border has sparked an unrest among indigenous tribal populations, notably the Kuki-Zo and Naga factions. They have not welcomed the government's proposal of putting up a fence for

management of cross border movement. Both the factions have reservations on the fencing initiative as they are concerned about disruption of their traditional lifestyle and community identity. Meiteis, with their primary concern of trans-border migration have, to some extent, liked the idea of fencing. Therefore, this initiative seems to deepen the divisions and aggravate the resentment, thus complicating the efforts for peace and reconciliation in the region.

Suspending FMR will also adversely affect India's Act East Policy by constraining regional security collaboration, interpersonal exchanges, and transnational commerce. The current structure promotes trust and cultural connections essential for regional integration by allowing residents along the border to move freely within a 16 km radius for social and commercial engagements. Interrupting FMR would jeopardize India's Act East Policy of improving relations with Southeast Asia. Myanmar has a strategic importance for India wherein it gives direct land and maritime gateway to ASEAN countries (Kumar, 2014). Any restrictions on trans-border movement will also adversely impact important projects like the Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (Kaladan) and Trilateral Myanmar-Thailand Highway project (Pant and Banerjee, 2024).

### **Recommendations**

The government should not focus on the suspension of FMR or fencing the border as it can create more tensions among the communities. Firstly, fencing the Indo-Myanmar border will disrupt the lives and cultural ties. For the Kuki-Zo and Naga communities in particular, the border is more than a demarcated line, it represents a longstanding connection to family, shared history, and cultural practices that go beyond artificial borders. A fenced border would isolate these groups, cutting them off from traditional livelihoods and social structures which could deepen the feelings of alienation and resentment. Secondly, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland government oppose the centre's decision to fence border as it would disrupt the local communities and heighten the regional aspirations (The Wire, 2024). And lastly, due to geographical complexities, it becomes difficult to transport the logistics and infrastructure to mountains and ridges in order to complete the fencing (Yumlembam,2024).

Therefore, a more pragmatic approach should be to increase surveillance with effective use of technology to monitor cross border movement which should respect the local heritage and traditional bonds and customs. In order to implement this it would be prudent to have an inclusive approach by incorporating the locals and winning their trust rather than superimposing an external agency with no local knowledge.



To resolve these deep-rooted ethnic tensions in Manipur, it is necessary to organize an inclusive dialogue between the communities. The presence of all community representatives along with major national authorities like union home minister is very crucial. This ensures government's dedication towards peace and inclusivity. This dialogue will facilitate lasting solutions and mutual understanding. A ministerial presence will enhance the procedure and demonstrate respect towards each group's perspective.

While the High Court's directive to Manipur Government for Meitei's ST status was the immediate trigger for the ongoing violence, the Kuki community have repeatedly felt targeted which is the cause of this surge. When the government launched its "War on Drugs" campaign in 2017, as a result, thousands of acres of lands were destroyed to stop illegal cultivation of poppy and around 2,500 people were arrested out of which majority were from Kuki-Chin community. The government's initiatives caused animosity within the Kuki population, leading to violent actions. Consequently, a discussion between government representatives and all communities is essential to mitigate this sense of resentment.

## **Conclusion**

A sustainable solution for the ongoing tensions in Manipur should focus on a government-led dialogue which ensures fairness and transparency between the conflicting communities. Government's primary focus should be on the internal difficulties rather than the foreign pressures. They should tackle with problems like territorial claims, resource management and ethnic representation. This dialogue will provide platform for both parties to share their concerns and promote cooperation through mutually agreeable solutions. The dialogue should address the grievances of both parties including land ownership policies, equitable development and cultural respect. Through communication, immediate tensions can be minimised and a lasting peace could be achieved.

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## About the Author

**Nomita Chandola** is a dedicated scholar in International Relations, with a strong academic foundation and a passion for understanding complex global issues. She recently earned her master's degree in International Relations from the University of Leeds, where she focused on modules such as global governance and climate security. Prior to this, she completed her bachelor's degree in Political Science with a minor in Economics from Kamla Nehru College, University of Delhi.

Currently, Nomita is a research intern at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies, where she delves into critical issues of strategic affairs and geopolitical dynamics. Her primary area of interest lies in South Asian studies, emphasizing security dynamics and their intersections with global politics. She aspires to pursue a PhD to further explore these themes. With a keen eye for policy analysis and research, Nomita aims to contribute meaningfully to the academic and policy discourse on international security and regional stability.



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