

FESTERING WOUNDS: ON MANIPUR'S ELUSIVE PEACE

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More than three months since ethnic violence broke out in Manipur, there are still little or no signs of lasting peace. From competing groups imposing blockades of arterial roads to sporadic attacks resulting in deaths, the conflict is rife with incidents suggesting the breakdown of law and order. Another indication of the state of affairs is the difference in perceptions between the police and the paramilitary Assam Rifles with unedifying acts such as an FIR being lodged by the police against the latter for “obstructing” it from discharging its duties. Far from moving away from the ethnic quagmire and in search of a détente, the situation is more like a powder keg. That people are still in relief camps and many houses have been destroyed, and anyone seeking peace has been subjected to violence or threats also attest to this unfortunate fact. India’s mainstream polity had an opportunity to use the monsoon session of Parliament to nudge key stakeholders to work towards reconciliation. But that opportunity was seemingly lost, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah had little to say beyond homilies on what needs to be done even as the Opposition only sought to pin down the government for its failures as a means to score a political point in the run-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha election.

The events in Manipur so far suggest that the ethnic conflict festers because of the intractable positions by the Meitei and Kuki-Zo leaders. The Meitei refuse to acknowledge the sense of bias in the State government’s actions — especially by Chief Minister N. Biren Singh — that have alienated the Kuki-Zo and its representatives, cutting across party lines. The latter seeks to harp on the idea of a “separate administration”, complicating the fragile co-existence of ethnic identities in the State which include others such as the Naga community. The refusal of civil society representatives to rise above their ethnic differences has also exacerbated the conflict, which has worsened due to the lack of accountability of the State government and its refusal to change its leadership — a step that seems to be the only clear possibility of bringing forward reconciliation. Manipur is a vital border State and the continuing distrust between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo will have a lasting impact on future generations, severely hampering progress. The Union government’s choices are clear: it can either continue the narrow-minded emphasis on not giving into any critique, even if constructive, and let the situation fester into an uneasy stasis, or take up the gauntlet and bring about substantive changes in the State leadership, heralding steps towards reconciliation.

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