

MANIPUR, A RUDE REMINDER OF NORTHEAST TENSIONS

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“The impression that Delhi is neutral in any conflict, and is only on the side of justice has to be properly communicated” | Photo Credit: AFP

Violence in Manipur, which has gone on for over a month now, [claimed well over a 100 lives and displaced thousands more](#), and has opened many raw wounds that most people had hoped belonged to a bygone era. The spectre of an unbridgeable divide between the Meiteis on the one hand and the Kuki-Chin-Mizo-Zomi-Naga tribes on the other is now all too evident, and any resolution will demand utmost sensitive handling. The ethnic divide and violence seems to suggest that little has changed in the northeast, notwithstanding the many developments in place. Thus the healing process is likely to be a long-drawn-out one.

Most people across the country had reason to believe that the northeast had over time become well and truly integrated. Also, that there were now more commonalities rather than differences amongst the various tribes and communities. The ethnic violence in Manipur, consequently, has come as a rude reminder. Notwithstanding improved communications, better transit facilities, and support for the special needs of the region, there does still exist a divide between the tribes and plains people within the region.

It is easy to pontificate whenever an outbreak of violence of this magnitude takes place, and to harp on certain aspects such as the existence of an excess of region-centric calculus, lack of internal cohesion, and ethnic/caste rivalries as the causes for internal tensions and violence. Such aspects, fortunately, had become lesser in number in recent times, but it is possible that the fraying of our composite culture in recent times — which has also effected other parts of India — is casting a shadow over the northeast.

An additional dimension in the northeast is the presence of ethnic sub-nationalism and identity politics in an aggravated form. Ethnic allegiance had oftentimes been in conflict with mainstream nationalism or vice-versa previously, but it was hoped that such tensions had subsided. The Manipur developments imply that in much of the northeast, ethnic identities still overshadow and overwhelm all other considerations. What is also disturbing is that according to some reports from the region, consolidation efforts by different tribal entities were resulting in subterranean pressures, and the result is that many issues which were deemed settled seem to have been reopened. This applies specially to Manipur where, of late, there have been incipient signs of a

resurgence of ultra-nationalistic tendencies. The confrontation between Meitei versus Kuki-Naga ultra-radicalism, as evidenced in Manipur these past weeks, needs to be viewed in the larger context of the conflict between the plains Meiteis and the Kuki-Mizo-Chin-Zomi-Naga hill tribes. What we witness in Manipur today is a conflict between charged up Meitei chauvinism seeking to consolidate their position within Manipur and across the region, in opposition to the Kukis, Mizos and other tribes. The Meiteis may lack a significant militaristic profile, but the Meiteis had earlier on developed a strategy of networking with other northeastern resurgent outfits and militant groups at one level, and with Maoist groups in the hinterland States of the country, at another. This is a matter of record.

Currently, the polarisation between the majority Meitei, and the other tribal communities, in Manipur appears total and irreconcilable. Notwithstanding the peace moves by the central authorities, fresh outbreaks of violence continue. Relocation of the two communities is taking place vigorously with parts of the State being designated as Meitei and Kuki, respectively. The demand for a separate administration as a prelude to the division of the State along these lines is currently gaining momentum.

The State Government — more specifically, the Chief Minister — has come under severe attack by the Kuki tribals for the ongoing violence. This is accompanied by accusations that the police are siding with the Meitei attackers. Meitei elements, in turn, have threatened to form a 'civilian defence force' to protect their people against attacks by Kuki militants. Old issues are being resurrected, such as the burning of the historic Centenary Gate in Leisang village by Meitei miscreants, thus sharpening the divide. Demands for the dismissal of the State government and the imposition of President's rule under Article 356 of the Constitution, alongside a demand by tribal groups such as the Kukis-Chins-Mizos-Zomis, urging the Centre to give the region inhabited by them a separate administration, are being vociferously raised.

The Home Minister, Amit Shah's recent visit to Manipur promised much, but it is highly uncertain whether the solutions that he has proposed — which is the standard prescription in all such situations — are the right ones at this time. His announcement of a judicial probe into the ethnic violence and of a three-member committee headed by a judge has been well received. His proposal for the creation of a unified command to oversee security in the State, however, appears draconian in the prevailing circumstances. The announcement of a Central Bureau of Investigation inquiry into specific incidents of violence is a welcome measure. However, changing the Director General of Police, who belongs to the Kuki tribe, on grounds of ineffectiveness may only serve to heighten the gap between the warring Meitei and Kuki communities.

What is needed at this time is for saner voices to play a leading role. Notwithstanding the fact that the northeast has been spared serious violence for some years now, the reality is that it is still a volatile region. It is in the process of changing and adapting to newer circumstances. What the Centre needs to achieve is an 'optimal positioning' even if it may seem like giving far too many concessions. Delhi is on test as to how it would adjust or react to the new situation that has presented itself — this demands innovative thinking. Even as States in the region crave greater autonomy, the process of achieving a proper equilibrium requires both sensitivity and 'out of the box' thinking.

Understanding cultural factors are critical, specially in times of conflict. The Meitei versus Tribal divide is both a cultural and sociological phenomenon. A solution demands a combination of adjusting to realities, coupled with an understanding of the moral imperatives of the numerous tribal communities that dot the northeastern landscape. The art is to come up with an agreement in which both or more parties to the dispute think it is the best from their point of view. A solution to the Manipur imbroglio in quick time is important — if a satisfactory solution is not found early,

it could aggravate centrifugal tendencies that have not entirely been dissipated, despite the best efforts of successive governments in Delhi and in the region over the past 75 years. The region is beset with people belonging to different cultures often confronting each other. Delhi has consistently tried to avoid an adversarial policy, and, instead, has sought dialogue. This is still the best remedy available, while avoiding any impression of weakness on the part of Delhi.

Delhi needs to acknowledge to itself that the situation in Manipur poses a 'problem' of no mean magnitude. An answer has to be found sooner rather than later before it ignites similar conflicts elsewhere in the region where such tensions also lurk. All communities across the region crave 'security'. The impression that Delhi is neutral in any conflict, and is only on the side of justice has to be properly communicated. The key task for Delhi would be to be seen to act on the basis of overreaching moral principles without, however, making a virtue of such principles. Today, there is enough common purpose and principles across the partisan divide; what is often absent is a weak democratic resolve and an ability to act in the shared national interest.

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