

Destructive state-making at the heart of violence

DH deccanherald.com/opinion/comment/destructive-state-making-at-the-heart-of-violence-1221975.html

May 26, 2023



Credit: DH Illustration

Barely three weeks after it hosted beauty pageants and entertained international guests, Manipur is experiencing what many human rights groups term a state-sponsored ethnic cleansing project. The turmoil stems from a historical conflict between the non-tribal Meitei community's state-making agenda in the Valley and the tribals' place-making assertion in the hills. The ethnic implications run deep. Here, any reference to the hills implies tribal groups, and the valley implies the non-tribal Meitei community.

I use the word "state-making" to imply a coercive means of subjecting people within a territory to comply with diktats. In such a process, democratic principles of consultation and the informed consent of the people are bypassed through legally dubious forms to show legitimacy.

The existing tribals in Manipur have struggled for decades to come out of exploitative, discriminatory, and exclusionary state-making practises that have left them in conditions of abject poverty. There is a long-standing resentment among the tribals, both the Kuki-Mizo-Chin groups and the Nagas, against the unequal development and disparity in infrastructure and institutional presence between the hills and the valley. The Meitei community has 40 representatives in the 60-seat Manipur Assembly, and this results in a tremendous degree of infrastructural injustice in Manipur. In 2021, it was pointed out in the Legislative Assembly that the hills received less than 3% of the total state budget for development projects in the preceding five years.

The Manipur (Hill Areas) Autonomous District Council Bill, 2021, proposed amendments to the 1971 Act seeking more autonomy on financial, planning, and budgeting aspects in the Hill Areas. The proposal was arrived at by 18 legislators from the official Hill Areas Committee. However, these have also been rejected by the state BJP government. The political hegemony and the resulting disparity are also clearly seen in the concentration of institutions in the valley, and thus power, in the hands of the dominant Meitei community. The fact that the Valley lacks the political will for inclusive governance is evident, and any call for legislative change that would empower the tribals in Manipur has always been met with stiff opposition. Additionally, there has been opposition in the valleys against a delimitation exercise in Manipur that is aimed at having an equitable and proportional representation of the hills in the legislative assembly.

The pathways and modes of statemaking in Manipur are therefore exploitative and undemocratic, making it vulnerable to losing its legitimacy. It is clear that the idea of a state in Manipur is not constituted through stable competition between different interest groups and societies but by the structural dominance of a particular non-tribal community. Rather than a game of consensual competition for equitably divisible stakes, there is an unequal struggle to dominate a powerful state apparatus. It is marked by the emergence of a new domain of political society that has political and financial reach beyond the local. They include political organisations and political publics such as the Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun, whose actors are directly involved with the government, allowing them to subvert and reconstruct state power wherever necessary.

Given this backdrop, the Manipur High Court Order dated March 27, which instructs the state government to expeditiously consider the inclusion of the Meitei community in the Scheduled Tribe (ST) list, is not only ill-informed but squarely unconstitutional and is responsible for the immediately ensuing ethnic violence. The Supreme Court itself recently pointed out that this judgement by the High Court is factually wrong and undermines the principles that the Constitution Bench on the classification of communities in the SC/ST list has laid down. Article 371C of the Constitution, which issues special provisions for the hill areas of Manipur by giving them a certain measure of autonomy, will completely lose its meaning if this demand comes through. The tribals in Manipur see this demand for ST status by the Meiteis as another form of statemaking whereby the dominant community is employing questionable legislative tools to dominate the hill areas and their resources. Such attempts to nullify the constitutional provision for a tribal community undermine the constitutional ethos of affirmative action.

Stoking up fuel for ethnic violence is the narrative painted by the state BJP government and manufactured consent in political discourses to point out that Kukis are illegal immigrants from Myanmar, drug traffickers, poppy planters, and forest encroachers. Hence, the need to declare many of their inhabited areas “reserved forest” (RF) or “protected forest” (PF) by forcibly evicting many villagers from their settlement. Even if there were elements of truth to this claim, it is the duty of the state to curb anti-social activities or make legal arrangements for alleged refugees. Displacement of communities through dispossession in this manner is akin to State-sponsored human rights violations.

Instituting Reserved and Protected Areas is more about the political conquest of the forested frontiers through deterritorialization of the Kukis and much less about correcting illegal conduct in the region. The concepts of “reserved” and “protected” forests in this context also presuppose a superior knowledge of forest management than the traditional ecological knowledge of the tribals and reflect aggressive processes of statemaking.

In articulating a solution to the current crisis, the state government should not reduce the complexities of social relations among diverse ethnicities and fix them in temporary, unstable, and provisional ways. The state government needs to seek out a long-term solution and overturn its tendency to neglect the various constitutional provisions on the rights of the tribals, whether it be on land, natural resources, or administration.

(The writer teaches economics at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru.)