

BRIEF HISTORY OF MANIPUR STATE

Manipur is a state in the North-east region of India. It is a region that is divided into six sister states Nagaland, Assam, Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh, and a brother state Sikkim. The boundaries of these states as we know them today did not always exist, it has been arbitrarily defined by the colonial government. The British first included all of the north-east in the Bengal Presidency in the 19th century, and in 1873 Assam province was carved out which included Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Manipur Kingdoms. It was after Independence in 1947 that Manipur and Tripura Kingdoms became princely states and the rest of the states were carved out of what was then Assam under the North Eastern Region (Reorganization) Act 1971. The North East Council was to be the advisory body in charge of the formation and development of the states. Since their inclusion in Independent India, they have had a fraught relationship with the Indian State. Much of the region has resisted against what is perceived as Indian occupation of these states; there have been armed insurgencies alongside demands for separation. Each of these states has been heavily impacted by frequent human rights violations. They have also faced cultural dilution and in some cases complete cultural extinction due to changing political power.

Manipur is not an exception to this. Before arriving at the contemporary crisis of the state vis-a-vis its own people and the Indian State, it might be of benefit to keep in context the history of the region. Manipur is inhabited by broadly defined communities- Meiteis, Pangals (Muslim community), Kuki-Zomi, and Nagas. Meiteis form over 50 percent of the state population and are situated in the Imphal Valley. Kuki-Zo and Nagas are hill tribes but not homogenous tribal groups. They are umbrella terms enlisted as 34 Scheduled Tribes (this category is a form of positive discrimination that keeps reservations in schools, colleges, jobs, healthcare, etc) in the Indian Constitution.¹

The recorded history of Meiteis in Manipur dates back to 33 CE. The Manipur Kingdom - *Ningthouja* also known as Meitei Dynasty is known to be one the longest-ruling dynasties. The primary source of history from 33 CE to 15th century CE is the text called *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, it is believed that the accurate history of this period is unknown because it was redrafted in the 18th century by the king Bhagyachandra (known for spreading Meitei Vaishnavism and also founding of [Manipuri Ras Leela](#)).²

¹ Mander, Harsh. (November 1, 2023). Manipur: A Land of Settled Grief. The Wire. Retrieved from: <https://thewire.in/security/manipur-a-land-of-settled-grief>

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Manipur#:~:text=Manipur%20became%20a%20princely%20state,between%20Japanes e%20and%20Allied%20forces.

The early eighteenth century is crucial to the history of Manipur because it marked the time when Vaishnavism or Hinduism was declared the state religion by King *Pamheiba* (he later took on the name Gharib Niwaz after conversion to Hinduism). This period is also known for the burning of all sacred texts that were written in the script *Meitei Mayek* (thus the redrafting of history). The script was replaced by Bangla hereon. Various historians and scholars have argued that it is unknown whether the dynasty was in fact a Meitei Dynasty and the redrafting of history at a particular juncture was done to strengthen Meiteis' claim over the region.³

The Kuki-zo (26 percent of the population) and Naga (17 percent of the population) tribes' presence within the boundaries of the Meitei Dynasty (known to be an independent dynasty) has varied with the kings and their expansion to the hill areas. Control over hilly areas or withdrawal from them has kept changing with the Kings and their approach towards expansion. 'During the rule of King Khagemba (1597-1652), the boundary of Manipur kingdom extended from the Barak (now in Assam) to Chindwin (now in Myanmar) from Maram hills and to Tipaimukh (bordering present-day Mizoram). During the periods of weak rulers, the kingdom was restricted to just the valley. Meidingu Pamheiba (1690–1751) also had a kingdom that is said to have included not just the hill areas of Manipur but extended the Irrawaddy River (present-day Myanmar) in the east to Cachar and Tripura in the west.'⁴ Kukis are largely situated in the southern hills of Manipur and Nagas are in the northern hills. Kukis in the chronicles of the Meitei dynasty were referred to as *Khongjais*. With colonization, various Christian missionaries entered the region and much of the community today practices Christianity. They are not just situated in Manipur, they are spread out throughout the north-east region. Nagas too are in present-day Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. All four communities have their counterparts elsewhere in Burma or Sylhet from where the Pangals trace their origins. The boundary between Manipur and Myanmar kept fluctuating and was only fixed after the British seized control over the region.⁵

Coming nearer in history, we see that in the early 19th century Burma invaded Assam and Manipur (between 1819 to 1826) and what followed was a war between the British and Burmese in which the former won. The British policy in the region set the ground for much of the crisis that has befallen Manipur since its accession to Independent India. One such policy is the separation or formation of an 'inner line' between the hills and the valley areas. They experimented with this policy in Assam due to the security threats raised by the possibility of

³ Same as 1

⁴ Schoetz, N., & Das, S. (August 4, 2023). When did Kukis reach Manipur and how the past is shaping the state's present. India Today. Retrieved from: <https://www.indiatoday.in/history-of-it/story/manipur-violence-when-did-kukis-reach-manipur-and-how-past-is-shaping-states-present-2416215-2023-08-04>

⁵ Arora, V., & Kipgen, N. (2012). The Politics of Identifying with and Distancing from Kuki Identity in Manipur. Sociological Bulletin, 61(3), 429–449. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26290634>

raids in the abundant valley by the hill tribals in the lean season.⁶ These became the excluded areas in the colonial period. The same policy was replicated in Manipur.⁷ In post-colonial India with the change in the political circumstances, the areas marked as excluded became the protected areas.⁸

In 1949, the Manipur Kingdom acceded to India and a merger agreement was signed called the [Manipur Merger Agreement 1949](#). Manipur was made a Union Territory in 1956 and became a state in 1972. The unsettled issue of boundary and identity has loomed large over Manipur throughout the post-colonial period. It has been a witness to multiple violent clashes. Ever since the formation of the state various insurgent groups have been in regular talks with the Government of India over demands for a separate state. There have also been ethnic conflicts around the question of 'real' inhabitants of the state and of tribal identity. Manipur has also been a hotbed for human rights violations due to heavy military deployment under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), a colonial legacy usually applicable to 'disturbed areas'. Under this Act, Indian Armed Forces deployed in the disturbed regions are empowered with impunity to take violent actions against civilians based on suspicion of anti-national activities. This was applied in Manipur in response to the rise of Naga peoples' demands for a separate nation in the 1950s. Ever since Independence various separatist and ethnic factions exist, to name a few- People's Liberation Army of Manipur, National Socialist Council of Nagaland, Kuki National Army etc. Many insurgent groups allegedly operate largely from across the border in Myanmar. The state, thus has been witness to regular violent and political turmoil. There were ethnic clashes among Nagas and Kukis in the 1990s which led to around 400 deaths.⁹ Kuki armed organizations have historically demanded a separate Kuki administration and nation. In an attempt to start a dialogue with them regarding their demands the state government signed a Suspension of Operations (SoO) Agreement in 2008 that prohibits both sides - the state and the insurgents from attacking each other and assured dialogue with Kukis.¹⁰ In March 2023 the government backed out of the agreement.

This brings us to the recent ethnic violence in the state between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities which began on 3rd May, 2023. Manipur is a largely agricultural economy with

⁶ Phanjoubam, P. (June 22, 2022). Mutant Legacy of British Era Law in Manipur. The New Indian Express. Retrieved from: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2022/jun/22/mutant-legacy-of-a-british-era-law-in-manipur-2468178.html>.

⁷ Same as above

⁸ Same as above

⁹ Mander, Harsh. (November 1, 2023). Manipur: A Land of Settled Grief. The Wire. Retrieved from: <https://thewire.in/security/manipur-a-land-of-settled-grief>

¹⁰ Hussan, A. (June 7, 2023). Manipur Crisis: What is the Suspension of Operations Agreement?. India Today. Retrieved from: <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/manipur-crisis-what-is-suspension-of-operations-agreement-2390021-2023-06-07>

the presence of a small cottage industry. The issue of the current conflict is that of land and identity. Meiteis who form over 50 percent of the population are primary occupants of the Imphal Valley i.e. 10 percent of the state's territory, and are not allowed to own land in hilly areas. Tribal communities -Kukis and Nagas who live in hilly areas are allowed to own land in the valley. In the last few years, Meiteis have started demanding Scheduled Tribe status that will allow them access to reservation in jobs and give them access to land in hill regions. The violence broke out with protests and counter-protests against this demand of Meiteis. Meiteis occupy 40 out of 60 seats in the state government assembly. Kukis claim that they will lose access to already existing reservations with the inclusion of Meiteis in the ST category. At the base of the concerns lies another argument which is that of illegal migration or infiltration of Kukis from Myanmar (which is now undergoing a military coup) who are settling in the hill region in the guise of local inhabitants. Additionally, allegations have surfaced by the Chief Minister of Manipur (a man from the Meitei community) against the Kukis' involvement in illegal poppy cultivation in the hills. As the conflict continues a physical border has been drawn between the two parts of the state; Kukis demand a separate administration citing the impossibility of reconciling with the Meiteis.

This has led to people being stranded, having lost homes and families as they continue to live in subhuman conditions without access to basic food, clothing, shelter, and healthcare requirements.