**Geographical threads of Identity: The Hills-Valley Conundrum in Manipur**

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**ABSTRACT**

Identity is a complex and dynamic concept that encompasses an individual or group's sense of self and how they perceive themselves in relation with others and the world around them. As a multifaceted construct, it is influenced by personal experiences, social interactions in the broader societal contexts and above all by the geographical factors, such as landscapes, climate, natural resources, and location. All these factors either individually or in combination play a crucial role in shaping the cultural, social, and historical identities of a region and its people. These factors influence various aspects of life, including traditions, customs, language, socio-economic and political structures. Identity in Northeast India is diverse and complex, with each state having its unique cultural, linguistic, and ethnic characteristics. The region is home to numerous indigenous communities, and identity plays a crucial role in shaping their social, political, and economic landscapes. Various factors such as history, geographical location and interactions with neighboring countries contribute to the complex hierarchy of identities in Northeast India. The hills-valley conundrum in Manipur is the result of this complicated geographical and cultural divide between the hilly regions and the valley areas of the state. This issue has been a significant aspect of Manipur's identity, influencing its social, political, and economic dynamics. It is in this context; the present article delves into the intricacies of this hills-valley divide in order to deconstruct the underlying factors responsible for the recent conflict in Manipur.

Keywords : Identity, Geography, Northeast, Manipur,

**I. Introduction**

\Identity is a dynamic concept that can affect both the individual and the society in which the individual is residing. The answer to the question “Who am I?” is reflected in how society sees the individual and how the individual sees himself.  Individual identity not only introduces the person himself but also speaks volume about who that particular person is “not”. Therefore, identity is a social construct which regulates our social, economic and political relations across time and space. Individual identity is always influenced by his surroundings leading to the culmination of specific behavior and habits. These behaviors and habits have led to the emergence of cultures, citizenship and identity and reflections of this situation can be seen in institutions such as religion, language, morality, education, law, economic and political structures, family, kinship system and marriage [1]. The feeling of belonging to a place or a region in which the person lives encompasses an individual or group's sense of self and how they perceive themselves in relation with others and the world around them. It is further observed that apart from being influenced by personal experiences, social interactions in the broader societal contexts, identity is also influenced by the geographical factors, such as landscapes, climate, natural resources, and location. All these factors either individually or in combination play a crucial role in shaping the cultural, social, and historical identities of a region and its people. Identity in Northeast India is diverse and complex, with each state having its unique cultural, linguistic, and ethnic characteristics. The region is home to numerous indigenous communities, and identity plays a crucial role in shaping their social, political, and economic landscapes. Various factors such as history, geographical location and interactions with neighboring countries contribute to the complex hierarchy of identities in Northeast India. The hills-valley conundrum in Manipur is the result of this complicated interaction between the hilly regions and the valley areas of the state. This issue has been a significant aspect of Manipur's identity, influencing its social, political, and economic dynamics. It is in this context, the present article delves into the intricacies of this hills-valley divide in order to deconstruct the underlying factors responsible for the recent conflict in Manipur.

**II. Deconstructing the Hills-Valley Divide**

Manipur, home to a 3.7 million people belonging to myriad ethnic groups, at India’s easternmost edge, has a turbulent history of ethnic clashes and militancy, which subsided in 2008 after a cease-fire agreement. However, the current violence that is taking place between two ethnic groups, the Kuki people and the Meitei people has no prior precedent. The turmoil has not only wreaked havoc on the local polity but is also becoming a potential threat across the state borders.The total area of Manipur (22,456 sq. km) is divided into hill and valley districts.  According to the 2011 Census, the Meiteis (including the Pangals) constitute the majority group, inhabiting 10.02% of the state’s total geographical area, and constituting 65.8% of the total population. Together, Nagas and Kukis occupy 89.98% of the total geographical area and account for 34.2% of the total population (Government of Manipur 2004). The state of Manipur comprises thirty-three recognized Scheduled Tribes, which are mostly ethnic Nagas and Kukis (Government of India 2011). The non-tribe Sanskritized and Hinduized Meitei community is concentrated in four plains/valley districts –Bishnupur, Imphal East, Imphal West, and Thoubal – and are surrounded by Nagas and Kukis, who reside in the remaining five hill districts – Churachandpur, Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong, and Ukhrul. Violent clashes broke out in the state after a 'Tribal Solidarity March' was organised in the 10 hill districts on May 3 to protest against the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, leading to the deaths of at least 54 people. However, the escalation in violence runs very deep into a myriad of complex architecture inclusive of both history and geography. The rest of the article will attempt to interrogate each of these factors.

**A.Tyrannies of British Colonialism**

Manipur was a sovereign monarch and the Metei King controlled the entire political and administrative system of the hills. The administration was a federal structure where the village chiefs were granted freedom, in return for small tributes annually. The rebel village chiefs were crushed from time to time [2]. It was a mutually beneficial relationship. The Meiteis had helped the tribes from time to time against the excesses of the British administration. On the other hand, when Manipur was occupied by the British Empire in 1891, the defeated Metei passed on their weapons and arms to the neighbouring hills [3]. When Churachand became the King of Manipur, the entire administration of the hills was entrusted to a single officer of the Manipur State Durbar, who was an English man appointed from the Assam Provincial Service [4]. The hilly terrains, the proximity to the neighbouring Chins and Burmans and the presence of myriad ethnic groups made the entire Northeastern region a formidable challenge to the British empire.  The colonial exploitation of the hill people continued in the form of imposition of land revenue, house tax, obnoxious law of free and forced labour. The British government was convinced that the Maharaja of Manipur is exploiting the hills by extracting huge amounts of money from them in the form of tax and annual tributes [5]. The Kuki rebellion of 1917-19 further triggered the takeover of the hill administration by the Englishmen and put them under the charge of a British Officer [6]. Thus, the British separated the Hills from Valley in Manipur and erased the cultural, historical and religious links between the Hill and Valley people. The seed for separate administration was sown by them and widened the Hills-Valley divide to realize their mission to gain complete control over the reins of the entire Northeastern region.

**B.Woes of Ethno-Nationalism**

The seed for separate administration that was sowed by the British colonial rulers further fuelled the spirit of ethno- nationalism. According to Ernest Gellner nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy where there is a close connection between ethnicity and nationalism, whereby cultural communities are created and maintained. The objective existence and subjective perception of inequality are indispensable to justify and ground nationalism; ensuing feelings of frustration and relative deprivation in controlling over resources precipitate ethnic nationalism [7]. On the other side, ethnicity has often been rhetorically used or sometimes even been invented in order to legitimize nationalist claims and to justify various political actions and demands [8]. Ethnicity is about asserting difference through ethnic markers such as religion, language, customary practices, and origin myths [9]. Sometimes, ethnic stratification is perpetuated and boundaries are accentuated through inequality in access and control over resources [10]. Ethnic stratification of resources and domination of one group over another in controlling resources can give rise to ethnic nationalism and ethnic identities may become politicized and competitive when access to resources (both economic and political) depends on the recognition of the group digressing into violence [11]. Manipur is a perfect example exhibiting such trends and tendencies. Discriminatory use and control over land has been a crucial determinant in shaping the ethnic identities with the Nagas and Kukis practicing shifting cultivation in the hills, while the Meitei settling for terraced cultivation in the valley. The hills which constitute nine-tenths of the state’s area and contain 37% of its population, in popular perception and in allocation of resources for economic development, continue to be underdeveloped and far behind the valley areas inhabited by the Meitei community. In Manipur, the state government is persistently accused of bias in favour of Meiteis in the allocation of facilities and funds for development. Tribal leaders complain and point to a lack of infrastructural development, poor conditions of educational and health services, endemic poverty, and lack of employment opportunities and access to development resources.  This feeling of frustration and relative deprivation have further precipitated into Kuki ethnic nationalism challenging the existing pattern of disparate distribution of economic resources and political power between Kukis, Nagas, and Meiteis. Despite the chant of Ching-tam amadani (oneness of hills and valley), Ching-tam machin manao (hills-valley brotherhood) emotionally, the hills and valley had departed long time ago; at present it is only the political boundary which forcefully binds them together.

**C.Political and Administrative Disparity**

The underrepresentation of the tribal people and the electoral injustice or discrimination of the tribals is clear in the fact that the hill areas are represented by only 19 members in the Legislative Assembly of the state (a mere 31.6% of the total seats) whereas they represent 42.8% of the total population. Contrastingly, the Valley population of a mere 1,628,224 (57.2 per cent) is overrepresented with 41 MLAs (68.4 per cent), even though the Valley accounts only for 10 per cent of the total geographical area of the state. Additionally, the distribution of administrative resources is skewed; for instance, there is one block development office (BDO) for every 160 sq. km in valley areas, but in hill areas it is for every 837 sq. km; one police station for every 90 sq. km in valley areas, but one every 670 sq. km for hill areas [12]. Tribal groups have often complained about insufficient manpower in government establishments in hill districts. Tribal organizations perceive that most of these problems occur because valley people (Meiteis) hold all the political power [13]. It should be also taken into account, the hill/tribal areas in Manipur have been subjected to the rule of both the Autonomous District Council (ADC) and the Hill Areas Committee (HAC). Manipur Hill Areas District Council Act was passed by the Parliament of India in 1971. The Parliamentary ADC Act of 1971 was arbitrarily amended in 2000, 2006, 2008, and 2011, ultimately rendering it pointless. Peculiarly, the ADCs and HAC in Manipur are neither under the Fifth Schedule (Administration of Tribal areas) of the Constitution nor the Sixth Schedule, but centralized under the Directorate of Hills and Tribal Development at Imphal, in contravention of democratic decentralization, with only one minister in charge of all affairs. Both ADCs and HAC are powerless as the state government exercises subtle decisive control and makes ADC/HAC provisions meaningless.

**D.Impasse created by Reservation and Unemployment**

Apart from the political and administrative disparities, the tribal communities in Manipur have often complained about their poor representation in government jobs. The state legislative assembly passed the Manipur Reservation of Vacancies in Posts and Services (for SC and ST) Bill on 12 December 1976, and the Governor approved it on 21 February 1977 [14]. The rules framed and published in Gazette No. 474 (B) on 10 December 1990 ‘for immediate enforcement’ were rescinded in Gazette No. 618 and 639 published by the Chief Secretary on 2 February 1991 and 5 February 1991 stating that ‘the same shall be treated as to have not been issued and existed’ [15]. But it was introduced in the state legislative assembly and the Manipur Reservation of Vacancies in Posts and Services (for SC and ST) Act 2007 was passed on 19 May 2007 [16]. However, the state government has not prepared the rules for its implementation yet, despite repeated complaints from All Tribal Students’ Union Manipur (ATSUM) [17]. It is mandatory to appoint tribal persons to at least 33% of all jobs,26 but only a few departments have been able to meet this target – sometimes due to a shortage of adequately qualified candidates, but mostly because of the lack of political and bureaucratic commitment [18]. It is often reported that Meitei groups have always opposed tribal demands by citing dangers to Manipur’s ‘territorial integrity’ due to the possible creation of ‘states within state’ [19]. Moreover, Meitei groups have resented reservations for tribal communities in jobs within the central public sector,claiming that opportunities for educated Meitei youth are limited [20]. The cycle of conflict has intensified with rising socio-economic challenges,uneven development between hills and valleys and with the re-emergence of Kuki nationalism mainly after the 1980s. It has further politicized the issue of the hills–valley divide.

**E.Travails of Uneven Development**

The answer as to why there is uneven development between the hills and valleys in Manipur is the cumulative product of non-implementation of Constitutional rights for the the tribals in hill areas by indulging administrative apathy as well as discriminatory policy making by those who have been controlling the affairs of the state. For instance, there is a huge disparity in fund allocation between hills and valley as there is no separate budget for the hills as enshrined in Article 371(c) [21].The 2020-21 budget shows that out of ₹7,000 crores, merely ₹41 crores were allocated to the Hills while the Valley received ₹6,959 crores [22]. Table 1 below shows discriminatory trend in fund allocation between Hills and Valley

                                                                                 Table 1

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| YEAR | STATE BUDGET (RUPEES IN CRORES) | TO VALLEY (RUPEES IN CRORES) | TO HILLS  (RUPEES IN CRORES) |
| 2017-18 | 5000 | 4892 | 108 |
| 2018-19 | 4900 | 4750 | 150 |
| 2019-20 | 5000 | 4880 | 129 |
| 2020-21 | 7000 | 6959 | 41 |
| TOTAL | 21,900 | 21,481 | 419 |

Source:https://manipur.gov.in/  
 The inequality in development between the Hills and the Valley can be also seen in the lack of accessibility to employment opportunities, medical facilities, and infrastructure in the former. Due to lesser employment opportunities in the Hills and exclusion from development that takes place in the Valley, many tribal people resort to poppy cultivation for sustenance [23]. A 2019 field study by Ngmajahao Kipgen, Associate Professor of Sociology at IIT (Guwahati) revealed that poverty, food insecurity, and material needs are the drivers of illegal opium production in Manipur [24]. While many tribes on the Hill cultivate poppies, Kukis feel they alone are being singled out and called drug peddlers now [25]. The Manipur government's ‘War on Drugs’ campaign last year destroyed the poppy crops before harvesting time without providing any alternative arrangements for the people, leaving them unemployed [26].

**F.Prejudiced policies of the State Government**

The violence that erupted in the state of Manipur on May 3 and 4 was the direct manifestation of the opposition from the state’s tribal population to the demand of a section of the Meiteis to include them too in the Scheduled Tribes list. With the approval of the same by the Manipur high court, who directed the state government to recommend it to the Union tribal affairs ministry, fear amplified within the small tribal communities of losing their constitutional safeguards against the majority Meiteis. Another reason that intensified the present imbroglio was the show cause notice issued by the state High Court to the president of the All Tribal Students Union of Manipur (ATSUM) and the chairman of the Hill Areas Committee (HAC) of the state assembly for criticising its order. It was ATSUM that organised the tribal solidarity march in all hill districts of the state on May 3 against the granting of ST status to the Meiteis. Violence erupted during one such march in Churachandpur district which escalated into full-blown mob violence in different parts of the state, targeting one community or the other. If the tribes are scared of losing their constitutional safeguards against the Meiteis, the latter are equally scared of losing their primacy in their traditional homeland, the valley area. The fact that no Meitei can buy land in the hill districts but tribes can do so in the valley area – which is traditionally the Meitei homeland – has exacerbated anxieties. This sense of insecurity and fear of being dominated by other communities which are larger in numbers than the Meiteis have also found expression in their demand to implement the inner line permit (ILP) in the entire state – granted by the Narendra Modi government.

Yet another point of trigger for the May 3-4 violence was the brewing anger within the Kuki-Zomi tribes over the decision of the state government led by Chief Minister N Biren Singh to withdraw the suspension of operations (SoO) agreement with their armed umbrella outfits, United People’s Front (UPF) and Kuki National Organisation (KNO). It essentially implied that the state government was withdrawing itself from the ongoing tripartite peace talks between these armed groups and the Narendra Modi government through a Centre-appointed interlocutor. This tripartite peace talks are significant for the Kuki-Zo communities as it has promised some form of self-governance akin to what the Bodo community was granted within Assam. Therefore withdrawal of  the Manipur government from the talks suddenly sent out the message to the tribal groups that the majority Meitei community (the chief minister is a Meitei) is opposed to granting any self-governance to them. This was followed by a series of protests across the hill districts of Churachandpur and Tengnoupal against the Chief Minister in response to eviction notices issued by the state government, including some churches, on the basis that they were encroaching upon forest land [27]. As per news reports, three churches were demolished in an eviction drive by the state government, thus pushing the Christian-majority tribal population to suspect the state’s majority community who are mostly Vaishnavaites, to have conspired against their places of worship [28]. The mob attacks on the churches i often justified as the firm determination of the state government to protect the reserved forest areas.

It is also important to take note of the significant role played by the Bangalore based Manipur Student Association in this entire imbroglio. They have added  a communal angle to the conflict by saying that Kuki militants and illegal Burmese immigrants backed by the drug cartels burned down the entire peaceful Hindu Manipuri settlements in Moreh, Tourbung and Churachandpur [29]. Further, it is often rumored that Kuki-Zomi communities in the hills are illegally harbouring the migrant Burmese citizens who are fleeing from their country due to civil war as they share common ancestry thereby trying to increase their population in the hill areas. The Biren Singh government has  been amplifying this fear, through moves that include highlighting that one of the chiefs of the armed groups of the Kukis is a Myanmarese citizen and a former politician in that country, and that the Kuki militant groups are ushering in refugees from Myanmar [30]. The chief minister accused Kuki militants of indulging in poppy cultivation in the forest areas of the hill districts to justify his eviction drive [31].

**III.Way Forward**

At present, the biggest challenge before the Government of India is to find a long lasting and permanent solution for the state of Manipur that has succumbed to an unprecedented state of violence that has been spreading the fear of insecurity among the people and hampering the process of economic development.  Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which has been ruling the Manipur government for the past six years, in order to ensure its political gains through vote bank politics, seems to have created a grand narrative that includes the marginalization of the Meitei at the hands of so-called Kuki outsiders as well as charges of Kukis engaging in drug trafficking and violating forest rights. New Delhi has already appointed a new police chief from outside Manipur, but he has yet to deliver results [32]. To suppress the violence, federal forces have created buffer zones—a tactic employed by the Indian and Chinese armies on their border since 2020—between Manipur’s hills and plains [33]. The mile-wide zones, manned by army and federal forces, serve to segregate the areas dominated by the warring ethnic groups [34].  Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s silence and seemingly indifferent attitudes towards the violence that is creating havoc in the state of Manipur raises several questions. The Central government lacks any concrete plan of how to stop the violence. On one hand, the deployment of army and federal forces is unacceptable for the Meiteis and on the other hand, the Kukis distrust the state police, which has allowed weapons and ammunition to be looted from its armories, raising concerns about a vicious cycle of violence. Moreover, there is also risk of unrest spilling over the neighbouring state of Mizoram and across the border into Myanmar since the Kuki people share ethnic roots with the Chin people in Myanmar and the Mizo people in the Indian state of Mizoram. This cascading violence is probably making in-ways into insurgency situations that have plagued the security architecture of the state in particular and the entire northeastern region in general, for decades. The return of insurgency in Manipur, makes India geo-strategically vulnerable in the region stretching from South Asia to SouthEast Asia and beyond towards Indo-Pacific. First, it will affect India’s much hyped Act East policy which is focused on connecting India’s northeastern region with nearby Southeast Asia through trade, culture, people-to-people contacts, and physical infrastructure. Secondly, the government of India must ensure peace and normalcy in Manipur, if India has to assume the role of Net Security Provider in the Indo-Pacific region. Third, India should remember that violence in Manipur will have a rippling effect on the success of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), one of the pillars of India’s Indo-Pacific strategy as China is ready to create disturbances at the borders by taking advantage of the present situation; thereby unsettling the entire geopolitical calculation of the QUAD (which Beijing sees as the potential competitor to its Belt and Road Initiative). Finally, this will also affect the bougeoning Indo-Japan collaboration and cooperation in the implementation of the connectivity projects in the northeastern region, making deeper inroads towards the Indo-Pacific. Violence and strife in Manipur need immediate intervention but not by using force and coercion, exercised by the federal forces and army. A visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the state, consoling those who have suffered from violence, providing relief, and inviting all ethnic groups to the table is the need of the hour. New Delhi should endeavor to build up bridges among the conflicting parties ensuring not just peaceful coexistence but mutual cooperation, bonding and ever-lasting peace. At the same time the state government must embark upon a long-drawn-out programme of economic emancipation, necessarily including creation of employment opportunities, industrialisation, trade promotion etc.

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