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“Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Manipur Saga ”

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“Out of sight, out of mind: The Manipur Saga”

Abstract: *The northeastern Indian state of Manipur has been witnessing ethnic conflict between the majority Meitei community, who are predominantly Hindus and the Kukis & Naga tribes, who follow Christianity. The state of Manipur from a geographical standpoint is bifurcated between the Imphal valley and the surrounding hill districts. The Meitei's are the majority ethnic population that inhabit the Imphal valley whereas the Kuki-Naga tribes are the primary inhabitants of the hill districts. The state for the past one year has been a victim of ethnic violence between the two communities which has created a civil war like situation in a strategically important and sensitive Indian state. This paper aims to analyse what is the background to this crisis, its genesis, the multidimensional causative factors that contribute to the ethnic tensions. In addition, the paper would also assess the current prevailing situation as of Dec '2024, what are the irritants in resolution of the conflict, and provide recommendations on the course of action that can be adopted to restore normalcy in the state.*

Keywords: *Manipur, National Security, Kuki, Meitei, Ethnic violence, Civil War*

Introduction

What sparked the Manipur conflict?

On May 3, 2023 the state witnessed violent clashes between the two ethnic groups when the All-Manipur Tribal Students' Union (AMTSU) organized a "Tribal Solidarity" march to protest against inclusion of the majority Meitei community in the Scheduled Tribes list, which if implemented would accord reservation to the Meitei community in higher education and job opportunities. In addition, if Meiteis are granted ST status, it would pave way for them to acquire land in the Kuki dominated hill districts, something that they were not entitled to earlier. The solidarity march organized by AMTSU was met with a proportionate response by the supporters of the Meitei community with a blockade of roads in the Imphal East district (Correspondent, 2023).

What prompted these protests by two conflicting ethnic groups?

In April 2023, the Manipur High Court passed a verdict in which they directed the state government to consider granting ST status to the Meitei community. For the past ten years, the state government of Manipur had been dragging its feet on submitting a proposal to the Union Ministry of Tribal affairs to include Meites in the ST list. Despite repeated representations by the community to the state government and constitutional forums, the decision to confer ST status was not paid heed to by the Manipur state government. For the Union ministry to accord ST status to Meitei's, the proposal needs to originate from the state government. The Manipur High Court in its judgement opined that no reasonable explanation had been provided by the state

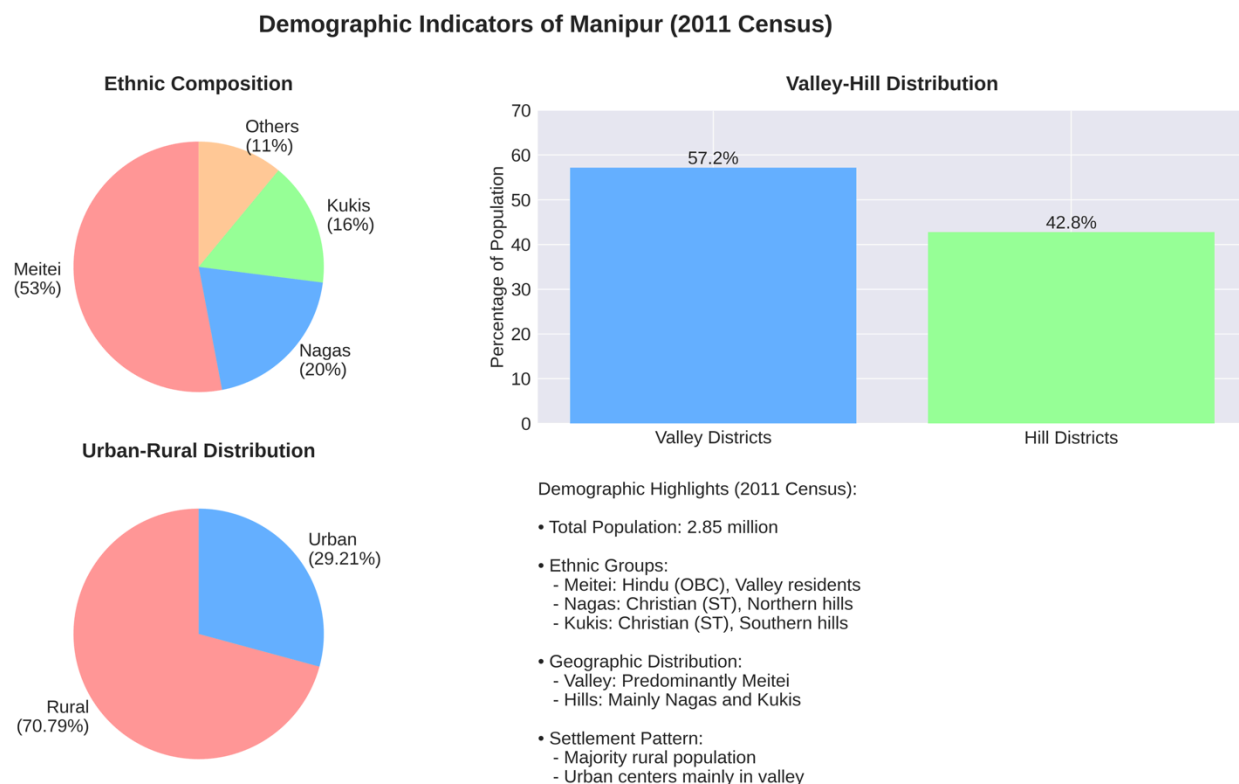
government for its delay and directed it to submit an affidavit within four weeks of moving an application with the Union Ministry to accord ST status to Meiteis (Lakshman, 2023).

This contentious high court ruling acted as the trigger point which spiralled and snowballed into full blown incidents of ethnic clashes between the Meites and Kuki-Naga tribes. ST status was a long standing demand of the Meitei community, who currently fall under the Other Backward Classes (OBC). This demand of the Meiteis is opposed tooth and nail by the Adivasis' Student union, which is of the view that giving Meiteis ST status would defeat the purpose of positive affirmation and protection of the indigenous culture of tribals. The Meiteis currently are not eligible for acquiring land in the hill districts of Manipur, a scenario which would be altered if they are conferred ST status. Anxiety of the Kukis over curtailment of their ownership of land is a principal cause of concern which has dictated their hostility towards the Meiteis. Once violence erupted in the state of Manipur, post the high court ruling, the law-and-order machinery of the state has broken down with no end in sight of how normalcy would be restored. Although the controversial high court ruling, which triggered the ethnic conflict stands withdrawn as of February 2024, the ethnic fire raging in Manipur continues to burn (Lakshman, 2024).

What the High Court ruling did was that it opened the floodgates for decades long tension that had been brewing between the various communities in Manipur and has laid bare the ethnic fault lines that exist within the state. The enduring violent clashes are extreme manifestations of the long dormant tension that was simmering between communities in the state. There are multiple causative factors that are responsible for the prevailing situation in the state. Let us

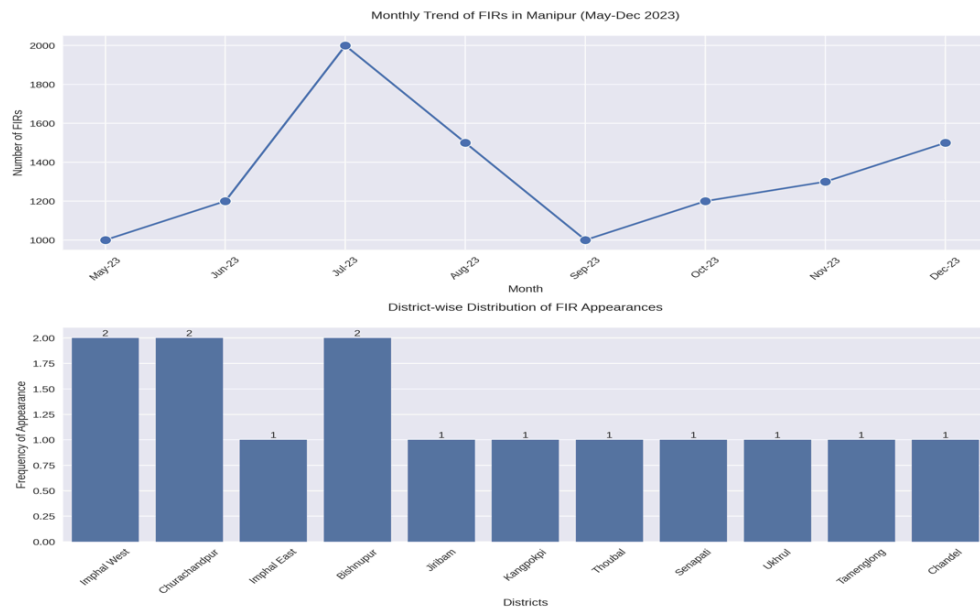
conduct a thorough analysis of these factors. But first, let's understand the demographic composition of the state and the human cost of the crisis in statistical terms.

Demographic Composition of the State

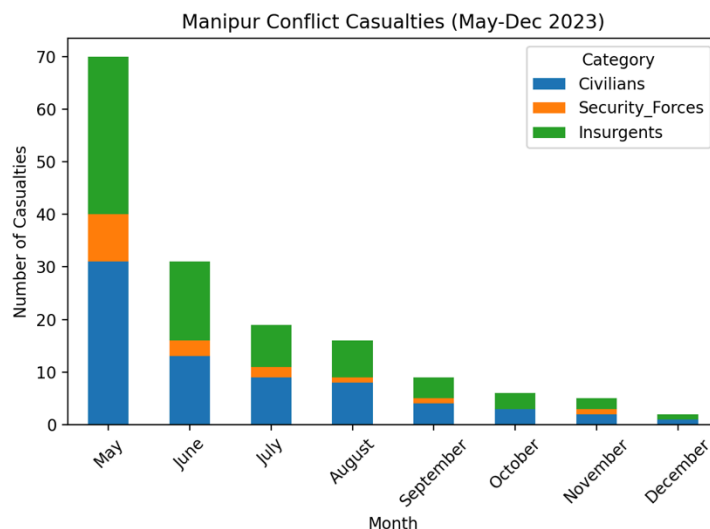


Source: <https://blog.mygov.in/a-glimpse-of-the-indigenous-tribes-of-manipur-part-1/>

“Human cost” of the crisis: Official FIRs filed, and Number of casualties visualized



Source: <https://www.india.gov.in/search-fir-district-manipur-police>



Source: Sphere India Situation Report

(https://sphereindia.org.in/sites/default/files/2023-10/Sitrep-13_Manipur%20Humanitarian%20Crisis.pdf)

Causative factors exacerbating the Manipur conflict

The conflict being witnessed in Manipur finds its roots in multidimensional factors that are driven by religious, ethnic, geopolitical and cultural factors. These factors are significant contributors, which have fuelled the current crisis. The triad of unique geography, endemic communal & ethnic disparities, strategic land boundary with Myanmar are some of the key contributors to the conflict. But the aforementioned factors are not exhaustive. The following factors have played a pivotal role in influencing the crisis: -

1. **“Valley-Hill” divide since the colonial era-** When India was under the British rule, the colonial power divided the region’s population into residents of hills and valley, each

governed by a different set of laws. This set in motion a sense of deep-rooted bifurcation between the Meiteis and Kukis, which was further exacerbated by granting ST status only to the hill tribes. Meiteis being the majority ethnic group in the state have harboured contentions about not being given the ST status. In the event that ST status is granted to Meiteis, it would radically alter the political landscape of the state. The hill tribes feel that such an event would dilute their existing economic benefits and tilt the balance of political power and influence of the state, towards the Meiteis (Sidhu, 2024).

2. **“Weaponization” of ethnic identities-** Hostility between the Meiteis and Kukis has emanated over the issue of indigeneity i.e. who are the indigenous custodians of the state of Manipur. Nagaland, as Manipur’s neighbouring state, has seen a long-standing militancy movement by NSCN-IM for the creation of a separate Nagalim-Greater Nagaland state which covers a substantial portion of the Naga-majority areas in Manipur. Demands along similar lines have been made by the Kukis for the creation of a Kukiland. These demands have shattered the prospects of any kind of cohesion and camaraderie and has driven a wedge between the different ethnic groups. The Meiteis brand themselves as “protectors” of the territorial integrity of Manipur. Their engagement with the hill tribes is through the prism of separatist demands made by factions of the tribal groups. This creates further hostility between the two communities (Behera, 2024).
3. **Asymmetric development & representation in the state-** The majority of infrastructural development in Manipur has taken place in the valley. Economic development and political decision-making is extremely “valley-centric”, which is a pole

of contention for the Kukis. According to estimates, the total budget allocation for the Imphal valley was INR 21,481 crores whereas for the hills, it was a far lower INR 419 crore (2017-2020). The tribes living in the hilly region (40% of population) have 19 seats in the state assembly and Meiteis (50% population) have 40 seats. This disproportionate distribution leads to Meiteis assuming an assertive posture over tribals in matters of governance, budgetary allocations, etc marginalizing the tribals and leaving them with a feeling of being “**politically disenfranchised**” (Behera, 2024).

Table 1. Demographic Indicators of Valley and Hills

Demographic Indicators	Valley	Hills
No. of Districts	4	5
Total Existing Assembly Constituencies	40	19+1
Total Population of District	1,633,672	1,222,122
Average Population per Constituency	40,841	61,106
Total Area of Districts (Sq.Km)	2,238	20,089
Average Area per Assembly Constituency (Sq.Km)	56	1,004

Source: The Inevitable Split (Vol. I) Page No. 6 (ZSF & KSO, 2023).

4. **Parallel governance structures**-The state also suffers from a “**governance deficit**.”

Factions of each ethnic group have created informal governance mechanisms to resolve the grievances of their respective communities. This is because effective decentralization of power has not taken place in Manipur, where the concerns of the hill communities are not given importance by public office holders. These parallel governance structures further lead to ethnic polarization as feelings of only the Meiteis being the beneficiaries of established governance structures, gets deeply entrenched within the hill tribes. Hill

Area Committees (HAC) were formed under Article 371C with the legislation of the Manipur State Assembly (Hill Areas Committee Order, 1972) and the ADC through the District Council Act-1971. But these HACs are reduced to being mere administrative bodies and remain dependent on the state government for implementation of policies. This systemic bottleneck creates resentment within the deprived hill community groups (Behera, 2024).

5. **Perceived threat of demographic imbalance-** In February 2021, the democratic government of Myanmar was ousted by its military junta, leaving the nation in turmoil. Manipur shares its land boundary with Myanmar. Due to close cultural linkages, a semi-porous border, existence of a free movement regime until recently before it was revoked in Feb'2024 (Singh, 2024), has accentuated the threat of illegal immigration and refugee influx in the state. The majority of Meiteis are of the view that the illegal migration of the Chins from Myanmar, following the takeover of the junta, threatens the “**demographic balance**” of Manipur. The Chins are also perceived as being involved in trade of drugs, narcotics, contraband and other criminal activities.

6. **“Vilification” of Kuki tribes as poppy cultivators-** There is a strong perception among the tribals that Manipur state government’s campaign of “War on drugs” is a systemic discriminatory campaign that paints them as “poppy farmers” and is targeted against them. This aggravates the existing trust deficit between the tribes and the Meitei dominated state government. Meiteis blame the Kukis for the uptick in drug trade in the state. Along with efforts to crackdown on poppy cultivators, the state government has

also initiated programme to identify illegal immigrants and drives to protect forest areas. These initiatives by the state government are being perceived by tribal communities as **blatantly biased, creating fear and anxiety among them**. Kukis believe they are being persecuted by the state authorities as their demographic and political representation is comparatively weaker than the Meiteis. The eviction of villages, mostly belonging to the Kuki-Zo-Chin communities, the demolition of Kuki churches and of the tribal colonies in Imphal Valley, add credence to the Kuki perception that they are being subjected to state-induced persecution (Behera,2024).

Roadblocks in the resolution of the crisis - Mistakes committed by stakeholders

A state of the Indian Union being in a civil war like situation for more than one year, with no end in sight is a huge travesty. It reflects poorly on various stakeholders and has negative implications from an internal security viewpoint. A major concern highlighted by security analysts, observers and civil society stakeholders is that the ethnic conflict being witnessed has no invisible role of a “foreign hand”. Usually, a conflict of this magnitude is spearheaded and sustained by a powerful external entity that has nefarious designs to destabilize the internal security apparatus of India. After a thorough analysis of the causative factors, we can conclude that external factors have a minimal role to play in the current conflict. Thus, we can say that the Manipur conflict is an extreme manifestation of deep rooted ethno-communal fault lines that have been allowed to proliferate in the state. These fault lines inflamed by certain trigger events has paved the way for an enduring ethnic conflict in the state.

This assessment begs some pertinent questions. What went wrong in terms of handling the crisis since it first erupted in May'2023? Have some actions and/or decisions of government stakeholders contributed to the crisis assuming a “long-term character”? What role have political factors played in dealing with the crisis? Have politico-electoral factors acted as irritants in finding a solution to the crisis? The following is an enumeration of factors which I feel, have acted as roadblocks and further worsened the conflict, in some cases.

1. **Failure of the N. Biren Singh led state government** – The current state government is headed by a former journalist-turned-politician N. Biren Singh who belongs to the majority Meitei community. Biren Singh has done no favours to the state or central government through his political postures and public engagements that come across as completely biased and one-sided. His actions have labelled his administration as partisan, an administration which the hill tribes have lost faith in. He has lost political legitimacy in the eyes of tribal communities as he is projected as being sympathetic to the demands of the Meiteis.

Instead of protecting vulnerable communities and upholding the rule of law, his government has widened the trust deficit by engaging in polarizing posturing and politics. An appalling incident came to light in the initial phases of the conflict where Biren Singh came across as implying that the Kuki-Zo communities are hand in glove with illegal migrants from Myanmar and are primarily responsible for narcotics trafficking, deforestation, harbouring illegal immigrants from Myanmar. A sitting chief minister's vitriolic rhetoric against constituents of his own state has destroyed the state government's credibility in the conflict. The fact that even after such posturing, he remains at the helm of state affairs is another roadblock in resolving the crisis.

(Update: -At the time of writing of this brief, Shri N. Biren Singh was the chief minister of the state of Manipur. As of 9th February, 2025, Shri N. Biren Singh has resigned from the post of chief minister (HT News Desk, 2025).)

2. **Militarization of society-** Biren Singh at an individual level, has had no qualms in providing state patronage to local Meitei vigilante groups such as “Arambai Tenggol”. These fringe groups receive support and are armed with sophisticated weapons aided by the state apparatus. The existence of such groups on the Meitei side has had a counter effect on the Kukis also feeling the need to have such armed groups to further their cause. This has led to the militarization of Manipur society. The police and paramilitary forces now have to deal with the armed cadre of these groupings, who are the forefront of igniting the conflict. Among all the allegations against Biren Singh, the most serious one has been his role in aiding and abetting groups like Arambai Tenggol, who have named by Kuki-Zumi groups in various FIRs (Baruah et al., 2024).

3. **“Muscular” political signalling-** The central government’s unexplainable delay in removing CM Biren Singh from his position and unwillingness to impose Article 356 to bring the state of Manipur under federal control of the central government acts as a principal roadblock. Why is this the case? The decision of removing Biren Singh or imposing President’s rule in the state would give ammo to the political opposition in Delhi, that this decision was long overdue, and the centre was dragging its feet on it. It would also reflect weakness on part of the central government of having acquiesced to the opposition’s demand, something which is a redline for them as it portrays political

weakness. Moreover, they do not see the Biren Singh administration as part of the problem.

The central government feels that Biren Singh is their best bet to restore normalcy in the state as he is best suited to implement the centre's directive. In addition, he is a compliant chief minister who has not questioned the centre's failure in intervening in the state. If he is replaced by another figure, then uncomfortable questions around fixing accountability in the central government for their mishandling of the conflict, would find its way in the state discourse. Additionally, the reasoning which works in Biren Singh's favour is that at the time of writing of this brief, he is not in-charge of the law and order of the state. The centre has deputed retired DG of the CRPF, Kuldiep Singh as the security advisor and he is in charge of the unified command of Manipur. The reasoning in the corridors of power in Delhi is that "Singh can't be blamed for the breakdown of law and order as he himself has no control over it. The security machinery reports to the security advisor, Kuldiep Singh (Retd. DG of CRPF)" (Baruah et al., 2024).

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4. **"Out of sight, Out of mind" syndrome** – Manipur is suffering from the classic phenomenon that every northeastern state in the country goes through. In Delhi's strategic thinking, northeastern states do not occupy the prime position due to their geographical distance from the mainland. It's difficult to imagine that a similar conflict

would have been allowed to fester for a year and a half in any state that is west of the chicken neck. Manipur's plight occupied the media cycles as a passing trend and then moved onto bigger & better things. This is the general apathy and indifference towards northeastern Indian states which even percolates into political and policy decision making. Since mainstream Indian civil society and institutions do not prioritize the mounting ethnic tensions in Manipur, the crisis has not been decisively dealt with a sense of urgency.

Assessment of the evolving situation (Situation report): Recommendations on the path to restore normalcy in the state

The road to restore peace and normalcy in the state of Manipur is an arduous task. The path to resolution needs to adopt a nuanced and multi-pronged approach. Measures need to be taken on multiple fronts to bring the ethnic conflict under control. In my opinion, the following measures can be exercised to have a shot at restoring balance and tranquility in the state: -

1. **Need of “political will”**- Political will needs to be displayed by both the state and central government to bring the conflicting parties to the negotiating table for meaningful dialogue. The dialogue can act as a precursor to confidence building measures (CBMs) that should be rolled out to build consensus within the conflicting parties. There are non-state actors like NGOs, fringe groups, community organizations who have stakes in keeping the hostile sentiments alive between the warring parties. Their nefarious designs must be countered by state and non-state actors like civil society activists, intelligentsia

and state officials. Also, these adverse actors should be identified, and costs must be imposed on them for endangering the social fabric of the state.

2. **Disarmament of militant groups-** It is necessary to disarm the active and sleeper cells of militant groups as well as civilians resorting to violent activities, with weaponry looted from the state police and paramilitary departments. The state authorities must act swiftly to ensure this outcome.

3. **Check the inflow of arms, drugs, refugees, etc-** Conflict zones become fertile ground for militant groups to operate, recruit & finance their operations. These conflicts also serve as platforms for militant groups to bolster legitimacy for their existence, which makes it necessary to devise a counter strategy to stem their rise. The presence of these militant groups would have ramifications in the form of cross border flow of drugs and arms. Covert operations must be conceptualized and implemented to infiltrate the organizational structure of these groups, and strategies must be devised to ensure these groups disintegrate from within. Rescinding the free movement regime (FMR), which earlier used to allow cross-border movement up to 16 km without a visa is a step in the right direction, considering the security environment in Myanmar and its internal security implications for India.

4. **Address competing ethnic sentiments -** A critical assessment needs to be conducted of land ownership patterns in Manipur according to ethnicity. Debates and discussions are required on the rationale of ethnic communities' assertion of customary ownership on land that necessarily functions around principles of 'othering' (Behera, 2024). The position

of the Kukis and Nagas to limit the Meiteis, constituting more than 50 percent of the state population, to a mere 10 percent of the land, needs re-evaluation. Similarly, state-led development benefits being asymmetrically concentrated among the Meiteis need to be democratized and equitably distributed among various communities in the state.

5. **Restructure the existing political representation** - The asymmetric governance advantages currently enjoyed by the Meiteis needs to be toned down. A restructuring of the legislative assembly constituencies would help bridge the hill-valley divide. After this restructuring, decentralization of powers to district & hill committees and awarding greater autonomy to these committees can be discussed without the overarching cloud of ethnic bias or skewed ethnic representation.
6. **Stem the rise of “ethnic majoritarianism”** - The demands for a separate homeland for the naga tribes find their genesis in the lack of a sense of fraternity among the different ethnic groups. Therefore, it is essential to inject a sense of fraternity among the diverse ethnic groups to neutralize the trend of ethnic majoritarianism that currently exists in the state. Decision makers should not entertain any demands for a separate homeland or claims by a particular community of them being the sole guardians of the territorial integrity of the state. Allowing space for such emotionally charged and divisive claims affects the social fabric of the state and is against the democratic ethos of our country.
7. **Display “statesmanship”, think long-run** - In an ethnically fragile state such as Manipur, policymaking should rise above the short-term electoral interests of incumbent regimes. All political parties at the state and center should shed their inward- oriented narcissistic approach, of viewing the conflict from the vantage point of their own political

strategy and work towards restoring normalcy in the state. The first course of action under this recommendation would be to relieve Shri. Biren Singh from his ministerial responsibilities without worrying out about the electoral ramifications of the same.

Update:- As of 9th Feb, '2025, Shri N.Biren Singh has resigned from the chief minister's post.) This decision is being touted as a measure of last resort by the ruling party to save face as Singh had lost all credibility in the eyes of the populace. Manipur's electorate was disillusioned by his leadership driven by partisan interests. The ruling party at the center has been successful as of now in taming the multiple power centers that had emerged to oppose N.Biren Singh. What remains to be seen is how the party would handle the political lobbying of multiple power centers who would stake a claim to lead Manipur, after President's rule is lifted from the state (Kham, 2025). From a governance standpoint, Biren's Singh resignation and imposition of President's rule is a step in the right direction. The focus now should be on disarming militant groups of the state and tending to the "trust deficit" that has been exacerbated between the two ethnic groups.

Conclusion

A soulful couplet by eminent poet Abbas Tabish comes to my mind with which I would like to conclude my analysis of the Manipur conflict. The poet writes "*Pani aankh mein bharkar laya jaa sakta hai, ab bhi jalta shahar bachaya jaa sakta hai*", which translates to "We can still save the burning city using our tears as water". This couplet is an apt representation of the current state of the "Bejeweled" land. It should instill a sense of introspection, reflection and empathy not just in the governing elites, but in every Indian on how to restore stability to the land of Manipur.

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