

In Manipur, famed Shirui Lily festival becomes first real test of normalcy

The Shirui Lily Festival is held in sites in Ukhrul town and Shirui village in Ukhrul district, where the Tangkhul Naga community is in the majority.

On Thursday, popular Imphal-based Instagram handle, Imphalgram, uploaded a video of a “road trip” to the hill station of Ukhrul, located around 80 kilometres from the city. The video shows the creators travelling by scenic hill roads, passing by markets, and security personnel and vehicles — ubiquitous in the state for the past two years — to reach Ukhrul. There, they visit different sites of the Shirui Lily Festival, one of the two major tourism festivals organised by the Manipur government, scheduled to begin on May 20. This is the first time since the ethnic conflict broke out in the state in May 2023 that the festival is being held.

After visiting the sites in Ukhrul with officials of the Manipur tourism department and meeting district administration and police officials, the video shows the creators driving back to Imphal in the evening and signing off: “Thank you for the company, Ukhrul Police.” The comments below immediately jump to the question of security and safety: “Can we go through roadways; is it safe; do we need to take a chopper?”

Throughout the conflict, Meiteis and Kuki-Zos have been unable to safely move in areas where the other community is in the majority. The Shirui Lily Festival is held in sites in Ukhrul town and Shirui village in Ukhrul district, where the Tangkhul Naga community is in the majority. But to get there, Meiteis and other residents of the state’s central Meitei-majority valley, which is surrounded by hill districts, need to travel through at least three pockets of Kuki-Zo settlements.

The last instalment of the festival in 2022 saw a footfall of around 2.19 lakh, drawing visitors from different states and parts of Manipur. But the largest number of visitors were from the Meitei-majority valley.

This time, the festival is being organised with a budget of Rs 6.3 crore. Pooja Elangbam, director of the Manipur tourism department, said that the Imphalgram creators were among “influencers” and bloggers from different communities in the state invited to the site as part of a “rigorous social media campaign” to build confidence that the journey will be safe.

“When we had our first organisational committee meeting on April 2, it was decided to constitute a security committee headed by the DGP. He assured us that the police, BSF and Army will be present along the way, and we are coordinating with the Ukhrul Superintendent of Police to ensure that the journey is safe. So far, no problems have been reported. I have been going to Ukhrul from Imphal every week, and we haven’t faced any issues... Provisions are being made; how many people finally attend the festival will probably depend on the first couple of days,” she said.

A moment of panic arose this week when a statement by an organisation named Kuki Zo Village Volunteer-Eastern Zone warned Meiteis against crossing Kuki-Zo areas to attend the festival. However, the Manipur Police swiftly issued a statement that no such organisation exists, and assured security for the free movement of people for the festival. The Kuki-Zo Council, based in Churachandpur, also distanced itself from the statement. Last week, Manipur DGP Rajiv Singh himself made a two-day visit to oversee security arrangements.

On Saturday, the Manipur police lodged an FIR against the president of Kuki Students’ Organisation, Delhi, for allegedly making a video threatening Meiteis. “All necessary security arrangements shall be made to ensure security of people attending the Shirui festival,” the police

said.

Ukhrul DC Asish Das said the administration has made different “strategies” to address the security issue. “There are areas where the community (Kuki-Zo) feels a little apprehensive about the movement of the other community. We have had meetings with locals in those areas to build their confidence, and they have assured support and cooperation. At a senior level, we have also had meetings with all civil society organisations of the Kuki-Zo community, and they have extended their cooperation. We are also deploying heavy forces of the Army, SSB, BSF and the Manipur police, who will put ROPs (road opening parties) along the highway. On top of that, if anybody feels apprehensive about travelling by themselves, we will provide convoys at particular timings by clubbing together a few vehicles so that people can travel without fear,” he said.

The festival will be held over five days and includes concerts every night, a literature event, a beauty pageant, a cooking competition and cultural performances.

Singed by the conflict, tourism has taken a nosedive in Ukhrul and the aim is also to boost the local economy, the DC said.

Ningkharun Shangh (28), a resident of Shirui village and the president of the Shirui Youth Club, said that of 500-odd households in the village, around 100 operate homestays while around 300 set up camping facilities for tourists.

“Tourism completely stopped during the conflict, which affected all these people. So far, some people have contacted us asking for accommodation, and villagers are making arrangements. Around 150 have gotten bookings so far, we’ll have to wait and watch to find out how many people arrive. On our part, we are preparing in full swing for all the events, and locals from the village are busy working on things like setting up the stages,” he said.

Many people in the area set up homestays and small hotels after the festival started in 2017. One of them is 33-year-old Wungmatem Nayo, who established dormitory-style rooms in 2019.

“Business has really been affected and we have hardly had any visitors. Most people who come to the festival are usually from Imphal, but I don’t think they will come. I’m not expecting many visitors this time,” he said.