



Kuki-Zomi organisations and leaders maintain that they have always been accorded step-motherly treatment. On the back of this grievance, the demand for a separate Kuki-Zomi administration has once again come to the fore. A poster in Churachandpur. RITU RAJ KONWAR

Manipur on the boil

The trigger for the violence of May 3 between the Kuki-Zomis and Meiteis may have been a Manipur High Court order, but the conflict between the two communities spans decades. **Abhinay Lakshman** reports on the concerns of these groups and the State's struggle to keep the peace in the valley and the hills

MIN. Haokip's Meitei landlord would often joke with him. "He would say, 'You just wait, we will wipe out Kukis from Churachandpur,'" recalls Haokip, an officer of the Government of India. Haokip would laugh off these comments. But no more. "Now, I've started to think about what this kind of thinking has done to us," he says.

Haokip was living in a rented flat with his wife and son in Imphal when violence broke out on May 3 between the Kuki-Zomis and Meiteis. He rushed back from work and hid in the house of the director general of police (DGP). He was joined by his family and a few government officers belonging to the Kuki-Zomi community.

Days after the ethnic clash in Manipur, the remnants of that dark night are everywhere. Imphal is dominated by the Meiteis. Neighbourhoods where the Kuki-Zomi people, mostly Christians, live wear a deserted look. Houses have been burnt down. Family portraits and birthday cards lie strewn around in the soot.

In the district's Paite Veng colony, the gates of homes have white sheets taped to them, which declare the last occupants as either Meitei or Kuki-Zomi. A Sanamahi flag flies atop a Meitei home, which stands next to the burnt home of a Kuki family. Sanamahism is the indigenous faith of the Meiteis. Two churches and a high school have been burnt down.

Fear lingers everywhere in the State, especially in Kuki-Zomi-dominated Churachandpur, the epicentre of the violence, 65 kilometres south of Imphal. Central Reserve Police Force personnel dot the main highway at 1-km intervals. Here, the rubble of Meitei homes lies at the fringes of some villages where the residents are predominantly Kuki-Zomi. All the Meitei villages on the edge of Churachandpur and Kangvai districts have been abandoned. Only a few dozen men have chosen to stay back. They have set up bunkers with gunny bags, and stand guard with their single-barrel or double-barrel rifles.

More than two weeks after violence broke out in Manipur, nearly 80 bodies have been recovered, according to official figures. Scores of people are injured and tens of thousands are internally displaced. Meiteis living in the hill districts continue to flee to the valley and the Kuki-Zomi people who had settled in Imphal are making their way to the hill districts.

Building tensions

Manipur has always had a majority of Meiteis, who were initially the rulers of the Manipur Kingdom. Leishemba Sanajaoba, elected to the Rajya Sabha on a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ticket in 2020, is the titular Maharaja of the Manipur Kingdom. The Meiteis comprise about 53% of the population (2011 Census). Most of them are Hindu or Sanamahi; a minority is Muslim. They have mostly lived in the Imphal valley. Around 41% of the State's population are Scheduled Tribes (ST), comprising Naga and Kuki-Zomi clans, who mostly follow Christianity and occupy the hill districts. As 90% of the State's landmass comprises the hill districts, less than 10% is occupied by the majority of the population residing in the valley.

The immediate trigger for the clash on May 3 between the two groups was a Manipur High Court order, giving a boost to the demand for ST status by the Meiteis. But tensions have been building up over the last 30 years, say residents of both communities.

Most Meiteis fall under the General category. A small section of them belongs to either the Sche-



As they [Kuki-Zomis] were running around burning houses, they kept shouting 'Meiteis, come out! Where are all the Meiteis?'

INDU BALA
Meitei resident of Churachandpur

duled Castes (SC) or Other Backward Classes (OBC). The Meiteis allege that the Kuki-Zomis have been trying to "increase their population" by facilitating illegal immigrants from Myanmar. "All the top officers, from the DGP to secretaries in the State government, are Kukis," says Sanasam Joykumar Singh, a Meitei leader associated with the Meitei Tribes Union (MTU).

A fringe group within the Meiteis has also come to the fore, emboldening the demand for separating the 'Old Kukis' from the 'New Kukis,' who they claim are the illegal immigrants.

On the other hand, Kuki-Zomi organisations and leaders maintain that they have always been accorded step-motherly treatment. "There are 40 Meitei MLAs in the State and only 20 tribal MLAs representing the hill districts. Of the 20, only 10 are Kukis. This Assembly passes a Budget allocating nearly 90% of resources to the valley and the rest to the Hill Areas. This has consequences," says Dr. J. Haokip, a pastor and community leader in Churachandpur who runs a boarding school for orphans.

On the back of this grievance, the demand for a separate Kuki-Zomi administration has once again come to the fore. It is being pushed by 10 Kuki MLAs, seven of whom are from the ruling BJP. In Churachandpur, the residents have crossed out 'Manipur' from State government offices and rechristened landmarks as 'Lamka.' This was what the area was called before it was named after Maharaja Churachand of Manipur.

The immediate trigger

A week after the Manipur High Court order on ST status for the Meitei people, Chief Minister N. Biren Singh was set to inaugurate a gym in Churachandpur on April 27. Kuki-Zomi outfits gathered in the district to protest against the government's survey on reserved forests and the eviction of the Kuki-Zomi people from these forests. The protests turned violent and the gym was set on fire. The government imposed Section 144 and suspended Internet services for five days.

A horde of Meitei youth in black T-shirts, part of an outfit called the Armbai Tenggol, waited at the border of the district. The outfit claims to protect Meitei culture and the indigenous customs of Sanamahism, and preserve the State's forest heritage.

After the April 27 protest, the All Tribal Students' Union Manipur called for a solidarity march on May 3 opposing the ST demand of the Meiteis. "But on the night of May 2, we got calls from Kangpokpi district," says Haokip. Kangpokpi, too, is mostly occupied by Kuki-Zomi villages. "Members of Arambai Tenggol had gone there and were asking passersby if they were Kuki.



The vandalised shops and houses belonging to the Meitei community in Kuki-Zomi-dominated Churachandpur district of Manipur. RITU RAJ KONWAR

They were preventing them from going into the hills, and panic spread."

As the rally concluded on May 3 in Churachandpur, reports of attacks on Meitei homes on the borders of the district trickled in. Then news followed of Meitei mobs trying to burn down the arch of the Anglo-Kuki war memorial. Following this, the rally in Churachandpur, too, turned violent. The first targets of arson were the offices of the Forest Department and Transport Commissioner. Within half an hour, as Meitei and Kuki-Zomi mobs clashed in Churachandpur, Meitei mobs, suspected to be of Arambai Tenggol, began wreaking havoc in the tribal neighbourhoods of Imphal. While suspected mobs of Arambai Tenggol looted weapons from government offices in Imphal, Kuki-Zomi groups in Churachandpur did the same, say officials.

'I can never go back to Churachandpur'

The main bazaar in Churachandpur is deserted. Meitei-owned stores have been burnt down. Stores that have been left untouched belong either to the Kuki-Zomis or to mainland settlers such as Punjabis, Bengalis and Marwaris. The doors of the stores of the settlers have been marked by the Kuki-Zomis as "our own." There are posters all over town, which read, "This is tribal land. [It] does not belong to the Government of Manipur." Or: "SOS – Separation is the Only Solution." Graffiti on the walls call for a 'Zoland' or 'Kukiland.'

Sitting in the home of the village chief of Sidem in Churachandpur, Sei Haokip, a leader of the Ku-



Meiteis are free to criticise the government or its policies, but when tribal people do this, they are thrown into jail.

SEI HAOKIP
Leader of the Kuki Students Organisation

ki Students Organisation, says, "Near the Saiton bridge, we saw the State commandos first come in with tear gas weapons. I told them that we didn't want tensions. They fired the shells and the Kukis ran into the hills. Within minutes, the Meitei villagers burnt our homes down."

Usually, the villagers in hill districts own licensed rifles. But a few months earlier, district magistrates in the State had directed all the villagers to submit their weapons to the government. "We had nothing to defend ourselves when they came," Haokip says. He phoned the local superintendent of police, he recalls. "All he said was, 'I cannot help. Take care of yourself.'"

On May 4, in Lailampat, a Meitei settlement in Churachandpur, 43 properties of the Kuki people were burnt down along with a church, Anganwadi centres, and other government buildings, says the village committee chief, Khupkholal Haokip.

At a church complex in Churachandpur, about 200 Kuki-Zomi-Chin families from seven villages have taken shelter after losing their homes to Meitei mobs. Dei Kho Chin recalls the night of May 3: "We saw people coming into the village in uniforms. I don't know if it was the police or just Meitei people disguised as the police."

Meiteis who fled the 16 *bastis* of Churachandpur after being attacked by mobs of the Kuki-Zomis allege that the State police force just stood by as they screamed for help. G. Indu Bala says about 200 people ran towards her home to burn it down. "We somehow managed to take shelter in a neighbour's house before coming to a relief camp the next morning," she says.

Indu Bala is now at one of the 23 shelter homes set up by the local MLA. "As they were running around burning houses, they kept shouting 'Meiteis, come out! Where are all the Meiteis?' I don't think I can ever go back to Churachandpur. I cannot trust that I will be safe there," she says.

In the Meitei and Kuki-Zomi villages in Churachandpur, a few dozen men stand in front of each of these villages as guards. Villages of both communities have erected new gates to restrict access and dug up the roads so that armoured vehicles cannot cross.

Hospital sources in both Churachandpur and Imphal say that there were close to a hundred bodies in the morgues of both districts. Neither district has declared how many are dead on either side of the conflict. While Kuki-Zomi organisations say that there were 20 confirmed dead at the district hospital in Churachandpur, and 50 unconfirmed, hospital officials in Imphal say there were about 80 bodies in the morgues of the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences and the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences.

"The bodies are being withheld until normalcy comes back. If we return the bodies now, it might lead to more violence," says an official amid apprehensions on both sides that the officials are fudging the number of dead. Both the Meiteis and the Kuki-Zomi people claim higher casualties on their side, alleging that the other community was the main perpetrator. Meiteis believe that the violence was carried out by members of militant outfits currently under the Suspension of Operations agreement, while the Kuki-Zomi people are certain that the state helped Meitei mobs to destroy their settlements.

Amidst this, the Naga tribes in Manipur have been conspicuously silent. Some Naga MLAs have even distanced themselves from their Kuki counterparts. Kuki MLAs have questioned this lack of support saying the Nagas were on their side in opposing the Meiteis' demand for ST status.

Trading charges

The Meitis are convinced that there is an increasing number of illegal immigrants in the hill districts. "Look at the rate of growth of Kuki villages in the hill districts. Illegal immigrants from Myanmar are being helped by their brothers and sisters here. And this is commensurate with the growth of poppy in these districts," says Thoiba Singh of the MTU. While data from the Narcotics and Affairs of Border wing of the Manipur Police show that more Kuki-Zomis are arrested in drug cases than members of other communities, there has been a rise in the arrests of Meitei and other community members too, in the last five years.

"The illegal immigration is obvious. 'New Kukis' are unable to understand and speak the Manipuri Meitei language because they are from Myanmar," alleges S. Joykumar Singh of the MTU.

Sei Haokip responds to this: "Kuki tribes comprise about 32 different clans who speak about 12 different dialects. We have always had our language. How can anyone say we are foreigners because we speak our own language?" He says his ancestors have lived on and off this land for generations now. But the Kuki-Zomi people have been at the receiving end of the state's hate for about six years now, Haokip alleges. He attributes the rise in this sentiment to the increased radicalisation of Meitei Hindus, which has led to the birth of outfits such as Arambai Tenggol and Meetei Leepun. "These outfits want to restore Manipur's greatness under the king's rule and protect the Sanamahi culture," he says.

The line between Sanamahi and Hindu Meiteis has never been thinner, he adds. Over 300 years, Sanamahi customs have been integrated with Hindu practices and rituals. A Sanamahi flag even flies atop the BJP headquarters.

"Meiteis are free to criticise the government or its policies, but when tribal people do this against policies like forest reservation and evictions, they are thrown into jail. When we don't have the chance to voice our opinions and we are demonised for trying to preserve our culture and language, how can we live together? How can we believe that the 'Meitei government' will stand with us," Haokip asks. The last straw, he says, was the demand for ST status by the Meitei people.

M. Manihar Singh Kongpal, a Meitei leader in Imphal, asserts that ST status alone will "level the playing field." He says, "We comprise the majority of the State's population and largely live exclusively in the valley region of Greater Imphal. Tribal people also settle in the valley for jobs, schooling, etc. But we are not allowed to buy land in the hills and settle there. How is this fair?"

As the embers of the fire continue to glow, security forces try to keep the peace.

