

BRIDGING THE GROWING TRUST DEFICIT IN MANIPUR

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At a temporary shelter | Photo Credit: AFP

Manipur, with over 35 communities inhabiting its valleys and hills, has a history of violence and deadly clashes. Ethnic violence has been brewing in the State for sometime as mutual suspicion between ethnic groups in the Imphal valley and the hills turned into simmering conflict between the Meiteis and the Kukis, especially after the order of the Manipur High Court on March 27, asking the State to recommend Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to Meiteis. Before this, the Manipur government had begun a drive to evict tribal villages from reserved forests, which was perceived to be an anti-tribal move, in turn leading to discontent and suspicion among the Kukis and other tribals. Hundreds of Kuki tribals have been dislodged from their traditional settlement areas without rehabilitation. The Kukis, with 10 MLAs in the 60-member Legislative Assembly, and the Kuki People's Alliance being a part of the ruling coalition under the Bharatiya Janata Party government in the State, did not make any difference.

This is not to say that the claims made by the Meiteis have no merit. They form 52% of the State's population but are restricted to 10% of the geographical area, that is the Imphal valley. While relocating from hill to valley is legal, they cannot shift and relocate themselves (most are Vaishnav Hindus) because of their non-inclusion in the ST category to the hill area — 90% of which is occupied by Nagas and Kukis. There are some Meiteis who think that their Hindu identity has brought them no political and economic benefits; on the contrary, this has become a liability as they are not treated as STs, and are deprived of the right to occupy 90% of the territory of the State.

Their grouse is not about the deprivation of jobs and political clout as they are disproportionately ahead of the hill people in these matters. The land issue is more crucial for them. It is worth recalling that the Meiteis have had a chequered history of violence and struggles before integration with India and acquiring the Hindu tag. They had sought to project a pan-Mongoloid identity, rejected the Bengali script and even tried to revive an old Meitei religion called Sanamahism. They formed several insurgent groups such as the People's Liberation Army, with bases in Bangladesh and Myanmar. They also protested against the presence of Mayangs (outsiders), which included Manipur Muslims called Pangals. Predictably, the Pangals formed the radical North East Minority Front.

While steps such as protracted military operations, peace talks and political negotiations, improved means of communication in the region, development and the granting of Statehood,

almost brought about a total integration with mainstream India, it is the trust deficit propelled by the hasty implementation of the Land Act and the High Court order that has resulted in it going back to square one and the old days of the insurgency. The only difference now is that the mindless violence is between the two ethnic groups, and not against the government or agencies representing the government.

Once again, the solution lies in military operations, at least till the intensity and the spread of the violence is controlled. The Indian Army, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the Border Security Force and even the Indian Air Force have been deployed. The Union Home Minister has returned to Delhi after camping in Manipur and presiding over the peace process. A former Director-General of the CRPF has been sent to Imphal as security adviser. An officer of the Tripura cadre, now serving as Inspector General, CRPF, is tipped to take over as Director-General, Manipur. Combing operations are on and relief camps are in place. The perpetrators of the violence are facing strict action. But hundreds have died and property worth crores has been destroyed. The panic continues. There are rumours that thousands of weapons which include AK-47s have been looted by Meities and Kukis have also looted weapons from the police in their area of influence. The views expressed by the Union Home Minister, the Indian Army chief and the Security Adviser that the violence is the result of ethnic clashes between two groups have not succeeded in undoing the impact of the statement of the Chief Minister 'that 40 Kuki terrorists' have been killed in operations. The Centre's stand and the presence of the Army and central forces are restoring the confidence of the Kukis.

Until Independence, much of northeast India was little explored and little understood. It was perceived to be 'another world', affected by years of insurgency and violence. But, of late, while other parts of the country have seen episodes of terror and violence, it is this region that has been peaceful. Its people have discovered their essential unity with the rest of the country. And, they are beginning to realise that they have vital contributions to make to the rest of India.

The administrative and judicial interventions of the immediate past have proved to be very costly whatever be the justification. The changes should be a natural evolution from the civilisation of the past, absorbing the sensitivities of the tribals, their susceptibilities, including a propensity to resort to violence when provoked. While military and administrative steps seem to be the only and immediate options, enough care should be taken to undo the damaging steps that have created the trust deficit, which is the root cause for the turmoil now.

K.V. Madhusudhanan, a former Inspector-General, Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), was the chief of the North Eastern Sector of the CRPF

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