

# Why Centre needs a broad roadmap to bring back normalcy in Manipur

Disarming locals in possession of illegal arms merits utmost priority through synergised operations by the security forces

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**Tyres and construction materials set on fire by miscreants in Manipur. PTI**

It is now well over hundred days that Manipur has been on the boil due to the ethnic violence between Meites and Kukis, the two main communities. While the immediate trigger was opposition by Kukis to the Manipur High Court directive on inclusion of Meiteis in 'Schedule Tribe' (ST) list, the tension, however, was brewing over the past couple of months.

As part of eviction drive against encroachment of protected land under the 'Forest Rights Act' (FRA) the authorities bulldozed a Kuki settlement in K Songjang Village in Churachandpur District on 20 February 2023. This led to the protests by the tribal groups, agriculture being the mainstay of their livelihood. On 27 April 2023, Chief Minister Biren Singh was to inaugurate a gymnasium in Churachandpur but a day earlier it was set on fire by the locals. A week later, the solidarity march by 'All Tribal Student Union of Manipur' on 3 May against granting ST status to Meites turned unruly, marking the beginning of the current crisis.

It is ironic that the distinctive nature of the North East Region (NER), characterised by deep fault lines — a consequence of historic and geographic anomalies — has often been ignored resulting in disastrous consequences. Current crisis in Manipur is a case in point.

Due to decades of contestation over land and natural resources among various ethnic groups, Manipur has a restive past. The complex demographics further complicate the situation. The state has a population of around 2.8 million; Kukis-Zomis and Nagas form 16 per cent and 24 per cent respectively, inhabit the hilly areas and practice Christianity. Meiteis are Vaishnav Hindus, 53 per cent of State population are largely confined to the Imphal Valley. The Valley, 1,860 sq km in size, constitutes barely 10 per cent of the state area but is home to 60 per cent of population. Due to the Manipur 'Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act 1960', non-tribals cannot own land in the 'Hill Areas'. Meiteis are better off and have higher representation in the government and public services compared to the tribals.

Manipur had witnessed fierce communal showdowns during the 1990s, although Kukis and Meites never clashed, rather held the social fabric together. Towards early 2000s, the state was marred by anti-establishment protests and agitations against the 'Armed Forces Special Powers Act' (AFSPA). Insurgent groups belonging to different ethnic communities were actively engaged in separatist movements. In Churachandpur, Chandel and Tamenglong districts, militants had established 'Liberated Zones' and their writ ran large, covering over 40 per cent of Manipur. The 'Valley Based Insurgent Groups' (VBIGs) namely 'United National Liberation Front' (UNLF) and 'People's Liberation Army' (PLA) had established number of well-fortified camps, equipped with sophisticated weapons

It was towards the end September 2004, as I had just taken over the Division in Manipur, a decision was taken at the highest level to clear Manipur of militancy. Consequently, 'Combined Headquarter' was established under the CM to coordinate the actions of security forces and civil agencies. Massive 'Counter Insurgency' (CI) operations by the Army commenced immediately. Dr Manmohan Singh, the then Prime Minister, visited Manipur a month later and was briefed of the ground situation. It took 18 months to clean out Manipur. With over 550 militants neutralised, the back of insurgents was broken and normalcy restored in the state.

The current situation is no less precarious than the one described above, although context is different. With over 160 innocent lives lost and around 60,000 persons displaced, Manipur is in dire straits. It has turned into a well-fortified battleground, with both sides heavily armed. The divide between the two communities has deepened as never before. As per recent media reports, even the State bureaucracy and police stand split on ethnic lines. While there is a temporary lull, the situation remains rather critical. Army has been deployed in aid to civil authorities, primarily manning the buffer zones separating the two sides, to prevent further clashes.

It is apparent that the state government has failed and the Central government efforts to retrieve the situation have not proved much effective. In fact, it was due to the viral video of 19 July 2023 that the gravity of catastrophe in Manipur came to light. Given the registered FIRs running into thousands, good numbers pertaining to sexual violence and murders, the Supreme court has instituted panel to look into relief and rehabilitation work, besides brought in officers to oversee the CBI probe to ensure speedy justice.

The Manipur crisis came up for discussion in the monsoon session in Parliament. While the Home Minister gave detailed review of the prevailing situation, the Prime Minister's expression of deep anguish came with an assurance that all efforts were on to find solution to restore peace and exemplary punishment would be meted to the guilty. Even during his address to the nation on the 77th Independence Day, the Prime Minister reiterated his commitment to bring normalcy to the beleaguered State.

To redeem the current situation, tough measures are required to be instituted forthwith, to include complete overhaul of current state dispensation. The Centre must outline a clear roadmap to bring back normalcy. Disarming locals in possession of illegal arms merits utmost priority through synergised operations by the security forces. To this end, roles and responsibilities of each organisation are required to be clearly defined to avoid any misunderstanding. The

obviate spillover of unrest into neighbouring states, especially Mizoram and Nagaland, suitable measures ought to be put in place.

In the long-term perspective, threats from the immediate neighbourhood and inimical external forces need to be evaluated in the ambit of national security. Border management with Myanmar demands a holistic review, especially in the wake of illegal immigration and drug menace. Strategy for the integrated development of NER as part of 'Act East Policy' entails exploitation of its vast natural and human potential, besides accelerating pace of road, rail and marine connectivity with South East Asia. This will greatly help to checkmate Chinese influence in the region.

During a farewell function hosted for me by the locals, I recall stating, "Manipur is a blessed land with bountiful of nature's boon; it's a man-made tragedy that here the sun sets at noon". The PM has given hope that soon Manipur will see a new dawn. Well, the State needs all the support it can get to navigate through the current grave calamity. Undoubtedly, it's a national call that ought to transcend the political wranglings and shenanigans!

*The writer is a war veteran. He has commanded a division in Manipur-Mizoram and is currently a professor of strategic and International relations. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely that of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views.*