

EXAMINING THE NEXUS OF ETHNIC VIOLENCE AND CASTE BASED RESERVATION POLITICS IN MANIPUR

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Abstract : Manipur has been burning with thousands of deaths, displacement, injuries, sexual assault, destruction of public properties, rioting, looting, mass gang rape cases are occurring. Kuki and Naga tribes are in against granting the Schedule Tribe (ST) status to the Meiteis, who are OBCs, because of the fear that Meiteis are better represented in jobs and government and have better economic status than the tribals. The issue of ST, SC and OBC status as a matter of caste-based reservation has been playing an influential role in the ongoing violence in Manipur. Thus, this paper intends to examines the Manipur violence through the lens of caste-based reservation politics, exploring how competition for reservation has fuelled inter-groups conflict , examining the structural flaws in the reservation system and its threats, as well as possible solutions. This study is mainly a secondary research based on data gathered from government records, books, articles, and journals.

Keywords: Caste-based reservation, ethnic conflict, identity politics, structural flaws, government's negligence.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Ethnic violence and caste-based reservation politics have long been significant factors shaping the social and political landscape of India. While these issues are often studied separately, the interaction of ethnic conflict and affirmative action policies, such as caste-based reservation in regions with complex demographic compositions, lacks attention as fundamental topic of research. One such region is Manipur, a state in Northeastern India, where diverse ethnic communities including Meiteis, Nagas, Kukis and other indigenous groups, coexist within a politically sensitive environment. In recent years, Manipur has witnessed an escalation in ethnic violence, which is deeply intertwined with debates around caste-based reservation and the perceived inequalities in their implementation.

Reservation on the basis of caste remains a central feature to the process of democratic politics in India. Somehow, the rush among different communities to get inclusion in more lower caste categories have led to violence, which is happening in the Manipur case. Manipur's history in context to the violence starts since 1709, when the king, Pamheiba converted the Meiteis forcibly as well as himself from Sanamahism religion to Hinduism. As well as he changed his name to Garib Nawaz and changed the region's name from Kanglaipaag to Manipur and declared the Hinduism as state religion (Singh and Khuraijam, 2013). Later on, when British came to Manipur to send back Burmese in 1824, they introduced Divide and Rule policy to keep separate the plains from the hills (Reghunadhan and K.K, 2024). . To include socially the tribes (Kukis and Nagas), Britishers send Christian Missionaries to the hills and convert the tribes to Christian religion. In 1960, a Land Reform Act was introduced which made that the people from valley couldn't buy lands in the hills. But the tribes living in hills could buy lands in Imphal valley, where the Meiteis live (Manipur Land Reform Act, 1960). So, the same divide and role policy seem to be continued, which led to more hills vs valley sentiments and Meiteis are continuously demanding ST status. Kukis opined that Meiteis were in privileged position from beginning, they were not ST . In 1965, to determine the ST, SC and OBC ,Lukur Committee was formed, which identified five criteria to be qualified for ST status :- primitiveness, distinctiveness, isolation, inhabitation and backwardness. This committee made some changes . Kukis and Nagas were remained in ST category and Meiteis were given SC or OBC status, but not the ST.

The recent outbreak violence in Manipur due to the demand made for reservation rights and the opposition from other communities illustrate how social policies designed for inclusion can in certain contexts, exacerbate divisions. These tensions have raised critical questions regarding the prevailing reservation system in India, which is caste based. This paper explores the nexus between ethnic violence and caste based reservation politics in Manipur, examining the historical roots, contemporary dynamics and the impact of reservation demands on ethnic relations. Through a critical analysis of Manipur case, it seeks to unpack the ways in which reservation politics intersects with ethnic identity and to assess the implications for policy and governance. Ultimately, this study aims to offer insights into potential pathway for resolving tensions in a way that honour both the spirit of social justice and the need for ethnic harmony.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW :

The history of violence in Manipur trace back to colonial period. Hostility towards a common force during the colonial period, have turned into war between 'its own' in contemporary Manipur. Contemporary conflicts in Manipur has its origin in various colonial policies where ethnic consciousness and accordingly the struggle for rights or more specifically of homeland of each ethnic groups became more pronounced in recent times (Khangchia, 2019). Meiteis are currently demanding ST status with the ground that they are insecure with the threat from tribals who are engaging in illegal activities, poppy cultivation, drug trafficking and immigration. Kuki and Nagas are opposing it with the view that Meiteis are well represented in government and job. One narrative is that of Meiteis hegemony that Manipur is ruled by Meiteis' CM and political representation of valley and hills is 40:20 ratio. Another myth is of state funds being syphoned off to the valley, whereas hills are without any developmental works (Delhi Manipuri Society, 2023). The level of conflict has reached to the level that continuous killing, rape, murder, crimes against women and children, burning cases of houses, displacement are occurring (Situation Report -10, 2023). However, as response to all the problems the only demand is for reservation is seem to be critical. The provision for Autonomous District Council (ADC) for the tribal areas has not been in working that Manipur ADC Bill, 2021 was even get cancelled. Economic underdevelopment , government unsympathy, low good governance — are the area for improvement (Das, 2023). The reality behind the protest is crafted action by a nexus of Kuki militants, frontal organization, intellectuals, police, politicians, which is an ultimate threat to national security (Delhi Manipur Society, 2023).

The caste-based reservation was introduced in India to address the historical social inequalities on the basis of caste and for providing opportunities for the marginalized communities to access education, employment and political representation. However, the caste based reservation policy is promoting the caste, instead of abolishing it. People are using it as tool, to meet their political benefits. Disadvantaged communities still face barriers to social mobility. Reservation is one solution, but coaching, funding and scholarships are also required to guarantee lower caste people equitable opportunity and status. Reservation has not yet resulted in what it was aimed. The dialectic of caste reservation is such that first it intends to benefits the victims of SCs and STs, secondly it suffers from dilution of the advocacy for inclusion by the upper caste people within the ambit of reservation quota. Thus, reservation ought to be granted only to those who are in genuine need (Santoshi and Dutt, 2023; Yoganandham, Kareem and Khan, 2023; Mondal, 2021).

Thus, there are significant numbers of research on Manipur violence, the history and the reservation system. But no research has been done on Manipur's ongoing violence from the perspective of caste-based reservation system.

3. METHODOLOGY :

This study combines a literature review, secondary data on demographic and conflict history of Manipur violence, and content analysis of media and political discourse as well as comparative study to analyse how caste-based reservation policies impact ethnic conflict dynamic in Manipur.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION :

a. Shift Grounds of Demand for ST status vs the Original Aims of Reservation

Kukis and Nagas live in hills which is 90% of total lands, and the Meiteis live in the plains , also known as Imphal Valley with 10% of lands. India's population increasing rate is 24.66% and Manipur's rate is 32.46% , which is not normal. According to the Meiteis, in hills region illegal business of Poppy cultivation, drug trafficking to Myanmar is going on through some dangerous groups. Hence, the population increasing rate is seem to be abnormal. In 1901, Meites

were 60% which came to 49% in 2022 and in 1901, Kukis were 1% which became 29% in 2022. Meiteis people claimed that Kukis are illegal immigrant from Myanmar, they are engaging with drugs trafficking. Hence, a survey in forest areas was sanctioned but Kukis didn't allowed. In 2023, the situation became more violent. On 3 May, 2023 ethnic violence broke out. After that on 14 April, High Court ordered the state government to recommend the central government in the matter of the demand of ST status for the Meiteis community. Situation became more out of control when a viral video surfaced two Kuki women being sexually assaulted and paraded naked by a mob. Over 1700 zero FIR registered but they were not transferred, police are also get divided they left to own communities police station, their weapons are also looted. Kuki peoples show themselves as being the target of the state government's treatment of indigenous land rights concern. Meiteis are experienced insecurity as a result of the flood of refugees from Myanmar following the military coup. The identities of various ethnic communities have also weaponized in the ongoing struggle. Questions are raised about the failure of the twin engine of BJP government.

Hence, the Meiteis are demanding the ST status as the solution for all the problems and insecurity they felt. ST status became the lust for the communities so that they are well represented and get reservation. Now, the upper categories seek to downgrade to lower category, it isn't because that they are unhappy with their culture, but only for reservation. It has reversed the sanskritization process in a way. Many argue for no need of reservation anymore, and many others argue for the reservation to be based on financial condition. Therefore, it became necessary to review the caste based reservation system. After a long debate in constitution assembly, the reservation is undertaken to resolve the historic oppression, inequality and discrimination suffered by the backward communities. Caste is embedded in our society, even now caste based discrimination is prevailing mostly in rural areas. Lower caste peoples are subject to exploitation since earlier times, they were harassed, discriminated and hindered by upper caste. Therefore, to correct the historical injustice done to lower caste and to bring tolerance and equality among them, caste is taken as the basis of reservation. Under this, STs, SCs and OBCs are provided reservation in legislature, jobs, education etc.. To uplift the lower castes and give them equal opportunities, reservation are must. However, various cases of violence among the upper castes and lower castes are reported in recent years. The upper castes people are also demanding for ST or SC status. Though, the reservation system has contributed to a large extent in reducing caste inequality and changing the mentality of the society; but it also leads to social unrest and instead of reducing casteism, it promotes. Upper caste communities came to felt threats from the lower caste who receives reservation; hence, they wills to downgrade their caste status. Manipur is victim of such case in a worse manner. According to Meiteis, hills region has create many problems for them as well as they are living only in 10% areas with 53% population. According to the Kukis, out of 60 legislative assembly seats 40 seats are in Imphal Valley and 20 in the surrounding hill districts. So, Meiteis are well represented and politically privileged. If ST status is granted to Meiteis then the entire hills area will be occupy by the Meiteis and Kuki's culture will be assimilated. As well as ST status will be of no value if the entire states citizens get ST status. Kukis are therefore opposing the Meiteis ST status. Thus, the ground cited by the Meitei community for demanding ST status — such as concerns over immigration, drug trafficking and illegal activities by the Kukis and Nagas — are largely unrelated to the original objectives of the reservation system. Similarly, the reasons cited by the Kuki and Naga communities for opposing ST status for the Meiteis, as well as well represented in jobs and government, don't align with the foundational principles of reservation. The caste-based reservation system was established to address historical injustices and inequalities faced by lower caste communities, aiming to secure their rights and promote equality. However, these recent demands appear more focused on accessing the benefits associated with reservation rather than correcting historical disparities.

b. Reservation as the only Solution to all the Problems

Now, the question is why the Meiteis only choose the ST status as the only solution to the all problems in Manipur? If Manipur is facing with such problems like- illegal immigrants, drug trafficking, illegal business of poppy farming then can only the ST status to Meiteis resolve entire problems? The matter of reservation became central concern here, Meiteis are willing to downgrade their caste status so that they can also get reservation. Why there is no other solutions to these problems except the demand for ST status? In four Northeastern states, the tribals areas have the provisions of Autonomous District Council under the sixth schedule, which is not available in Manipur. In states like Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, there are provision of Inner Line Permit and Licensing system. To solve the issues of immigration, illegal business, there is no effort for such solutions unlike other states. Indeed, the Manipur Autonomous Council Bill was rejected. Government is only imposing curfews, cut down the internet and thereby controlling the situation. Hence, Kukis are accusing the whole matter as vote bank politics of the BJP government. Many peoples opined for reformulation of reservation system and suggest that economic condition should be the basis of reservation instead of

the caste. However, the intention behind the caste based reservation is not of less significance. The embedded caste system of our society is not so easy to remove easily. To reduce the discrimination of lower caste and to generate a sense of tolerance became necessary. The discrimination against the lower caste like Dalits was quite pathetic, for which our constitution assembly debated long. Out of 121 crore total population in India, 20 crore consists of the SC which is 16.63% of total population and 10 crore consists of ST which is 8.61% of the total population. According to Mandal Commission report, OBC is 52% of total population and according to NSSO it is 41% . So, conclusion can be drawn from this data that out of total population , around 75% are backward class and remaining 25% are general. In case of reservation, SC are getting 15% reservation and ST get only 7.5% reservation and OBC get 27% reservation. So, around 50% out of 75% backward classes get reservation. Reservation is seem to be a discrimination itself, which provides more or less reservation on the basis of caste. And according to our constitution everyone is equal before law and equality is our fundamental right . So reservation is seem as illegal, a tool which is discriminating. However, reservation is a compulsion, if there is a country and there discrimination and inequality with particular community then they get rebellious, which is a threat to the country. This is why reservation are given and try to take all equally, otherwise it is a biggest threat than a nuclear bomb. India is a largest democracy ; hence, ensuring everyone's participation is essential. Since, the prevailing of Varna system, the upper class had 100% reservation in education, the backward class were even not allowed to go and use public place. Untouchability is a reality in Indian society, we can't ignore it. Backward peoples were treated like animal and generation to generation these were going on and the backward people became weak and remained as backward. STs and SCs are in such a backward situation that they don't have the minimum things needed to get the seat on that reservation and getting out of village and taking that seat is a difficult task for them. Therefore, STs, SCs seats are vacant in PhD courses, IITs ,Lok sabha etc. In case of competitive examination, who don't get selected humiliate the ones who get the seat on social media, this seems very normal . But cutting off a certain community from society is very painful. Reservation is a tool which can end discrimination; though, it is working slowing. In the matter of reserved seats in elections for the backward class, people opined against, but if it is not there then the backward people will not win after getting tormented and manipulated.

c. Vision for the Income-Based Reservation

Most of the people belief that reservation should be income based. The prime motive of reservation was not to financially equalise all over India. Reservation is not a poverty elimination scheme indeed, it is brought only because to remove the discrimination of backward communities . Caste is always with people no matter rich or poor, there is no such thing that after became rich a person will not be discriminated against for his caste. If someone in unable to move forward due to poverty then there are many schemes like :- National Old Age Pension Scheme, MNREGA, NREGA etc. are for them . Below Poverty Line (BPL) is a different scheme for the families, subsidies are also there. Government impose tax on rich to help the poor . To remove poverty, welfare schemes should be strong. Reservation aims to increase the representation of the backward class, the only logic behind. Many people against reservation, but they stay silent in EWS matter, which is a income based reservation provided to generals. Hence, caste is a very controversial topic. MK Gandhi said that discrimination will end if people will start marrying intercaste. In marriage even now lower caste have disadvantage, in rural areas a upper caste girl is not allowed to marry a lower caste boy. Hence, it is clear that the rush in Manipur is a lust for reservation and it is claimed to be solution for all the issues . The upper castes have keep an angry against the ST and they felt that their rights are robbed.

d. Ending of Reservation and Need for Caste Census

Many people says that there is no more need of reservation, as it unable to reduce intolerance, so this tool is not workable. However, the thing is that if the reservation is stop, then in which slow speed the lower castes is moving forward will be stopped forever. Caste is the reality of Indian society, which is more visible in rural areas presently. People are even now more conservative regarding caste, no intercaste marriage is allowed. However, in Manipur main problem is that since 1932, no caste based census has been conducted. So, to decide which are the communities should include and which are not is difficult. And the tribals and Meiteis are rule by divide and rule policy by separating them from each other. They only trust their own police, own officials. So, government should make them tolerant economically as well as socially. Issue of immigration , illegal business should resolve as soon as possible and media should also be more active. As a whole, the Manipur violence is not a single caused case , communalism on the basis of ethnicity and religion , caste politics ,vote bank, government negligence all have contributed . Tolerance between the tribals and non tribals js not persist. This issues need a complicated negotiation as soon as possible without any biasness have to bring trust among them. Caste based census should conduct and other provisions should be analyse for solving the issue

immediately.

e. Government's Negligence and Drawbacks of Reservation System

These tensions and distrust in Manipur are further accentuated by the fact that successive state government have been unsympathetic and uncaring towards the hill areas. That hill areas have remained economically underdeveloped with poor quality of life. Infact in 2021, the Manipur government ranked quite low in good governance index and was judged one of the worst governed state. The state government should urgently focus on ushering in industries and service sector led development which would provide more non-farm economic opportunities to the people of Manipur. This could potentially reduce people's attachments to the land. Most importantly, the state government should sincerely strive towards providing an effective, transparent and inclusive governance to the people of Manipur (Das, 2023).

Reservation policy was enacted for a period of 10 years, but it is continuing till today by way of extension. Moreover, new provisions for EWS reservation brings more debates. Reservation should not be provided perpetually generation after generation. Equal importance should be given for the abolishment of the caste system, malpractices of untouchability, and other sorts of discrimination from our society. So that equality in society can be ensured (Santoshi and Dutt, 2023). These are the areas that need immediate attention of the government.

5. KEY FINDINGS OF THE STUDY :

- The focus of reservation policies in Manipur has shifted, with groups increasingly demanding ST status for benefits, rather than addressing caste-based inequalities that led to tensions and violence.
- Manipur faces various issues, including immigration, poppy cultivation, drug trafficking, population growth, violence, and economic underdevelopment. However, reservation alone cannot resolve these challenges, and the government should take necessary actions to address them.
- Calls for income-based rather than caste-based reservation in light of recent violence are complex. Reservation is not intended to address economic disparities, as separate welfare programs already exists for that purpose.
- Ending reservations entirely is premature, as no caste census has been conducted to assess progress on caste equality.
- Government's negligence has exacerbated the issues underlying Manipur's unrest. Corruption persists under the guise of reservation policies, and government continues to extend the policy without measuring the caste disparities, in a way it more promotes the caste instead of ending it.

6. CONCLUSION :

The study shows that the nexus between ethnic conflict and caste based reservation politics in Manipur highlights the complex and counterproductive dynamics of identity based policies in the region. Originally intended to uplift marginalized groups, the reservation system has been repurposed by various communities seeking socio-economic advantages, resulting in increased social fragmentation and escalating tensions. This shift has diverted the attention from the core objectives of caste-based reservation.

To address these challenges, it is essential for the government to approach Manipur's issues comprehensively, implementing policies that go beyond reservation alone to tackle the root cause of underdeveloped, ethnic friction, and resource inequality. Conducting a caste census could provide an empirical basis of assess whether current policies are achieving social justice and disparities. Moreover, strengthening transparency and accountability measures could curb the misuse of reservation benefits and help to restore trust in the system. Ultimately, fostering sustainable peace in Manipur will require both a reformed approach to reservation policies and targeted development programs.

The ongoing violence in Manipur has increasingly become matter of grave human rights violation and poses a serious threat to national unity. The government must take immediate action to protect the people, strip the escalation of violence

and work towards a sustainable solution. Along with caste census, a re-evaluation of the Land Reforms Act, Autonomous District Council and Inner Line Permit provisions may be necessary to address the tensions, along with clear policies for preventing refugees, illegal business to ensure safety and integration. Stability in Manipur should be prioritised to foster lasting peace and security.

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