



State-Society Rift in Manipur: Tracing Trends on Cohesion and Conflict

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the ongoing divide between the state and society in Manipur, India. It argues that social cohesion, fair political representation, and violent conflict are not just separate issues they're tangled together. Manipur's deep ethnic divisions, shaped by its history and tough political battles, make it hard for people to feel like they share a common identity or trust the state. Things only get worse when state institutions fail to deliver justice. The government loses its grip and gaps in leadership, while non-state actors' step in to fill the gap. The paper uses ideas from securitisation and power-sharing theories to dig into how these problems. Real stability means going further building an inclusive government, actually sharing power, making institutions accountable, and letting communities lead the way on peace.

KEYWORDS: *state-society relations, social cohesion, political representation, ethnic conflict, governance, Manipur*

1. Introduction

Manipur, tucked away in India's Northeast has always been a place where different communities, politics, and conflict intersect. Ever since the state merged with the Indian Union in 1949, the state has seen waves of political violence, clashes between and within ethnic groups, and a constant undercurrent of tension. These problems run deep, exposing old cracks in the relationship between the people and the state. It has forced citizens to ask some tough questions about who gets represented, who really holds power, and whether the state itself is seen as legitimate.

This paper digs into the history and the present to figure out how Manipur ended up so divided. It looks closely at how ethnic rivalries and battles over political control have made it hard for the state and its people to come together. It will look into whether or not different groups' distinct cultural and ideological pursuits find a place in state institutions. While doing so, it will trace how trust in state institutions has worn thin, and how non-state actors have stepped in where the government has fallen short. This work attempts to get

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a clearer picture of when and why people push back against state power. It points toward ways to build more inclusive governance and rebuild the bonds between the state and society.

2. Difficult Terrain of State–Society Relations in Manipur

Manipur's entry into the Indian Union is still a sore spot, and people can't agree on what really happened with the 1949 Merger Agreement. Some, like Mangal, L. (2020), focus on the idea of coercion and loss of sovereignty basically, that Manipur was annexed rather than freely joining India. Others point to the cracks within Meitei society itself, like internal divisions and people turning against the monarchy.

When the absolute monarchy finally ended, and a constitutional monarchy was put on experience, most people in Manipur seemed to welcome it. But if one looks at the years just before the merger, things get even more interesting. The Manipur Constitution Act of 1947 put in place right before India's independence, laid out a legal framework for an independent state. What stands out is how it defined who the citizens were: not by ethnicity or religion, but simply by being born and living in Manipur. Section 2 of the Act says anyone born and domiciled there was a state subject. That meant Meitei, Naga, Kuki-Zo groups, even marginalised communities like the Loi all were included, no one group put above another. Instead of ranking people by ethnic identity, they focused on shared residence as the only real test for political rights. This was the stage of relative cohesion as the constitution made an attempt at self-governance in a princely state, which reflected post-Protected State aspirations for rule of law, democracy, and fundamental rights

Scholars like K. Jyotirmoy (2018) see this as a brief but significant moment, when Manipur tried to build a pluralist civic order and kept its legal identity separate from ethnic politics. The 1947 Act's citizenship clause was Manipur's early attempt to create a sense of common belonging that cut across tribal, ethnic, and communal lines. The idea was simple: if you lived there, you belonged. However, the years between 1947 and 1949 are still hotly debated. After the merger with India, things changed fast. Manipur went from being a Union Territory to a full-fledged state in 1972. But with that came heavy-handed central policies like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) which many criticise for enabling human rights abuses and making people feel even more alienated from India. The old colonial trick of dividing the hills and the valley did not go away either. New administrative rules just made those divisions deeper, separating ethnic groups by space and politics and laying the groundwork for future conflict.



3. The Erosion of Social Cohesion

Social cohesion in the ideal sense means how well a society takes care of everyone, making sure people are not left behind or pushed apart. It is tied up with fairness, social mobility, and whether people actually trust the system to work for them (OECD, 2011). However, contemporary Manipur is characterised by fragmentation. The society is split along old ethnic and geographic lines, and the divide runs deep. When Manipur was put under the “protected state” category, the state administration under colonial rule managed the Imphal Valley separately from the hill areas, which were home to different tribes. That policy did not just fade away after 1949. Over time, this hill-valley divide and split got entrenched into the way people see themselves, making it tough for any sense of a shared Manipuri identity to take root.

This was further complicated by the ideas of who lives where and what they believe. The valley is just 10% of the land but packed with over 60% of the people, mostly Hindu Meiteis. The people of the hills became mostly Christian and were put under the Indian constitutional category of the tribe. This setup in many ways, triggered a fear of losing their culture or getting pushed out politically. It resulted in turning the region’s cohesive diversity into a constant source of stress.

The successive governments, both the centre and the state, could not retain the cohesive diversity. Instead of acting as an honest broker or bringing people together, it has leaned on heavy-handed rule. The imposition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) is one good example. This move has made people feel watched, controlled, and alienated, like the state is something to fear, not trust (McDuaie-Ra, 2016). So, people pull back into their own communities, searching for safety and identity elsewhere. The trust that could have held everyone together just is not there anymore.

4. The Contours of Conflict

As mentioned, Manipur’s cohesive diversity is characterized by a patchwork of different communities. The Meiteis, who are mostly Hindu but also include a sizeable Muslim group called Meitei Pangals, live mainly in the Imphal Valley. That valley takes up just about 10% of Manipur’s land but has over 60% of its people. The hills covering the other 90% are home to the Nagas and the Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes, most of whom are Christians. Over time, the state’s religious balance has shifted: fewer people follow Hinduism now, while Christianity has grown, echoing changes in Manipur’s wider society and culture. According to the 2011 Census, Manipur’s population was almost evenly divided between Hindus and Christians. Hindus made up 41.39%, and Christians were close behind at 41.29%. Muslims accounted for 8.4%, while about 8.2% of



people followed tribal religions. A smaller portion of the population identified as Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, or said they had no religion at all (Census 2011).

Ethnic based political rhetoric often talks about Manipur's politics as if it is just a numbers game. Most contend that Meiteis outnumber the others and that they dominate the political landscape. It is not entirely wrong. The Meiteis, crowded into the valley, control 40 out of 60 seats in the state assembly. The hills, split between Nagas and Kukis, get the remaining 20. The constitution promises autonomy for the hill areas through Article 371C and Autonomous District Councils (ADCs). However, these measures have not worked out as planned. The councils barely have any real power funding is inconsistent, and the state government (which the hill tribes see as dominated by valley interests) keeps interfering. This is one of the possible reasons as to why there has been a constant push to extend the Sixth Schedule to the identified tribal areas basically, to give tribal councils more control and resources. So far, this demand seems to have only fueled more friction.

Whenever trouble erupts, the state responds with curfews, internet blackouts, and military crackdowns. These quick fixes never get to the heart of people's complaints. The real problem runs deeper: politics is now run along ethnic lines, with groups clinging to exclusive identities. This mindset makes it look like the system is rigged to keep Meiteis on top, rather than finding common ground.

The distribution of assembly seats 40 for the valley, 20 for the hills gives the Meiteis a clear advantage. It is no surprise that the hill tribes often feel the government only serves valley interests (Shimray, 2022). The constitutional safety nets Article 371C, the Sixth Schedule, ADCs are supposed to guarantee tribal autonomy.

There are allegations that the ADCs do not get the powers they need. They are always short on funds and stifled by interference from the state government. Instead of real self-governance, they have become empty symbols. That is the rationale behind why tribal groups who had been demanding a stronger Sixth Schedule setup for the hills.

Moreover, there has been a fierce debate over affirmative action like the Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. For existing ST communities, this feels like a direct threat. They already have limited privileges, and now they worry about losing even that. The whole situation breeds distrust between groups and makes state institutions look illegitimate, especially to minorities. When people do not feel represented or respected, they pull away from the state. This contention has made cohesion difficult. It also provides a space where ethnic/identity based civil society groups and insurgents step in, claiming to speak for their



communities. The end result is clear. Manipur's social fabric is stretched thin and its politics stay on shaky ground.

5. The Manifestation and Drivers of Conflict

When cohesion falls apart, and people stop feeling represented, conflict does not just show up as a few bursts of violence. It deepens it and stays. In Manipur, this is not a simple story of ethnic clashes or skirmishes. It is layered as social groups go head-to-head with the state, testing its authority. Over a period of time, citizens no longer trust the government. Once people start seeing institutions as unfair or biased, they pull back. They look for other ways to organise their lives, sometimes setting up their own systems.

Land and resources are always at the centre of the fight. The hills in Manipur are laden with forests and minerals, and lately, there has been a boom in poppy farming (Sharma, 2025). That is not just cash for the local economy. It is also a lifeline for the economically depressed and even armed groups. The government tries to crack down on these poppy fields, but people see those raids as targeting specific communities. That just stirs things up more, sparking rounds of violence and payback. Added to this issue is the fallout from the current Myanmar crisis. Since the 2021 military coup, refugees have been streaming into Manipur. Suddenly, the whole picture gets even more complicated. The citizens start worrying about outsiders taking over questions about land, culture, and who gets to be represented in politics all bubble up. The debate over who belongs and who does not get loud, and it is easy to see why tensions run high.

With the state struggling to keep a grip, a whole mix of non-state actors' steps in. Ethnic armed groups chase their own goals of the restoration of sovereign Manipur (Misra, U, 2022) and other, just more land in ethnically identified areas. Then, there are ethnic based vigilante groups and civil society organisations like the Meira Paibis, the women torchbearers. They organise protests, patrol neighbourhoods, and sometimes even hand out their own version of justice. It blurs the line between helping the community and challenging state control. Meanwhile, small arms keep pouring in, so even a small dispute can turn deadly fast (Statesman, 2025).

The political heat in Manipur does not come out of nowhere. Social and economic pressures crank everything up. Allegations of intent on land grabs and resource battles go way back, tied up in old claims and new development plans (Gupta & Kujur, 2023). The poppy trade, especially in the hills, keeps violence alive because it bankrolls armed groups. When the government moves in on poppy farms, people see it through the lens of ethnic rivalry, and that just makes things worse. Migration adds another layer whether



it is people moving from the hills to the valley, or refugees crossing from Myanmar, locals worry about losing their place and their resources.

In response to the recent issues related to ethnic violence, the state's response has been mostly just curfews and internet blackouts short-term moves that do not touch the real issues. In fact, these heavy security tactics just make people more suspicious, prove the critics right, and add fuel to the conflict that everyone says they want to end.

6. Rift as Self-reinforcing Cycle

Manipur's split between the state and society keeps feeding on itself. Weak social bonds, perceived unfair political representation, and a whole mess of conflicts just keep pushing each other forward. The government, both in the past and now, has not managed to build a civic identity that includes everyone or to share power in any real way. That has left a lot of people feeling like the state just is not for them. And when people stop trusting the state, armed groups, grassroots activists, and ethnic identity-based civil society groups find it a lot easier to push back and challenge its authority.

It has been noted that the state cannot fix the fissures with quick technical solutions or just by tightening security. What is needed is a serious political reset, something that can break this cycle. To start, the state has to pull back its security presence from daily life and open up a real, inclusive conversation about the future. This would recognise old wounds but would not necessarily heal the deepened wounds. Trust will not return unless people see real representation. This means the state has to think out of the box, taking a hard look at what the proposed solutions would actually do. As for the ongoing conflict since May 3, 2023, it is not just a law-and-order problem. The state as a responsible agency has to tackle the root causes: create other ways for people to make a living besides poppy farming, be clear and fair about how land can be used, and get communities working together on security.

Real peace does not come from force. It comes when the state earns its legitimacy—by being fair, by representing everyone, and by acting as a real, impartial referee for all its people and it is the only way forward.

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