

How the hills of Manipur voted

Voting patterns in the Outer Manipur Parliamentary constituency exhibited the deep ethnic divide between groups, which were in conflict in the past and continue to simmer



A polling booth in the constituency

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The hills of Manipur, a hotbed of ethnic conflicts in the 1990s, went to polls on 11 April. The Outer Manipur Parliamentary seat is reserved for the scheduled tribes; yet many in the backward areas of the valley also have a share of the vote without the right to contest.

In the past this constituency has seen a tight contest between two groups of people. There are 34 recognised tribes in the state while some are still clamouring for recognition as a separate tribe identity. But they were loosely grouped into Kukis and Nagas during the British colonial rule, although some oppose the imposition of such a generic identity.

The Kuki Inpi, Manipur and Kuki Students Organisation faced a lot of controversy in February for endorsing a Kuki candidate, who wished to get a Congress ticket for the Outer Manipur constituency. Similarly, two militant groups, the Kuki National Organisation and Zomi Revolutionary Army, vouched for another candidate for the Bharatiya Janata Party's ticket. The Isak-Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland was also alleged to have rigged the polls in favour of the Naga People's Front candidate.

Manipur is known for having the largest number of armed militant groups operating in the state, each establishing a "parallel government". Unlike the Assembly election, which

is largely fought on the lines of clan, Parliamentary elections have largely been contested on ethnicity. The Nagas vote for Naga candidates while the Kukis vote for their Kuki candidates. This voting behaviour was not as rigid before the Kuki-Naga conflict in 1993. Similarly, the conflict between the two ethnic cousins — the Thadou-Kukis and Paites in 1997 — influenced the latter, which as a social group, voted largely in favour of the NPF candidate this time in the constituency dominated by them.

While both community-based political workers and militant groups reinforce ethnicity to achieve their electoral objective, the former uses emotive appeals to its members to influence their voting. On the other

hand, the latter employs intimidation through threats of using force, as is evident in many cases, and rigging, as reported by candidates themselves and their political parties. Ethnic polarisation is at its peak during pre-polling days with each group aligning and realigning themselves to achieve electoral gains. Past instances of tensions and conflicts resurface and bitter memories are invoked against the "other" to consolidate group solidarity, which could in turn translate into votes.

Sizeable votes in the Imphal Valley for this Parliamentary constituency, comprising people who are mainly from a social category other than the scheduled tribes, are a decisive factor when contested evenly between the two groups in the hills. In the last two decades protecting the "territorial integrity of Manipur" has been the catchword to woo valley voters. This election showed a departure from such an overriding concern, which is indicative of the success in political bargaining on the issue. Despite the strong presence of the BJP in the state for the last couple of years, widespread protests against the Citizenship Amendment Bill polarised voters. This was quite in contrast with other parts of the country where the politics of polarisation handed the advantage to the BJP.

How much does ethnicity matter?

Being a largely Christian population, the hills of Manipur have been traditionally inclined towards the Congress and other regional parties for their secular and pro-minority policies. Notwithstanding that, the BJP candidate closely trailed the NPF candidate when results were declared on 23 May. It indicates how begrudgingly a certain section of people in the hills

choose ethnicity over their preferred political party. On the other hand, voting beyond ethnic boundaries shows irreconcilable differences within groups that appear to have been arbitrarily put together and are symptomatic of the struggle for power and dominance. In Manipur, the involvement of militant groups in elections has been known for quite sometime now. What differentiated this election from the previous one was how militants emerged from the shadows to openly support their favourite candidates, indicating the possible understanding between those in political power and the militant groups.

The deep division and shared conflict-ridden past between the two ethnic groups underscore the urgent need for bifurcation of the hills into north and south by adding another Parliamentary constituency, besides providing adequate political autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. How and when such a policy decision can be taken depends on the political will of the Centre. It would also add to their efforts to bring about political stability in the North-east as a whole.

In such ethnically polarised societies, the community-based organisations attempt to impose their preferred choice of candidate on their community members as they often consider themselves "moral entities in their own right". In this process, the democratic right of individual choice is sidelined and group rights are overtly placed above everything else. This is the challenge, which the hills of Manipur and other multi-ethnic spaces of the North-east, will continue to face in the days to come.