

# Unfolding the Manipur Riots

*The riots are the outcome of a long build-up of tensions in which the state government is complicit.*

*Thongkhohal Haokip writes:*

A riot broke out in Manipur on 3 May 2023 after a tribal unity rally in Churachandpur concluded peacefully. The rally was organised by the All Tribal Students' Union Manipur against the demand for the inclusion of the dominant Meitei community into the Scheduled Tribe (ST) list. The riot spread to Moreh and Imphal where, according to press reports, more than 60 people have been killed, over 40 churches and 1,700 houses incinerated, 20,000 people shifted to safer places while a few thousands still remain in relief camps, and 1,041 weapons looted from police stations and the Manipur police training centre, etc. This rally was organised after a single bench judge of Manipur High Court, on 19 April 2023, directed the Manipur government to submit a recommendation in reply to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. In response to a writ petition filed on 7 May 2023 by the Manipur Tribal Forum Delhi and a special leave permission filed by the chairman of the Hill Areas Committee in the Supreme Court regarding the violence in Manipur and the ST status demand, the Chief Justice of India observed that neither the Court nor the state have the power to "add, subtract or modify" the ST list. There was a systematic build-up leading to this violence in the past few months.

Tension has been escalating when the state government issued a special order on 7 November 2022 which set aside the orders passed in objection cases, excluding villages from the proposed Churachandpur–Khoupum Protected Forest in the 1970s and the early 1980s. With this order, 38 villages in Churachandpur district suddenly became encroachers in their ancestral lands. On 20 February 2023, K Songjang village was evicted, claiming that it newly came up in 2021. In fact, the village was destroyed in 1993 during the Kuki–Naga conflict and the village chief wanted to re-establish it after the Old Cachar Road was developed and is in the process of being converted into a national highway. Against this discontentment of the eviction drive, the Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF) organised peaceful protest rallies on 10 March 2023. Despite prohibitory orders, the rally was peaceful, except in Kangpokpi where clashes took place between the police and protesters. However, the chief minister of Manipur blamed insurgent groups operating in areas where the rallies were peaceful for creating disorder, and unsuccessfully attempted to withdraw the ceasefire agreement with them.

In April, there were attempts by the forest and revenue departments to conduct a joint survey in the disputed Churachandpur–Khoupum Protected Forest areas. The ITLF opposed the joint survey claiming that the village chiefs were not informed and it bypassed the village authorities.

This growing discontentment in the hills against the policies of the state government also saw a simultaneous radicalisation of a section of the politically dominant Meitei community. Radical groups such as Meitei Leepun and Arambai Tenggol were accused of recruiting volunteers, indoctrinating, and training them in self-defence.

Manipur has a history of violent ethnic conflicts and public protests are often held to vent out public anger. The protests turn violent in some cases but no counter-mobilisation had happened in the past. However, in the recent tribal solidarity rally, counter-blockades were organised even a day before the rally took place. When violence broke out in the Churachandpur–Bishnupur border after the rally, there was no effective control by the police and it spread to other parts of the state. The timing of this violence is systematically planned. On 24 March 2023, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 was further removed from four police stations in the Imphal Valley, including Moirang and Nambol in Bishnupur district where the violence broke out, while the hill areas, including Churachandpur, were still placed under the category of "disturbed areas." The chief minister made a public appeal for peace only after 18 hours after the riot broke out.

The political scientist, Paul Brass, terms this dramatic production of riots in Indian politics as "institutionalised riots systems." During the preparation for these riots, there was a selective demonisation through inflammatory speeches in order to dehumanise the Kukis. The simmering tensions were continuously kept alive until the riots were activated when a mob desecrated the Anglo-Kuki War Centenary memorial gate through arson during the solidarity rally. This act of defiling an object that is held in high esteem by the Kukis is punishable under Section 3.1(t) of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Now that the riots are under some semblance of control, official explanations will be galore that these riots are spontaneous, mass-based, and are impossible to control and prevent. There will be attempts to shift the responsibility of these riots from the authorities, politicians, and political parties to the police and the general public. The beneficiaries of these riots will be certain dominant sections of the current political establishment, which gains an unfair advantage by claiming to be so-called protectors of a particular community in Manipur. Political decentralisation is the only way to prevent such riots in the future.

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