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Premium

# In Manipur, a government that's worsening the conflict

N Biren Singh government's decisions in Manipur have increased hostility among communities, prolonged current impasse

Written by Thongkhohal Haokip Updated: October 11, 2023 22:01 IST

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Manipur CM N Biren Singh. (FILE)

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Last month, Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh requested the central government to revoke the Free Movement Regime (FMR) agreement with Myanmar in order to curb the influx of the so-called "illegal immigrants", allegedly responsible for the ongoing violence in the state. Earlier, in September 2022, the FMR was temporarily suspended in the wake of the coup in Myanmar in February 2021 and the inflow of refugees into Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland.

The temporary suspension of the FMR is explicable, given the acute political unrest and fragile security situation in the neighbouring country from where large scale inflow of refugees has become exigent in Mizoram. But, India and Myanmar have never had a history of violent boundary disputes. Most of these boundary settlements were largely arbitrary — the concerns of local people were hardly kept in mind before the boundary lines were drawn or settled.

These borderlands are cultural spaces where people from the same ethnic stock inhabit contiguous areas. In times of trouble, ethnic ties are much stronger than state-imposed borders and laws, which Mizoram has demonstrated in the last two years. Manipur shares a border of about 390 km with Myanmar. Only about 60 km of this stretch has been taken up for fencing by the central government while the rest continue to remain porous. In the increasingly security-centric border management, the FMR has been a recognition of the lived realities of borderlands.

The border between Manipur and Myanmar was formalised by the boundary commission of 1881, which corrected the errors of the one drawn by R B Pemberton in 1834, and placed it on the foothills of the eastern slopes of the Dingpi ridge in Manipur or the western foothills of the Kabaw valley in Myanmar. The border line passes through or just misses several villages as these foothills were one of the preferred locations for settlement. Many of these villagers on the Indian side of the border depend on the economic activities in the Kabaw valley for livelihood. The lack of all-weather roads on the Indian side of the border forces them to walk a few metres east, across the porous border and on to the India Myanmar Friendship Road, linking Moreh-Tamu-Kalemyo-Kalewa, to travel to Moreh via Tamu, and then to Imphal and other parts of the country.

The lack of proper medical facilities in many villages in the extreme southeast of Manipur has also forced villagers to avail the nearby facility in Khampat, a small township mainly of Kuki-Chin inhabitants in Myanmar. As an informal practice, the Myanmar authorities would allow such travel after a casual identity check to ascertain whether they were from the so-called "border villages". Such an informal border regime has been the practice since the early days of Independence. In fact, those belonging to the border villages were hardly even aware of the FMR, until recently.

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The Kuki insurgent groups, who are engaged in peace negotiations with the Centre, demand the extension of FMR up to 80 km (aerial distance) on both sides of the Indo-Myanmar border and 120 hours or five days stay with visa-less entry and movement for the Kuki people. The call for a permanent revocation of the FMR by the Manipur government, therefore, makes the situation more precarious in the light of the five-month-long unrest, that has deepened the chasm between the politically dominant Meitei community — mainly settled in the heart of state — and the trans-border Kuki community. This is especially so when the crisis of food and medical supplies in the borderland deepens due to the continuous blockade in Imphal valley.

The recent extension of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in the hill areas of Manipur, while excluding 19 police stations in Imphal valley, is another manifestation of how the two geographical areas of the state are treated differently and unequally. The continuation of the "disturbed area" tag of the hill areas under AFSPA, despite the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) signing the ceasefire agreement with the government of India in 1997 and the Kuki insurgent groups since 2008, is a stark contrast to the Valley, despite most of the Valley-based insurgent groups still fighting against the Indian state. This apparent favouring of the Valley area also contributes to the animosity between communities.

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Similarly, the attempt to segregate population in the Manipur-Myanmar border appears to be an ad hoc approach. Despite the segregation of the population on ethnic lines, this conflict is not permanent. Given the dependence of the communities on each other, there will have to be discussions on better ways to co-exist. In contrast to the usual state-centric theory, the lived experience in the borderland — which, in the words of the Mexican sociologist Jorge A Bustamante, is a space where "broad scenes of intense interactions in which people from both sides work out everyday accommodations based on face-to-face relationship" — has to be taken into account.

The demand of N Biren Singh for the revocation of the ceasefire between Kuki insurgent groups and the government of India, instead of demanding a quick settlement, and his continuous blaming of Kuki insurgents as responsible for the present crisis in Manipur irks many. The allegation of "illegal immigration" causing violence, without evidence, and the attempts at doing away with the FMR may serve his interest, but the central government should not easily fall into the trap of a particular narrative.

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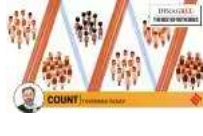
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