

Ethnic Identity and Political Mobilization in Contemporary Manipur

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Abstract:

Manipur's contemporary politics is deeply shaped by the interaction of ethnicity, territory, representation, land rights and governance legitimacy. The state's hill-valley geography has created different historical experiences for the Meitei, Naga, Kuki-Zo and Meitei-Pangal communities, while constitutional arrangements such as Article 371C have only partly addressed tribal autonomy and hill-area administration. This paper examines how ethnicity becomes a political resource through which communities negotiate identity, security, recognition and access to state power. Based on a qualitative, descriptive-critical and secondary-source method, the paper analyses scholarly literature, census data, constitutional provisions, government documents and recent reports on the 2023 Manipur conflict. The study finds that ethnic mobilization in Manipur is not merely a cultural expression; it is a response to perceived insecurity, uneven development, contested representation and weak institutional trust. The paper argues that sustainable peace requires a shift from competitive ethnic nationalism to cooperative federal citizenship through inclusive governance, credible autonomy mechanisms, transparent land policy, justice-based rehabilitation and institutionalized inter-community dialogue.

Keywords: Manipur; ethnicity; political mobilization; identity politics; hill-valley divide; Article 371C; representation; governance; peacebuilding.

1. Introduction

Ethnicity is one of the most influential forces in the political life of plural societies. In Manipur, ethnicity is not limited to language, tribe, religion or cultural memory; it is closely connected with land, security, representation, constitutional protection, development and access to governance. The state is divided geographically and politically into the Imphal Valley and the surrounding hill areas. The valley is largely associated with the Meitei community, while the hill areas are inhabited mainly by Naga and Kuki-Zo tribal groups. The Meitei-Pangal community also occupies a significant minority position within the social and political structure of the state.

The politics of Manipur has evolved through a layered historical experience that includes the pre-colonial kingdom, British administrative intervention, the merger with India in 1949, statehood in 1972, insurgency, militarization, constitutional safeguards and competing claims over land and identity. These layers have created both cultural coexistence and political mistrust. Census 2011 recorded Manipur's total population at 28,55,794, while the Scheduled Tribe population was 9,02,740, forming about 35.1

percent of the state population (Census of India, 2011). Such demographic composition has made representation, territory and autonomy central to political debate.

The ethnic violence that began on 3 May 2023 revealed the depth of unresolved tensions in the state. The immediate trigger was linked to the debate over Scheduled Tribe status for the Meitei community, but the causes were wider: hill-valley mistrust, land insecurity, competing narratives of indigeneity, uneven development, armed groups, borderland anxieties and perceived bias in governance. Reuters reported that the conflict had killed at least 250 people and displaced around 60,000 by late 2024 (Reuters, 2024). The crisis therefore cannot be understood only as a law-and-order problem; it is a governance, representation and citizenship crisis.

This paper critically examines ethnicity as a political resource in contemporary Manipur. It focuses on how ethnic identity shapes mobilization, representation, autonomy claims and governance legitimacy. The central argument is that sustainable peace in Manipur requires institutions that respect identity without allowing ethnicity to become a permanent instrument of exclusion.

2. Review of Related Literature

Existing scholarship on Northeast India shows that ethnicity, autonomy and state formation have been central to political contestation in the region. Baruah (2005) describes the Northeast as a region where the nation-state has often faced durable disorder because communities experience state power through the lens of identity, territory and security. In a later work, Baruah (2020) argues that the language of nationalism in Northeast India is shaped by both state integration and local fears of cultural erasure.

Studies on Manipur specifically underline the importance of ethnic identity and political assertion. Shimray (2001) explains that ethnic assertion in Manipur emerged from historical experiences of marginality, representation and territorial consciousness. Kshetrimayum (2009) highlights that ethnicity in Manipur is not static; it changes with social transformation, political opportunity and the changing role of community organizations. Kipgen (2013) links ethnic conflict in Manipur to political competition, identity claims and territorial concerns, while Haokip (2023) examines the politics of recognition in the context of the 2023 violence.

Historical studies such as Sanajaoba (1993), Kabui (1991) and Parratt (2005) show that Manipur's present tensions are connected with older histories of kingdom, customary authority, hill-valley interaction and administrative separation. Studies on insurgency and political integration, including Horam (1988), Hazarika (1994) and Haokip (2012), show that ethnic mobilization in Manipur cannot be separated from border politics, armed movements and the region's complex relationship with the Indian state.

The literature is useful in explaining the historical and political roots of ethnic mobilization. However, many studies discuss ethnicity, insurgency, or autonomy separately. There remains a need for a focused paper that connects ethnicity with representation, Article 371C, hill-valley governance, the 2023 conflict and post-conflict peacebuilding in one integrated analytical frame.

3. Research Gap and Significance of the Study

The major research gap lies in the limited integration of three dimensions: identity-based mobilization, institutional representation and governance legitimacy. Previous works have discussed ethnic conflict and identity politics, but fewer studies examine how constitutional safeguards, Assembly representation,

land anxieties, relief policies and civil society mobilization together shape contemporary political behaviour in Manipur.

The significance of this paper is academic, political and policy-oriented. Academically, it contributes to political science, ethnic studies and governance studies by offering a concise framework for understanding ethnicity as a resource of political negotiation. Politically, it explains why elections and formal institutions alone cannot ensure democratic trust if communities feel insecure. From a policy perspective, it suggests that peacebuilding must go beyond security deployment and address autonomy, justice, rehabilitation, representation and inter-community dialogue together.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the role of ethnicity in shaping political mobilization in contemporary Manipur.
2. To analyse the relationship among identity, land, representation and governance legitimacy.
3. To study the hill-valley divide and its impact on political participation and institutional trust.
4. To critically assess constitutional and administrative mechanisms such as Article 371C, the Hill Areas Committee and Autonomous District Councils.
5. To suggest inclusive governance measures for peace, representation and inter-community trust.

5. Research Questions

1. How does ethnicity influence political mobilization in contemporary Manipur?
2. Why has the hill-valley divide become central to identity politics and governance debates?
3. How do different communities perceive representation, autonomy and state legitimacy?
4. What are the limitations of existing constitutional and administrative safeguards?
5. What policy measures can strengthen peace, justice and inclusive governance in Manipur?

6. Research Methodology

This paper follows a qualitative, descriptive-critical and analytical research design. It is based on secondary sources such as census data, constitutional provisions, scholarly books, peer-reviewed articles, government documents, institutional reports and credible news reports. The study does not attempt to produce primary field data; rather, it synthesizes available literature and documentary evidence to understand the structural logic of ethnic mobilization in Manipur.

The method of analysis is thematic. The paper identifies major themes such as identity protection, land anxiety, representation, autonomy, civil society mobilization, governance failure, humanitarian displacement and peacebuilding. These themes are examined through political science and governance perspectives. The period of analysis covers the historical background of hill-valley relations, but the main focus is on contemporary Manipur, especially the post-2023 crisis.

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary data. Some aspects of community perception, local-level narratives and relief conditions require field-based verification. Nevertheless, the secondary-source approach is appropriate for a critical research article because it enables a structured analysis of the relationship between ethnicity, institutional design and political mobilization.

7. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The paper uses four interconnected theoretical perspectives. Ethnic identity theory explains how shared culture, language, ancestry, memory and territory become a basis of collective consciousness. Resource

mobilization theory helps to explain how community organizations, student bodies, churches, women's groups and political leaders convert identity into organized political action. Recognition theory shows that communities mobilize when they feel culturally invisible, politically neglected or institutionally disrespected. Finally, federalism and autonomy theory explains why territorially concentrated communities demand constitutional safeguards, decentralization and local self-governance.

Concept/Theory	Meaning	Relevance to Manipur
Ethnic Identity	Collective identity based on culture, memory, land and belonging.	Explains Meitei, Naga, Kuki-Zo and Meitei-Pangal political self-understanding.
Resource Mobilization	Organization of people, symbols and networks for political action.	Explains roles of civil society, student bodies, tribal councils and pressure groups.
Recognition	Demand for dignity, visibility and equal respect within the state.	Explains demands for protection, autonomy, constitutional safeguards and fair representation.
Federalism and Autonomy	Distribution of power between central, state and local institutions.	Explains Article 371C, Hill Areas Committee, ADCs and demands for stronger autonomy.

8. Analysis and Discussion

8.1 Historical Roots of Ethnic Political Consciousness

Manipur historically had a distinct political and cultural identity. The Meitei kingdom provided a central political structure in the valley, while many hill communities maintained customary systems based on village authority, clan organization, chieftainship and customary law. Hill-valley relations included trade, cultural exchange, alliance and conflict. British colonial rule introduced administrative separation between the valley and hill areas after the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, strengthening the institutional distance between communities.

Colonial classification through census, religion, land arrangements and administration gave ethnic identities more formal political meaning. After Manipur's merger with the Indian Union in 1949 and its statehood in 1972, the question of autonomy, representation and identity did not disappear. Instead, democratic politics became a platform where historical anxieties were translated into claims over land, constitutional protection, jobs, development and security.

8.2 Hill-Valley Divide and Political Representation

The hill-valley divide is the structural base of Manipur's ethnic politics. The Imphal Valley contains a high concentration of population, administrative offices, educational institutions, markets and political power, while the hills cover a larger geographical area but experience weaker infrastructure and stronger demands for autonomy. This geography has produced two different political anxieties: the valley often speaks in the language of demographic pressure and land scarcity, while the hills speak in the language of land protection, customary rights and fear of domination.

The Assembly structure reinforces this debate. Manipur has 60 Assembly seats, with 40 constituencies located in the valley and 20 in the hill districts; 19 seats are reserved for Scheduled Tribes and one for Scheduled Castes. Although this distribution is based on constituency and population principles, it creates a perception among hill communities that legislative power is valley-heavy. At the same time, valley communities often feel territorially constrained by hill-area land protections. Thus, democratic representation exists formally, but the feeling of fairness remains contested.

8.3 Article 371C and the Limits of Hill-Area Autonomy

Article 371C of the Constitution provides a special provision for Manipur. It allows the President to provide for a committee of the Legislative Assembly consisting of members elected from the hill areas, and it gives the Governor a reporting responsibility regarding the administration of the hill areas (Constitution of India, Article 371C). The provision was designed to ensure special attention to tribal hill areas and protect their administrative interests.

However, the practical strength of Article 371C has often been questioned. The Hill Areas Committee and Autonomous District Councils were expected to offer local voice and protection, but their powers, financial autonomy and implementation capacity are widely considered limited. When constitutional safeguards appear symbolic rather than effective, communities often turn toward protest, ethnic organizations and extra-institutional mobilization. This gap between constitutional promise and administrative practice is one of the key sources of political distrust in Manipur.

8.4 Identity Politics among Major Communities

Meitei mobilization is shaped by historical memory, language, Vaishnavite and Sanamahi traditions, indigeneity concerns, migration anxiety and the demand for cultural and constitutional protection. The demand by sections of Meitei society for Scheduled Tribe status has been presented as a way to protect land, culture and employment opportunities. However, many tribal organizations oppose the demand, fearing that ST status for the politically influential valley community may weaken tribal safeguards and intensify pressure on hill lands.

Kuki-Zo mobilization is shaped by tribal identity, land rights, security, church and civil society networks, and demands for separate or stronger administrative arrangements. The 2023 conflict made Kuki-Zo demands more assertive because many community leaders argued that coexistence under the existing state structure had become insecure. Naga mobilization has a distinct history linked to customary land rights, broader Naga political aspirations, cultural identity and autonomy. Meitei-Pangals occupy a complex minority position; they share linguistic and social space with valley society but also maintain a distinct religious identity and seek fair representation, education, employment and security.

8.5 The 2023 Conflict as a Governance Crisis

The 2023 conflict transformed long-standing ethnic tension into a major humanitarian and governance crisis. Reuters reported that the violence between the Meitei and Kuki communities had killed at least 250 people and displaced about 60,000 by late 2024 (Reuters, 2024). The conflict also produced segregated spaces, relief camps, fear of movement, breakdown of inter-community communication and the hardening of competing narratives.

The crisis continued to affect the political system. In February 2025, Reuters reported the resignation of the Chief Minister of Manipur amid continuing ethnic clashes, noting that the conflict had killed at least 250 people and displaced 60,000 people (Reuters, 2025). Such developments show that the conflict was not only a community dispute but also a test of governance legitimacy, security management and democratic accountability.

The Union Ministry of Home Affairs extended financial support to Manipur for relief camps and rehabilitation. Official information shows special assistance in FY 2023-24 and 2024-25 for relief camps, rehabilitation schemes and complementary nutrition/personal hygiene support; it also listed a FY 2025-26 special package of Rs. 1,760 crore covering security-related expenditure, CAPF deployment charges and support for rehabilitation of internally displaced persons (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2026). This confirms that the crisis moved beyond immediate violence and required long-term state intervention.

8.6 Civil Society, Student Bodies and Ethnic Organizations

Political mobilization in Manipur is not confined to electoral parties. Student bodies, women's groups, tribal councils, church networks, cultural organizations and local pressure groups actively shape political discourse. These organizations can act as protectors of community dignity and can press the state for accountability. They are important in a society where formal institutions are often seen as distant or biased.

At the same time, civil society mobilization can deepen polarization when it frames the other community only as a threat. During ethnic conflict, community organizations may become parallel authorities, controlling narratives, movement and public opinion. A democratic peace process must therefore include civil society but also encourage responsible language, inter-community dialogue and accountability against hate speech.

8.7 Land, Security and Territorial Anxiety

Land is the emotional and political heart of the Manipur question. For tribal communities, land is connected with ancestry, village authority, customary law and collective survival. For many Meiteis in the valley, land scarcity and demographic pressure create a feeling of confinement within a small geographical space. These contrasting anxieties make land both a material and symbolic issue.

Any sudden change in land law, forest policy or identity status can intensify conflict if it is not preceded by dialogue, legal clarity and trust-building. A sustainable land policy must protect customary tribal rights, address valley land scarcity, prevent illegal encroachment, ensure transparent records and balance ecological concerns with community livelihoods.

9. Major Findings

1. Ethnicity in Manipur is both cultural and political. Communities mobilize not only for identity celebration but also for land, security, jobs, recognition and institutional dignity.
2. The hill-valley divide is the main structural basis of ethnic politics because geography, land systems, administrative concentration and settlement patterns produce different political anxieties.
3. Representation is formally democratic but emotionally contested. Numerical representation alone does not create trust if communities perceive the state as biased or inaccessible.
4. Article 371C has constitutional importance, but its limited practical effectiveness has contributed to demands for stronger autonomy and institutional reform.
5. The 2023 conflict hardened ethnic narratives and converted political mobilization into a humanitarian crisis marked by displacement, segregation and competing victimhood claims.
6. Governance failure intensifies ethnic mobilization. Delay in justice, weak communication, inadequate rehabilitation and perceived bias strengthen the role of ethnic pressure groups.

7. Peace requires institutional redesign and social reconciliation, not only security deployment. Sustainable peace must combine justice, autonomy, rehabilitation, inclusive development and inter-community dialogue.

10. Suggestions and Policy Recommendations

First, inclusive governance platforms should be created with credible representation from Meitei, Kuki-Zo, Naga, Meitei-Pangal and other communities. Peace committees must have clear mandates, balanced membership and institutional backing.

Second, the functioning of the Hill Areas Committee and Autonomous District Councils should be reviewed. Financial autonomy, administrative authority and accountability mechanisms must be strengthened. The demand for Sixth Schedule status or alternative autonomy arrangements should be examined through constitutional dialogue rather than confrontation.

Third, land policy must be transparent and consultative. Customary tribal land rights and valley land scarcity must both be recognized. Land should not be treated only as property because in Manipur it is also connected with identity, memory and security.

Fourth, a justice and reconciliation mechanism is necessary. Impartial investigation, prosecution, compensation and rehabilitation should be ensured. A truth-and-reconciliation process may help record suffering across communities and reduce propaganda.

Fifth, rehabilitation of displaced persons should be treated as a rights-based priority. Relief camps cannot become permanent spaces of uncertainty. Safe return, housing, livelihood restoration, education for children, health care, mental health support and community security guarantees are essential.

Sixth, hate speech and misinformation should be controlled without suppressing legitimate democratic expression. Responsible media reporting, community fact-check networks and peace education can reduce rumor-based mobilization.

Seventh, youth and women's organizations should be central to peacebuilding. Women in Manipur have historically played an important public role, and youth participation can help transform conflict-oriented mobilization into dialogue-oriented democratic participation.

11. Conclusion

Ethnicity and political mobilization in contemporary Manipur represent a serious challenge to democratic governance in India's Northeast. The crisis is not simply between communities; it is also between identity and citizenship, territory and representation, autonomy and integration, security and justice. The 2023 violence revealed that Manipur's institutional arrangements have not fully resolved the deeper questions of trust, land, recognition and governance legitimacy.

The paper argues that ethnicity in Manipur has moved beyond cultural identity and has become a political language through which communities negotiate dignity, resources and security. This does not mean ethnicity must always lead to conflict. If supported by inclusive institutions, fair representation and constitutional trust, ethnicity can become a democratic resource for plural coexistence. The challenge is to prevent identity from becoming a permanent boundary of exclusion.

A peaceful Manipur requires a new political imagination based on constitutional morality, shared citizenship, genuine decentralization and justice-oriented reconciliation. The Meitei, Kuki-Zo, Naga, Meitei-Pangal and other communities should not have to choose between identity and democracy.

Sustainable peace will emerge only when identity is respected, representation is balanced, governance is impartial, land policy is transparent and development is inclusive.

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