

Negotiating Peace in a Fragmented Polity: The State and Conflict Resolution in Manipur

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Abstract

The prolonged ethnic conflicts in Manipur cannot be understood simply as episodes of violence or law-and-order problems. They are rooted in historical grievances, competing claims of identity and territory, unequal political representation, and weaknesses in governance. This article examines how the state has attempted to manage and resolve conflict in a politically fragmented setting involving multiple ethnic communities and competing political interests. Drawing on conflict transformation, peacebuilding, and negotiated governance perspectives, the study argues that coercive measures may contain immediate violence but cannot, by themselves, create lasting peace. Sustainable peace requires meaningful political dialogue, legitimate institutions, equitable governance, and the participation of affected communities.

The study uses a qualitative research design based primarily on secondary materials, including government reports, judicial pronouncements, policy documents, academic studies, and publications by national and international organisations. It also examines official statements and civil society interventions through discourse analysis. The analysis suggests that state responses have often been reactive and heavily security-oriented. While these responses have addressed immediate threats, they have done less to resolve deeper problems such as political exclusion, uneven development, contested land arrangements, and declining public confidence in institutions. The study therefore argues for a broader peacebuilding framework based on institutionalised dialogue, stronger democratic institutions, recognition of customary and community-based mechanisms, and participatory policymaking. Such an approach can help connect state-led conflict management with locally grounded peacebuilding and may offer useful lessons for Manipur and other ethnically divided societies.

Keywords: Ethnic Conflict; Conflict Resolution; Peacebuilding; Fragmented Polity; Negotiated Governance; State Capacity; Identity Politics; Democratic Governance; Collaborative Governance; Reconciliation; Manipur.

Review of Literature

Research on conflict resolution in Manipur cuts across political science, sociology, peace and conflict studies, security studies, and public policy. Much of this scholarship has concentrated on insurgency, ethnic mobilisation, and state security responses. Comparatively less attention has been given to peace negotiation as a process that connects state capacity with democratic governance, institutional legitimacy,

and inclusive peacebuilding. This study builds on that broader body of work while bringing these dimensions together.

Johan Galtung's *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization* (1996) provides an important conceptual starting point. Galtung distinguishes between negative peace, understood as the absence of direct violence, and positive peace, which requires addressing structural inequalities and building fair and just institutions. John Paul Lederach's *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (1997) similarly emphasises that lasting peace depends on long-term reconciliation, local participation, and sustained relationships among communities that have experienced conflict. Roger Mac Ginty, in *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance* (2011), draws attention to the importance of local institutions and indigenous practices in formal peace processes. Oliver P. Richmond's *A Post-Liberal Peace* (2011) extends this critique by questioning purely top-down peacebuilding and highlighting the potential of hybrid arrangements that connect state institutions with local political practices.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that conflict resolution in divided societies is not simply a matter of restoring order. It also involves negotiation, legitimacy, participation, and institutional inclusion. In the Northeast, Rajat Kanta Ray's edited volume *The Politics of Ethnicity in North-East India* (1989) remains useful for understanding the historical roots of ethnic mobilisation. The contributors show how colonial policies, identity formation, and political competition contributed to ethnic divisions that continue to influence regional politics. Udayon Misra's *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland* (2000) further examines the relationship between ethnic nationalism and the Indian state, particularly around questions of autonomy, recognition, and political authority.

For Manipur, the works of Aheibam Koireng Singh and other scholars have explored electoral politics, nationalism, colonial legacies, and identity formation. Volumes such as *11th Manipur Assembly Elections 2017: Issues, Manifestos and Outcome* (2019), *Armed Violence and Nationalism: Reflections in Manipuri Literature* (2018), and *Contemporary Research Trends on the Culture, Society, Economy and Polity of Manipur* (2019) illustrate the growing importance of identity politics in governance and democratic competition.

R. S. Jassal's *Militancy and Conflict Resolution in Manipur* (2011) provides an early systematic discussion of insurgency, counter-insurgency, and state responses. Jassal's work suggests that security measures need to be accompanied by political dialogue if peace is to become sustainable. The contribution of civil society has also received considerable attention. Vijaylakshmi Brara's writings, including *Peace Activists – Also Marginalised?* (2011), *Their Bodies and Their Souls: The Meira Paibis of Manipur* (2011), and *A Plea for Consensual Governance* (2014), highlight the role of women's organisations and grassroots peace activists in mediating between communities and the state. Her work reinforces the argument that democratic peacebuilding must include community participation and forms of governance that are responsive to people at the grassroots level.

Contemporary Debates and Research Gap

Recent discussions have increasingly examined the ethnic violence that escalated in 2023 and what it revealed about governance, democratic legitimacy, and state capacity in Manipur. The crisis brought renewed attention to weaknesses in institutional coordination, public trust, and conflict management. It also reopened debates about federal arrangements, constitutional protections, political representation, and the possibilities of inclusive governance.

Despite this expanding literature, important gaps remain. First, many studies continue to examine insurgency, ethnic mobilisation, and security policy separately rather than as interconnected dimensions of conflict. Second, relatively few studies bring conflict transformation theory into direct conversation with the functioning of state institutions and democratic governance in Manipur. Third, the relationship between political legitimacy, institutional trust, and sustained dialogue among multiple stakeholders has not received sufficient attention.

This study responds to these gaps by examining conflict resolution through the combined perspectives of state capacity, negotiated governance, and collaborative peacebuilding. It argues that lasting peace will require more than reactive security measures. It will require institutional reform, sustained political dialogue, fairer development, and a democratic approach to transforming conflict.

Analysis and Discussion

1. Historical Roots of Political Fragmentation

The present conflict in Manipur is the product of a long historical process rather than the result of a single political event. Colonial administration created and reinforced distinctions between the valley and hill areas by placing them under different legal and administrative arrangements. Elements of these differences continued, in changing forms, after Manipur's merger with the Indian Union in 1949. Over time, differences in political representation, land tenure, and patterns of development contributed to divergent political experiences.

These historical conditions helped connect ethnic identity with demands for autonomy, territorial rights, constitutional protection, and political representation. Sanjib Baruah (2005; 2020) links many conflicts in the Northeast to incomplete processes of state formation and uneven governance, in which democratic institutions have existed alongside exceptional security arrangements. Gangmumei Kamei (2015) likewise shows how earlier administrative divisions continue to influence political relationships among the Meitei, Naga, and Kuki-Zo communities. These historical legacies remain important in understanding contemporary political mobilisation and perceptions of the state.

2. Ethnic Identity and Competitive Political Mobilisation

Identity politics is one of the most important dimensions of conflict in Manipur. Political mobilisation often takes place around ethnicity, language, customary institutions, and claims over territory. These identities are therefore not simply cultural markers; they also become political resources through which communities seek representation, development, security, and recognition.

Disagreements over land rights, constitutional safeguards, reservation policies, and administrative jurisdiction have contributed to a growing sense of insecurity among different communities. Edward Azar's (1990) theory of Protracted Social Conflict helps explain how conflicts can become entrenched when communities believe that they are systematically excluded from political decision-making or denied fair access to state resources. In Manipur, competing understandings of indigeneity, historical settlement, and territorial entitlement have intensified mistrust and made political compromise more difficult.

The persistence of identity-based mobilisation shows why the conflict cannot be explained simply through individual incidents of violence. At a deeper level, violence reflects continuing struggles over recognition, legitimacy, political authority, and access to resources.

3. The State as Security Provider and Political Mediator

The state has two closely connected responsibilities in Manipur: maintaining public order and acting as a political mediator among competing communities. In practice, balancing these roles has been difficult. State responses have historically depended heavily on policing, military deployment, counter-insurgency operations, and emergency legal measures. Such interventions have, at different times, helped contain armed violence, but they have been less successful in resolving the underlying political and social grievances connected with representation, governance, and inclusion.

Lederach (1997) argues that durable peace cannot be built through coercive security mechanisms alone. It requires rebuilding relationships, restoring trust, and creating spaces where conflicting groups can engage in meaningful dialogue. Applied to Manipur, this means recognising that security operations may reduce immediate violence but cannot by themselves change the conditions that allow conflict to persist.

The effectiveness of the state should therefore be judged not only by its ability to restore order but also by whether it can act as a credible and impartial facilitator of political negotiation. Democratic legitimacy is as important to long-term peace as the state's capacity to maintain security.

4. Institutional Deficits and the Crisis of Governance

Governance deficits are another major factor behind the persistence of conflict. Weak coordination among institutions, delayed responses, declining public confidence, and fragmented administrative authority can reduce the credibility of government and make conflict resolution more difficult.

The ethnic violence that escalated in May 2023 exposed many of these institutional weaknesses. It produced serious humanitarian consequences, including displacement, destruction of homes and public infrastructure, disruption of education and health services, and increasing social separation. Public reporting cited in the study indicates that the violence resulted in more than 250 deaths and displaced more than 60,000 people.

The state also became the focus of sharply different perceptions among communities. Whether or not such perceptions are factually justified, their existence matters because they influence trust in institutions and complicate reconciliation. Charles Tilly's discussion of state capacity highlights the importance of a state's

ability to provide security, justice, and effective governance. When any of these capacities is seriously questioned, institutional confidence can decline and prolonged conflict becomes more difficult to resolve.

5. Civil Society and Community-Based Peacebuilding

Manipur has a strong network of civil society organisations, customary institutions, women's movements, youth groups, religious organisations, and community associations. These actors often perform roles that go beyond conventional civil society activity. They have provided humanitarian assistance, facilitated local negotiations, helped build confidence, and acted as intermediaries during periods of tension.

The Meira Paibi movement, tribal councils, village authorities, church organisations, and other community-based groups have all played important roles in different contexts. Their experiences support Joel Migdal's argument that governance is not always controlled exclusively by the formal state but may be shared among several centres of authority.

This is particularly relevant to peacebuilding in Manipur. Local traditions of dialogue, community empathy, and reconciliation can complement formal political negotiations by rebuilding trust where people actually experience conflict. Peacebuilding should therefore be understood as a shared process involving both state institutions and society rather than as a responsibility of government alone.

6. Negotiating Peace Beyond Ceasefire Politics

Peace negotiations in Manipur have often concentrated on ceasefires, suspension-of-operations arrangements, and security-related agreements with armed organisations. Such measures can be important for reducing immediate violence, but they do not necessarily address the political and social conditions that produced the conflict in the first place.

A more durable approach would move beyond military de-escalation towards a wider political dialogue involving the major stakeholders. This should include representatives of hill and valley communities, women's organisations, youth groups, customary institutions, elected representatives, security agencies, and constitutional authorities.

Experience from other divided societies suggests that peace agreements are more likely to endure when they are supported by institutional reform, equitable development, meaningful political participation, and mechanisms for addressing historical grievances. In this sense, peace in Manipur should be treated as an ongoing democratic process rather than simply the absence of armed confrontation.

7. Democratic Governance and Sustainable Peace

Conflict resolution and democratic governance are closely connected. When people feel represented and included, the likelihood of political exclusion and alienation is reduced. Strong and credible institutions can also provide peaceful channels through which grievances can be expressed and negotiated.

For Manipur, sustainable peace requires strengthening constitutional institutions; ensuring impartial law enforcement and access to justice; reducing socio-economic disparities between hill and valley areas; creating regular forums for inter-community dialogue; recognising the constructive contributions of

customary institutions and civil society; improving transparency and accountability; and developing conflict-sensitive policies that respond to identity-based grievances before they escalate.

These priorities are consistent with Galtung's idea of positive peace. Peace, in this understanding, is not simply the absence of violence. It also involves justice, equality, social inclusion, and institutions that allow communities to participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their lives.

Way Forward and Policy Recommendations

The continuing conflict in Manipur makes clear that security-centred responses, while necessary for protecting civilians and maintaining public order, cannot provide a lasting solution on their own. The deeper challenges include political exclusion, competing ethnic identities, uneven development, contested land governance, and declining trust in public institutions. The state therefore needs to move from a mainly reactive approach to one that is preventive, participatory, and focused on transforming the conditions that sustain conflict.

First, an inclusive institutional dialogue mechanism should be developed to support sustained engagement among the Meitei, Naga, and Kuki-Zo communities, civil society organisations, women's groups, youth representatives, customary institutions, and government agencies. Such dialogue should be continuous and transparent, with independent facilitation where necessary, so that disagreements can be addressed through constitutional and democratic means.

Second, the Government of Manipur and the Union Government should strengthen democratic governance by ensuring impartial law enforcement, improving administrative accountability, protecting human rights, and increasing institutional transparency. Rebuilding public confidence is essential if state institutions are to regain legitimacy and be accepted as credible actors in the peace process.

Third, development policy should be conflict-sensitive and more equitable. Investment in infrastructure, education, healthcare, employment, and livelihoods should address disparities across hill and valley areas. Local communities should have a meaningful role in planning and implementing development programmes so that development is not seen as externally imposed.

Fourth, land and resource governance require careful policy review. An independent commission involving constitutional experts, historians, geographers, and representatives of major communities could examine land administration, customary tenure, forest governance, and territorial disputes while respecting constitutional safeguards and indigenous rights.

Fifth, community-based peacebuilding should be formally connected with state-led conflict resolution. Customary institutions, women's organisations, religious leaders, and civil society groups have considerable experience in mediation and reconciliation. Their participation could be strengthened through district-level peace committees and community dialogue forums.

Finally, rehabilitation and reconciliation should be treated as central elements of post-conflict governance. Displaced people require sustained support for housing, education, livelihoods, and psychosocial

recovery. At the same time, reconciliation initiatives should create opportunities for communities to rebuild relationships. Regular conflict monitoring, independent research, and policy evaluation can also improve early-warning systems and help prevent future violence.

Conclusion

The conflict in Manipur is not simply a law-and-order problem. It has developed through the interaction of historical legacies, ethnic identity politics, competing territorial claims, governance deficits, and declining trust in institutions. Together, these factors have produced a fragmented political environment in which peace remains fragile despite repeated state interventions. Security measures remain necessary to protect civilians and contain violence, but they cannot resolve the deeper political and social conditions that reproduce conflict. The central challenge, therefore, is to move from reactive conflict management towards a more comprehensive process of conflict transformation.

The study shows that the state's effectiveness as a peace actor depends not only on coercive capacity but also on its ability to function as a legitimate, impartial, and accountable institution. Peacebuilding in Manipur must take seriously the different aspirations of the Meitei, Naga, Kuki-Zo, and other communities. This requires democratic dialogue, constitutional safeguards, equitable development, and appropriate recognition of customary institutions. Restoring public trust, strengthening the rule of law, and widening opportunities for participation are essential for rebuilding social cohesion and reducing the possibility of renewed violence.

Lasting peace also depends on meaningful cooperation between government and society. Civil society organisations, women's groups, traditional institutions, religious leaders, and local communities can contribute to confidence-building and reconciliation in ways that formal institutions alone cannot. Their role should complement, rather than replace, governmental responsibility. At the same time, policies concerning land, resources, rehabilitation, and socio-economic inequality need to be designed with greater sensitivity to the ways in which they affect different communities.

Theoretically, the study brings together conflict transformation, positive peace, state-society relations, and inclusive governance to provide a broader framework for understanding conflict resolution in divided societies. It suggests that negotiated peace should not be viewed as a one-time settlement. It is an ongoing process involving institutional reform, democratic accommodation, relationship-building, and sustained dialogue.

The experience of Manipur therefore points to the need for a peacebuilding approach that balances security with justice, diversity with equality, and state authority with democratic legitimacy. A multidimensional and participatory approach offers a stronger basis for long-term stability, democratic resilience, and inclusive governance in Manipur, while also providing wider lessons for other fragmented and ethnically diverse societies.

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