

The Hindutva Movement in Northeast India: Situating Manipur Christian Suffering in Context

John

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Abstract

The civil war that has broken out in Manipur since May 2023 is actually a calculated attack on minority Christian tribal people. Widespread destruction of churches, houses, communities, and tribal peoples' lives has inflicted deep, widespread, and ongoing suffering among Manipur's Christians. In addition to bringing relief and a peaceful and just resolution to the conflict, urgent needs include lessons that churches worldwide need to learn from indigenous Christian communities.

Key Words: indigenous, Kuki, land, Meitei, tribals

Introduction

Christian suffering in India is underreported, as many Christians have consciously decided to hide it for fear of death. In many cases, the suffering is designed in such a way that it appears otherwise. This is especially the case among Dalits and tribals, who are at the lowest strata of India's social hierarchical caste-structure. The rise of the assimilative ideology and vision for *Akhand Bharat* ("Undivided India") under the current Indian government has directly targeted tribal Christian communities of Northeast India for three reasons:

1. Those communities follow a religion that promotes human dignity, equality, and social emancipation.
2. They practice an egalitarian indigenous tradition that contradicts social hierarchy.
3. Perhaps most fundamentally, tribal people own land and resources that attract multinational corporations (MNCs) and others, including the state government, for control: the normal MNC approach is to first deal with the people's religion and culture and then give money to their leaders and grab their land and resources.

It is in this context that Christian suffering in Manipur needs to be understood. This article attempts to discuss the complex nature of Christian suffering in Manipur with the aim of advocating for space for indigenous communities in politics, in knowledge production, and in religion for sustainable community.

Manipur

Manipur is a tiny state in the extreme northeast corner of India. It is one of the eight states of Northeast India that is connected with the rest of India by a narrow corridor of a 12 mile-wide stretch of land flanked by Nepal and Bangladesh. The three main communities in Manipur are the Meiteis, the Kukis (during this ongoing violence the hyphenated term "Kuki-Zo" has been introduced for better unity among all the cognate tribes of the community), and the Nagas. Besides their myths, the three communities have much to share in common including linguistic similarities particularly between the Kukis and the Meiteis (Grierson 1904). Historically, the dominant Meiteis occupied the most fertile part of the land, the valley, while the Kukis and the Nagas occupied the hills—most of which are unproductive.

By proportion, the valley/hill divide is 10/90 percent. With the conversion of Meiteis to Hinduism in the eighteenth century, the valley-hill divide incorporated the two additional elements of religious and social difference: the Meiteis adopted the Hindu caste system and

looked down on tribal people as socially untouchables. Since the twentieth-century Christian conversion of many Northeast Indian tribal peoples, Christianity is also considered the religion of low-caste communities. The valley-hill divide thus became more than simply a geographical divide. The divide became even more pronounced with the introduction of a different system of government after India's independence in 1947: 40 out of 60 State Assembly seats were reserved for the valley while only 20 seats were allotted to tribals. This disparity always puts minority communities in a disadvantaged position in obtaining development projects.

Background to the Ongoing Violence

Two further matters need to be noted here: national-level and state-level ideological movements. The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Dal Party (BJP) with its “Undivided India” ideology has sought to assimilate minority cultures into the majority culture both nationally as well as in each state, including Manipur. The ideology became aggressive with the BJP's landslide victory in 2014, prompting the Hindu-nationalist Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) chief Ashok Singhal to declare, “Delhi is ruled by Hindus after 800 years” (Kumar 2014). Singhal's statement reflects the *Hindutva* (“Hindu-ness”) view of Indian history that resents the combined eight centuries of first Muslim, then Christian, rule that was broken by India's 1947 independence (Sharma 2020).

The expansion of *Hindutva* ideology among some tribal communities of Northeast India through the paramilitary Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS: “National Volunteer Organisation”) and other organizations gradually became a home-grown movement under the current national government. The ideology has been presented in such a way that it has gradually and smoothly adjusted within majority Christian communities in Northeast India (Longkumer 2020). Northeast Indians, including many tribal Christians of Manipur, who were indoctrinated with the ideology in schools and hostels in different parts of the country since the 1980s played an important role in expanding the influence of *Hindutva* among their own people. Erasing certain tribal histories and conversion of their religious places of worship are only the beginning of the long-term *Hindutva* project. Tribal Northeast Indians' helplessness in the face of the project is well expressed by Sanjib Baruah when he writes, “India's prevailing governing philosophy is not conducive to fostering a climate of political innovation in the region. In the current scheme of things, it is hard to imagine the political space opening up for alternatives to the exclusionary politics of rightful shares to emerge in those parts of Northeast India where it has become the dominant form of claims-making” (Baruah 2020, 192). This *Hindutva* strategy is also beautifully expressed by a scholar and human rights defender, Dr. Angana P. Chatterji at the Centre for Race and Gender, University of California, when she writes, “Across India, experiments to forge the 'Hindu national community' are predicated on the breakage of minoritised Muslims and Christians, and Adivasis and Dalits. What's happening in Manipur is part of a plan operationalised by the Hindu Right decades ago” (Chatterji 2023).

Within the state of Manipur, since its merger into India in 1949 there have been several attempts to alienate the minority tribal Christian communities from their land and culture. The recent report of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (December 2022) highlights some of the problematic issues “faced by Scheduled Tribes in the State of Manipur” (National Commission for Scheduled Tribes 2022, 2-6):

1. Denial of bills that protect tribal people, their land, and their culture, in particular “The Manipur (Hill Areas) Autonomous District Council Bill 2021” recommended by the Hills Area Committee;
2. Demand of the majority Meitei for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to circumvent land purchase restrictions in order to grasp the tribal lands;

3. Infringement of tribal land and forest through enforcing incorrect, unilaterally imposed British era protected and reserve forest acts;
4. Encroachment into tribal land in the hills through manipulation of the 1960 Manipur Land Revenue & Reform Act;
5. Failure to fill ST backlog or shortfall of posts in all state departments and central institutions in Manipur;
6. Removal of Armed Forces (Special Power) Act (AFSPA) 1958 only from valley districts but remaining in the hills in discriminatory fashion;
7. Imposition of majority language on tribal people for recruitment for any post in Postal Services and Banking Institutions;
8. Disproportionate representation in the State Assembly in which 40 seats are reserved for the valley and only 19 out of the remaining 20 seats are for ST (more than a 2/1 ratio)—despite eligible voters being split approximately 60/40 (approximately 1.2 million to 800 thousand);
9. Bureaucratic manipulation by including many tribal hill villages under valley police jurisdiction in the name of “convenient administration” and by keeping land records of many villages of the hill districts in the custody of nearby valley districts.

On top of these problems, there has been a systematic attempt to demonize minority Kuki communities and segregate them from others with no interference whatsoever from the administration. Allegations of Kukis being illegal migrants, narco terrorists, and poppy cultivators need to be understood in light of this recent envisioned majoritarianism among the majority community. The aim of the majority-dominated state government is to protect the geographical integrity of Manipur (further explained below) by pacifying the demands of minority Kuki and Naga tribal communities. For the recently established *Meitei Lipun* (“Meitei Pride”) and the revival of the *Arambai Tenggol* (traditional army of Meitei King) in particular, the geographical integrity of Manipur includes the revival of Sanamahism (the traditional Meitei ancestor-worshipping religion) and the promotion of a sense of common Meitei identity and stronger moral integration among all Meitei communities for firmer control of Manipur and its resources. On the other hand, for tribal people land, culture, and identity are inseparably connected, as Sitlhou beautifully expresses: “Changes in land relations lead to a redefinition of identity” (Sitlhou 2015, 70).

Details of the events immediately leading to the violence is given by the Indigenous Tribal Leaders’ Forum’s “Countdown to 3rd May” (ITLF 2023).

The Infamous May 3rd Incident and the Complexity of Ensuing Christian Suffering

Considering it their last resort to address the state government’s move against the minority tribals, both the Kukis and the Nagas—under the leadership of their student bodies, “All Tribal Manipur Students Union” (ATSUM)—organized a peaceful solidarity march on the 3rd of May in all the 10 tribal districts of Manipur. The immediate concern then was the announcement of the Manipur High Court endorsing the Meitei Scheduled Tribe demand. The peaceful march ended in the early afternoon, and actually many participants had already returned to their homes. However, after about half an hour, the burning of the gate of the 1917-1919 Anglo-Kuki War centenary monument near the Hill-Valley border area triggered the ongoing communal violence. (There is a different version from the Meiteis that it was the Kukis who started the violence, but there is evidence to show otherwise.) Of course, the struggle of tribal people for justice and peace started much earlier due to their systematic alienation by the Government highlighted above. It is also very important to note that the Government of India was to sign an agreement with Kuki leaders on May 4th to settle their demand for a Territorial Council—with which the majority community disagreed. Apparently the two-pronged purpose

of the ongoing violence is to interrupt the settlement process of the Kuki demand for constitutional protection of their land and identity and (as explained earlier) to “protect the geographical integrity of Manipur” (as intended by the radical Hindu-nationalist agenda and by the Meitei majority).

It is in such a context that the ongoing full-scale civil war is rooted and sustained. The following chronological account of the events of the first few days and three nights of the violence (ITLF 2023) reveals a premeditated religious element in the violence where the ideology of an “Undivided India” and the purpose of ostensibly protecting the geographical integrity of Manipur (for the sake of the majority community) merge.

3rd of May, 2023

The violence broke out around 4pm after the peaceful march, and the tribal people were caught totally unprepared. The first victim who was beaten to death by the Meitei mob wearing black T-shirts was a pastor who was defending his congregation by resisting the mob from attacking his church. His wife and mother called him to come home and at least have his dinner, but the pastor replied, “Mom, how can I leave my people and come in this grim situation?” The body of this pastor has still not been found. For their part, the Meitei mob, once the clash started in Churachandpur District (south-central Manipur) that evening, immediately and systematically attacked minority Kuki Christians in various districts: in Imphal city, 15 Kuki communities were attacked, and 183 houses and three churches were burned down; in Bishnupur district, 79 houses and five churches were burned down; in Churachandpur district, 195 houses and 10 churches were burned down; in Kangpokpi district, 187 houses, eight churches, and two synagogues were burned down, and in Thoubal and Tengnoupal districts 70 houses were burned down (ITLF 2023). In this strategic plan, none of the Kuki tribes—Hmar, Paite, Vaiphei, Thadou, Gangte, Simte, Mizo, and others—were spared. In all cases, the main target was the church because it is the symbol of tribal people’s identity, strength, and hope. To win the sympathy of others in central India it was reported that the violence was due to attacks on Hindu temples in Christian dominated Churachandpur, and several national journalists came to verify those reports. After a few days Christian leaders were able to correct that false narrative by showing the journalists that the temples were still standing intact, and the journalists interviewed Hindu business community leaders in town. The Army camp in Imphal and other districts were not given any orders to act and stop the violence.

4th of May, 2023

Killings and the burning of churches and schools continue but the Army is still not given orders to intervene. In Imphal East District the burning of houses took place from around 7am to 9pm. All together there were 16 villages and their churches along with 524 houses that were burned down, schools and churches were attacked, and around 3430 people were displaced. In Kangpokpi District attacks began at 9am and went up to 12pm. Three villages with their churches were attacked and around 900 rendered homeless. At around 6pm three tribal villages under the district were attacked wherein around 58 houses, three churches, and two schools were all razed to the ground, and around 180 people were displaced. In various other districts 18 tribals were killed, many people were severely injured, and many people took shelter in the jungle. Three tribal daily wage labourers working at a construction site in Imphal were pulled from their rented accommodation and attacked mercilessly. Two of them were stoned to death in the middle of the main road. The third man, Mr. David Liansianmuan, son of Jimmy Khupminthang of Zoumunnuam Lamka, survived, although he was left to die in the middle of the road with a huge stone was tied to his leg to prevent him from running away.

5th of May, 2023

Additional Central Security Forces were airlifted to Imphal but were not given orders to act. Extreme communal violence continued unabated. In Imphal East District from 7am in the morning to 8pm, nine tribal villages under the district were attacked by the Arambai Tenggol, wherein around 295 houses were razed to the ground, along with six churches as well as five school buildings. A total of more than 1700 people were displaced. In Kangpokpi District from around 1:30 pm to 3:30 pm three tribal villages were attacked by the Arambai Tenggol: 75 houses were completely razed to the ground as well as three churches and one government-aided school, and more than 550 people were displaced. In another location, four persons were killed, including two women. One was a Miss Nianghoiching, age 33, a staff nurse in the district hospital. Another was a wife and a mother named Kimmalsawm, age 38. Another was a young man named Moikhenmung, age 19. The other is still unidentified. At that time, there were 12 dead bodies and more than 190 injured in Churachandpur District Hospital.

6th of May, 2023

The situation in Imphal remained extremely distressing with a further tragic development: by this fourth day of the attack, none of the minority Kuki Christians—including those who were receiving treatments in different hospitals in Imphal—could remain wherever they were but had to take shelter in Army camps. At the same time, many patients died in the hospitals and their bodies unclaimed as their caregivers had to flee for safety. In Kangpokpi district, particularly at the foothills of Imphal Valley, more than 20 villages including several churches were burned down despite the presence of Indian Army troops in the area. In most cases, the state police forces would come first and chase away all men from the village, then the mob could come and burn villages. On this day, six people were killed, including a mentally disabled woman named Thiandam, age 50, who was cut into pieces and burned along with her house.

During those first few days and nights, more than 300 churches of all kinds—including Catholic, Presbyterian, Assemblies of God, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Evangelical, Believers Church, Church of the Nazarene, Salvation Army, Baptist, and Independent—were either burned or vandalized. Churches both of Meiteis in the valley and of the tribals were targeted. The churches were always the first targets during the attacks. There are two reasons for this. First, the church is the source of strength, hope, and identity of the tribal people. Second, to the Hindu Meitei, Christianity is considered the religion of low caste communities, hence eliminating it is part of the community integration process for national strength. In this process of destroying churches, the Government was absent to provide security to minority communities. Many observers were misled to suggest that the ongoing violence is an isolated case and has nothing to do with religion, but the experience on the ground shows otherwise.

The goal to attack the churches was achieved in the first few days of the violence, and what has come afterward are other issues, including land and resources which too are parts of the design. Having said that, in the case of Meitei Christians in Manipur valley until today, they are not allowed to meet together for public worship services, and in fact many of their leaders are still hiding in safer places. For fear of attack by their own people who are not Christians, Meitei Christians abstain from contacting Kukis for mutual support and cooperation. Meitei Christians thus have different elements than Kukis in their suffering.

Overall, as of mid-September, there were 137 confirmed deaths, 200 villages burned down, 7000-plus houses burned down, 360 churches and living quarters burned down, and 41,425 Internally displaced persons. Mob attacks, assisted gang rape, torture, looting of property, mutilation of dead bodies, and the delay or total failure of law and order are common in the ongoing attack on minority tribal Christians (ITLF 2023).

Some Implications

What else is gone when the church is burned down? For indigenous Kukis and other tribal Christians in Northeast India, when their church is destroyed the source of identity, strength, and hope as the nerve of their existence is attacked at the root. During the Sanskritization of the Meiteis in the valley, tribal people in the hills did not opt for that religion but instead believed in Christianity, because they found in it a liberating message. One must never forget that it is Christianity that made the Kukis who they are today, but unfortunately for the same reason, like Christians in Kandamal District of Odisha in 2008, they are under attack partly because of their positions in the society that the gracious God brings them through Christianity after generations of deprivation and oppression as tribals under a hierarchical structure of India/Manipur. Managing the people's religion is given as an important strategy to control their world. Now, whether or not the Kukis will really abandon the source of their life and identity in Christ is a big question. In some cases, it works the other way round: some people have come to a deeper faith in Christ through seeing how God protected them in the midst of bomb shells and bullets during this violence. Kuki communities will face bigger tests of faith from both political and developmental forces in the post ethno-religious attack which currently is at its peak.

In a world that seems increasingly materialistic and godless, Christian persecution today can be so confusingly complex that often it does not look like Christian persecution. For contemporary Manipur, persecution is about an attack on the people's history, religion, culture, land, and resources in the wider context of the BJP's vision for an "Undivided India." The persecution has not been driven by the worship of any god as such but from a mammon worship that, in fact, has led some people to deny any religious element in the current persecution (Parratt 2023). Looking at the issue more deeply, the goal is material wealth for power in the name of nation building or territorial integrity, and the means is religion which is the nerve of a community. Religion, in this case Christianity, is considered important because it is that which provides holistic development of Kuki communities.

The Christian message was brought by a Welshman, Watkin Roberts, in 1910 under the "Thadou-Kuki Pioneer Mission," better known as the "1910 Kuki Mission." It was on that foundation that Kuki communities were founded and flourished in parts of current-day Northeast India, the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, and the Northwestern part of Myanmar (Haokip 2014). Besides the transforming impact of Christianity in the society, land and resources have been part of the reason behind the ongoing ethno-religious persecution in Manipur. Kuki communities have occupied the best part of Manipur's hill areas with vast untapped natural resources, hence in large part, like many indigenous communities across the world, the Kuki people suffer exploitation together with their land. This multidimensional nature of indigenous Christian suffering is a new frontier for twenty-first-century mission.

In addition to this multidimensional suffering, another important implication for world Christianity is the question of embracing indigenous people and the transforming values of their cultures. In India, Christian persecution takes place mostly among Dalits and tribal communities. Anti-conversion laws and constitutional reservation provisions are often used to control them. Similarly, in Christianity, no sufficient space has been given for indigenous people to represent their traditional wisdom in Christian belief and practice. The prospect of indigenous Christianity can be visualized in the way they see all reality as interconnected and interdependent. For the particular context addressed in this article, the issue of land becomes very important for the people's theology and life. Land, for indigenous people, is not merely an object or capital but a living being with which humans must relate with integrity and care.

This view of land is different from the way capitalists see it, and it is here that an alternative theology may be explored for peaceful and sustainable earth community.

The final implication is a call for a prophetic Christian message to our present generation. Both at local and global levels, the Church gradually becomes a mere spectator of the alarming rise of fascist ideologies globally in the name of national strength, stability, and security. In Northeast India, particularly Manipur during this time, the Church is unable to speak up prophetically and with a united voice against attacks on Christianity at the local level. The Church of Manipur as a whole—of the Nagas, Kuki, and Meiteis—has failed to see the issue from the perspective in which all concerns of faith, land, and politics are intertwined. Had the churches of all communities stood together to denounce the violence at the beginning, Manipur would not have witnessed this large scale of Christian suffering. The prophetic voice is the voice against ideologies and structures including tribalism that deny space for all, particularly minority communities, and that promotes justice and peace. This capacity for the Church to convey a prophetic message is a matter of urgency, at both local and global levels.

Conclusion

Christian suffering in Manipur has resulted from the vision for an “Undivided India,” the protection of Manipur’s geographic integrity for the majority community, and minority people’s search for space within those other two aspirations. Three goals wrapped up in one complicated vision! In that vision, concerns for religion, politics, domination, and land grabbing are intertwined. Therefore, one must not overlook the dynamics of faith, power, and territory in the context of Manipur—a topic that needs to be further explored (Sookhdeo 2008). Sadly, often the bodies of innocent women are chosen as sites of violence for playing out the politics of majoritarianism. Christianity being the religion that enables the holistic transformation of tribal communities and liberating them from centuries of suppression has been the main target in this violence, but that reality has been obscured by other issues. The need is to embrace indigenous communities and their traditional values as equal participants in all knowledge productions including religion and politics for sustainable community. The twenty-first-century Christian missions in particular must seriously consider revisiting indigenous wisdom and knowledge through a creative and critical-Christian approach that is biblically sound, historically integrated, and contextually appropriated for a relevant mission theology and practices.

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