Why the Centre Must Act in Manipur

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The mainstream media recently reported that the Home Minister, Mr. Amit Shah, after having reviewed the deteriorating communal situation in Manipur, has directed his Ministry to organise a face-to-face meeting of representatives of both the Meitei and Kuki communities. While the intent behind this move is welcome, it can be nothing other than an exercise in utter futility. Truth is, talks would have had a positive impact if undertaken in full earnest when the ethnic clashes first broke out last year. Not only is it now a case of 'too little too late', but also suggests the MHA is completely out of touch with ground realities, as a civil war rages, that is slowly, but surely, engulfing the Northeast.

Over the past year we have been witness to a car wreck in slow motion that has destroyed decades of socio-political progress and economic development in the State. Incidentally, this was only possible thanks to the efforts and sacrifice on the part of the Army, Assam Rifles and the CAPF that waged a relentless campaign against separatist elements. Unfortunately, over the past year, the Central Government has remained curiously ambivalent and disconnected from the state. As Lt Gen Nishikanta Singh (Retd) recently tweeted, "I am just an ordinary Indian from Manipur living a retired life. The state is now 'stateless'. Life and property can be destroyed anytime by anyone just like in Libya, Lebanon, Nigeria, Syria etc. It appears Manipur has been left to stew in its own juice. Is anybody listening?"

The rift between the two communities appears unbridgeable as they face off along the Manipur River in Churachandpur District, and in Tengnoupal and Kangpokpi Districts. The Kuki/Zo communities find themselves totally isolated and besieged by militias owing allegiance to the majority community, openly supported by the State. The local government administration in the hill districts has become virtually non-existent. These communities can no longer travel to Imphal for any reason and in the event of having to travel outside the State are forced to make an arduous 16-hour road journey to Aizawl from Churachandpur. District Hospitals are perennially short of medical supplies and provide basic healthcare with funds collected from within the community. Reports allege that Lakhs of Rupees worth of medical supplies sent by NGO's as relief disappeared, allegedly with government connivance.

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Surprisingly, despite the difficulties and inconvenience caused by this blockade, the Kuki community as a whole, while keen on peace, is reluctant to join any attempt to bring about reconciliation. They are quite happy to be free of the earlier endemic discrimination and constant humiliation they were subjected to by Meiteis occupying the higher rungs within the state and district administration and the police. This new-found freedom has led to a change in attitudes within the community. They no longer wish for a return to the pre-violence days status quo but want the Centre to enact legislation that will give their districts greater administrative and financial autonomy within the state under Schedule 6.

The chief minister, Mr. Biren Singh, of the BJP, bears much of the responsibility for this tragic turn of events over the past year and is perceived to be openly supportive of the Meitei militias. Armed cadres belonging to the Arambai Tenggol and the separatist terror group, the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), openly roam the streets with their weapons, displaying their newfound power, and are bent on loot and terrorising the locals. While much of the mainstream media continues to avoid covering the dire situation there, the people have clearly shown their displeasure with the current state of affairs by voting in Congress MPs for both the Inner and Outer Constituencies.

This has come as a huge embarrassment for Mr. Biren Singh and his militias, as also for the Tangkhul dominated NSCN(IM). Despite the Nagas having been involved in the initial tribal protests opposing the grant of ST status to the Meitei community, which was the trigger for the targeting of Kukis and the ongoing violence, the NSCN ensured the Naga community remained 'neutral'. This has cost the NSCN(IM) hugely, both politically and in terms of credibility. By appearing to ally with the Meiteis, it has placed its claim for Greater Nagalim in complete jeopardy. This has led to rise of opposing factions within the Tangkhuls for the first time, challenging the dominance of the NSCN(IM). The Outer Manipur MP Elect, Alfred Kan-Ngam Arthur, himself a Tangkhul, is a beneficiary of this factionalism having won by 85000 votes. Given that the Naga talks with the Centre seem to be going nowhere, the NSCN(IM) finds itself becoming increasingly irrelevant, which may force it to take actions inimical to our national interest, in an attempt to gain sympathy within the community.

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The existing state of affairs was not possible if the Army, Assam Rifles and the CAPF were not side-lined by the Centre. This was done by removing AFSPA from the Meitei dominate valley, thereby ensuring the Army

and Assam Rifles have been put in veritable cold storage and left to fend for themselves with no clear mandate. As and when detachments are deployed for missions within the Valley, they are routinely subjected to harassment and abuse by the local police, Meitei Leepun, Arambai Tenggol and their separatist allies. There are numerous videos that have gone viral on social media showing cadres of the UNLF and Arambai Tenggol proceeding in armed convoys, in what appear to be SUVs looted from Automobile showrooms, openly threatening and abusing military personnel deployed at a checkpoint somewhere on the Imphal-Jiribam Road. The impact of all this on morale of troops is easy to visualise.

If it has already not done so, it is only a matter of time before the Chinese start pouring oil over troubled waters in this strategically important border state. This in turn, will add to the vulnerability that the entire Northeastern States already suffers. Clearly governance in the state is wholly compromised and in the hands of militant leaders, who are a law unto themselves. In these circumstances the Centre can no longer afford to be complacent and must act firmly with all powers at its command. There are four actions it needs to take. At the outset, it needs to appoint an experienced Governor who understands the complexities of tackling militancy, preferably a senior retired bureaucrat or military veteran from within the State.

Secondly, the Biren Singh government has lost its ability to govern, which implies the necessity for a declaration of President's Rule. Thirdly, there is a need to issue a proclamation declaring the complete state as a "Disturbed Area" thereby allowing for the promulgation of AFSPA for the entire state. The Army and Assam Rifles should be tasked to neutralise all those involved in waging war against the state. Finally, before the SF commence action grant of amnesty should be announced for all militant groups and their cadres that turn themselves in, along with arms and other war-like stores in their possession, within 72 Hours at designated camps. It is only then that talks would have some hope of success.



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