

OF MAJORITARIANISM, MARGINALISATION, AND MANIPUR

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Introduction

What is identity, one may ask. The answer would lie in a hierarchy of markers, starting with gender extending to nationality. Somewhere in between lies religion and ethnicity. Somewhere along lies a minority. The diversity and vibrance of the identities in a country like India are often awed at, but the ground-level reality has changed rather drastically from the short-lived delirium of harmony. Post-independence, India emerged as a secular state, but with a unique concept of secularism. Brajeshwar Prasad from Bihar proposed the inclusion of the word ‘secular’ given its vitality for the Indian national leaders and its potent role as a security of the morale of the minorities (Jha, 2002). However, he came to be ridiculed for conflicting socialism and liberal democracy. But the stance changed by the nearing end of years of blood, sweat, and tears of the constitution makers. Separation of state was a step towards democratisation. The European model of secularism was one of indifference towards religion and altogether a dissent of it. But a country having been emancipated from clutches of severe oppression was bound to fall into clutches of majoritarian oppression in the absence of guarantee of protection by the State for all alike. The spirit of European secularism, of complete separation of state and religion, had to be accompanied with the philosophy of *parens patriae*. The state had to protect the weaker from the oppression of the stronger and could not be stone cold in terms of religion. What emerged after long hours of debate and discussion was a young, democratic India with secularism as the *fait accompli*, having political recognition without having been given a definitive form. The concept was that of a protective, welfare state, and words simply fell short and unconstructive to describe it. The fate of Indian secularism, as can be seen now, has turned out to be a tragedy. Love for the nation has been utterly confused with the love for one’s religion (Hasan, 2020). Fierce nationalism has taken a surge even in peaceful times for the protection of a creed, which is under no immediate or future threat. We have shifted greatly, and rather sadly, from reverence of ideals of harmonious co-existence. To be protected as a minority, it has become important to be associated or affiliated with the majoritarian upholding (Sahoo, 2020).

Constitutional Framework for protection of the Minority

The framers of the Indian Constitution foresaw the majoritarian tendencies of the people. A nation fresh out of years of emancipation has to be kept out of the clutches of all possible social issues, and one which is difficult to trace is majoritarianism, as there is no clear-cut manner in which it can be identified in its gestation period. Nothing initially seems out of the blue when the majority section seeks to assume a paternalistic rather than a brotherly role, and soon the patronisation takes the colour of dominance and silent suppression. In order to prevent these tendencies, the Constitution confers certain provisions for accommodating minorities to develop. Articles 29 and 30 of the Indian Constitution specifically confer cultural and educational rights of minorities to maintain any educational institution of their choice, interpretation of which is no doubt a judicial matter. Article 30

(2) further provides for scope of seeking funds from the state for such institutions. Interpretation of these two articles further roots in the Freedom of Religion as guaranteed by articles 25 to 30. For the sake of this article, the accepted definition of 'minority' has been the group whose population is less than 50%. However, the question that arises is over how the 50% of the population is calculated; is it calculated with regards to the composition of a particular area, one state, or the entire country at large? One community could be a minority at one place and a majority at another, and therefore not only the rights need to be absolute, but also the criteria that determine the status of a minority community. Through the developments of the cases of *re: The Kerala Education Bill (re: The Kerala Education Bill,... vs Unknown, 1958)*, T.M.A. Pai (*T.M.A. Pai Foundation & Ors vs State of Karnataka & Ors, 2002*), and most recently the ongoing AMU case (*Aligarh Muslim University Through its Registrar Faizan Mustafa vs Naresh Agarwal, 2006*), the conceptualization and implementation of a definition of 'minority' may be traced, yet the grey area remains large.

From even a superficial reading of the relevant provisions of the constitution, the very goal of the state as a guardian for the disadvantaged is clear. State has been guided towards the light of protecting those who are socially downtrodden. If the majority, which already assumed a substantial quantum of power in the state machinery, is given the benefit of a loophole due to the lack of a universal, non-contested definition of 'minority', the very purpose of a welfare state is defeated and internal peace threatened. Equating national minority communities with those of the national majority is *prima facie* biased and inegalitarian (Requejo, 2005).

A Historical Background of Manipur

The Northeastern state of Manipur is one layered with ethnic diversity and no stranger to civil strife. The current scenario presents a scene of direct socio-political and total geographical separation between the valleys and the hills. Since time immemorial, administration of the valleys and the hills were always two distinct set-ups. There has been a distinct legal system and system of land ownership under tribe chieftainship in the hills as opposed to Maharaja rule in the valleys. After India attained independence, Manipur subsequently joined India in 1949, (*Manipur Merger Agreement, 1949*) abandoning its sovereignty and its erstwhile 'Kangleipak kingdom', and earning statehood in 1972 (*North-East Area Reorganisation Act, 1971*) which brought along with it popular dissent among its populace. Manipur has a lengthy history of inter-ethnic conflict and insurgency. The United National Liberation Front (UNLF), the first armed opposition organisation, was established in 1964 with the goal of separating Manipur from India and creating a new nation (Manipur, India - A safe house for dangerous men, 2007). With time, numerous other groups emerged in Manipur, each with its own objectives and the backing of various ethnic communities. While the valley-based Meitei insurgents demanded a separate nation from India, the Kuki insurgents sought for a state within a state under the provisions of Article 244 A of the Indian Constitution. Following Manipur's attainment of statehood, the hills' administration underwent corresponding reforms. Through the Twenty-Seventh Amendment Act of 1971, the Union government added Article 371 C to the Indian Constitution in order to address unique issues that might result from administrative reforms. The Manipur Legislative Assembly (Hill Areas Committee) Order, 1972 was then issued by the Indian President, and as a result, the Hill Areas Committee (HAC) was established to safeguard the interests of the tribals and provide for accelerated

development in the hills (Bhatia, 2010). However, this is a contentious issue because of reports at the ground level about the ineffectiveness and disability of the HAC and its institutions. The proposed reforms aimed to grant hill villages ‘internal autonomy’ within the state, but the majoritarian administration is unwilling to give up the hegemonic control it has wielded for more than 50 years (Haokip, 2022). The pent-up resentment and systematic exploitation of the minority tribes, especially under the Biren administration, unfolded in the form of dissent, protests, and counter protests which eventually led to the recent pogrom of 2023, where the Meiteis’ consistent majoritarian goals are the core cause of this exploitation.

Deconstructing the Manipur Issue

The rippling effects of majoritarianism are observed even amongst the subaltern landscapes where sub-groups drown in in-fighting. The Manipur issue has made news headlines lately and echoed the seepage of majoritarianism even amongst minority groups. 57% of the population lives in the valley region (*Manipur Population Census data, 2011*) of which, the majority are the Meiteis, who follow Hinduism. The remaining population resides in the hills, the religion primarily being Christianity. The people of Manipur form a minority group in the wider demography; however, upon an inspection of the regional politics, one can get a gist of the multi-faceted power conflict. With affiliations to and acceptance of the agendas of the majoritarian Hindu nationalists, the Meiteis managed to catch hold of the centre stage in public discourse. Sadly, their religious identity became a tool at the hands of such nationalists to portray their creed as “victims” to the “extremes” of the minority population of Manipur. Where the aim of the discussion should have been amelioration and immediate restoration of peace in the country, newspapers rang the bells of “religious persecution”. It did not take long before the political violence came to be seethed in religious colour. With allegations such as “Myanmar illegal immigrants” and “opium cultivators” the entire Kuki-Zomi population came to be vilified. The events of May 3 (Dhillon, 2023) unfolded into a brutal slaughter of the tribal population in Meitei dominated regions. The Meitei were quick to add their side of the story and propagate the “immigrant” agenda. In early 2023, Meitei Tribal Union submitted a writ petition to the Manipur High Court to seek Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. They complained about not being able to buy land in the hills while the tribal population can do so in the valleys. They argued that to remove this unjustness, they needed to be included in the scheduled list (Manipur High Court admits plea on ST status of Meiteis, 2023). The single-judge bench even passed the order directing the state government to confer the ST status on Meiteis. This order was stayed by the Supreme Court, calling it “factually incorrect” (Pal, 2023). Meiteis are included in the OBC category, but they further seek the ST status. The distinction between the status of the Kukis and the Meiteis is necessary to acknowledge the state demography. If both are given the same rights, majoritarian forces will rise rampantly. The state government is, in all regards, biased against the hill population. They seek to benefit the already privileged. The demand is not only a jibe on political ideals of equity but also on the economics of welfare. A Pareto-optimal solution only comes when the welfare policies uplift both communities in an equitable manner, but this is clearly not the closure the State Government is seeking to achieve. Meiteis, who already have better access to education and job opportunities will slowly take over the state machinery to the jarring disadvantage of the Kuki-Zomi population. If we start to talk of political equality, we must also be mindful of the difference in the seats allocated to hills and valleys in the State Legislature. 40 seats are allotted to the valley, while

20 to the hills (Harad, 2023). The Chief Minister has conveyed his prejudice and malignity quite clearly, having called the hill-dwellers “poppy cultivators” and “illegal immigrants” in more than one recorded public speech. The signs are clear but the solution is not so much. Arguments forwarded by the Meiteis can be assumed to be plausible in the lack of conceptual clarity of what defines a minority. Mere land disparity in no way defines minorities.

The very concept of minorities proves to be quite difficult. Through judgments such as that of TMA Pai, efforts have been made with regards to seeking a clear end to the hazy cloud of undefined territory, the basis of which is entirely based on claim and contention. The majority of Manipur as a state is Meitei, but the problem arises with the ‘demographic’ analysis. Meiteis are a minority in the hills; Kuki-Zo tribes form the majority in the hills and a minority overall. The jamboree of differences arises as a group seeks to contend for a minority status where it is in minority despite its dominance all in all. If we simply define minorities as “those which are lesser in population”, we open a door to nowhere. A powerful majoritarian group may, because of the ‘demographic’ and historical divide be a minority in one particular smaller section of the entire vast territory; however, when given that the majority of state machinery resides with them, it shall be an easy task to hijack the rights guaranteed exclusively to the minority, ultimately disgracing the constitutional vision of uplifting those who need the support of the State.

The Victim-Perpetrator Roulette

The focus of mainland media yet remained on religious protectionism and nationalistic chauvinism (Khare, 2022). The Meitei population very cleverly sought attention on the basis of their religion and the North and Central Indian populace have been successfully mobilised into their support. The nasty politics does not end at misrepresentation of the issue and contortion, but moves towards claim over victims of their own atrocities. Soon began the roulette of victimisation and perpetration. The majority within the marginalised community in an attempt to gain the traction over the minority, blamed the Kuki-Zomi populace for the violence and consequently all attempts of theirs came to be hunted down as barbaric and incessant acts of violence. The fine line of morality between perpetration and self-defence warped and wore thin, ultimately stripping the community of its right to protect itself. More so, the derogatory pin-pointing led to popular rebellion resulting in complete chaos. Yet the Hindu nationalists persisted in support of their “comradery”, to protect “Bharat Mata” (Mother India) which they have blatantly confused with the Hinduistic religious identity. The insecurity and fear of being outnumbered is deep seated and the same is counted upon by the slightly advantaged marginalised community to gain association with the “cultural hegemon”. It merely warrants them to continue on with their unprovoked ethnic cleansing.

Having explained the ethnic demography of Manipur, one thing that comes to the forefront is the systematic marginalisation of the tribal segment. The tribal groups which comprise around 40% of the population account for 19 out of the 60 constituencies in the state. Going by the 2011 census (*Manipur Population Census data, 2011*) and data analysis by the Zomi Students’ Federation and Kuki Students’ Organisation presented in the form of a book called ‘The Inevitable Split’ documenting the events in Manipur in 2023, one tribal MLA from the hills represented more than 60,000 people,

whereas one from the valleys was accountable to 40,841 people. It shows up as a prime example of political injustice, wherein a group is severely underrepresented and sidelined. The Constitution of India, under Article 244 (2) guarantees a special provision for autonomous administration of the tribal areas in the Northeast. But the protective provision itself becomes redundant when the hill council is reduced to a mere advisory body instead of an administrative one. Apart from political deprivation, economic disadvantage and development concentration are two other factors leading to systematic marginalisation. The piece of documentation that has been mentioned before also highlights, the practice of making separate allocation for the hill in the budget was discontinued in the absence of any reasonable explanation. Fund allocation for the hills rarely crosses the one-tenth benchmark despite accounting for a great majority of land. Often, the Grants-in-Aid is diverted to the development of valley regions (*The Inevitable Split*, 2023).

Meitei dominated regions, especially Imphal often complain of infiltration by the hill dwellers. However the contention here must not be mindless finger-pointing. One major factor for probable crowding is the very crowding of government institutions in the valley region, keeping the hills deliberately underdeveloped and deserted while citing environmental reasons.

The social status of hill people is outrageously that of “*Haomacha*” which means untouchable (*The Inevitable Split*, 2023). There are layers and layers of marginalisation on the microscopic level. When we look from a vantage we can observe that the whole population of Manipur forms a minority in India. On a national level, the Meiteis and Kuki-Zomi groups suffer the brunt of majoritarian tendencies rather than as a group. There is great power in the hands of the Hindu population. Over the course of years, we have seen the unification of national identity with the colour saffron. Evidently, any minority group would want to benefit from the shades of the colour orange, especially to seek certain privileges guaranteed to sections culturally different from the mainland. Meiteis have strategically used such tactics. They have appealed to the senses of the national majority to seek fervour. The ‘narcissism of minor differences’ (Hausing, 2011) is not only a deciding political factor at a regional level but also at the national level.

Conclusion

Ideologies are one of the most powerful tools in the hands of the hegemon. Once a well-defined thought, moral or otherwise, is presented to the people, it gives a false sense of cause to the people. They mobilise and polarise into fragments in favour or against that agenda. Nationalistic identity itself has always carried a divine form and unified the citizens together for the interest of the nation. However, its amalgamation with religious supremacy has led to something vicious (Gupta, 2007). Supremacists sway the national fervour to their requirements and the marginalised become silenced. The majoritarian tears down the marginalised and seethes it with violence only for the events of Manipur to reincarnate itself.

Manipur is a mini world-system in itself. The principles of modern capitalism - the rigid developed and the underdeveloped, are applicable and interpreted politically. The minority may have the ‘special right’ but not real state power. The dominant class seeks to take over these bare entitlements in the name of ‘immigrant crisis’. The national majority joins in for their personal advantage. Events repeat themselves

in one form or the other. Self-defence becomes violent perpetration and so on and so forth. These are the times that call for concretised solutions and not vote-bank politics.

The tribal population has time and again reiterated the demand for separate administration, a complete separation of the hill and valley region. Creation of a separate state may not be feasible given the small land size and population, but creation of a Union Territory and its administration by the union itself is the safest and practical most long-term solution. Not only will it allow the state to actively protect ethnic violence, but may as well provide for ground level development which has for so long been denied to hill areas. There might be difficulties in implementation of demands, however that does not leave space for 'it-shall-too-pass' strategy. Political hue and cry, mobilisation, or integrationist groupism will only lead to further tensions, Provided the nature, scale, and intensity of the conflict the violence will continue to live in the minds of the people in addition to the already existing years of animosity. Forgiveness will come in years, the urgency till then resides in creating a demarcated undisputed separate administration.

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