

Manipur displays Modi's idea of India



A church burnt during the ethnic violence in Manipur, in Langching village, on 31 May 2023. Tensions between the Meitei and Kuki communities have spurred deadly clashes for over a month, while the prime minister Narendra Modi has maintained a studious silence. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Caravan Columns

On 30 May, the chief of defence staff, General Anil Chauhan, told journalists that the situation in Manipur “has nothing to do with counterinsurgency or insurgency. It is primarily a clash between two ethnicities.” This directly contradicted Manipur’s chief minister, N Biren Singh, who had proclaimed, two days earlier, that “it is not a fight between communities” but “between the state and central forces against the terrorists who are trying to break Manipur,” a thinly veiled euphemism for Kukis. Singh, who has headed the Bharatiya Janata Party’s “double engine” government in Imphal for six years, was rebutted again, by the union home minister, Amit Shah, who asserted in his press conference on 1 June that the clashes were *nasli hinsa*—racial or ethnic violence.

That a chief minister is not fully on the same page as the country’s home minister and senior-most military officer should be a matter of concern. What should be more worrying is the inherent truth in Shah and Chauhan’s claim of an ethnic clash. It has resulted in violence that has lasted for a month. Officially, 98 lives have been lost, but the actual number, as per ground reports, is higher. There are nearly forty thousand people in 272 relief camps, and many have fled to other states and even to strife-torn Myanmar. Around two hundred and fifty churches have reportedly been burnt and destroyed. The houses of a union minister and BJP MLAs have been attacked. The violence did not abate even during Shah’s tour and a visit by the army chief, General Manoj Pande. If it is a war between opposing groups of citizens of the same country, the correct nomenclature is civil war.

Civil or not, the clashes have brought home the dangers wrought when the intricate tapestry of various ethnicities, that make the states of the Northeast, unravels. A discussion on the history and sociology of the region is beyond the scope of this column. The region’s seemingly stable inter se relationships emerged out of a cauldron of violence that lasted decades, in which the Indian state was as big a culprit as any foreign power or militant group. The sensitive nature of these fragile ties, in a land of numerous cultures, languages, ethnicities and religions, can only be sustained by an inclusive mindset at every level and in every manner. The formation of every new state in the region has created its own minorities, and it is unviable to split them into even smaller states. The provisions of Article 371, based on the same principles as the much-derided Article 370, provide the means to reconcile majoritarian claims with claims of minorities, to evolve a coexistence rather than a separate existence. In the [words](#) of Suhas Palshikar, it provides “a template for federalism within federal structure.”

Instead, what we have on display, nationally, is blatant majoritarianism from the ruling party. The idea of one nation, one everything—anchored in the image of the old Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh slogan of “Hindi, Hindu, Hindusthan”—is intolerant of non-majoritarian coexistence and federalism in any form. This Hindutva narrative, fed to the masses as a political rationale through a propagandist corporate media, gives a licence to other groups to formulate their own majoritarian narrative. The majority, constructed on either religion, caste, language or ethnicity, can then be weaponised against the minority. In the Northeast, this has been witnessed in BJP-ruled Assam and seems to be the template followed in Manipur. In a [recent interview](#), Himanta Biswa Sarma, the chief minister of Assam and the convenor of the North East Democratic Alliance, said that, in Manipur, “the distribution of population is such that seventy percent of people are in thirty percent landmass. Kukis and Nagas can come to the valley, but Meiteis cannot go to the hills. It is the same thing in Assam also, with regard to Bodoland.” RR Singh, the BJP MP from Inner Manipur and a minister of state for external affairs, has asked Modi to do away with Article 371, which provides special provisions for the hill areas of the state.

Sarma also claimed that “the central government is being fiercely neutral while dealing with all the communities” in Manipur. It could be seen as an indictment of the state government, which has acted in a blatantly biased manner to target the Kuki community. But neutrality is not what the communities need—they deserve justice. There can be no neutrality between the fire and the fire brigade. Or, as the anti-apartheid activist Desmond Tutu put it, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.” This is evident in the sharp calls from the Kuki community, which showed banners of protest to Shah during his Manipur visit and made explicit demands for a separate administration for the hill areas.

The union government’s neutrality may be debatable, but its absence from the scene is unquestionable. Even a month after the violence began, Modi is yet to utter a word. Let alone visiting the state, he has not even chaired a meeting on the situation. He prioritised his role as the BJP’s chief campaigner in Karnataka over his duty to Manipur as prime minister. He has time to go to Australia, even after the Quad Summit was cancelled, or to inaugurate Vande Bharat trains or to address a party rally celebrating nine years in power, but no moment to console the dead in a sensitive border state. Manipur adds to the long list of issues—from the China border crisis to Adani’s alleged corruption to the wrestlers’ protest—where Modi has buried his head in the sand.

It took twenty-one days of violence for Shah to even visit Manipur. His four-day trip resulted in numerous announcements but was marked by bizarre happenings. The director general of the Manipur police and his deputy did not have operational control of their force, because they are both from the Kuki community. The DGP accompanied Shah to Kuki areas but did not attend any security meeting with Shah in Imphal. Biren Singh was in Imphal but did not accompany Shah to the hills, as he is a Meitei. The BJP spokesperson and its Manipur in-charge, Sambit Patra, was seen attending Shah’s official meetings. The army’s 3 Corps had to issue a statement that its Meitei officers are neutral. The state administration is fractured, demoralised and debilitated, but the chief minister remains in office, as his sacking would demolish Modi’s campaign mantra of a double-engine government for every state. A new DGP has been sent to the state and the union home ministry seems to have taken direct charge of the situation, without officially promulgating Article 355 for a complete breakdown of law and order. The centre is attempting to paper over the conflict and patch up a sense of normalcy, so that the country’s gaze can be diverted elsewhere.

Nothing indicates the complete breakdown of law and order than the looting of weapons from the armouries of security forces, mainly in Imphal. More than four thousand weapons, including AK47, M16 and INSAS rifles, have been plundered from the forces since 3 May. Of these, around 650 weapons have been returned, after appeals by the state government. The estimates for missing ammunition vary wildly from fifty thousand rounds to five lakh rounds. Manipur lies at the crossroads of Mizoram, Nagaland and Myanmar. It is not hard to guess that many of these weapons have already gone to the lucrative arms market or been hidden safely, to be used at a later stage.

In his press conference, Shah made appeals for the return of these weapons, which begs the question of whether he would have done the same if a hundredth of this number had been looted in Punjab or Kashmir. In the eyes of the Modi government, some communities and states are more equal than others. In one aspect, however, Manipur has been treated like Kashmir was after the abrogation of Article 370: the ban on the internet. Irrespective of the effect on business, governance, education or entertainment, the government has ensured a complete clampdown on information.

The darkness may not allow many to see what is happening in the state, but there are others who can hear the canary in the coalmine. What is happening to Manipur can happen to the rest of India. Peace is not merely absence of conflict; it cannot be established if conditions that foster violence continue to flourish. Those conditions underpin Modi’s idea of India.

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