

Why you must care for Manipur

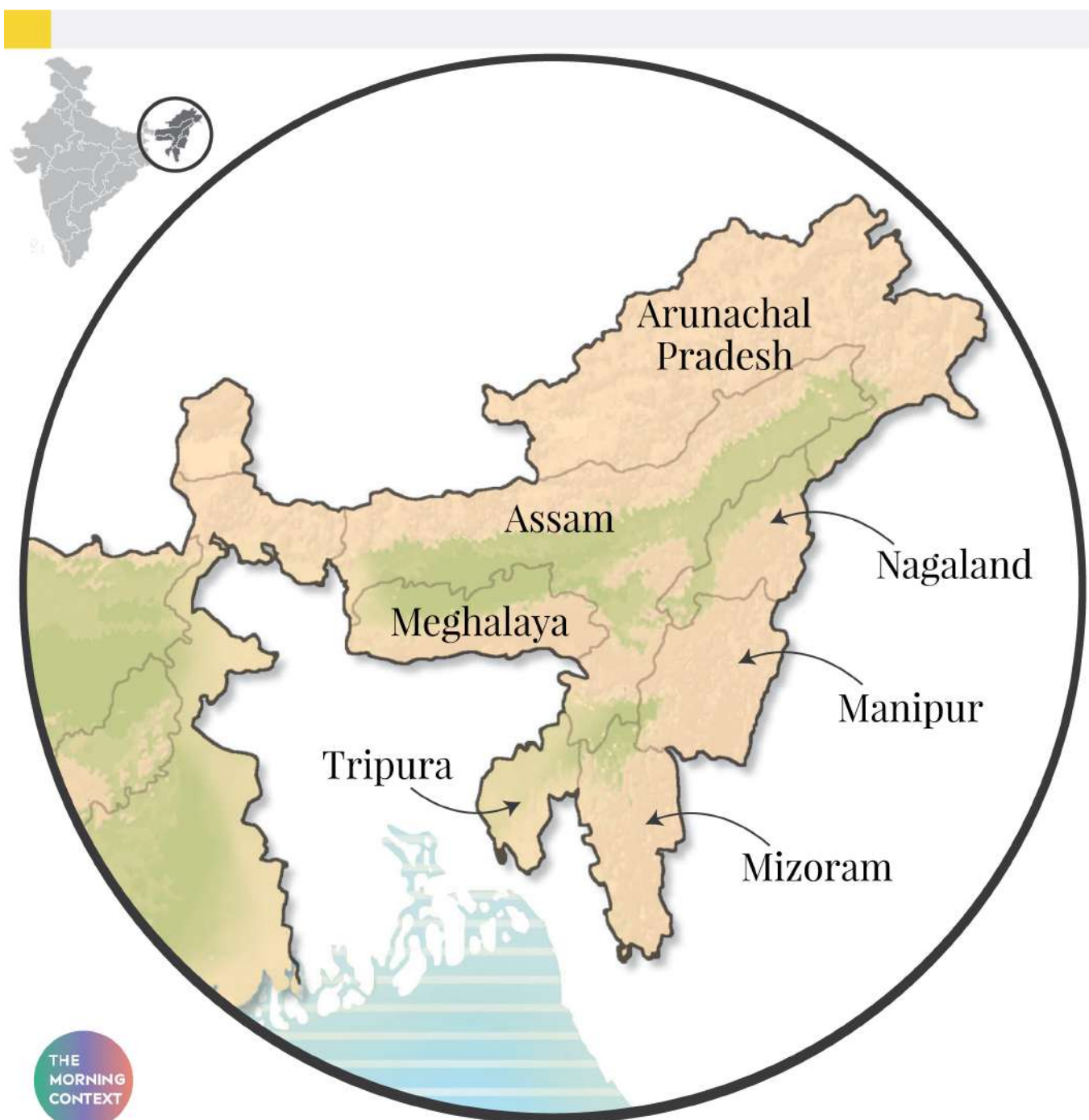


The screams from Manipur are louder and clearer because of Modi's silence. There are good reasons why patriotic Indians can't ignore the unfolding disaster in the country's easternmost state.

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Manipur is a small state. It is so small that it vanishes in the imagination of the political masters ruling in Delhi. Not because it ranks 23rd out of the 36 states and union territories in the country by population or 25th in area, but because it has only two seats in the Lok Sabha and a lone MP in the Rajya Sabha. At a time when politics has been reduced by the ruling party to winning elections, or getting a majority without winning them, size does matter—the size of political heft. On top of that, Manipur is a remote state, far on the eastern edge of the country. Most Indians would struggle to place it on India's map (below is a helpful map so that you don't fail the simple test).



For more than eight weeks now, Manipur has been engulfed by violence between the tribal Kuki community in the hilly areas and the majority Meitei community of the plains (the Nagas, which also reside in the hills and had violent clashes with the Kukis in the 1990s, have stayed away so far). The Meiteis control political power in the state, which has been ruled by the BJP since 2017.

The current violence was triggered by protests over a high court judgement about classifying the majority Meitei community as a scheduled tribe, but the underlying reasons encompass issues of control over land, claims of being original inhabitants, grievances over government jobs, allegations of criminality and drug trafficking, and religious and ethnic rivalries. Militant groups exist on all sides, as do vocal civil society activists. The melange of issues makes it hard to talk of the crisis in simplistic terms. That's the nature of most conflicts in northeast India, and that is why they need deft political handling.

Silent PM, failed HM

What we have instead is a silent prime minister and an unsuccessful home minister. Narendra Modi has time to travel abroad and within India, speak on myriad issues and wave flags to inaugurate trains. But he hasn't been able to find time to even issue a statement about the violence, death and destruction in Manipur. The question of visiting the state or chairing a meeting is a far cry. MLAs from both the BJP and the opposition were unable to get a meeting with him for days. This when more than 140 people are dead, around 200 villages and 300 churches burnt, more than 60,000 people rendered homeless and nearly 4,500 weapons taken away from state armouries.

The residence of a union minister and the properties of nine state legislators have been burnt by angry mobs in the capital Imphal. A BSF jawan was killed in an exchange of fire with armed mobs, while other members of the armed forces have been injured by gunfire. If all this doesn't deserve a word and a visit from the prime minister, then he better have a damn good excuse for his indifference.

Amit Shah, Modi's right-hand man since the Gujarat days, was seen to be personally taking charge. He chose to visit the state after four weeks of violence, posted a retired IPS officer as its new security advisor, appointed a new director general of police from outside the state, and sent in a large quantum of central forces. Everything that Shah has done so far has only worsened matters. He sought 15 days of peace, starting June, but the violence only worsened in that period. He promised to return to Manipur in 15 days; he hasn't even after a month.

The home minister has also effectively split the state into two: the hills are being managed directly by the Centre while the valley is being handled by the state government. The two are divided by a buffer zone manned by central armed police forces, separating the army and the Assam Rifles deployed in the hills from an antagonistic state police that is deployed in the valley.

Pitched battles are being fought between the security forces and armed "miscreants"—the term that was officially being used by the government. This has now been upgraded to armed "rioters". Manipur is witnessing anything but riots. After engaging the army and the Assam Rifles, the armed mobs are escaping to the jurisdiction of 15 police stations in six districts in the Imphal valley where the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, or AFSPA, was lifted last year. The army needs a civil magistrate to operate in these areas, that too after they have been requisitioned by local authorities.

It is not clear if the Centre has imposed Article 355 in the state, further creating confusion about the command and control of security forces. In an all-party meeting held in Delhi when Modi was in Egypt, Shah ruled out the imposition of president's rule in Manipur. By now, it is evident that the BJP's top leadership has also doubled down on retaining Biren Singh as chief minister, despite him being a proven failure. Friday's drama about Singh's purported resignation, the staged tearing of the letter and Singh's assertion to not resign show the prime minister as weak, lacking control and ineffective. The status quo needs a major disruption, but Modi and Shah, either out of incompetence or due to Hindutva ideological bigotries, have chosen to reinforce failure.

Four reasons to care

By any yardstick, the BJP's political failure in Manipur is spectacular. It is a testimony to India's press freedom ranking of 161 out of 180 countries that not one national newspaper has questioned Modi's silence or Shah's incompetence. They may not care for Manipur, but all patriotic Indians, such as the readers of this newsletter, should—for four good reasons.

First, it is a humanitarian crisis not witnessed in any Indian state in such a short period of time. Schools and hospitals are shut, highways that act as lifelines to the state are blocked, the internet has been banned since 3 May, the economy has ground to a halt and food is scarce. The number of persons rendered homeless by violence is more than 60,000, with people from the state even preferring to seek refuge in Myanmar where the military junta is conducting aerial bombings. Others are in camps in Mizoram, Meghalaya, Assam and Nagaland. If this was an African country, international humanitarian organizations would have moved in full strength by now. But with Indian NGOs the victims of a witch hunt by the Modi government, there is no one to fill that critical vacuum.

Second, the situation has major security implications. In 2020, after the China border crisis began, the Indian Army had moved out its 57 Mountain Division from Manipur to focus on its primary responsibility as a reserve on the Line of Actual Control. The current security failure has meant that these soldiers have had to be moved back to the state, weakening India's posture against China in the eastern sector. It is unlikely that these soldiers can be moved out of Manipur any time soon, and Beijing would not mind this protracted commitment of the Indian Army one bit.

Third, the tensions are spilling over beyond the boundaries of Manipur, and even India's. The state has been ethnically divided de facto, first by the antics of the state government and then by the policies of the Modi government. The Kukis have made it amply clear that they can't be part of a Meitei-dominated Manipur any longer. They either want to become a union territory or a new administrative unit, or even be part of an extended Mizoram state. The Nagas have already been demanding a Greater Nagalim, having signed the framework agreement with the Modi government in 2015.

Around 300 churches have been burnt in Manipur, which borders both Mizoram and Nagaland, two of the three Christian-majority states in India. The Kukis share an ethnicity with the Chins in Myanmar and a porous border means that many Meitei armed groups are also operating from that country. Trafficking of drugs and weapons in that part of the world only complicates the situation, rendering it liable to suddenly erupt in flames at the slightest provocation.

Fourth, it shows the Indian State in an abysmally poor light. This is the same Indian State that has dealt with major uprisings in Punjab and Kashmir with a firm hand. It sent air force fighter jets to bomb insurgents in Aizawl in 1966 when India's sovereignty

was challenged.

But in Manipur, we have a situation where the State has simply vanished and its final instrument of authority, the army, is unable to conduct operations in the Imphal Valley. The army is left to tweet videos of its helplessness and hapless appeals about the pathetic state of affairs. Those appeals should have been made to the union government in confidence, asking it to pass suitable political directions. Either the army's leadership doesn't have the moral courage to raise these issues or is not being given the time of the day by the political leadership. The army chief's two-day visit in May saw the violence worsen and he has not commented on the situation since. The "miscreants" and the locals no longer fear the army. Meitei women forced the army to hand over the prime accused of an ambush that had killed 20 Indian soldiers in 2015. Would the army have done the same in Kashmir?

The damage to the respect and authority of the Indian State is unimaginable. After Manipur, its credibility lies in tatters. It comes across as weak, tired and distracted. An Indian State that is incapable of dealing with its internal challenges in a mature way is unlikely to fulfil New Delhi's aspirations of being a great power. The problem is political. The solution cannot come from the security forces. Manipur shows once again that India's numerous diversities need to be accommodated constitutionally. They cannot be browbeaten into submission under the hegemonic tentacles of "Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan".

Manipur may be small and distant, but its screams are loud enough to be heard across India. Modi's silence has made the screams sharper and clearer. If you listen carefully, they contain a warning and a message—about India's future on the path of Hindutva.

Obiter dicta

Manipur is geographically distant, and that distance is reflected in academic work focused on the state, or even on the northeast. Subir Bhowmik's [Troubled Periphery: The Crisis of India's North East](#) (2014) is a good primer, and [Northeast India: A Political History](#) (2023) by Samrat Choudhury provides the fuller context.

[The Kuki people, possible descendants of one of Israel's lost tribes](#) is a 2017 documentary by France24 English on the Kukis' claims of being one of the lost tribes of Israel. The fervour of the Kuki people has even persuaded the chief rabbi of Israel to approve their immigration to the Promised Land.

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