

India: Call Out Anti-Kuki Xenophobia: Generic Calls For Justice In Manipur Won't Do

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Violence in Manipur is not one-sided, but what must not be denied is the xenophobic politics of Meitei chauvinism.

Soon after the video of [mob sexual violence](#) against three Kuki women in [Manipur](#) went viral, one of the men seen in the video, Huirem Herodas, was arrested. Soon after his arrest, the Meira Paibis (senior women of the Meitei community) of his village gathered and set his house on fire.

When the Meira Paibis mete out such vigilante violence, is it an act of feminist solidarity with Kuki women?

A Meira Paibi leader said of the decision to burn the house, "Be it Meitei or other communities, as a woman, outraging a woman's dignity is not acceptable. We cannot allow such a person to be in our society. It's a shame to the entire Meitei community."

Solidarity needs to start with a sense of empathy: for the sexual violence and loss of loved ones suffered by the Kuki women, one of whom lost her father and her brother, who were neighbours and friends to the other two women.

Solidarity needs to start by thinking about the extent to which hateful radicalisation got a grip on one's own community, that made such violence possible.

It needs to reflect on what collective action is needed to begin to undo such hate and radicalisation in one's own community, family, and friends. The Meira Paibis performed a collective action full of moral certitude and righteous defence of the honour of their community, in burning down a house of Herodas. But Herodas too was part of a collective, which committed violent atrocities with a sense of moral certitude that it was righteously defending the interests of the same community.

The shameful scenes of a Meitei mob stripping and parading Kuki women, seen by the whole world, blew the [claims by the State and Central governments](#) that there was no mob violence against unarmed civilians in the state, and that those killed were just the bad guys: "illegal immigrants", "[militants](#)", and "narco-terrorists" from Myanmar. The members of that mob were undeniably bad guys, and their victims were equally undeniably unarmed women and men, not terrorists.

An immoral act committed in the name of one's community is an occasion to call all moral certitudes of the community and the narratives of its political representatives into question. It's an occasion to pause in the ongoing conflict and ask, "[Wait, are we the baddies](#)"? Instead, what the Meira Paibis are doing is to declare, in effect - "See, we're the good guys, we punish the bad apples, and that's that."

The Method in Mob Madness

In the atrocity seen on the video, separate mobs of Meitei boys and men stripped, assaulted and raped the three women, saying all along that they were avenging Meitei women and children raped and killed by Kuki men. They also said that there were Meitei men in the mob who tried to prevent the rest from assaulting the women; and who later came to the women and gave them their clothing to wear.

In another incident, a young Kuki woman who [narrowly escaped](#) with her life was abducted from the street by men in an SUV. Next, she says, young and older women wearing the traditional dress of Meitei women thrashed her and then handed her over to men of their community asking the latter to “kill her.” As the assault continued, she heard a man making a phone call to members of the Arambai Tenggol, a Meitei-chauvinist armed group, and saying “We have captured one tribal.” She could escape with the help of a passing stranger: a Muslim auto driver.

In yet another instance, two young Kuki women were dragged by a mob from a girls’ hostel associated with a nursing institute. They say that two women from the mob entered the hostel demanding to see identity cards because they were “looking for Kuki girls”, and not Naga or Meitei girls. In spite of the efforts of the senior member of the nursing staff, a Meitei woman, to intervene, the students were handed over by the two women to “radical mobs belonging to the Meitei community.” They recall the women inciting the men, “Why are you still keeping them alive? Rape them, cut their bodies into pieces and burn them alive.” The mob “chanted anti-tribal slogans”, and one of the women recalls being called an “illegal immigrant from another country.”

There is a pattern here: the mobs comprise Meiteis who are on a witch-hunt for Kukis, “tribals” to kill and rape. They call Kukis “illegal immigrants,” and claim to be avenging rapes committed by Kukis. The mobs include Meitei women who facilitate and participate in the assault and incite the mob to rape and kill.

Meanwhile, there are Meitei women who have tried to protect Kuki victims from the mobs, and men uneasy with atrocities towards women.

A New Political Dynamic

There are attempts to understand the ongoing carnage in Manipur in terms of concerns and issues of contention between Meiteis and Kukis. The cross-border drug trade, linked to poppy cultivation by Kukis in the Manipur hills; tensions over land, resources and ST status; anxieties caused by immigrants and refugees fleeing the military dictatorship in Myanmar; aspirations among Kukis for autonomy; and other issues.

There is no doubt that such concerns are at play in the Manipur situation. These are genuinely felt by concerned communities, and should not be dismissed as mere prejudices. In the North East, contentions over land, political identity, territorial claims, and so on have been sharp, and have often resulted in violent clashes between communities. Armed groups claiming to represent these issues have often targeted civilians of the “other” communities, committing massacres, and sexual violence, and forcing entire populations to flee regions under their control. It can appear, therefore, that what is happening in Manipur right now is similar to previous episodes of violence in the state and the region, even if of a far worse scale and intensity.

But there is something new and dangerous in the current crisis, which draws on elements from past

conflicts and prejudices but is also a product of the current political climate nationally. When the citizenship of every member of a community is treated with suspicion; when immigrants and refugees are described as “illegal” (a word ascribing to them a sinister conspiratorial purpose); when the name of the community is tied up in an almost hyphenated fashion with the term “terrorist” or “militant”, the matter crosses the line of a sincerely felt concern or debate over into the territory of [xenophobia](#). The sharpest and most bloody political or social disputes can be resolved eventually – but not if one party in the dispute is denied recognition as fellow citizens and human beings.

To identify “drug lords from Myanmar”, “poppy cultivation”, “narco-terrorism”, “Kuki militancy”, “separatist politics”, and so on as the causes and contexts of the violence in Manipur, is to perpetuate xenophobic anti-Kuki dog whistles and thus be part of the problem. This is because these concerns are not the cause of the violence. The cause is the fact that these concerns are being weaponised by a xenophobic politics that has come to dominate the Meitei community, and moreover, that is in power in Manipur and Delhi. And it is the centrality of this politics that distinguishes the current Manipur crisis from previous conflicts and clashes in the North East.

Xenophobic Politics Powered By The ‘Double Engine’

The mobs mentioned in victim testimonies that have emerged have clearly been radicalised to see Kukis, tribals through a xenophobic lens, so that they appear outside society/nation/humanity, making violence against them thinkable. Such radicalisation can happen only through sustained, organised propaganda which trains the majority community to use dehumanising language for the minority.

It is easy to recognise in the language of the Meitei mobs, the political language of Chief Minister Biren Singh. Early in July, Biren Singh indicated he would be resigning as chief minister. But thousands of Meitei women, said to be led by Meira Paibis (senior Meitei women) gathered in a show of support for him and “tore up his resignation letter.” Soon after, he [taunted Kuki Twitter users](#), implying in a series of tweets they were not Indian but from Myanmar, and therefore had no right to homeland in India.

He was speaking straight from a xenophobic, script, which accuses the Kuki community of being “illegal immigrants”, “Myanmarese”, “narco-terrorists”, “militants” and so on. There can be debates and arguments about what the state’s policies should be towards immigrants or refugees from Myanmar, drug trade, militancy, or demands for a separate administration. But it is clear that the Chief Minister is using language to target the entire Kuki community as violent drug traders who do not belong in Manipur and India. That is xenophobia 101. And it is this same xenophobic language that is spoken by the mobs that attack Kukis.

The older dynamic of conflicts and even prejudices between communities has been overlaid by the xenophobic and majoritarian narrative getting an unprecedented impetus from the “double engine” BJP governments at state and centre. All over the country, Home Minister Amit Shah has repeatedly referred to “[illegal immigrants](#)” as “[termites](#)” infecting and weakening the nation’s body politic, promising that the BJP would identify and eradicate such a pestilence. Shah used such dehumanising fascist language to imply that all Muslims in India, and especially in the border states, are actually “Bangladeshi” and it is their illicit votes that allow the Congress party to win elections. In Manipur, the CM, the BJP and Meitei chauvinist armed groups which clearly have the government’s indulgence and maybe patronage, apply the same template to speak of the Kuki community.

The violence in Manipur is not one-sided; Kukis too have been the aggressors towards Meiteis. Neither are Meiteis as a community the “perfect villains”; nor are Kukis the

“perfect victims”. What must not be denied though, is that the xenophobic politics of Meitei chauvinism that is at the root of the current crisis.

To restate: the sexual violence seen in a single video is part of a larger pattern of violence targeting the Kuki community: violence that is a direct product of the xenophobic politics of the ruling BJP and its “double-engine” governments in Manipur and Delhi. Every submission by state and central governments to the supreme court has offered the same xenophobic rationalisation for the violence.

Justice for these instances of sexual violence lies in recognising that the acts are not those of “bad apples” in an otherwise moral society. The anti-Kuki mobs in Manipur today are organised, not spontaneous; exactly as the anti-Muslim mobs in Gujarat in 2002 were organised and not formed in a spontaneous reaction to the burning train at Godhra.

Protest demonstrations, however well meaning, that make generic demands for “justice and peace for Manipur”, allow the oppressor room to hide. Meitei chauvinist rallies say they want “peace” - but theirs is a xenophobic definition of peace, for “illegal immigrants” and “narco terrorists” (ie Kukis) must be evicted from the country.

Justice is a precondition for peace. Justice for the victims of these mobs lies in holding every institution down the entire chain of command - the prime minister, the home minister, the chief minister, the state government, police officers and personnel - responsible for their acts of omission and commission that allowed such mobs to spread hate, and commit arson, rape and murder with impunity over months.

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