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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Manipur — When Fire Spreads to the Hills

 THE HINDU

3 April 2026

POLITY

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Why has the Indian state's security-first approach failed to resolve the Manipur ethnic conflict, and what political framework could enable sustainable peace between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities?"

THE CORE ARGUMENT

The ethnic conflict in Manipur — which erupted in May 2023 between the Meitei (valley-dominant, majority) and Kuki-Zo (hill-dominant, tribal) communities — has entered a dangerous new phase. Fresh violence in the Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, and Tengnoupal hill districts signals that the conflict is no longer contained to the Imphal Valley foothills. The Hindu argues that nearly two years of a de facto ethnic partition of the state — where the two communities live in parallel, incompatible administrative realities — cannot be resolved through security deployments alone. The Centre's continued failure to initiate meaningful political dialogue, combined with the breakdown of trust in state institutions, makes a negotiated settlement increasingly distant.

THE CONFLICT — ORIGINS AND ESCALATION

PHASE	KEY EVENTS
Pre-2023	Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status; Kuki opposition; forest encroachment disputes
May 3, 2023	All Tribal Students Union Manipur rally against Meitei ST demand triggers violence
May–June 2023	200+ deaths, 50,000+ displaced, hundreds of churches and temples burned, army deployed
July 2023	Viral video of Kuki women being paraded naked by Meitei mob — national outrage, Supreme Court intervention
2023–2025	Periodic flare-ups; effective ethnic partition; dual administration emerging
March–April 2026	Violence spreads to deeper hill districts; Kuki militant groups resume attacks

THE STRUCTURAL FAULT LINES

1. The ST Status Demand: The Meitei community’s demand for Scheduled Tribe status is the immediate trigger — but not the root cause. ST status would grant Meiteis land rights in hill areas currently reserved for tribals under the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act, which prohibits non-tribals from buying land in hill districts.

2. The Hill-Valley Divide:

- **Valley (10% of area):** ~60% of population; Meitei-dominated; economic and political centre
- **Hills (90% of area):** ~40% of population; tribal communities (Kuki-Zo, Naga, others)
- Hill tribes fear valley expansion into their land if Meiteis get ST status

3. The Kuki-Zo Demand: Following the violence, Kuki-Zo leaders have demanded a **separate administration** — a Union Territory or separate state carved out of Manipur’s hill districts. The Centre has not engaged with this demand.

WHY THE SECURITY-FIRST APPROACH HAS FAILED

SECURITY MEASURE	WHY INSUFFICIENT
60,000+ central forces deployed	Prevents mass violence but cannot address political grievances
Internet shutdowns	Cuts information flow but breeds grievance and distrust
AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) in hill areas	Legitimate security tool, but associated with impunity — deepens tribal alienation
Governor's Rule / President's Rule denied	State government continues under Chief Minister Biren Singh despite loss of Kuki MLAs' support

THE CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

- **Sixth Schedule:** Provides autonomous district councils for tribal areas in northeast India — Manipur hill areas are under this framework, but councils have limited powers and face resource constraints
- **Inner Line Permit (ILP):** Manipur has ILP — requires permits for non-natives to enter — but this has not prevented the conflict
- **Article 355:** Centre's duty to protect states against internal disturbance — invoked to justify central force deployment but not political intervention

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 2 — Polity and Governance:

- **Federalism** — Centre-State relations during ethnic conflict; Governor's role
- **Sixth Schedule** — tribal self-governance in northeast; limitations
- **AFSPA** — provisions, controversy, Supreme Court rulings
- **Article 355/356** — Centre's intervention powers

GS Paper 1 — Indian Society:

- **Ethnic identity and conflict** — northeast India's tribal-non-tribal dynamics
- **ST status** — criteria, demand politics, implications
- **Internal displacement** — scale, humanitarian response

UPSC RELEVANCE

“No security deployment, however large, can substitute for political dialogue in an ethnic conflict. Manipur’s tragedy is not a law and order problem — it is a political crisis requiring political courage, inclusive negotiation, and a constitutional framework that addresses the legitimate fears of both communities.”

FACTS CORNER

- **Manipur area distribution:** 28,586 sq km total; valley (Imphal West, Imphal East, Bishnupur, Thoubal, Kakching districts) ~2,238 sq km; rest is hill districts
- **Kuki-Zo communities:** Umbrella term for 31+ tribes (Kuki, Zomi, Chin-related groups); primarily Christian; predominantly in Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, Tengnoupal districts
- **Meitei:** Valley-dominant; primarily Hindu (also Sanamahism adherents); not currently ST; OBC status at state level
- **Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act, 1960:** Prohibits non-hill tribals from purchasing land in hill districts — the central legal stake in the ST status demand
- **COCOMI:** Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity — Meitei civil society body opposing Kuki separation demand
- **ITLF:** Indigenous Tribal Leaders’ Forum — Kuki-Zo umbrella body; principal interlocutor for hill communities
- **60,000+ displaced:** Largest internal displacement in northeast India since the Assam riots; relief camps still operational as of 2026
- **Supreme Court intervention:** Three-judge bench monitored the situation from July 2023; expressed concern about state government’s inaction and CBI investigation pace

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