



Communal Conflict and Policy Challenges: The Muslim Experience in Manipur

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ABSTRACT

Manipur, located in the northeastern region of India is marked by a rich tapestry of ethnic groups, each contributing to the complex socio-political landscape of the state. Among these groups, the Muslim community referred to as Pangal, holds a unique position that straddles integration and marginalization. This paper delves into the evolution of Muslim identity in Manipur, the communal tensions that have periodically disrupted the relationship between ethnic groups, and the role of the state in mediating these conflicts. Special attention is given to the communal riot of 1993, which represent a critical turning point in the collective consciousness of the Muslim community and its relationship with the state. Additionally, the paper examines the impact of state policies, such as reservations and socio-economic programmes on the Muslim population and explores avenues for addressing the ongoing challenges they face.

Historical Background of Muslim Identity in Manipur

Pangals developed a distinct identity that blended cultural, religious and linguistic elements unique to Manipur. Unlike other Muslim communities in India, Pangals share linguistic and some cultural ties with the majority Meitei population. However, despite these similarities, the community has historically experienced socio-economic disadvantages contributing to a pronounced sense of marginalization.

The colonial period had a significant impact on the evolution of ethnic identities in Manipur. Policies like the Manipur Hill People Regulation of 1947 underscored the divisions among ethnic groups, creating an environment where distinct identities were both reinforced and politicized. The regulation's attempt to administer different communities separately laid the groundwork for future tensions. Following India's independence, these divisions persisted as Manipur transitioned from a princely state to an Indian state, creating challenges in managing ethnic diversity.

The Muslim community's struggle for recognition and equitable treatment was exacerbated by the socio-economic landscape. Muslims were largely engaged in low-income occupations and faced barriers to education and political representation. This marginalization sowed seeds of discontent and a quest for identity. The term 'Pangal' began to reflect a community that was simultaneously part of and apart from the larger Meitei society. The rise of educated Muslim elites in the 20th century further shaped this identity, as they began advocating for better representation and socio-economic development.

The Role of the State and Communal Conflict

The 1993 communal riot between the Meitei and Muslim communities was a defining moment in the history of Manipur, highlighting the fragility of inter-ethnic relations and the challenges faced by the state in maintaining peace. The violence erupted on May 3, following an incident in which three Meitei youths were caught and beaten by Muslim residents of Lilong. The youths had approached Muhammad Adon Mia's residence in an attempt to recover payment for an unfulfilled arms deal which led to their confrontation with the local Muslim community.

Rumours quickly spread that Meitei students were being detained and mistreated, and that Muslim men had committed acts of violence against Meitei women. These allegations fuelled anger within the Meitei community and prompted retaliation. Members of the anti-social groups incited mobs to attack Muslim neighbourhoods, resulting in the destruction of property, the burning of vehicles and the loss of life. Notably, buses carrying Muslim passengers were intercepted and torched, leading to tragic incidents such as the burning of four passengers alive at Kakwa Huidrom Leikai. The violence persisted until May 10, affecting multiple districts, including Imphal and Thoubal. Though it is difficult to draw a correct figure of dead toll in

such communal clashes, the Group Clashes Inquiry Commission came out with the conclusion that nearly one hundred persons died and a large number of persons were injured. There was also destruction of properties during the communal clashes in the affected districts.

The riot left a significant number of families displaced and deeply traumatized. The state imposed curfews, dispatched additional police forces and employed tear gas and lathi charges to disperse violent mobs. However, these measures were met with criticism for being too slow and insufficient to prevent the escalation of violence. Allegations arose that law enforcement failed to act proactively and that bias might have influenced the state's response.

The Group Clashes Inquiry Commission's findings concluded that while there was no evidence of direct conflict between organized groups of Meiteis and Muslims, anti-social elements had taken advantage of existing tensions. The inquiry pointed out that the violence was not a planned confrontation but rather the result of deeply rooted socio-political and ethnic animosities. The commission's report commended the police for their efforts to restore order but also acknowledged the limitations of the state in preventing the initial outbreak of violence.

Impact of the 1993 Riot on Muslim Identity

The aftermath of the 1993 riot had profound implications for the Muslim community in Manipur. The violence solidified a sense of collective identity, marked by both fear and resilience. The riot exposed vulnerabilities within the community, emphasizing the precarious position of Muslims in a state where ethnic tensions often erupted into violence. The sense of being targeted reinforced a collective consciousness that spurred the community to seek greater representation and safeguards. The Pangal identity, once a mere label, gained deeper significance in the wake of the riot. The community's response included the formation and strengthening of organizations aimed at advocating for Muslim rights and socio-economic development. Groups such as the All Manipur Muslim Students Organization (AMMSO) emerged as vocal proponents of the community's interests, pushing for better access to education, employment and political representation. The psychological impact of the violence was long-lasting. Stories of trauma and loss resonated through generations, fostering a narrative of survival and unity. This period also witnessed the increased use of the term 'Pangal' as a means to emphasize both the community's roots in Manipuri society and its distinct cultural identity. However, this dual identity posed challenges, as it sometimes led to tensions between aspirations for integration and the preservation of uniqueness.

The riot also influenced the political and social strategies of the Muslim community. Leaders and intellectuals began to engage more actively in public discourse, framing their demands in terms of social justice and equality. The idea of political mobilization gained traction with a focus on lobbying for policies that would address socio-economic disadvantages and protect the community from future violence. Yet, despite these efforts, the community continued to face significant obstacles, including limited political clout and a fragmented leadership.

Reservation Policies and Socio-Economic Challenges

One of the most contentious issues for the Muslim community in Manipur has been the implementation of reservation policies. The state's decision in 1994 to include Meitei-Pangals in the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category was significant but insufficient. Unlike other OBC groups, Muslims did not receive specific weightage within the quota system which effectively diluted the benefits they could access. This policy oversight has been a focal point of contention and a rallying issue for community leaders.

The socio-economic status of the Muslim community has remained relatively low, marked by high poverty rates and limited access to quality education and employment opportunities. While inclusion in the OBC category offered some advantages, it did not fully address the unique challenges faced by Muslims in Manipur. Reports from community organizations, such as the Manipur Minority Muslim Development Committee (MMMD) and AMMSO have repeatedly highlighted these disparities, calling for separate quotas that better reflect the Muslim population's needs and demographics.

Critics of the existing reservation system argue that treating all OBCs equally overlooks the significant socio-economic variations among them. The Meitei majority, which is also classified as OBC, benefits disproportionately from the existing policies due to its more advanced social and educational status. This has led to a competitive imbalance, where the Muslim community struggles to secure opportunities meant to uplift marginalized groups. The demand for a separate sub-quota for Muslims within the OBC category is rooted in the community's recognition of this inequity and the need for targeted measures.

The struggle for fair representation is not limited to reservations in education and employment. It extends to political representation and participation in governance. Unlike other northeastern states where ethnic or religious communities have formed political parties to advance their interests, the Muslim community in Manipur has historically been integrated into mainstream political parties. This integration has limited their ability to collectively influence state policy, as Muslim leaders often lack the cohesion and numbers needed to act as a strong bargaining force.

The lack of substantial progress in socio-economic development has further fuelled grievances within the Muslim community. The formation of organizations and advocacy groups has played an essential role in

keeping these issues in public discourse. The AMMSO, for instance, has been vocal in demanding that the state government implement reservation policies similar to those in other states with significant Muslim populations, such as Kerala and Karnataka. These demands include specific quotas in government jobs and educational institutions, reflecting the community's proportion within the population.

The State's Role and Policy Recommendations

The role of the state in addressing the socio-economic and political challenges faced by the Muslim community in Manipur is critical. While efforts have been made, such as the establishment of the Manipur State Minorities Commission and recommendations for implementing the Prime Minister's 15-Point Programme for minority welfare, these initiatives have often fallen short in execution. The state must demonstrate a stronger commitment to bridging the gaps between policy and practice.

One policy recommendation is the creation of a distinct sub-quota for Muslims within the OBC category, reflecting their demographic and socio-economic status. Such a measure would ensure that benefits intended for marginalized communities reach those most in need. The establishment of targeted educational and vocational programmes would further support the upward mobility of the Muslim community. Additionally, the state could prioritize initiatives aimed at fostering entrepreneurship and economic independence through financial support and training programmes.

The government should also enhance its conflict prevention and community engagement strategies. Programmes that promote inter-ethnic dialogue and collaboration could help mitigate tensions and build trust. The role of civil society in fostering understanding and peace cannot be overstated, and the state should support grassroots initiatives that encourage cooperation among different communities.

Addressing the community's political representation is another vital area. While the Muslim population in Manipur does not have a dedicated political party, the state could facilitate greater involvement by ensuring that electoral processes and representation mechanisms are inclusive. Encouraging Muslim leaders to take active roles in policy-making and governance would empower the community and promote a sense of shared responsibility.

Conclusion

The 1993 communal riot was a watershed moment for the Muslim community in Manipur, underscoring the vulnerabilities of a minority group within a state marked by ethnic diversity and periodic conflict. The violence not only highlighted the limitations of the state's ability to manage inter-ethnic tensions but also propelled the Muslim community to seek stronger representation and socio-economic support.

Despite steps taken by the state, including the recognition of Muslims as OBCs and the formation of minority commissions, significant gaps remain in addressing the community's needs. The demand for a separate quota, coupled with targeted development programmes reflects the broader struggle for equality and justice. The state's role in fostering inclusion, protecting minority rights and ensuring that policies are effectively implemented is crucial for sustainable peace and development.

The path forward requires a multifaceted approach that combines policy adjustments, community engagement and economic empowerment. Building trust between communities and enhancing dialogue can help bridge divides and promote a more inclusive society. For the Muslim community in Manipur, the journey towards equal representation and socio-economic advancement continues, with the hope that state and societal efforts will converge to create an environment where all communities can thrive.

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