



## Implementation of international humanitarian law in internal armed conflict with special reference to recent conflict in Manipur

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### Abstract

Armed conflicts of greater or lesser intensity are occurring in different parts of the world and have become part of our daily life, intruding in our homes via satellite TV, "breaking news" and the front pages of our daily newspapers. More and more they are targeting the civilian population. The unfortunate and inevitable consequence of these conflicts is misery and human suffering. If the international community as a whole as well as individual nation succeed in avoiding conflicts and settling all their differences by peaceful means, it will be an ideal achievement for the mankind. But as long as there are conflicts, be they international or internal, there is a need to mitigate suffering brought about by them to countless innocent people by taking certain steps purely on account of humanity, morality and public conscience. International humanitarian law precisely attempts to achieve this result by restricting those means and methods of warfare which cause unnecessary suffering or which are indiscriminate in character and also by obliging parties to a conflict to spare persons who do not or no longer participate in hostilities. Undoubtedly, this law has assumed considerable importance during the recent past in humanizing myriad of internal and international armed conflicts in different parts of the world. Irrespective of its violations at times, it has succeeded in alleviating suffering brought about by armed conflicts to a significant extent <sup>[1]</sup>.

For proper application of this law, it is necessary that it is understood, firstly, by those who are required to apply it, such as the armed combatants and political authorities; and secondly, by those who are protected by it. From this point of view, its dissemination in the civil society and govern- mental circles including the armed forces assumes considerable significance. Indeed, it is an obligation on states parties to the Geneva Conventions -the core instruments of international humanitarian law.

**Keywords:** Intensity, intruding, mitigate, humanity, conflict, suffering, indiscriminate, violation, armed conflict, significant, civil societies, geneva conventions

### Introduction

International Humanitarian Law is a branch of international law. It is also called the law of armed conflict. In other words, it is a special branch of law governing situations of armed conflict. According to the generally accepted definition, the international humanitarian law applicable in armed conflicts means international rules, established by treaties and customs. Such treaties and customs are specifically intended to solve humanitarian problems directly arising from international and non-international armed conflict. Such treaties and customs, for humanitarian reasons, limit the rights of the parties to a conflict to use the methods and means of warfare of their choice or protect persons or property that are, or may be, affected by the conflict <sup>[2]</sup>.

### Brief Historical & evolution of International Humanitarian Law

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which is an impartial and neutral humanitarian organization, has been striving to assist and protect lives and dignity of victims of armed conflicts and armed violence in different parts of the world for the last 160 years on the basis of international humanitarian law. One of the mandates entrusted to the ICRC by the international community is to facilitate promotion of development, application and dissemination of international humanitarian law. The ICRC therefore, considers the role of the civil

society in this process as a vital contribution to the effectiveness of its efforts.

International humanitarian law is not new to the Indian civilization. In teachings of different religions, which prevailed and are still prevailing in the Indian sub-continent, fundamental norms of this law have been given a paramount position. Modern humanitarian law is a well-articulated and elaborate body of law founded on universally cherished and accepted values. Any attempt to spread the message of fundamental principles of this law and its understanding in the society must be encouraged. From this point of view, the initiative taken by the Researcher, by demonstrating keen interest in and thorough knowledge of this law <sup>[1]</sup>. And have noticed that the present work contains articles on various important facets of this law, which are of immense practical relevance. This work will help a large number of students, academicians, lawyers, media persons, policy makers and arms carriers to understand the modern developments in humanitarian law and their application during contemporary armed conflicts.

### Relevance of IHL& its applications in Manipur

Manipur, the land where the game of Polo was born is the ancestral territory of the Manipur people, it is situated in the northeast corner of India and bounded in the east by Myanmar (Burma). The present territorial area is 22,327sq. km. It lies within 23. 83°.N to 25.68°E attitude and 93.03°E to 94.78°E longitude. A fertile alluvial valley extends north-south in the middle and it is surrounded in all directions by

hill ranges of rich bio resources forming a part of the eastern Himalayas.

The peoples of Manipur are more or less known as Manipuri consulting about 36 ethnic groups. The Meeteis being considered as the major ethnic group and they traditionally inhabit the valley along with other ethnic peoples who settled here decades ago. In the surrounding hills, many other ethnic peoples settled. The Manipuris are more akin to the peoples of South East Asia; ethnically and culturally are distinct from the rest of mainland India. The total estimated population of Manipur is above 2.6 million including almost 1 million undocumented migrants.

After the British left the Indian subcontinent in 1947, Manipur regained its sovereign independence. It adopted a written constitution after election of people's representatives to the State Assembly on universal adult franchise in August 1948. The State Assembly was inaugurated by the King Bodhachandra in October the same year thereby marking the historic transition from the 2000-year-old absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. Probably, Manipur was the first to introduce parliamentary democracy in South and Southeast Asia.

However controversially Manipur was annexed into the Dominion of India on 15 October 1949. The King signed under duress the 'Manipur Merger Agreement' on 21 September 1949. The same day, the Government of India abolished the Manipur Constitution and all its democratic structures, including the State Assembly and the elected government.



**Fig 1:** Emblem of International Committee of the Red cross (ICRC)

### **Evolving Conflict in Manipur**

A structural violence emerging out of the creation of social and political structures that deprive the rights of indigenous peoples of Manipur in terms of safety, respect, participation, economy, identity and culture, considered to be the base for the existing conflict which is marked by:

1. the controversial 'Manipur Merger' that abolished the Manipur Constitution and all its democratic structures, including the State Assembly and the elected government.
2. the subsequent downgrading of the princely State of Manipur to a Part C State even not a full-fledged state.
3. And the imposition of Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA).

The questionable civil, political, economic, social and cultural situation triggered a new generation fighting for the restoration of political sovereignty on the basis of self-determination. A fear of Indian homogenization affecting the indigenous identity due to a perplexity in the culture, religion, and which began in the early 19th century and the nature of regional disparity which mainly characterized by a pattern of being a captive economy along with a pressure of

influx population further aggravates the situation in the Princely State of Manipur.

The nature of the conflict in Manipur is considered mainly of a liberation armed movement with low-intensity war against the Government of India and other State actors. It is a sustained fighting between organized armed forces and for each side feels increasingly justified to use violence because the other side is.

In the historic past, when Manipur was still under the division of many principalities like Meitei, Moirang, Khuman, Heireng Khungja, Khendre, Chaireng, etc., there was a very old manuscript written in Meitei script called Chainarol. The manuscript chronicles records of seventeen such bouts of mutual fight and all the fundamental principles of IHL were found in it. Another ancient manuscript called Takhel Ngamba details the kinds of foes who should not be killed although fallen at the hands of victor. It records that a foe who has fled from the battlefield or who has disarmed himself should not be killed. A foe who has taken refuge on the top of a tree or who has dipped and taken refuge under water shall not be killed. Further, a foe who pleads for life biting a handful of grass or one who pleads with folded hands shall not be killed. Again, one who is stripped of his clothes or one who is apparently scared of confrontation shall not be killed. Manipur has been the tradition of implementing International Humanitarian Law through ages.

This concept of civilian-protection under International Humanitarian Law is widely used in Internal Armed Conflict situation. The scholar wishes to use this concept to understand the gaps in the implementation of International Humanitarian Law in internal armed conflict and recommend measures to plug those so as to make the procedure responsive to the victims' desire, aspirations and minimized the conflict.

This work will be focusing on the ground reality from practical experiences of the scholar. India ratified the Geneva Conventions on 16 October 1950. On 14<sup>th</sup> August 1961, by enacting the Geneva Conventions Act by the Parliament of India it came into force throughout the country.

### **Implementation of IHL in Manipur**

During the Four Geneva Conventions as people of Manipur were in the armed conflict situations allowed access to International Humanitarian Agencies of ICRC, international defenders and journalists.

International Humanitarian Law is the only way available to ferret out workable device to put an end to impunity for grave breach of Geneva Conventions including the Common Article 3 so that those persons whether belongs to armed forces of Government of India or non-governmental forces must be personally liable and also accrue command responsibility and be punished for the grave and other breaches of Geneva Conventions and other related serious violations of laws and custom of war by establishing International Criminal Tribunal for Manipur, or prosecution under International Criminal Court (ICC) or National Court having jurisdiction to try violation of grave breach of Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols and other serious violations of laws and customs of war by suitable amendment to existing the Geneva Conventions Act, 1960. The Government of India must not isolate itself from the International Criminal Court Statute and it is high time to

sign and ratify the same for cause of humanity for the betterment of each citizen of Manipur State [3].

### International Humanitarian Law and Armed Conflict in Manipur

The Parliament of India has enacted the Geneva Convention Act, 1960 so as to give effect to the four Geneva Convention, However, the act remains ineffective in Manipur and North Eastern states of India. Though the Humanitarian organization like ICRC does not have the authority to determine the legality of such conflict, it has certain mandate to take initiative in case of grave breach of Humanitarian laws. The ICRC may visit places of detentions or make official or unofficial approaches to the concerned authorities or make use of its own right to take humanitarian initiatives. This is a great need of conflicting zone to have a national committee which could be linked up with the ICRC for effective implementation of Humanitarian Standard. The role National Red cross society has also been found quite inactive in the state for a long time.



Fig 2: Map of Manipur

### Prolonged invocation of repressive laws

The state of Manipur has been one of the restive states ever since she had become a part of union of India. Armed

conflict occurs in the state for nearly half a century. The perennial situation of prolonged armed conflict between the govt. forces and insurgency groups reveals the utmost necessity of application of international Humanitarian laws and principles. Movement of National Liberation, guerrilla and insurgency have become the most endemic issue of the State. The contemporary humanitarian law assumes the status of codified laws, customary rules, Martens Clause and, Jus cogens, among others. They need to be applied in the state of Manipur or elsewhere in India by assessing the existing international humanitarian norms and principles in the light of the armed conflict. The govt. of India being a party to the four Geneva Convention of 1949 is under the legal obligation to abide by the humanitarian laws [4].

### Understanding the Present Manipur Conflict and Its Geopolitical Implications

Since May 3,2023 the northeastern Indian state of Manipur has witnessed repeated inter-ethnic clashes primarily between two local ethnic communities, the Meitei and Kuki. The violence has resulted in over 75 deaths and the burning of at least 1,700 buildings (including homes and religious sites). More than 35,000 people are currently displaced as well, with many now living in one of the 315 relief camps in the state. As the fighting continues, these numbers may also be rising.

The state government response has largely echoed the strategies India has previously employed during unrest in the Northeast or Jammu and Kashmir. This has included issuing military curfews, suspending internet services and deploying approximately 17,000 troops and paramilitary forces with shoot-on-site orders in effect for “extreme cases.”

While the violence in Manipur is some of the worst witnessed in the state in decades, it is not an unfamiliar occurrence in India’s Northeast, where the identities of different ethnic communities have repeatedly been weaponized to serve the interests of a powerful few. Any moves toward peacebuilding in the medium- to long-term will have to reckon with what has long been a weaponization of colonial fault lines as even decades after India’s independence, very little has been done to foster understanding between different communities regarding one another’s history, culture and traditions.

### Democracy at Gun Point

The Current Manipur Violence in Context Manipur which means “Land of Jewels,” consists of a valley surrounded by mountain ranges. The state is home to 39 ethnic communities following different faiths, including Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, as well as Indigenous religious traditions such as Sanamahi. Opposition to the manner of Manipur’s merger with India in 1949 laid the groundwork for the nascent stages of resistance and separatist movements and remains at the heart of the dispute between New Delhi and many restive portions of the Northeast.

To quell this resistance, the Indian government imposed the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act in 1958. The act provides broad-based powers for the military and paramilitary groups to “[maintain] public order,” in “disturbed areas,” which have been primarily applied to regions of the Northeast and Jammu and Kashmir.

The act has been criticized by rights groups and contributed to a deep trust deficit between the state and central

government in Manipur, while the central government argues it has been necessary for maintaining order in areas with a history of insurgency — some predating India's independence. In the Northeast (and elsewhere), the central government has also emphasized the threat of foreign support for separatist movements<sup>[5]</sup>.

Today, the region features multiple conflicting claims to ethnic and communal homelands — and armed insurgent groups to defend those claims. In Manipur, there are at least four valley-based armed groups, several Naga groups and nearly 30 Kuki armed insurgent organizations. The proliferation of armed groups — at one point estimated to stand at around 60 — contributed to the sense of a “war within a war” in the state.

Those closely connected with political power took advantage of the tumultuous situation, and the state became the site of rampant gun-running and narco- and human-trafficking. Armed groups frequently back candidates in state elections. In 2022, two Kuki insurgent groups issued statements in support of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), and in 2019 images on social media reportedly showed a letter written by armed groups to Indian Home Minister Amit Shah asking for a party ticket to be given to a candidate of their choice — although the armed group later disputed this.

Northeast politicians have reported intimidation by opposing armed groups, and civil society organizations in Manipur emphasized that the 2022 elections were overshadowed by “open intimidation” from militant groups and violence across polling stations. This has led to “democracy at gunpoint” in this fragile region.

**What Sparked the Latest Violence in Manipur?**

The most recent violence began after the Manipur High Court asked the state government to consider Scheduled Tribe status for the Meitei community, which is the majority population in Manipur. This status would ensure protection within the Indian Constitution and allow the Meitei expanded access to benefits, including reserved seats in government.

The Meitei community in Manipur had long requested this status. However, there were strong concerns that such a move would deepen ethnic divisions, particularly with the Kuki and Naga Indigenous communities. Indeed, soon after the court announcement, a rally was held in protest by the All-Tribal Students Union of Manipur on May 3, 2023.

The violence began that same day, when reports surfaced that the Anglo-Kuki War Memorial Gate had been burnt down. This led Kukis to burn several villages inhabited by Meitei communities in Churachandpur, which in turn prompted retaliation by the Meitei, who reportedly torched several localities belonging to the Kuki community in the Imphal Valley areas, leading to several casualties<sup>[6]</sup>.

While the protests may be identified as the most immediate trigger of violence in Manipur, intra-Indigenous community tensions had been rising in the state for several years. The current state government's handling of Indigenous land rights issues, for instance, has been perceived as targeting the Kuki communities primarily living in the hill areas surrounding the capital valley. Efforts to survey reserved forests in the hill regions was said to be an effort to reduce poppy cultivation, but has resulted in evictions in Kuki villages.

Meanwhile, another point of contention is the current land imbalance between Indigenous communities: Meiteis cannot

buy lands in the previously mentioned hill regions, but Kukis and other tribal communities can buy lands in the valley.

Additionally, the influx of refugees following the 2021 military coup in neighbouring Myanmar particularly those from Sangai region, who have strong ties with the Kukis — has also created a greater sense of insecurity for the Meitei Indigenous community. Though the real decision-making in the conflict lies with those who control the guns, drugs and politics, the ones most affected in both the communities are women and children. The identities of different ethnic communities were weaponized in the current conflict to suit the agenda of a few.

### **Evolution of the Conflict**

While getting reliable information from Manipur has been difficult, images and reports from the state portray an ongoing “war zone,” with heavily armed militants continuing to roam, villagers arming themselves and a sharp deterioration in trust between citizens, governance and security.

Social media posts that manage to circumvent the internet blackout are often rife with messages of hate, division and desolation. Prices of essential commodities are skyrocketing and trucks carrying food, medicine and essential supplies have been left stranded. While it is unclear at this point how the conflict will evolve in the short-term, two trends are of particular importance to watch:

*Response of the Indian State.* At the start of the violence, there was a notable silence from the central government. This elicited criticism from opposition parties, which have accused the BJP of focusing more on the upcoming elections and using silence to foster violence.

With the violence ongoing for nearly one month, India's Home Minister Amit Shah did recently arrive in Manipur for a four-day visit aimed at “restoring normalcy” to the state, while India's chief of army staff also recently visited Manipur to assess the situation. At a press conference in Manipur on June 1, Shah announced that a judicial probe that would “investigate the violence” on behalf of the central government, led by a retired High Court judge. He further announced the creation a peace committee between members of different communities, additional fencing on the Myanmar border, and called for the return of an estimated 1,420 weapons looted from local police since the start of the clashes.

The ongoing violence, however, will be a key determining factor in whether these commitments can be met. Amid the chaos on the ground, armed groups continue to exploit the situation, while others have raised concerns of cross-border attacks. Given the concerns and promises to expand border fencing, India will likely need to engage with its neighbours in the region if the violence continues.

*Reconciliation Prospects.* Several communities in the state and the region are holding peace and prayer meetings, religious leaders have called for peace, and others have called for the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Women's groups across northeast India have issued appeals and formed “Mothers Peace Committees” in various localities.

Ending the current violence and fostering long-term reconciliation efforts, however, are fundamentally two different — although interlinked — ends. Any reconciliation must contend with the legacies of violence

from multiple insurgencies and the often-heavy-handed responses by the government, which have contributed to lasting trauma within the state<sup>[7]</sup>.

Across all communities, the people in Manipur have suffered immensely for years as they saw their rice fields turned into battlefields and peace be taken away by a few power-hungry people who have engineered division and sown violence. Citizen-centric dialogues and engaging civil society will be key to addressing decades of deep distrust and historical hurt that have polarized Indigenous communities across the region. Indigenous peacemaking initiatives, truth-telling and forgiveness ceremonies could be a way to start to soothe the fractured hearts and minds of communities who have lived through violence for decades. Women in peacebuilding is also needed, to begin what will be a long process of building responsive governance and transparency in the region.

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The state was swiftly bifurcated along ethnic lines, with the Meiteis in the valley and the Kukis in the hills, defending their territory against violent mobs, with a buffer zone created in the middle.

To enter the territory of the opposing tribe was soon considered to be a death sentence. Much of the violence has been fought with thousands of weapons stolen from police and army barracks.

So far, more than 140 people have died in the violence and 60,000 have been displaced. The internet remains shut down in large parts of the state.

Though the state and central government – which are both ruled by the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) – have claimed that the situation has begun to calm down, intermittent clashes have continued to erupt and those fighting on both sides have warned that Manipur remains on the brink of civil war.

The clashes have renewed and strengthened a longstanding demand by the Kukis for their own separate state. Kuki groups say the violence has proved they can no longer live safely under the oppressions of a Meitei-dominant state and have pledged they will not stop fighting until their own state is granted. The Meitei community and the state government fiercely oppose the creation of a separate Kuki state.

### **How has the government responded?**

Even as the violence escalated, the response from the central BJP government was notably muted. The BJP state government – dominated by the Meitei community – has been accused of being complicit in the violence against the Kuki minority by allowing Meitei gangs to carry out violence with impunity.

Prime minister Narendra Modi maintained a months-long public silence on the conflict and has yet to visit Manipur since the violence broke out<sup>[8]</sup>.

However, he has faced criticism for not addressing the broader conflict or referring to those who have died in the fighting. Some allege that the Hindu nationalist Modi government is not stepping in to protect the Kukis, who are Christians, from the Meitei, who are Hindus.

India's home minister, Amit Shah, visited Manipur at the end of May, 2024 but he failed to bring about a ceasefire between the groups or bring the two parties together for negotiation. The "peace committee" set up by Shah has been shunned by Kuki groups, who allege it is dominated by Meitei figures, including the BJP chief minister.

The supreme court also chastised the government for not getting the situation in Manipur under control. Chief justice Dhananjaya Chandrachud said: "It's time that the government really steps in and takes action because this is simply unacceptable.

The Kuki people, mostly Christians who comprise about 25% of Manipur's population, reside in the hill areas and perceive the new tribal status for largely Hindu Meiteis as a threat to their survival. They fear that Meiteis, who have better political representation and higher incomes, will

purchase land and settle in Kuki-dominated areas in the hills.

But the conflict isn't just about the tribal status issue. It stems from several other factors, such as the longer-term perception of Kukis as outsiders, the government's anti-drug programme, as well as religious divides.

Kukis dispute claims they aren't Indigenous to the area as they largely migrated from present-day Myanmar during the first half of the 19th century, saying Meiteis and others try to discredit their land rights and status in Manipur by saying they were "planted" there by the British.

The state shares a porous border with Myanmar and has been a hotspot of illegal drug trafficking since the Golden Triangle at Thailand is connected with the Indian Border of Moreh Town, which is about 85km far away from Imphal, the Capital City of Manipur, INDIA. Since 2017, Modi's BJP government, through its "war on drugs" has destroyed poppy fields in the hills, causing many Kukis to lose their livelihoods.

The conflict also includes religiously motivated rather than ethnically motivated attacks, according to Archbishop Rev. Dominic Lumon of Imphal. In a 15 June, 2023 report, Archbishop Lumon cited 249 Meitei churches that were burnt down in the initial 36 hours of the unrest. But during the first three days, the Kukis were fleeing and could not have destroyed Meitei churches, the report said: "In the midst of this orchestrated propaganda, subtle attacks on Christianity seem to have found a clean and unsuspecting space."

The government of India, Ministry of Home and Ministry of Defence have deployed 48,000 soldiers on 4 May, 2023 but the violence still continued. The government also shut down internet access in Manipur, making reliable information inaccessible for people both inside and outside the state.

Displaced people from both communities are 58,000 people taking shelter in about 351 relief camps in Manipur, run mostly by civil society and community-based organisations.

### Conclusion and Suggestion

The failure of the government to act swiftly to stem the violence has deepened the ethnic divide and will make the conflict harder to resolve.

It is therefore concerning that instead of taking steps to halt the violence immediately, BJP governments in New Delhi and Imphal failed to respond swiftly. Although a complaint regarding the gang rape of two Kuki women by a Meitei mob in early May was filed immediately, it took police 78 days to detain the accused. Chief Minister Singh has shown extreme reluctance to act against the mobs.

As shocking has been the response or rather the lack of it by the central government. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was silent on the Manipur crisis for months. It was only after the Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud urged the government to act that Modi issued a rather bland statement just ahead of parliament's monsoon session.

The violence has concretized the Kuki-Meitei divide, which will take a long time to heal. So deep is the mistrust between communities that there are allegations that the security forces and law enforcement agencies are divided along ethnic lines. If there is any truth to these allegations, then it will be even more difficult to deal with the volatile situation in Manipur<sup>[9]</sup>.

Addressing the Kuki-Meitei conflict requires a multifaceted approach and the collective efforts of all stakeholders

involved. Retrieval of weapons that mobs looted from police armouries must be prioritized. Efforts should be made to involve civil society organizations, NGOs, Village Chiefs, Gram Panchayat Leaders, village based local organizations, MLAs, Ministers, Village Clubs and Women organizations comprising the both communities of Meitei and Kukis in the State of Manipur in promoting dialogue, peacebuilding, and reconciliation between the communities. Political leaders from different communities should sit close-together on the negotiable Table for peaceful dialogue and find ways to reduce tensions. Forming a committee to look into the genuine development issues raised by different communities could be a positive step toward addressing the grievances and concerns of the affected

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