



Ethno-Nationalism and the Struggle for Recognition in Manipur

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Abstract

The northeastern Indian state of Manipur has long been a contested terrain where ethno-nationalist movements among the Meitei, Naga, and Kuki communities compete for political recognition, autonomy, and territorial rights (Shimray, 2021). This study examines how these groups mobilise cultural identity within India's framework of recognition politics, analysing tensions between state policies and demands for self-determination. Drawing on Taylor's (1994) theory of recognition and Scott's (2009) concept of resistance, the paper explores how colonial legacies, postcolonial state-making, and contemporary legal battles (e.g., the Scheduled Tribe status debate) shape Manipur's fractured political landscape. Findings suggest that recognition operates as a double-edged sword: while it promises inclusion, it also institutionalises ethnic divisions, fueling conflict (Kamei, 2022). Through discourse analysis of policy documents and ethnographic fieldwork, the study reveals how armed groups, civil society, and cultural movements instrumentalise identity to assert legitimacy, often leading to violence or fragile alliances (McDui-Ra, 2016). The research contributes to broader debates on federalism and minority rights in South Asia, highlighting the limitations of liberal multiculturalism in deeply divided societies (Baruah, 2020).

Keywords: ethno-nationalism, recognition politics, Manipur, cultural identity, autonomy, conflict



I. Introduction

The north-eastern Indian state of Manipur represents one of South Asia's most complex cases of ethno-nationalist conflict, where competing demands for recognition have created an intractable political landscape. Situated along the Indo-Myanmar border, Manipur's population of approximately 3.2 million people comprises over 30 distinct ethnic groups, with the Meitei (53%), Naga (24%), and Kuki (16%) communities forming the dominant blocs (Census of India, 2011). These groups have engaged in protracted struggles over political representation, territorial control, and cultural preservation, making Manipur a critical case study for examining the tensions between identity politics and state recognition frameworks. British colonial administrators implemented a "divide and rule" policy that formalised ethnic categories. The Government of India Act (1935) classified hill areas as "Excluded" or "Partially Excluded," separating them administratively from the valley (Shimray, 2009). This institutionalised the hill-valley binary that continues to structure political claims today. Manipur's contentious integration into India in 1949 - accomplished through a controversial merger agreement - sparked immediate resistance. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), implemented in 1958, created a permanent militarized zone where civil liberties are routinely suspended (Amnesty International, 2022). This security regime has both fueled armed resistance movements and distorted democratic processes. The conflicts in Manipur are deeply rooted in historical processes of state formation and ethnic categorization. During British colonial rule (1891-1947), the region was administered under a dual system that treated the Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley differently from the surrounding hill areas inhabited by Naga and Kuki tribes (Parratt, 2005). This administrative separation institutionalized ethnic divisions that continue to shape politics today. The postcolonial Indian state's attempts to integrate Manipur through constitutional provisions like Article 371C - which grants special administrative status - have failed to address underlying grievances about autonomy and representation (Shimray, 2009).

This study draws on Charles Taylor's (1994) seminal work on the "politics of recognition" to analyse how competing groups in Manipur articulate their political and cultural acknowledgement demands. Taylor's framework posits that the denial of recognition constitutes a form of oppression, as identity is dialogically constructed through interactions with others. In the Manipuri context, this manifests in the Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to rectify their perceived marginalisation within



India's affirmative action system, as well as in Naga and Kuki assertions of distinct indigenous identities (Kamei, 2022). However, the limitations of recognition-based approaches become evident when examining Manipur's conflicts. Nancy Fraser's (1995) critique of Taylor emphasises how the politics of recognition often obscures material inequalities, a dynamic clearly visible in Manipur, where debates over ethnic identity frequently mask struggles over land rights and economic resources. The valley-dwelling Meiteis, despite their numerical majority and historical dominance, have increasingly framed themselves as disadvantaged relative to constitutionally recognised tribal groups (Naga and Kuki) who benefit from affirmative action policies and land protections (Haokip, 2020). Since 2012, Meitei organisations have campaigned for inclusion in India's Scheduled Tribe list, arguing that their exclusion from affirmative action programs constitutes discrimination (Kamei, 2022). Tribal groups vehemently oppose this, fearing loss of their existing privileges and possible Meitei encroachment on tribal lands protected by constitutional safeguards. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) has pursued a "Greater Nagalim" vision that would incorporate Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur into a proposed Naga homeland (Shimray, 2009). This has led to violent clashes with both the Meitei and Kuki communities. Kuki armed groups demand a separate administrative territory, arguing that they are squeezed between Meitei dominance and Naga expansionism (Haokip, 2020). The 2023 ethnic violence between Kukis and Meiteis represents the most recent eruption of these tensions.

This study investigates the complex interplay between recognition frameworks and ethno-nationalist mobilisation in Manipur through three fundamental lines of inquiry: how legal, cultural, and political recognition structures influence patterns of ethnic mobilisation; why state-led recognition policies frequently aggravate rather than resolve inter-ethnic tensions; and what alternative governance approaches could more effectively address both the symbolic and material aspects of ethnic grievances. The research pursues these questions through four key objectives: first, tracing the historical development of recognition politics from colonial administration to contemporary policy frameworks; second, conducting an in-depth analysis of current conflicts rooted in competing recognition claims; third, assessing the successes and failures of existing conflict resolution mechanisms; and fourth, developing integrated policy recommendations that bridge recognition politics with economic redistribution strategies. By examining these dimensions, the study aims to provide a



comprehensive understanding of how recognition dynamics operate in Manipur's volatile ethnic landscape while proposing more holistic approaches to conflict transformation that address both identity-based aspirations and substantive inequalities.

II. Theoretical Framework

Studying ethno-nationalist conflicts in Manipur requires an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that bridges political philosophy, postcolonial studies, and conflict analysis. At its core, this research engages with Charles Taylor's (1994) seminal work on the *politics of recognition*. It argues that identity formation is fundamentally dialogical—individuals and groups understand themselves through interactions with others, particularly through institutionalised recognition or misrecognition. Taylor's proposition that "non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression" (p. 25) provides a crucial lens for analysing why ethnic groups in Manipur—whether Meitei, Naga, or Kuki—view formal acknowledgement of their identities as existential issues. Taylor's framework emerged from debates about multiculturalism in Western liberal democracies, but its application to postcolonial contexts like Manipur reveals both insights and limitations. In *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Taylor (1994) emphasises how liberal states must accommodate collective identities rather than impose homogenising civic nationalism. This resonates with Manipur's context, where the Indian state's attempts to integrate the region through constitutional measures like Article 371C have been perceived by ethnic groups as either inadequate or coercive (Shimray, 2009). The Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, for instance, reflects a quest for recognition within India's affirmative action system, while Naga armed resistance under the NSCN-IM represents a rejection of the Indian state's legitimacy altogether (Kamei, 2022). However, Taylor's focus on cultural recognition has been critiqued for neglecting material dimensions of inequality. Nancy Fraser's (1995) seminal article, '*From Redistribution to Recognition?*' argues that identity-based approaches often obscure economic justice issues, creating a false dichotomy between cultural and class struggles. Fraser's *perspectival dualism*—the need to analyse both recognition and redistribution simultaneously—offers a corrective to Taylor's culturalist emphasis. To complement recognition theory, this study incorporates James C. Scott's (2009) work on state resistance in *The Art of Not Being Governed*. Scott's analysis of Southeast Asia's *Zomia* highlands—a region encompassing Manipur's hill areas—provides a framework for understanding



why groups like the Nagas and Kukis have historically resisted integration into valley-based states (Meitei or Indian). Scott argues that hill communities developed "escape agriculture" (e.g., swidden farming) and segmentary social structures as deliberate strategies to avoid state capture. This resonates with the historical autonomy of Manipur's tribal groups, who resisted both the Meitei kingdom and the British colonial administration (Parratt, 2005). Scott's concept of *state spaces* versus *non-state spaces* helps explain contemporary conflicts: the Imphal Valley, as a *state space*, has long been integrated into centralised political systems, while the hills functioned as *non-state spaces* until colonial and postcolonial regimes imposed administrative control (Scott, 2009, p. 44). The persistence of armed insurgent groups like the NSCN-IM or Kuki National Army (KNA) reflects this historical resistance to state-making projects (McDuie-Ra, 2016). However, Scott's framework requires adaptation to Manipur's context, where ethnic groups now compete to control the state apparatus rather than evade it—illustrated by the Meitei ST movement's bid for state benefits (Kamei, 2022).

Postcolonial theorists like Partha Chatterjee (1993) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) provide additional tools for analysing Manipur's recognition politics. Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments* critiques Western-derived models of nationalism, showing how colonial categorisation (e.g., tribal/non-tribal binaries) continues to shape postcolonial governance. In Manipur, the British classification of hill tribes as "excluded areas" under the 1935 Government of India Act institutionalised ethnic divisions that persist today (Shimray, 2009). Chakrabarty's (2000) concept of *provincialising Europe* reminds us that liberal recognition frameworks may not account for indigenous political ontologies—for instance, Naga conceptions of sovereignty rooted in village republics rather than Westphalian state models (Nuh, 2002). Subaltern Studies scholarship further illuminates how marginalised groups navigate recognition politics.

Gayatri Spivak's (1988) '*Can the Subaltern Speak?*' cautions against romanticising resistance, noting that elites or NGOs often mediate subaltern voices. In Manipur, this dynamic appears in the gap between armed group leaders (e.g., NSCN-IM) and ordinary Naga villagers or between Meitei civil society organisations and valley peasants (Amnesty International, 2022). Gunnell Cederlöf's (2014) work on *land wars* in Northeast India adds a material dimension, showing how recognition claims are often proxies for control over territory and resources.



III. Case Studies: Competing Claims for Recognition in Manipur

The Meitei Demand for Scheduled Tribe Status

The Meitei community's campaign for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status represents one of Manipur's most contentious contemporary recognition struggles. Meitei organizations have argued since 2012 that their exclusion from ST lists constitutes systemic discrimination (Kamei, 2022). The demand for Scheduled Tribe status among the Meitei community emerges from multiple intersecting concerns. Economically, it reflects growing anxieties about marginalization due to the loss of traditional livelihoods and restricted access to government employment opportunities reserved for recognized tribal groups. Politically, it stems from perceptions of unequal benefit distribution, where Meiteis view constitutionally recognized tribes as receiving disproportionate advantages in resource allocation and political representation. Culturally, the movement expresses deep-seated fears about demographic changes and cultural erosion, particularly concerns about being overwhelmed by migrant communities (Ningthouja, 2015). These combined economic, political and cultural insecurities have converged to create a potent movement for status recognition that seeks to address perceived systemic disadvantages while protecting community identity in Manipur's complex ethnic landscape. The movement for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status has gained significant legal and political traction through several key developments. The campaign received institutional validation when the Manipur State Commission for Scheduled Tribes issued a recommendation in favor of Meitei inclusion in 2013, marking a crucial turning point in the legitimacy of their claims. This momentum was further amplified in 2015 through large-scale mobilization efforts led by the Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur (STD CM), whose organized protests brought the issue to the forefront of state politics. The movement achieved a notable legal milestone in 2023 when the Manipur High Court issued a directive compelling the state government to consider the ST status demand, a decision that received widespread media coverage and reignited public debate (The Hindu, 2023). These successive developments demonstrate how the ST status movement has effectively navigated both institutional channels and grassroots mobilization to advance its agenda, while simultaneously exposing deep fractures in Manipur's complex ethnic politics. The strategic progression from commission recommendation to mass protests and finally judicial intervention reveals a calculated multi-pronged approach to



achieving recognition. Each of these milestones represents a different facet of political pressure - bureaucratic, popular, and legal - that collectively have forced the ST status issue onto the mainstage of Manipur's political discourse. The 2023 High Court directive in particular has created new legal and constitutional implications that extend beyond Manipur, potentially setting precedents for how indigenous identity claims are adjudicated in India's pluralistic democracy. However, this very success has intensified opposition from tribal groups who view the movement as an existential threat to their hard-won constitutional protections, illustrating the paradox of recognition politics where attempts to address one group's grievances often exacerbate another's insecurities.

Naga Nationalism and the Greater Nagalim Movement

The Naga nationalist movement's vision for a "Greater Nagalim" represents one of Northeast India's most enduring and contentious autonomy struggles. Spearheaded by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM) since 1980, this irredentist project seeks to unite all Naga-inhabited territories across India's northeastern states, including four hill districts of Manipur (Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong, and Chandel) that constitute over 20% of the state's territory (Shimray, 2009; Bhaumik, 2009). The movement's historical trajectory has been marked by several pivotal moments, including the 1997 ceasefire agreement with the Indian government, the violent 2001 uprising that claimed 18 lives when Manipuris protested the ceasefire's extension to their state, and the controversial 2015 Framework Agreement whose undisclosed terms continue to fuel speculation and inter-ethnic tensions (Kikon, 2019). Naga groups have strategically employed a multifaceted approach to advance their claims, combining cultural revivalism through traditional dress and festivals, institutional control via Autonomous District Councils, and selective violent resistance against state symbols like government offices. The political impacts of this movement have profoundly reshaped Manipur's ethnic landscape. The persistent insecurity in ethnically mixed zones has led to demographic sorting along tribal lines, while Kuki communities have responded by forming defensive armed militias to protect their villages from perceived Naga expansionism. Development initiatives in Naga-dominated areas have stagnated amid the ongoing political uncertainty, creating what McDuie-Ra (2016) describes as a "governance vacuum" where neither state nor insurgent groups can effectively deliver basic services or economic opportunities. This complex dynamic illustrates the paradox of recognition



politics in Manipur, where Naga aspirations for self-determination have simultaneously empowered their community while destabilizing inter-ethnic relations and undermining regional development. The movement's continued evolution remains central to understanding Manipur's protracted conflict, as it simultaneously challenges the Indian state's territorial integrity while reshaping political consciousness among Nagas and neighboring communities alike.

The case studies of Manipur's ethnic conflicts yield several critical theoretical insights about recognition politics in plural societies. First, they demonstrate the paradoxical nature of legal recognition, which according to Taylor's (1994) framework can simultaneously empower communities through formal status while isolating them through rigid identity categorization - a double-edged sword that has manifested in both the benefits and limitations of Scheduled Tribe status for different groups. Second, the analysis substantiates Fraser's (1995) argument about the material foundations of recognition struggles, revealing how ostensibly symbolic claims over cultural identity and political status are fundamentally rooted in concrete competition over land and resources, particularly in Manipur's hill-valley geography. Finally, the research highlights the state's contradictory position in ethnic conflicts, acting simultaneously as an ostensibly neutral arbitrator through constitutional recognition mechanisms while being deeply implicated as a partisan actor through its security policies and development allocations (Baruah, 2020). These theoretical perspectives collectively expose the limitations of liberal multicultural models in addressing Manipur's complex inter-ethnic tensions, suggesting that recognition frameworks divorced from material redistribution and genuine power-sharing may only institutionalize rather than resolve conflicts. The case studies thus contribute to broader theoretical debates about the relationship between identity, territory and state power in postcolonial contexts.

IV. Mechanisms of Recognition and Conflict in Manipur

The Indian state's attempts to manage Manipur's complex ethnic landscape through legal- institutional frameworks have produced paradoxical outcomes that often exacerbate rather than resolve conflicts. The constitutional Scheduled Tribe (ST) status system (Article 342) has become a particularly contentious battleground, with Meitei demands since 2013 triggering violent backlash from tribal groups who perceive this as "recognition encroachment" (Kamei, 2022). This rigid classification system, rooted in colonial-era tribal categories, fails to account for evolving socio-economic realities



(Xaxa, 2016), intra-group hierarchies, and urban-rural disparities (Ningthouja, 2015). Similarly, Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) established under the Sixth Schedule have created parallel governance structures that, while granting limited self-rule to hill tribes, simultaneously fuel inter-tribal boundary conflicts (Haokip, 2020). The 2019 extension of

the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system exemplifies how ostensibly protective measures can be weaponised, with this British-era regulation now used to harass both outsiders and internal migrants (Amnesty International, 2022). Violent mechanisms remain deeply entrenched in Manipur's recognition struggles. State repression through the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has created a vicious cycle, with its suspension of civil liberties and documented extrajudicial killings (1,528 cases from 2000-2012) fueling insurgent recruitment (HRW, 2023).

The complex interplay of recognition mechanisms in Manipur yields several profound theoretical implications that challenge conventional understandings of multicultural governance. First, they reveal what Taylor (1994) identified as the fundamental paradox of recognition politics - that formal state acknowledgment of group identities, rather than fostering harmonious coexistence, often serves to institutionalize and harden ethnic boundaries.

This is starkly evident in how Scheduled Tribe status and Autonomous District Councils have frozen colonial-era categories into rigid administrative compartments. Second, the Manipur case powerfully validates Fraser's (1995) insight about the inseparable nexus between recognition and redistribution, demonstrating how ostensibly cultural or symbolic claims over language, territory, and political status are fundamentally anchored in material struggles over land, resources, and economic opportunities.

Finally, the empirical evidence from Manipur illustrates Scott's (2009) concept of everyday governance, showing how local actors - from insurgent groups to village councils - creatively appropriate, reinterpret, and subvert state recognition mechanisms to serve their own ends. Together, these theoretical perspectives expose the limitations of top-down recognition frameworks in addressing deeply rooted ethnic conflicts, suggesting that sustainable solutions must simultaneously engage with symbolic claims while transforming the material conditions and power structures that sustain them.

The Manipur experience thus contributes to broader theoretical debates about the relationship between identity, territory and state power in plural societies, while underscoring the need for more nuanced



approaches that bridge recognition with substantive justice.

V. Key Arguments

This study advances three central arguments regarding recognition politics in Manipur:

The Recognition-Redistribution Paradox

Following Fraser's (1995) critique of Taylor (1994), the research demonstrates how state recognition mechanisms in Manipur have prioritized symbolic identity politics over material redistribution, exacerbating rather than resolving conflicts. The Scheduled Tribe status debates exemplify this paradox—while ST classification provides cultural recognition and limited affirmative action benefits, it fails to address the valley-hill development divide where Meitei- dominated areas receive 87% of state infrastructure funds (Manipur Economic Survey, 2022). This creates what Baruah (2020) terms "recognition without resources," fueling zero-sum competition between groups.

Institutionalised Ethnic Entrenchment

The study reveals how colonial-era administrative categories (e.g., "tribe"/"non-tribe") have been ossified through post-independence legal frameworks like Article 371C and the Sixth Schedule. As Scott (2009) predicts in his analysis of state-making projects, these institutional arrangements have hardened ethnic boundaries rather than fostering fluid identities. The 2023 violence demonstrates the lethal consequences—when Kuki and Meitei's communities retreated into ethnically "pure" zones; it mirrored British cartographic practices from the 1919 Government of India Act (Shimray, 2009).

Recognition Framework Reforms

The study's findings suggest several concrete policy reforms while revealing enduring contradictions that resist easy solutions. For recognition framework reforms, the data advocate moving beyond rigid Scheduled Tribe categories to adopt need-based criteria (Xaxa, 2016), which could help depoliticise ethnic identities while targeting actual socioeconomic disadvantage. Decentralizing Autonomous District Council powers to more localised village councils may mitigate inter-tribal boundary conflicts, while proposed sunset clauses for draconian laws like AFSPA (with a suggested 20-year limit) could help break the cycle of militarisation and insurgent recruitment. Economic redistribution mechanisms require urgent attention to address the material foundations of ethnic conflict. A proposed 55:45 valley-hill development fund split would begin correcting historical imbalances, while innovative measures like cross-ethnic job quotas (such as reserving 10% of teaching positions in hill



schools for Meiteis) could foster integration. Technological solutions like blockchain-based land records, potentially piloted in Churachandpur district, might increase transparency in these most sensitive issues. Cultural-symbolic interventions could include multilingual education programs that validate all major languages (Meiteilon alongside Naga and Kuki languages), the transformation of contested sites like Kangla Fort into multivocal heritage spaces, and the establishment of interfaith councils to address religious dimensions of conflict.

VI. Conclusions

This study reveals how state-led recognition policies in Manipur—designed to accommodate ethnic diversity—have instead institutionalised division, transforming cultural identity into a contested resource for political and economic gain. The findings challenge liberal multicultural assumptions, demonstrating that constitutional mechanisms like Scheduled Tribe (ST) status and Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) have entrenched colonial-era binaries (Xaxa, 2016), ignored material inequalities (87% of development funds allocated to Meitei- dominated valley areas), and fueled intergroup resentment. Far from mitigating conflict, these frameworks have created what Baruah (2020) terms "ethno-territorial enclaves," where insurgent- enforced buffer zones (SATPO, 2023) and parallel governance structures exacerbate fragmentation. The weaponisation of identity markers—from the Meitei revival of Sanamahism to Naga dress codes and Kuki church networks (HRW, 2023)—reflects a broader neoliberal commodification of ethnicity, where recognition becomes both a political tool and an economic asset. This aligns with Brass's (1997) instrumentalist theory but extends it by showing how armed groups monetise identity while communities leverage cultural claims for survival. The study proposes three transformative pathways: (1) delinking recognition from territory through needs- based councils (Xaxa, 2016); (2) redistributive justice via hill-valley funding parity (55% hill allocation) and cross-ethnic job quotas; and (3) security reforms like phased AFSPA repeal and gender-inclusive policing (UN Women, 2022). Yet unresolved tensions persist—particularly demographic anxieties (Meitei 1.8 vs. Kuki 3.2 fertility rates) and the state's dual role as both arbitrator and combatant. Ultimately, Manipur's crisis exposes the limits of liberal multiculturalism in postcolonial frontiers. The 2023 violence underscores how recognition, when reduced to a scarce resource, can collapse pluralism into ethnic warfare. The solution may not be amplifying identity politics but transcending them—shifting focus from symbolic status to land,



livelihoods, and dignity. Manipur can only move beyond the paradoxes of recognition toward lasting peace by addressing these material foundations.

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