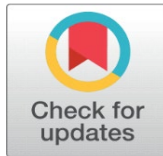
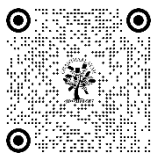


# DESTABILIZATION OF THE MANIPUR STATE AND THE ROLE OF MYANMAR REFUGEES BEHIND THE ARTIFICIALLY ENGINEERED VIOLENCE

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## DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.3690](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.3690)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## ABSTRACT

The destabilization of Manipur is because of breaking the Suspension of Operation ground rules by Kuki's militants that was signed between the central, state, and Kuki's groups in 2008. The sudden increase in Kuki's Population happens after this agreement by bringing huge illegal immigrants from Myanmar to Manipur, India. Building a huge population, using them for poppy cultivation, engaging in drugs and arms trafficking, making huge demographic changes in the Manipur state, and posing a threat to the indigenous people. Manipur is very close to the Golden Triangle and it has an ancient gateway to the Southeast Asian nations through Moreh town. This paper is based on primary data and used secondary data from local papers and journals. The state government is afraid that some hill parts of the state may fall under this region. Districts like Churachandpur, Tengnoupal, Kamjong, and Ukhrul have practiced the highest poppy cultivation followed by other hill districts. The central government decided to start border fencing to stop illegal infiltration and terminate the Free Movement Regime (FMR) which allows both citizens to enter up to 16 km without any proper document but was opposed by other north-eastern states due to its own interest. Temporary refugee camps are set up in the hill districts of Manipur.

**Keywords:** Golden Triangle, Suspension of Operation, Refugees, Myanmar, India

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Manipur is a gateway and has a very similar culture to Southeast Asian nations. Due to this Manipur and northeast India and the rest of India have advantages in many sectors partnering with nations of southeast Asians in terms of economic development, exchange of knowledge, and building of infrastructure. Look East policy was introduced in 1991 by the Indian government to uplift the northeast states through partnership with ASEAN countries. By 2014 it was officially named Act East policy by the Indian government to strengthen more than the former. After 2014 new projects have been taken up in Manipur state and the neighbouring country Myanmar. But due to instability in Myanmar since 1958 many Myanmar citizen fled their own country and settled in the neighbouring countries and India is one of them. Those who fled and entered Manipur mostly were Chin people from the Chin state and these people are the brethren of Kuki of Manipur. Since then, many fled in Manipur from time to time in different waves but never returned to their country. This has happened for the last 6 decades but unfortunately, both the state and the central government don't have the proper policy to deal with refugees. This improper checking of infiltration became a burden after many decades and challenged

**How to cite this article (APA):** Ningthilsana, C., and Shukla, A.S. (2024). Destabilization of the Manipur State and the Role of Myanmar Refugees Behind the Artificially Engineered Violence. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 5(4), 1020–1026.  
doi: 10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.3690

the state and the indigenous people by trying to change the demography, infiltrating the administration, and politics of the state. From the state government point of view, recent violence was between the Kuki militant and the state force challenging the state government trying to break up the state and fulfil their demand for the homeland. As told by one of the cabinet ministers said that around 6 lakhs illegal kuki from Myanmar already settled in Manipur and more than 1500 unrecognized villages had already been set up during the satellite survey. The recent violence that broke out has many factors like breaking of Suspension of operation ground rule, Poppy Cultivation, and Eviction of illegal settlements from the reserved forest, all these factors are co-related to refugees from Myanmar.

### Methodology

1. **Qualitative method:** This paper used primary data collected from different villagers who are reside very closely to the so-called buffer zone areas where violence took place. These villagers know how outsider came and start sheltering from time to time and started controlling the places.
2. **Quantitative method:** This paper used secondary data from different source such as journals, news articles, local papers, etc.

### 3. DISCUSSION

This Paper discuss about what is the root cause of the violence. The paper mainly focusses on the role of refugees from Myanmar and how they empowered the Kuki militant to wage war against state government and especially to the Meitei people by breaking the Suspension of operation ground rule that was signed by central government, state government and the Kuki militant groups. The violence was funded from the profit of Poppy cultivation that has been started decades ago. Refugees are used as man power to cultivate poppy in different parts of hill districts of Manipur. The Kuki village chief give forge Aadhar card to the refugees, building house to settle by cutting wood from the reserved forest which are not allowed and established a new unrecognised village and also enrolled into the voters. The state government started "War on drugs" mission to tackle the poppy cultivation and end to drugs related matter. Since it started the state government with the help of civil power has already destroyed 18000 acres of poppy cultivations and this affects much harder to the business of drug cartel, militant who are protecting the drug lord. And another reason is eviction of illegal settlement from the reserved forest. State government has started eviction of illegal settlement in both hill and valley districts. But the Kuki People violently reacted on May 3<sup>rd</sup> with the help of Kuki militants with armed sophisticated weapons, automatic guns by burning down Meitei houses in Kangbai area which is the border of Churhandpur and Bishnupur districts. Burning down of forest beat office to exterminate the documents related to establishment and records of villages. Cleansing of Meitei people from Kuki dominated districts like Churhandpur, Kangpokpi and Tengnoupal. Meitei also retaliated.

### Suspension of Operation with Kuki's Militant and Breaking Ground Rule

Northeast India has faced numerous difficulties since the country's independence, including persistent demands for autonomy and even outright secession by various militant ethnic groups. While Naga militancy was the first to gain traction in the area, other ethnic groups' movements soon trailed behind. Notably, the Assamese, Bodo's, Kuki's, Nagas, and others have been engaged in violent activities for a considerable amount of time. The Northeast has recently become a firestorm due to demands for self-determination, as individuals there are increasingly identifying themselves according to their ethnicity, language, and territoriality. Currently, various ethnic militants in the region are demanding their ethnic territory. which exacerbates interethnic tensions and makes governing more difficult. Manipur has established a reputation as one of India's most unstable states over the years due to inter-ethnic conflict and the militarization of ethnic groups for various political reasons. The conflicting claims and ideologies only make the situation worse. While the Nagas and Kuki's want their respective ethnic homelands to be carved out of their areas of inhabitation, while Meitei insurgency demands secession from India. Manipur has more ethnic militias than any other region in the nation, and it also experiences more inter-ethnic conflicts regularly (Kom 2011). These were unknown in Manipur until the 1980s, when they became a crucial aspect of the state's politics, causing Manipur to become one of the most anxious states in the area. Throughout time, ethnic bargaining and ethnic assertion in the region have turned to militancy as a means of gaining political and economic advantages from the central government. Despite being the scourge of the region, militancy, or terrorism, its exact meaning remains elusive to analysts across the globe. The signing of a tripartite talk, also known as the Suspension of Operation, as a result of negotiations between the Kuki militants, who are divided into two camps: the Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and the United People's Front (UPF), and the Government of India and

the state government of Manipur, is a significant development for the state of Manipur, despite obstacles related to militancy (Kom 2011). It is therefore anticipated that negotiation, as a peaceful dispute resolution process, will lead to a tangible resolution of ethnic conflict. The agreement to Suspension of Operations (SoO) was officially signed on August 22, 2008, to establish political communication with extremist organizations. Given that the Kuki organizations, who had previously advocated for the establishment of a distinct Kuki state, decided to establish a "Kukiland territorial council," which would have independent financial and administrative powers from the Manipur government (Hussain 2023). Manipur is home to about 32 Kuki insurgent groups, 25 of which are governed by a tripartite agreement between the state and central government. The agreement for the Suspension of Operation is valid for a full year. Nevertheless, the same has been renewed annually. To ensure that the SoO agreement is implemented effectively, representatives from each signatory formed the Joint Monitoring Group (JMG). The agreement states that the UPF and the KNO are obliged to respect Manipur's territorial integrity, the laws of the land, and the Indian Constitution. All forms of atrocities, including extortion, are forbidden to them. The central government will designate specific camps where the militant cadres will be housed. Arms were placed behind a double lock in a secure room. Only to protect their leaders and to guard their camps were the groups given weapons. The underground cadres in the approved camps receive a monthly stipend of Rs 5,000 as part of their rehabilitation package. Additional funding was given to keep the camps operational. On the other hand, Meitei's people demanded the central government withdraw the suspension of operation with Kuki's militants (Hussain 2023). The People's Alliance for Peace and Progress demanded in writing that the South of Korea agreement be revoked because, in their words, the current SoO agreement has strengthened militant groups that are in charge of bringing in Kuki migrants, training them in language and combat in their camps, and using the undocumented immigrants as laborers for drug trafficking, poppy cultivation, and arms runs. It is also stated that Manipur has been experiencing an unrelenting influx of illegal migrants from Myanmar for a considerable amount of time. Due to Kuki Chiefs, officials, and the Suspension of Operation militant groups acceptance of illegal migrants as soldiers. This has resulted in encroachment, deforestation, and other illegal activities on available lands like the Reserve and Protected Forest, protected sites, and wildlife sanctuaries. The SoO pact further strengthened the alleged Kuki militants' hold over these areas as well as the neighbouring regions of Manipur and Mizoram (Hussain 2023). These militants saw an opportunity to make money through narco-related activities like drug trafficking, opium production, and poppy cultivation. The current situation is being described as the result of terrorism carried out by Kuki Militant groups that are allegedly supported by drug trafficking. They are purportedly mediated by Kuki policy makers and high-ranking officials, who use Kuki illegal migrants from Myanmar as soldiers in addition to the Kuki militants who are suspended from operations.

### Golden Triangle

In essence, the current chaos in Manipur, which has resulted in thousands of displaced people and hundreds of fatalities, is more of an act of external aggression against Indian territory than it is an intercommunal ethnic conflict. It appears that armed groups from across the border are actively engaged in killing people and setting houses on fire in the outskirts of the Imphal valley. These groups are armed with sophisticated weaponry. All of this chaos seems to be part of a long-term plan by some extremely strong drug lords operating in the notorious Golden Triangle to expand their operations into the northeastern region of India (Neken n.d.). In some Manipur villages by the 1980s, poppy cultivation had spread to small patches in order to feed the opium addiction of the locals. However, poppy plantations in the Manipur hills appear to have grown alarmingly during the last ten or so years. The inability of the Burmese government to award citizenship to the Rohingyas and the ensuing immigration from Myanmar into Manipur through the porous border have likely contributed to the unexpected growth of the poppies industry in Manipur's hill districts (Neken n.d.). India shared borders with Myanmar, the state of Manipur is the gateway to southeast nations for northeast and the rest of India, smuggling is becoming increasingly popular in the northeaster region of India. Smuggling-related crimes in Manipur include drug trafficking, the smuggling of weapons, counterfeit Indian currency, and goods. Drugs are among the most frequently smuggled goods through this border region. Drug trafficking is a worldwide illegal industry that includes the production, distribution, and sale of drugs that are illegal under applicable laws. South East Asia's "Golden Triangle" and "Golden Crescent" are the production hubs for the majority of the world's drug supply (Singh and Singh 2014). The region of South Asia is a hotbed of illicit drug activity. This region's many nations produce a wide range of drugs, including marijuana, heroin, and opium. The Golden Triangle, which is made up of the triangle-shaped countries of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar in Southeast Asia, is the world's largest producer of drugs. The Asian nations of Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, and Pakistan are included in the Golden Crescent. A significant quantity of heroin is smuggled from this region to other countries. However, in the global market, Golden Crescent heroin is thought to be of lower quality than Golden Triangle

heroin. The state of Manipur's physical proximity to the drug-producing regions of the Golden Triangle, such as Tiddim Kachin and Shan Hills, makes it simple to smuggle drugs from these regions into other parts of the world. Many villages along the border provide a good point of connection between this state and Myanmar, as roads and hill tracts cut through dense jungle. The principal drug hubs in Myanmar are located in Mandalay, Tiddim Tahang, Homatin, Kheinam, and Tamu. These hubs serve as the entry points for the heroin trafficking route that travels through the Indian state of Manipur, passing through the towns of Behiang (Churchandpur District), New Samtal (Chandel District), and Kamjong (Ukhrul District) (Singh and Singh 2014). As a component of India's international trade, border trade with Myanmar has significant potential to impact both countries' economic development in North Eastern India and Myanmar. India's northeastern cities are rapidly developing. And it's now the primary motivation for criminals smuggling goods into these regions of the nation. Lack of coordination between the various agencies involved, including the Narcotic and Crime Bureau, Customs, Department of Revenue Intelligence, State Police, Border Security Force, and Assam Rifles, is one reason why the number of smuggling cases remains high. Smuggled goods pass through Moreh town, which is located 109 km south of Imphal on the Myanmar border, where over 90% of the goods are traded. It is estimated that about 40,000 people in Manipur alone make a living from it, despite the lack of a thorough survey. The unrest in the state and the nation as a whole intensifies due to the ease with which cross-border crime is being committed with Myanmar, a neighbour. Because Manipur and other North-eastern Indian states are situated in a vulnerable geographic area, fencing around them is more challenging. These vulnerable borders are used to smuggle drugs. The price of the drug, known locally as "No 4", has significantly decreased in the local market as a result of the establishment of "clandestine" mobile heroin manufacturing units in the State, according to officials of the centre-run NCB. They also noted that this has significantly increased the number of drug users. In the local market, a kilogramme of heroin is worth between Rs. 10 and Rs. 15 lakhs, but on the global market, it can fetch over Rs. 1 crore. "We have concrete reports that a few mobile heroin production plants have opened in Manipur," NCB Regional Director Vijay Shahasane stated on Monday during a press conference in Imphal (Triangle 2011). Additionally, there have been rumours that drug lords in China, Myanmar, and Nepal are funding illicit poppy farming in Manipur's hill districts (Triangle 2011). Manipur's poppy growers reportedly make about Rs 30,000 per kilogramme from the fluids taken from the seeds, and they added that 400 square metres of plants can yield one kilogramme of these products (Triangle 2011). The creation of a new Golden Triangle along the Indo-Myanmar border is a serious concern that necessitates a coordinated response at all levels. This was stated on September 18 at the 54th United Nations Human Rights Council session in Geneva. According to Athouba, the security of the area and the lives of the indigenous people have been jeopardised by the "emergence of a new Golden Triangle" in the borderland between India and Myanmar. As the spokesperson for the Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI) and vice president of the International Peace and Social Advancement (IPSA), COCOMI is leading the people's movement against narcoterrorism in the midst of the ongoing conflict in Manipur that has resulted in over 170 deaths and over 60,000 displacements (Directory, Pages, Video, World, *et al.* n.d.). A portion of the traffic also comes from North-East India, which shares a border with Burma spanning 1463 km. Road transportation from Myanmar to the northeastern states of Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram is used to carry heroin and opium. The Assam Police believe that drugs, especially heroin and brown sugar, which are produced by drug lords in the "Golden Triangle" region—where premium poppy seeds are grown in large quantities—are shipped to the northeastern states of India. These transshipments pass via Tamu, Myanmar; Moreh, Manipur; Nagaland; and Assam, Myanmar routes between Mizoram and Bangladesh and the Bark Valley (Assam). Guwahati has evolved into the main hub for drug trafficking in the course of events (Baruah and Baruah 2021). But according to reports, some medications made in the "Golden Triangle" are thought to be entering India through Bangladesh. North-East India, which is near the "Golden Triangle," which is the meeting point of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar, has been among the worst-affected areas. The "Golden Triangle," which is notorious for its illicit opium poppy cultivation, is responsible for more than 60% of the world's drug trade and has significantly increased opiate consumption among South-East Asians. This has increased the likelihood that the region will supply the vast majority of the illicit drug trade in the region. The 1,463 km international borders between India and Myanmar are porous, which has resulted in a massive influx of different kinds of drugs (Baruah and Baruah 2021). The topography of the international border with Myanmar is primarily isolated and hilly. From the poppy fields of northeaster Myanmar through Bhamo, Lashio, and Mandalay into the northeaster region of India, both heroin and opium are transported by road. The main routes used by drug traffickers originate in West Myanmar and travel through the states of Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram before arriving in Guwahati, and then on to Kolkata and other parts of the nation. Indeed, the area is thought to be the quickest path from South-East Asia to the Asian metropolises. This has made the North-Eastern area a prime location for a variety of synthetic drugs made in Myanmar by warlords and criminal



groups. The current situation allows for the illegal drug trade to operate both ways because drugs are not only being smuggled into India through the "Golden Triangle," but they are also being smuggled out of the country via the same routes. Kuki Insurgent groups have benefited financially from a thriving drug trade along the Indo-Myanmar border, which allows them to continue their violent military campaigns. An official from the Indian government made a statement in Imphal, predicting that unless Rangoon intervenes by implementing more stringent preventive measures, India will likely experience a drug flood from Myanmar in the coming years. There is also an abundance of this synthetic drug made in Myanmar, China, Bangladesh, Laos, and Thailand. The Bay of Bengal's coastal routes are also used for the transshipment of large amounts of synthetic drugs to India. Thus, regional integration is intimidated by the possibility of the opium trade. Plans for development are underway to improve transport links, lower trade barriers, and ease border controls. This carries the risk of giving networks of organised crime plenty of opportunity to benefit from the process of regional integration.

### **Border Fencing, Free Movement Regime and Opposed by other bodies**

India and Myanmar share a 1648 km land border. The land boundary agreement, signed on March 10, 1967, and ratified shortly after, as well as the maritime boundary agreement of 1982, served as the bilateral agreements that delineated and demarcated the two borders. Similar to other international Indian sub-continental borders, the border between India and Myanmar is characterised by a high porosity (Mohamed and Abdellah 2016). In addition, the topography of the border between India and Myanmar varies, with high ridges and peaks next to the Himalaya in the north and low mountains in the south. Because of this, the area has a lower population density than the borderland between Bangladesh and India. The border between India and Myanmar is extremely vulnerable. This is due to several factors, the first of which is that the border has not yet solidified into lines dividing two independent nations. Secondly, the border crosses through an area that is rife with insurgencies. Third, there is a special arrangement at the India-Myanmar border known as the Free Movement Regime that allows the tribes living there to cross the border 16 km away without needing a visa. This area turns into a safe haven for a variety of illicit activities, including the smuggling of drugs, the trafficking of people, insurgent cross-border movements, and infiltration (Mohamed and Abdellah 2016). According to the state government, maintaining the safety and security of the state and its citizens comes first, even above the development agenda. The government has made a number of important decisions, including building a 398-kilometer border fence, bolstering border security, eliminating the FMR, waging war on drugs to combat the growing threat of drug abuse and trafficking, implementing the Inner Line Permit System, identifying illegal immigrants, and proposing the creation of a population commission to monitor the influx of illegal immigrants and unnatural population growths in certain areas of the state (Directory, Pages, and Video n.d.). He said that work on border fencing with Hybrid Surveillance System (HSS) has already started in certain areas of the state as part of the Central government plan to build it along the 1648 km international boundary shared with Myanmar. The demand for a reversal of the decision to abandon the Free Movement Regime (FMR) and reinstate it in Naga areas along the Indo-Myanmar border was made by the All Naga Students' Association, Manipur (ANSAM), in a memorandum submitted to the Union Home Minister and a call made to the governor (Don't scrap FMR in Naga areas : ANSAM n.d.). According to ANSAM, the reintroduction of FMR, which permits border-dwelling tribe members to travel up to 16 km on either side of the nation without a visa, was a welcome move that lessened hardship and improved the standard of living for those people. As this would mean severing ties with their brethren who live across the border in Myanmar, the Kuki bodies claimed that the decision to abandon the FMR is regrettable and painful. According to the organisations, any government programme or policy is bound to fail unless there is close cooperation and support from the local populace (Directory, Pages, Video, Organisation, *et al.* n.d.). This is the only way the government can maintain peace and security in the area. They went on to say that FMR permits travel up to 16 kilometres on either side of the border. Furthermore, a large number of residents in the border region are members of the same family or tribe. Therefore, ending the FMR would cause close relationships and families to dissolve. Both the central and state government think that FMR is one of the reasons infiltrations of illegal immigrants in the Manipur and other northeastern states.

### **Myanmar refugees' camps in Manipur**

Alarmed by rumours of illegal immigrants from Myanmar settling in Manipur, the government established a Fact-Finding Committee, which discovered 2,480 illegal immigrants or refugees from Myanmar spread across the state's five hill districts. 1,147 of these 2,480 undocumented immigrants were found in Tengnoupal district, where they had founded 13 villages. In ten villages in Chandel, 1,175 persons were found. Recently, illegal immigrants who are refugees from

Myanmar founded these villages. Likewise, six new villages were founded in the Churachandpur district's hilly regions by 154 illegal Myanmar nationals. 718 new refugees were reported to have entered the Tengnoupal district on July 24, 2023. With this, there are currently 3,198 refugees in Manipur (Shimray 2024). The Manipur government interpreted the makeshift settlements in the forest as an attempt by the Kuki-Zo to relocate refugees, or undocumented immigrants, in order to alter the State's demographics or cultivate poppies. It is false to accuse the Kuki-Zo tribe of encouraging illegal immigration to settle in the forests and to blame the villagers for showing empathy and compassion by assisting their fellow refugees from a war (Shimray 2024). A fund totalling Rs 20 lakhs has been approved by the state home department to build two buildings at the Myanmar Refugees in Leikun, Chandel, to house thirty people, according to an official source today. According to the source, of the two buildings that will be built, one will house fifteen Myanmar refugees, and the other will house the home guards who will be assigned to guard the refugees (Directory, Pages, Video, Festival, *et al.* n.d.). Due to unrest brought on by the military crackdown on rebel groups in Myanmar, 4363 citizens of Myanmar have recently arrived in Manipur's Kamjong District in search of safety. This presents a serious threat to the state's ability to maintain law and order. Given that Manipur and Myanmar share a porous border spanning over 398 km, Kamjong District's 104 km border is inadequately fenced, which has allowed a notable influx of refugees into Manipur. These refugees, who primarily consist of Chin tribes with ethnic ties to the Kukis of Manipur (Directory, Pages, Video, and Manipuris n.d.). A refugee conveyed appreciation to the Manipur government for implementing humanitarian relief efforts for the Myanmar refugees, who have been leading a miserable life since departing from the unstable circumstances in Myanmar. He said that they entered Manipur through Moreh after managing to flee the terrible circumstances in Myanmar, and he referred to the Manipur government's assistance in providing them with a place to stay as a blessing. The refugee expressed hope that the Manipur government would take the necessary steps to provide them with supplies for survival until the tense situation in Myanmar eases. According to sources, more than 150 refugees from Myanmar are currently residing in the state as a result of the violence there (Directory, Pages, Video, and Newmai n.d.).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Security arrangement in both the hill and valley is not satisfied by peoples as more than 100,000 central armed forces personnel have been deployed in the state but still the violence continued since 3<sup>rd</sup> May. People criticising the state government, armed personnel for inability to tackle the situation and also blamed the central forces for one sided and bias. To acknowledge and address the root caused of the violence and tackle the situation both the central and state government should understand the role of refugees from Myanmar that they are trying to break by destabilising the state. Bring of National Registered of Citizens, establishment of State population commission, scrapping of Free Movement Regime, Proper Border Fencing of Indo-Myanmar Border 1640 km long, Protection of reserved forest from illegal settlement will help tackle the present violence in long term and long process. But for now, the first thing both the central and state government should do is bringing law and order under control to the state. Basic essential should reached every part of the state. Economic blockade in the State and National highways should open.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I want to acknowledge my supervisor for his guidance while preparing this paper, and I want to give special thanks to the local clubs of Manipur while collecting the primary data.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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