

## Shumang Leela & Suspension of Agreement (SoO)

### Why in News?

In what could have been an anti-climax to a melodramatic Shumang Leela act (a traditional form of theatre in Manipur), 38 Meitei legislators took a six-point public oath-taking at the Kangla Fort, Imphal, on January 24.

### Key Highlight

- The six-points oath called upon the Centre to do the following: abrogate the tripartite Suspension of Agreement (SoO) that it signed with the State and Kuki-Zomi-Hmar militants since 2008; implement the National Register of Citizens but using 1951 as the base year; construct a border-fence across the India-Myanmar border; replace the Assam Rifles with other central paramilitary forces; delete 'Kuki' from the Scheduled Tribe list, and relocate 'Kuki refugees' in Manipur to Mizoram.
- If these were implemented, they would not only further expose the vulnerability of the Kuki-Zomi-Hmar groups but would also effectively erase their long-standing protective discrimination benefits.
- In hindsight, had the above points been played as themes of a Shumang Leela act to showcase what could have transpired in the real world, patrons of Shumang Leela would have been sorely disappointed by the inversion of its conventional themes, wherein brotherhood, tolerance and justice, among others, are sacrificed at the altar of collective self-love and perceived sense of insecurity.
- Clearly, the legislators lost Tagore's dream of 'clear stream of reason' and a fearless mind which should have animated their public action even as they allowed themselves to be consumed by the burning passion to protect the interests of the 'Sanamahi' and Meitei 'community'.
- That this reflection and reasoned public action were missing from the legislators' public action became apparent as the six-points oath failed to mention 'disarmament', which was one of the four resolutions passed earlier by the Assembly.

## A dark message to Delhi from Kangla Fort

In what could have been an anti-climax to a melodramatic Shumang Leela act (a traditional form of theatre in Manipur), 38 Meitei legislators took a six-point public oath-taking at the Kangla Fort, Imphal, on January 24. Unlike the four-generic resolutions passed by the State Assembly, and reportedly endorsed by 34-odd State legislators (this included a Meitei Pangal and five Nagas) three days earlier, the six-points oath (later endorsed by the Chief Minister of Manipur, N. Biren Singh) made explicit its communal overtones by castigating the 'Kuki' for unilaterally fomenting violence since May 3.

**Everything other than disarmament**  
The six-points oath called upon the Centre to do the following: abrogate the tripartite Suspension of Agreement (SoO) that it signed with the State and Kuki-Zomi-Hmar militants since 2008; implement the National Register of Citizens but using 1951 as the base year; construct a border-fence across the India-Myanmar border; replace the Assam Rifles with other central paramilitary forces; delete 'Kuki' from the Scheduled Tribe list, and relocate 'Kuki refugees' in Manipur to Mizoram.

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Clearly, the legislators lost Tagore's dream of 'clear stream of reason' and a fearless mind which should have animated their public action even as they allowed themselves to be consumed by the burning passion to protect the interests of the 'Sanamahi' and Meitei 'community'. That this reflection and reasoned public action were missing from the legislators' public action became apparent as the six-points oath failed to mention 'disarmament', which was one of the four resolutions passed earlier by the Assembly. This is glaring given that almost half of the 6,000 automatic rifles and over five lakh rounds of live ammunitions from various police armouries that were handed over to ragtag mobs are reportedly still with the Arambai Tenggol, the armed militia under whose diktat and supervision this oath-taking event was held.

This, and the fact that much of the arms and ammunition continue to be in the hands of armed



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The Indian state needs to be aware of the implications of the recent oath-taking event by 38 Meitei legislators in Imphal, under the gaze of a militia group

militants across the divide, continue to be a key structural cause of this violence.

#### An abandonment of constitutional duty

Given the extensive reports of Arambais being involved in violent attacks against several Kuki-Zomi-Hmar villages, the legislators' decision to publicly partake in the Arambais agenda only reinforces the partisan image and the role of the Meitei legislators in Manipur's violence. There may have been applause following the Arambai Tenggol's triumphant shout of 'Manipur na yai phare' (Manipur has done well) in Kangla as they retreated to their camps in motor cavalcades after this event, but far from securing the interests of the Meiteis and protecting Manipur's territorial integrity, there are signs of a sense of insecurity. If one is to go by the hostile responses on social media, this event has also sharpened the emotional, demographic and territorial divide between the Kuki-Zomi-Hmar and Meitei.

The immediate fallout of this was evident during the event as three legislators, who included Meghachandra, the President of Congress Pradesh Committee, were physically assaulted by the Arambais for attributing the violence to misrule by the Bharatiya Janata Party in the State. The muzzling of dissent and violent intolerance stems from this. That the Arambai Tenggol brooks no dissent and might unleash terror was also evident when its cadres vandalised the residences of human rights activist Bablo Loitangbam and a retired police official, Thounaojam Brinda, when they implicated the Arambai Tenggol for its role in this cycle of violence.

By giving in to the diktat of the Arambai Tenggol and Korounganba Khuman, its commander-in-chief (out of fear of being labelled 'enemy' and 'traitor' of the Meitei 'community'), the Meitei legislators have abandoned their primary constitutional duty and oath to protect India's Constitution.

This dramatic event is also remarkable for its symbolic and iterative significance. That an armed militia chose Kangla Fort as the site for public oath-taking demonstrates its determination to not only revive the glorious past of *Kangleipak* (the local name for Meitei Kingdom) from its symbolic and traditional seat of power, but also project this as a fulcrum to revive Meitei indigenous tradition, culture, and religion (*Sanamahi*). The event is also significant for another reason – that elected representatives of a democratic state, whose primary oath of allegiance is to the Indian Constitution, are very pliable and can be blackmailed under duress to capitulate to the partisan communal agenda of an unelected, and armed militant group. That elected legislators could be overshadowed in a democratic and constitutional state is disturbing

as it strikes at the very root of the legitimacy of the Indian state.

#### Dangers of a radical agenda

The fact that this event was organised to convey a strong political message to New Delhi is clear as it happened within days of backroom attempts by a three-member team of the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (headed by A.K. Mishra, a retired police officer and an interlocutor with Kuki-Zomi-Hmar SoO groups in Manipur), to persuade the Arambai Tenggol to either cancel or postpone the event. In its ambition to upstage the 38-odd Meitei legislators (plus the Chief Minister who later signed the pledge) as the bearers of democratic legitimacy, the Arambai Tenggol and this oath reinforced the communal and partisan agenda/interest of large segments of Meitei non-state actors and their legislators in targeting the 'Kuki' as the problematic 'other'.

Although the Arambai Tenggol is largely seen as a private militia (started and sustained under the patronage of Leisemba Sanajaoba, the titular king of Manipur, and the powers-that-be), it also represents a calibrated organisational attempt to revive Meitei indigenous culture, tradition and religion (*Sanamahi*). Much like the radicalisation of youths in Punjab in the 1980s under Bhindranwale's Dardami Taksaal, the Arambai Tenggol has succeeded in reorienting many unemployed Meitei youth to the cause of a sovereign *Kangleipak* under the veneer of reviving Meitei's fast-vanishing indigenous religion, traditions and cultures such as traditional martial arts that focus on the use of sword, and a horse-mount dart as a weapon. In doing so, the Arambai Tenggol has galvanised popular interest and support in quick time. However, given that it operates in an insurgent space where the 'radical' agenda and interest of a motley of non-state actors including armed groups which espouse a sovereign *Kangleipak* intersect and often either coalesce or reinforce one another, the Arambai Tenggol is susceptible to manipulation and control by powerful social forces and political actors.

It is precisely here that one should be wary of the Janus-faced Arambai Tenggol. Allowing the mighty Indian state to capitulate to this armed militia, or other powerful social forces, just because it is amenable to cultural and nationalist appropriation by some vested parties in their electoral pursuit cannot be used as a ruse to denude what the eminent sociologist Michael Mann in a different context calls the 'infrastructural power' of the state – that is, the autonomous power to regulate state-society relations. Otherwise, this public event could turn out to be India's Bhindranwale moment again.

*The views expressed are personal*

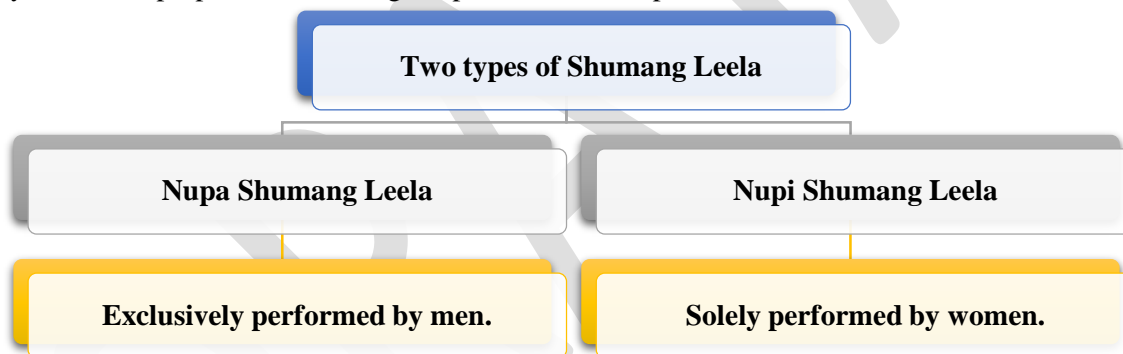
- This is glaring given that almost half of the 6,000 automatic rifles and over five lakh rounds of live ammunitions from various police armouries that were handed over to ragtag mobs are reportedly still with the Arambai Tenggol, the armed militia under whose diktat and supervision this oath-taking event was held.
- This, and the fact that much of the arms and ammunition continue to be in the hands of armed militants across the divide, continue to be a key structural cause of this violence.
- Given the extensive reports of Arambais being involved in violent attacks against several Kuki-Zomi-Hmar villages, the legislators' decision to publicly partake in the Arambais agenda only reinforces the partisan image and the role of the Meitei legislators in Manipur's violence.
- There may have been applause following the Arambai Tenggol's triumphant shout of 'Manipur na yai phare (Manipur has done well') in Kangla as they retreated to their camps in motor cavalcades after this event, but far from securing the interests of the Meiteis and protecting Manipur's territorial integrity, there are signs of a sense of insecurity.
- If one is to go by the hostile responses on social media, this event has also sharpened the emotional, demographic and territorial divide between the Kuki-Zomi-Hmar and Meitei.
- The immediate fallout of this was evident during the event as three legislators, who included Meghachandra, the President of Congress Pradesh Committee, were physically assaulted by the Arambais for attributing the violence to misrule by the Bharatiya Janata Party in the State.
- The muzzling of dissent and violent intolerance stems from this. That the Arambai Tenggol brooks no dissent and might unleash terror was also evident when its cadres vandalised the residences of human rights activist Babloo Loitangbam and a retired police official, Thounaojam Brinda, when they implicated the Arambai Tenggol for its role in this cycle of violence.
- By giving in to the diktat of the Arambai Tenggol and Korounganba Khuman, its commander-in-chief (out of fear of being labelled 'enemy' and 'traitor' of the Meitei 'community'), the Meitei legislators have abandoned their primary constitutional duty and oath to protect India's Constitution.
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- That elected legislators could be overshadowed in a democratic and constitutional state is disturbing as it strikes at the very root of the legitimacy of the Indian state.
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- Much like the radicalisation of youths in Punjab in the 1980s under Bhindranwale's Damdami Taksal, the Arambai Tenggol has succeeded in reorienting many unemployed Meitei youth to the cause of a sovereign Kangleipak under the veneer of reviving Meitei's fast-vanishing indigenous religion, traditions and cultures

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### What is Shumang Leela?

- Traditional form of theatre in Manipur with unique gender role reversals.
- Male actors play female roles, and female artists portray male characters in female theatre groups.
- Originated as a comedic genre for royalty, it has transformed into a potent medium for mass education, entertainment, and relaxation.
- In Nupi Shabis, men take on all female roles in the plays.
- Believed to have roots in Lai Haraoba, a ritual of the Meitei community in Manipur.
- Plays serve the purpose of educating the public on social, political, and economic issues.



### Kangla Fort

- Kangla Fort stands as a significant historic and archaeological site in the heart of Imphal, the capital city of Manipur.
- Traditionally, it was the seat of power for the Meitei rulers of Manipur until 1891.
- The old Govindajee Temple, situated adjacent to Kangla Fort, is the largest Vaishnav Hindu temple in Imphal.
- The temple is in close proximity to the palace of the former rulers of the Manipur Kingdom.
- The outer and inner moats, along with other relics, vividly showcase Manipur's rich art and architectural heritage.



## Suspension of Operations (SoO) Agreement

### Ceasefire Agreement (2008) Overview

### Kuki Insurgent Groups under SoO Agreement

### Kukiland Territorial Council

- **Ceasefire Agreement (2008) Overview**
  - Aimed at initiating political dialogue with Kuki insurgent groups and ending violence.
  - Signatories: Centre, Manipur Government, Kuki National Organisation (KNO), United People's Front (UPF).
  - 25 groups included (17 under KNO, 8 under UPF).
- **Kuki Insurgent Groups under SoO Agreement:** Nearly 30 groups in Manipur, 25 under the Suspension of Operations (SoO) Agreement.
- **Kukiland Territorial Council:** Shift from demanding a separate state to advocating for a territorial council with financial and administrative autonomy.

## Terms of SoO Agreement

### Tenure

### Rehabilitation Package

### Current Status

#### Tenure

- Initially one year, extendable based on implementation progress.
- Extensions granted by the Government annually, amid threats of breaching the agreement by Kuki outfits.
- Joint Monitoring Group (JMG) oversees implementation.
- No operations allowed by security forces or underground groups.
- Militant cadres confined to designated camps, arms stored under strict security measures.
- Responsibilities outlined for insurgents: Adherence to Indian Constitution, laws, and territorial integrity; prohibition of atrocities and extortion.

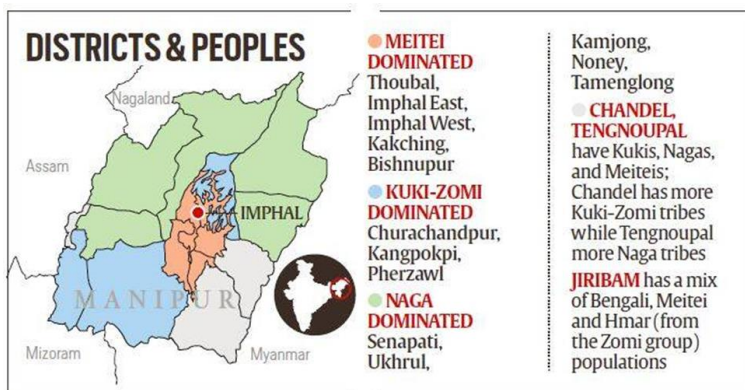
**Rehabilitation Package:** UG cadres in designated camps receive a monthly stipend of Rs 5000.

#### Current Status

- Manipur government decides to withdraw from SoO agreement with Kuki National Army (KNA) and Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA).
- Allegations of their involvement in inciting agitation among forest encroachers cited as the reason for withdrawal.

## Who are Kukis?

- The Kukis are a diverse ethnic group residing in the northeastern regions of India, specifically Manipur, Mizoram, and Assam, as well as parts of Bangladesh and Myanmar, primarily in hilly areas.
- In Manipur, the Kukis constitute around 30% of the total population and coexist with the Naga tribes, leading to historical conflicts related to territorial claims.



- The Naga-Kuki clashes stem from overlapping territories, with some Kuki areas coinciding with the envisioned Naga homeland of Greater Nagaland or Nagalim.
- Apart from the Kukis and Nagas, the Meiteis, who are non-tribal Vaishnavite Hindus, reside in the valley region of Manipur.
- The Kuki insurgency has its roots in the post-independence period when Manipur acceded to India, and internal autonomy was promised but not fully realized until 1972.
- The imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in 1980 intensified the conflict, with allegations of excesses by the army.
- During the 1980s, the Kuki insurgency gained momentum with the formation of the Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and its military wing, the Kuki National Army (KNA).
- Ethnic clashes between Nagas and Kukis in the early 1990s led to the formation of various Kuki insurgent groups, resulting in significant casualties.
- Despite a reduction in clashes in recent decades, lingering tensions between the Naga and Kuki ethnic groups persist.

## Delisting some Kuki-Zomi tribes

- The Manipur High Court directed the State government to recommend the inclusion of Meiteis in the Scheduled Tribes (ST) list to the Centre.
- The primary reason for the Meiteis' demand for ST status is their inability to own land in forested hill districts, designated for ST landownership.
- The ethnic conflict between valley-based Meitei people and hills-based Kuki-Zo (ST) communities ignited in 2023, prompted by the Manipur High Court's directive.
- The Centre requested the Manipur Government to review a representation advocating the removal of specific Kuki and Zomi tribes from Manipur's ST list.
- The Chief Minister of Manipur mentioned the possibility of forming a special committee to address the issue.
- The representation challenging the ST list was sent by the National Secretary of the Republican Party of India (Athawale) in Manipur.

### Key points from the representation

### Significance of the representation

### Analysis of the representation

#### **Key points from the representation**

- The representation argued for the inclusion of Meiteis in the ST list by proposing the exclusion of certain Kuki and Zomi tribes.
- It objected to three specific entries in Manipur's ST list: "Any Mizo (Lushai) Tribes," "Zou Tribes," and "Any Kuki Tribes."
- The main argument for excluding these entries is their alleged lack of "indigenous" status in Manipur, with no mention in pre-Independence Censuses.
- The representation claimed that the ambiguity of "Any Mizo (Lushai) Tribes" and "Any Kuki Tribes" in the ST list has facilitated illegal immigrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh in wrongly availing ST benefits in India.

#### **Significance of the representation**

- This marks the first instance of the Meitei community advocating for their ST inclusion while contesting the eligibility of specific Kuki and Zomi tribes.
- The move could potentially impact the criteria for defining STs, which have remained unchanged since the introduction of the Lokur Commission's recommendations in 1965.



### Analysis of the representation

- The claim that the contested communities were not residing in Manipur during the 1950 Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) list publication is debunked.
- The 1950 list included three tribes for Manipur — "Any Kuki Tribe," "Any Lushai Tribe," and "Any Naga Tribe," encompassing respective sub-tribes.
- No empirical evidence currently supports the assertion that the presence of these tribes' names in the ST list facilitated organized illegal immigration into Manipur. The representation's claim that the entries were not specifically recommended by the First Backward Classes Commission is contradicted by the Commission's recommendation for individual tribe names in the ST list.
- The 1956 revision of Manipur's ST list included 29 entries with individual tribe names, retaining "Any Mizo (Lushai) Tribe" and including the tribe "Zou."
- The Lokur Commission addressed the debate by categorizing tribes as larger groups with sub-tribes, aiming to reconcile the inclusion of whole tribe names or specific tribe names in the ST list.

### Scheduled Tribes List

- It is a constitutional document that recognizes the rights and privileges of certain communities in India that are considered to be historically disadvantaged and marginalized.
- The list is not static but can be amended by the Parliament of India under Article 342 of the Constitution.

### Who should be allowed to "add, subtract, or modify" the Scheduled Tribes List?

- This question has been a matter of debate and controversy for decades, as different stakeholders have different views and interests on the issue.

### Important Commissions

Commission	Establishment and Chairman	Mandate and Recommendations	Submission Date
<b>First Backward Class Commission</b>	Established by Presidential Order on Jan 29, 1953, under the Chairmanship of Shri Kaka Kalelkar (Kaka Kalelkar Commission)	Submitted a report on March 30, 1955	March 30, 1955
<b>Lokur Committee (1965)</b>	Criteria for defining a community as a tribe: indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical	Provided criteria for defining tribes; focused on primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, and	-

## Scheduled Tribe (ST)

**Definition**

Article 366 (25) of the Constitution of India defines Scheduled Tribes as tribes or tribal communities identified under Article 342.

**Identification Process**

**Article 342(1)**

The President, in consultation with the Governor, can specify tribes or tribal communities as Scheduled Tribes through public notification

**Article 342(2)**

Parliament has the authority to include or exclude communities from the Scheduled Tribes list.

**Criteria for Specification**

Primitiveness, geographical isolation, shyness of contact, and social, educational & economic backwardness distinguish Scheduled Tribes from other communities.

**Inclusion Procedure**

- Proposal originates from the State or Union Territory government.
- Sent to the Union Tribal Affairs Ministry.
- Ministry forwards it to the Office of the Registrar General of India (ORGI).
- If ORGI approves, the proposal goes to the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST).
- The concurrence of these institutions is required before forwarding the proposal to the Cabinet for amending the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950.



Commission	Establishment and Chairman	Mandate and Recommendations	Submission Date
	isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large	shyness of contact with the larger community	
<b>Bhuria Commission (2002-04)</b>	Constituted in 1995 to recommend provisions for the extension of panchayat raj to Scheduled Areas; recommended inclusion of villages (yet to be implemented)	Recommendations included provisions for extending panchayat raj to Scheduled Areas, including specific villages, - pending implementation by the President of India	
<b>Xaxa Committee (2013)</b>	Mandated to examine the socio-economic, educational, and health status of tribal communities and recommend intervention measures	Submitted a report in May 2014; focused on assessing and improving the socio-economic, educational, and health status of tribal communities, providing recommendations for intervention measures	May 2014

## Why does the Meitei Community want ST Status?

- The Meitei community, represented by the Scheduled Tribes Demand Committee of Manipur (STDCM), has been advocating for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status since 2012.
- Their request is motivated by the desire for constitutional safeguards to protect their culture, language, and identity.
- The Meiteis contend that they were acknowledged as a tribe prior to Manipur's merger with India in 1949, asserting that their tribal identity eroded post-merger.
- Exclusion from the ST list has left the Meitei community feeling marginalized and devoid of constitutional protections.
- The STDCM emphasizes that the Meitein/Meetei people have experienced gradual marginalization in their ancestral land.
- Census data reveals a decline in their population share from 59% in 1951 to 44% in 2011, reinforcing their sense of vulnerability.
- Granting ST status is seen by the Meitei community as a crucial step to preserve their ancestral land, uphold traditions, culture, and language, and shield themselves against external influences.

## Why are Other Tribal Groups in Manipur opposing the Demand of Meiteis?



- **Meitei's Dominance:** The Meitei community, with a majority in population and political representation, resides mainly in the valley where most Assembly constituencies are located.

- **Job Loss and Affirmative Action Concerns:** Other Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities fear that granting ST status to the Meiteis may lead to job losses and competition for affirmative action benefits.
- **Recognition of Meitei Culture:** The Meitei language is already listed in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution.
- Some sections of the Meitei community fall under Scheduled Castes (SC) or Other Backward Classes (OBC), providing specific opportunities.
- **Political Influence Agenda:** Concerns exist that the Meitei community's push for ST status aims to gain political influence, diverting attention from the political demands of other tribal groups like the Kukis and Nagas.
- **History of Kuki-Naga Standoffs:** The Kukis, encompassing multiple tribes in the Northeast, have a history of violent conflicts with the Nagas over trade and cultural dominance, resulting in torched villages and civilian casualties.
- **Tribal Eviction Discontent:** Discontent arises from state government notices labeling 38 villages in the Churachandpur-Khoupum Protected Forest area as "illegal settlements" and residents as "encroachers." Eviction drives initiated by the government have led to clashes.
- **Administrative Autonomy Violation:** Kuki groups argue that the survey and eviction violate Article 371C, which grants administrative autonomy to tribal-dominated hill areas in Manipur.