



## Evaluating Peace Efforts in the Meetei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo Conflict Through the Lens of Ripeness Theory

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### Abstract

This study evaluates peace efforts taken up in the Meetei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo conflict in Manipur, India, through the lens of William Zartman's Ripeness theory. The conflict, marked by conflicting aspirations and violent clashes, presents a complex case for conflict resolution. This work examines the fundamental ideas of this theoretical approach to conflict resolution research. According to the ripeness theory, parties will most likely resolve conflicts when the conflicting parties reach a 'ripe moment,' characterised by a 'mutually hurting stalemate' (MHS) and a perception of a way out (WO). This moment is closely linked to an upcoming past, or recently avoided disaster. This study analyses peace efforts and looks for possible ripe moments of the conflict and analyses whether an MHS exists. Through qualitative examination of significant events and secondary data, the paper aims to evaluate these peace efforts and identify why conflict resolution often fails to yield positive outcomes, using Zartman's ripeness theory as a framework for perspective. The results indicate that understanding and capitalizing on the 'ripe moment' can significantly enhance the likelihood of successful conflict resolution between the Meetei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo groups. The study identifies the absence of a mutually hurting stalemate and the lack of a perceived way out as the key reasons why peace negotiations have failed. This study enhances conflict resolution by illustrating the relevance of Ripeness Theory to ethnic conflicts and providing an outline for policymakers and mediators to identify and address critical junctures in the peace process.

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### Introduction

Manipur, an enchanting state in northeastern India, is characterized by breathtaking landscapes, remarkable art, and a vibrant culture. It provides a distinctive experience of varied ethnic communities, where hills and valleys, along with their diverse traditions, dialects, and customs, converge to form a dynamic cultural heritage.

Manipur comprises three principal ethnic groups: the Meetei, Nagas, and Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes. The state is geographically partitioned into two separate regions: the valley and the hills. The valley comprises around 10% of the whole geographical area, whereas the hills include 90%. The Meetei, the predominant ethnic group, mostly reside in the valley, while the hills are inhabited by several tribes. The inhabitants of the hills are mostly classified into two principal ethnic groups: the Nagas and the Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes. Historically, these three communities coexisted happily, participating in interactions that influenced their cultures and lifestyles.

It is important to note that ethnic conflicts often arise in societies characterized by multi-ethnicity. Manipur, a highly diverse society with multiple ethnic groups, is particularly vulnerable to such conflicts. The last decade of the twentieth century is best remembered in Manipur for a series of violent ethnic clashes. The first major conflict was the Naga and Kuki clash, which began in 1992 and continued until 1998. Clashes between the Meeteis and Muslims occurred in 1993. In 1995, a conflict erupted between the Kuki and Tamils in Moreh, and the Kuki and Paite clashes took place in 1997–1998 (Singh, 2006) <sup>[9]</sup>. The most recent ethnic conflict in the state was the Meitei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo clash of 2023.

### Purpose of the Study

This study aims to evaluate the peace initiatives in the Meitei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo conflict using William Zartman's ripeness theory. Specifically, it seeks to determine whether the necessary conditions for successful conflict resolution exist by examining the willingness of both parties to negotiate and the presence of a perceived way out. The study aims to assess the effectiveness of current peace efforts and provide recommendations for fostering a sustainable resolution.

### Methodology

The research methodology for evaluating peace efforts in the Meitei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo conflict through the lens of ripeness theory employs qualitative methods to gain in-depth insights into the conflict dynamics and negotiation processes. The study examines the key events and factors leading to the conflict. Investigations of these events and factors follow, facilitating the inquiry into the underlying causes of the conflict and enhancing the tools available for the conflict resolution process. A thorough examination of secondary data sources accompanies event analysis. These include the sources in authored and edited books, scholarly articles, media coverage, etc.

Furthermore, secondary data informs the context and background of the conflict and ripeness theory, which allows a deeper understanding of the concepts and theories involved. By integrating multiple data sources, this methodology provides a comprehensive evaluation of the success or failure of peace efforts in the Meitei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo conflict through the lens of ripeness theory.

### Importance of Conflict Resolution

Peter Wallensteen (2018) <sup>[10]</sup> emphasizes the importance of mutual recognition and sustainable solutions in resolving conflicts instead of one-sided victories that often lead to further tensions. He describes conflict resolution as a process by which two sides reach an agreement that meets each side's core concerns, recognizes each other's continuing existence, and stops violence. According to Wallensteen, a peace agreement differs from a capitulation agreement, as the former guarantees mutual recognition and coexistence. In contrast, capitulation means one side is ultimately defeated and has no incentive to care about the other's interests or position. He emphasizes that to achieve sustainable peace, both conflicting parties must coexist with mutual respect for each side's continued presence. Here, the emphasis is on the importance of mutuality in conflict resolution, a particularly relevant concept when examining ripeness theory.

### Meitei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo ethnic Conflict

On 3 May 2023, ethnic violence broke out in Manipur, between the Meitei and the Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribal communities. The confrontation transpired during a solidarity march orchestrated by the All-Tribal Students' Union Manipur (ATSUM), a tribal student organization. The march was organized in response to the Manipur High Court's instruction to the state government, pushing it to propose to the central government the Meitei community's request for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. The demonstration opposed the Meitei community's request for Scheduled Tribe recognition. The tribal solidarity march elicited a reaction from several valley-based groups, which established counter-blockades in various areas of the valley. Meanwhile, the demonstration quickly escalated into violence, marked by widespread gunfire in the streets of Churachandpur with advanced weaponry. Reports also indicated the arson of Meitei residences in Churachandpur Torbung and other areas predominantly inhabited by the Kuki-Chin-Mizo community, to which the Meitei responded, leading to the escalation of the conflict, which resulted in considerable fatalities and compelled numerous individuals to abandon their residences. The unrest resulted in extensive devastation, with thousands of homes incinerated and places of worship, including temples and churches, desecrated and torched. A multitude of individuals sustained injuries, and several are unaccounted for.

### Roots of the Meitei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo Conflict

Although the High Court directive and the subsequent peace march acted as immediate catalysts, the conflict must be understood in the context of deeper, underlying issues that had been building over time. These included illegal migration from Myanmar, strict government policies against poppy cultivation in hill districts, and the Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. The Kuki community perceived these policies as discriminatory and anti-tribal, particularly in the context of land disputes, forced evictions, and withdrawal from the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with Kuki militant groups (Shimrah, 2023; Das, 2023) <sup>[8, 1]</sup>. The ST demand by the Meitei was also opposed by tribal groups, who saw it as a threat to their political representation and land rights (Meitei, 2023) <sup>[5]</sup>.

### Peace Initiatives in Manipur

Following the outbreak of ethnic violence in Manipur, multiple actors called for peace and dialogue. The Governor, political leaders, MLAs, and civil society organizations—including AMCO (All-Manipur Christian Organisation), SOREPA (the Socialist Revolutionary Party) Kangleipak, UNC (United Naga Council), MBC (Manipur Baptist Convention), and NMU (Naga Women's Union)—appealed to communities to avoid violence and restore normalcy (The Sangai Express, 2023a) <sup>[11]</sup>. The state and Indian governments established peace committees at the constituency and state levels, while COCOMI (Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity), and ANSAM (Naga Students' Association, Manipur) encouraged cooperation and constructive dialogue. Interfaith efforts led by MBC and appeals from regional student bodies, Zeliangrong organizations, and international actors, such as the European

Parliament, further reinforced calls for restraint and reconciliation (The Sangai Express, 2023b) <sup>[12]</sup>. These combined efforts reflect widespread commitment from political, religious, and civil society groups to restore lasting peace in Manipur.

### **Persistent Violence Despite Widespread Peace Efforts in Manipur**

Notwithstanding extensive peace initiatives from multiple perspectives, the outcomes have been unsatisfactory. Violence has continued unabated despite numerous appeals and denunciations calling for the cessation of hostilities and a restoration of peace. A notable setback transpired within days following the establishment of a peace commission by the Indian government, chaired by Manipur Governor Anusuiya Uikey. The committee encountered failure when COCOMI a prominent Meitei civil society organization, retracted its involvement. Moreover, two significant Kuki-Chin-Mizo organizations—the Kuki Inpi Manipur and the Committee for Tribal Unity Sadar Hills—vehemently opposed the establishment of the peace committee, hence exacerbating the challenges in promoting dialogue and reconciliation. (Meitei, Kuki bodies slam 'peace committee', 2023) <sup>[4]</sup>

Further instance of an endeavour that produced no concrete outcomes transpired when MLAs from the Meitei, Kuki-Chin-Mizo, and Naga communities assembled for the first time in 17 months since the onset of hostilities to seek a peaceful resolution to the persistent conflict. The assembly unanimously decided to appeal to the state's populace, encouraging all communities to reject violence to prevent further loss of innocent life. Although the MLAs deliberated on prospective actions and plans for the forthcoming days, no definitive results were attained. (Manipur peace efforts, 2024) <sup>[3]</sup>

### **Ripeness Theory Overview**

Having examined peace efforts and their outcomes, let us now explore the key reasons for their failures through the lens of ripeness theory by addressing the fundamental question: Why did these efforts fall short?

In conflict resolution, ripeness theory provides a crucial framework for understanding why some peace efforts succeed while others fail, emphasizing the importance of timing and favourable conditions over the substance of proposed solutions. Zartman (2001) <sup>[14]</sup> argues that while most studies focus on the content of proposed solutions, increasing attention is being given to the critical role of timing in achieving successful conflict resolution. He contends that even skilled mediators and fair proposals will fail if the conflict is not "ripe" for resolution. Rather than emphasizing specific solutions, ripeness theory underscores the significance of timing. A conflict becomes ripe when both sides acknowledge that continued fighting is too costly and that negotiation presents a viable alternative (O'Kane, 2006) <sup>[7]</sup>. When neither side sees a path to victory and resources are depleted, the incentive to negotiate grows stronger (Mooradian & Druckman, 1999) <sup>[6]</sup>. Thus, identifying the right moment is essential for conflict resolution (Kleiboer, 1994) <sup>[2]</sup>.

Two key elements must be present for a conflict to be ripe for resolution. The perception by the parties is that they are in a mutually hurting stalemate (MHS), and there is a sense that a negotiated solution is possible (Way Out).

### **Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS)**

The concept is based on the idea that conflicting parties may reach a stage where they cannot further escalate their efforts to secure victory. In other words, they become trapped in a stalemate and find themselves in a deadlock where neither side can advance the conflict toward a decisive win. This impasse grows increasingly burdensome for both parties, though the level of suffering and its reasons may differ. Consequently, they start looking for an alternative solution or a means to end the conflict (Way Out), as persisting in the struggle is neither feasible nor desirable (Zartman, 2008) <sup>[15]</sup>.

### **Way Out (WO)**

A "Way Out" refers to the perception that a resolution is attainable, even if the parties have not yet identified a specific solution. What matters is their belief that a negotiated settlement is possible. Additionally, both sides must share this belief and be willing to work together toward a resolution. Without this sense of a 'Way Out,' the pressure from the Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS) would leave them feeling stuck with no viable alternatives (Zartman, 2008) <sup>[15]</sup>.

The Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS) and the perception of a Way Out (WO) are rooted in how the conflicting parties view and interpret their circumstances. The theory places significant emphasis on perception, highlighting that the parties' perception of the situation, rather than the actual conditions, drives them to seek resolution. In other words, how the parties interpret their circumstances, their perception, creates a Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS), often shaped by actual, objective conditions.

Crucially, what generates an MHS is not merely the existence of an objective deadlock but the parties' recognition of it. If the parties do not perceive themselves as stuck, an MHS has not yet formed. An MHS is defined by the parties' perception of a deadlock, not just objective realities. If they fail to see their situation as an impasse, an MHS does not exist. However, if they perceive themselves to be at a standstill, regardless of the evidence, an MHS is present (Zartman & De Soto, 2010) <sup>[13]</sup>.

### **Previous Applications of Ripeness Theory in Conflict Resolution**

Ripeness theory has been widely applied in conflict resolution studies across various countries, sharing insightful analysis of when parties are most likely to engage in negotiations. In nations such as Zimbabwe, Namibia, Angola, Eritrea, South Africa, the Philippines, Cyprus, Iran-Iraq, Israel, and Mozambique, ripeness theory has helped analyse the conditions that lead to the initiation of talks and the factors contributing to their failure. Studies consistently show that ripeness is a crucial framework for understanding when negotiations succeed, when both sides perceive that they have no better option than to engage in dialogue, or fail when conditions for resolution are ignored or dismissed. (Zartman, 2001) <sup>[14]</sup>.

### **Failure of Peace Initiatives in Manipur: A Ripeness Theory Perspective**

The absence of a Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS) is a key factor in the failure of peace efforts in the Meitei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo conflict in Manipur, India.

According to Zartman's theory, for conflict resolution to succeed, both sides must perceive that the conflict is causing

mutual harm and that the current situation is unsustainable. In the Meitei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo conflict, peace efforts have consistently fallen short because the conditions outlined in Zartman's ripeness theory for effective conflict resolution were absent. Specifically, the absence of a Mutually Hurting Stalemate and the lack of a perceived way out have hindered progress. Without these essential components, the conflicting parties have been unable to achieve a sustainable resolution, leading to repeated failures in successful conflict resolution. The Meitei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo conflict, rooted in ethnic, historical, socioeconomic, and political issues, has seen numerous attempts at negotiation and peacebuilding. However, the primary reason these efforts have largely failed is that the conditions for ripeness were either absent or not recognized.

### **Absence of a Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS)**

The absence of a Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS) is a critical factor contributing to the repeated failure of peace efforts in the Meitei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo conflict in Manipur, India. According to Zartman's ripeness theory, successful conflict resolution requires both sides to perceive that the conflict is causing mutual pain and that the status quo is untenable. In the Meitei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo conflict, both communities have endured significant losses; however, the perception of a mutually hurting stalemate has not fully materialized. Violence and forced displacement have created an urgent crisis, but deep-seated historical grievances and mutual suspicion have prevented both parties from recognizing the conflict as damaging enough to seek a negotiated solution. Despite several attempts at resolution, the absence of a Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS) remains a major barrier, as both sides have yet to perceive the conflict as causing enough damage to make the status quo unsustainable and prompt negotiations.

### **Absence of a Way Out**

Zartman's theory also highlights that both parties must perceive a feasible way out of the conflict for resolution to be possible. In the Meitei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo conflict, however, this perception has been lacking. For instance, the Kuki-Chin-Mizo community's demands for territorial autonomy have been opposed by the Meiteis, who view it as a threat to Manipur's Territorial integrity. Similarly, the Meitei demand for Schedule Tribe (ST) status has been rejected by the Kuki-Chin-Mizo s. These opposing positions have further complicated efforts to find a mutually acceptable solution. Peace efforts have found it hard to offer a clear and mutually acceptable path forward. Temporary ceasefires and government efforts have been deemed insufficient, as they do not address the root causes of the conflict. Neither party has considered negotiation without a credible and inclusive resolution.

### **Timing and Readiness**

When it comes to peace initiatives, timing is key. According to Zartman, such ripe conflicts are only amenable to resolution when the parties are genuinely willing to negotiate. Peace efforts had often been out of step with the readiness of different parties to come to terms in the context of the Meitei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo conflict. Many of these initiatives have come too late, often as reacting to violence, rather than addressing its roots causes before reaching a tipping point. The deep-seated mistrust between the Meitei and Kuki-Chin-

Mizo communities has further undermined these efforts. There can be no incentive for peace unless trust exists in such a way that peace initiatives have a chance to stick. For negotiations to work, both parties must understand the situation and be willing to negotiate constructively. The same willingness has been lacking in the Meitei-Kuki-Chin-Mizo conflict, where historical grievances, territorial stakes, and mutual distrust stand in the way of coming together. As a consequence, peace efforts have repeatedly failed, illustrating the need to match the timing of diplomatic efforts to the willingness of the parties to engage.

### **Conclusion**

There have been three primary explanations put forward as to why peace negotiations in the Meitei-Kuki-Chin-Mizo conflict have so far failed to obtain a meaningful outcome: the absence of a Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS) or lack of common pain, the absence of an out or way out, and that the precedence or conditions for negotiations were misaligned in terms of timing and readiness. The Ripeness theory relies on the premise that conflict can only be settled if both sides acknowledge the high costs of continued violence (MHS) and that both see the negotiation as a valid alternative (Way Out) and the literal engagement. This means building on two realities to eliminate the barriers to lasting peace. Both communities must feel the urgency of ending the conflict and perceive the possibility to reconcile.

The study's findings underscore how an understanding of and ability to leverage a 'ripe moment' can significantly enhance the chances for a successful peace process. At the same time, those responsible for dealing with conflict will also appreciate the significance of timing. Not only does this study emphasize the importance of Ripeness Theory in the context of ethnic conflicts

In conclusion, the Meitei and Kuki-Chin-Mizo conflict presents a relevant case study of how Ripeness Theory can be used to analyse complex, deeply rooted conflicts. Policymakers and mediators can reach better outcomes in similarly intractable conflicts by concentrating on establishing the proper conditions for negotiation, such as by fostering a shared understanding of the stalemate, investing in establishing trust, and ensuring that the dispute's timing aligns with readiness in negotiations.

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