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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# THE POSITION OF PANGAL IN THE ONGOING MANIPUR CRISIS: BETWEEN IDENTITY AND SURVIVAL

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### ABSTRACT

When the ethnic conflict in Manipur erupted with devastating force in May 2023, the world's attention quickly polarised around two primary communities: the valley-dominant Meitei (predominantly Hindu) and the hill-dwelling Kuki-Zo (predominantly Christian). Villages burned, thousands were displaced, and the fault lines of ethnicity, religion, and land rights tore open the social fabric of one of India's most culturally layered states. Yet in the architecture of this tragedy, one community has remained persistently invisible - the Pangal, the Muslim of Manipur. The Pangal occupy a paradoxical position in the ongoing crisis. Ethnically, linguistically, and culturally bound to Manipur, they share the valley, the mother tongue, and many of the social customs of their Hindu counterparts. And yet, as Muslims, they are viewed with suspicion by segments of their own ethnic community, while remaining outside the fold of solidarity extended to Kuki or Naga. They belong everywhere and nowhere - a community whose very existence complicates the neat binaries that partisan narratives of the Manipur crisis prefer. This paper seeks to examine the distinct vulnerabilities, political marginalisations, and quiet acts of survival that define the Pangal experience within the current conflict. It argues that understanding their position is not peripheral but essential to any honest reckoning with the deeper crisis of belonging, citizenship, and pluralism in Manipur.

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## INTRODUCTION

The term "Pangal" derived from the Manipuri word for Muslim denotes a distinct ethno-religious community that has inhabited the Imphal valley for centuries. Numbering approximately 8 to 10 percent of Manipur's population, the Pangal are primarily concentrated in the valley districts: Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal, and Bishnupur. Historically, they trace their origins to the Islamic missionaries and traders who arrived in Manipur during the medieval period, particularly following the reign of Meidingu Kiyamba in the 15th century and the later patronage of King Charairongba in the 18th century. Unlike immigrant Muslim communities in other parts of Northeast India, the Pangal are deeply autochthonous. They speak Manipuri, practice many of the valley's cultural traditions, participate in Manipuri classical arts, and consider the Imphal valley their ancestral homeland. Their mosques stand beside Sanamahi shrines and Vaishnavite temples; their festivals are woven into the broader calendar of Manipuri cultural life. This deep integration is precisely what makes their current predicament so instructive about the nature of the crisis itself. In 1995, following prolonged advocacy, the Pangal were included in the Central list of Other Backward Classes (OBC), a recognition of their socioeconomic vulnerability. However, their exclusion from Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, a demand some sections of the broader Meitei community now champion has distinct implications for them, raising questions about the purposes and effects of such categorisations on minority sub-groups.

### *The Anatomy of the Manipur Crisis and the Pangal's Place Within It*

**The Proximate and Structural Triggers:** The Manipur conflict of 2023 was ignited by a complex interaction of political decisions, legal rulings, and long-festering grievances. The Manipur High Court's April 2023 direction asking the state government to consider extending ST status to the Meitei community was received by the Kuki-Zo hill communities as an existential threat to their reserved land rights and political representation. On May 3, 2023, a "Tribal Solidarity March" in the Churachandpur district escalated into violence that rapidly spread across the state, leaving hundreds dead, thousands of homes and churches razed, and an estimated 60,000 to 70,000 people internally displaced. Deeper structural drivers include competition over forest land and poppy cultivation, the politics of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system, the militarisation of Manipur under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), growing Meitei nationalism, and the demographic anxieties stoked by political actors. In this charged landscape, the Pangal find themselves threading an extraordinarily delicate needle.

**Neither Fully Protected Nor Fully Included:** The Pangal are, by all cultural and residential markers, valley people. Yet the political mobilisation of the Meitei community in this crisis has been animated significantly by a specific brand of Hindu Meitei identity politics as one in which the Pangal, as Muslims, are at best tolerated companions and, at worst, objects of suspicion. Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun, the two armed civilian groups that have played an active and

widely documented role in the valley during the conflict, are steeped in the ideology of Meitei cultural revivalism and Sanamahism, the indigenous religion of the Meitei. Reports from human rights organisations have noted incidents where Pangal localities in Thoubal and Bishnupur were themselves targeted or pressured, their loyalties questioned by their own ethnic community. At the same time, the Pangal are not Kuki-Zo. They do not share the hill communities' grievances around forest rights or tribal land protections. They are not represented in the Kuki-Zo demand for a separate administration or Union Territory. The conflict's violence has, in part, displaced Kuki-Zo Christians from the valley and Meitei Hindus from certain hill-adjacent areas but the Pangal, clustered in valley districts, occupy a zone where the dynamics of threat are both more intimate and more unpredictable.

***Identity Under Siege: The Dual Burden of Ethnicity and Religion:***

The Pangal's identity crisis in the current context is not new, it is an intensification of a chronic condition. They have long navigated a dual burden: the pull of Meitei ethnic identity on the one hand, and the call of a broader Islamic solidarity on the other. In the valley, to emphasise their Meitei-ness risks subordinating their faith to the demands of a Hindu-inflected cultural nationalism; to foreground their Muslim identity risks being seen as outsiders, as agents of a different geopolitical imagination. There is also the question of how the Pangal are perceived in the national imagination. India's broader political climate since 2014 marked by heightened suspicion of Muslim communities, a chilling of minority assertion, and the majoritarian redefinition of national belonging creates a context in which any visible Muslim community organising for rights in a conflict zone can be framed as provocative or separatist. The Pangal, trying to protect their homes and livelihoods in Thoubal or Lilong, cannot entirely insulate their situation from these larger national currents.

***Political Marginalisation and the Question of Representation:***

Politically, the Pangal have historically returned representatives to the Manipur Legislative Assembly, particularly from constituencies in Thoubal and Bishnupur districts. Their electoral significance has meant that no party - Congress, BJP, or regional formations - can entirely ignore them. However, political inclusion at the transactional level of votes has rarely translated into genuine representation of interests in moments of crisis. The BJP government of Chief Minister N. Biren Singh which has faced severe criticism for its handling of the conflict, its alleged partiality toward Meitei militants, and its failure to disarm armed groups like Arambai Tenggol counts some Pangal figures within its coalition. Yet Pangal community leaders have repeatedly petitioned the state government for protection, for the disarming of valley militias, and for the restoration of normalcy without receiving substantive response. When the National Investigation Agency (NIA) and the Supreme Court of India began scrutinising the role of armed groups in the valley, Pangal voices were among those quietly relieved not because they opposed the Meitei cause in its entirety, but because the arming of communal militias in their immediate neighbourhood represented an existential risk. The absence of the Pangal voice from national media coverage of the Manipur crisis is striking. Civil society reports, parliamentary debates, journalistic investigations, and Supreme Court proceedings have overwhelmingly centred the Meitei-Kuki binary. This erasure is not accidental; it reflects the political economy of attention in Indian public life, where Muslim minorities in conflict zones are rarely framed as victims deserving solidarity, and where the complexity they introduce disrupts convenient narratives.

***Economic Vulnerabilities and Displacement:*** The economic dimension of the Pangal's vulnerability deserves particular attention. Many Pangal families are smallholder farmers, traders, weavers, and artisans in the Imphal valley economy. The disruption of trade routes, the imposition of blockades, and the climate of fear that has pervaded the valley since May 2023 have disproportionately affected small and mid-scale economic actors, a category in which Pangal families are heavily represented. In areas close to the violence the periphery of Bishnupur, sections of Thoubal district Pangal households have faced direct threats, property damage, and in several documented cases,

forced displacement. Unlike the massive displacement of Kuki-Zo communities from the valley (which received substantial documentation and media coverage), or the displacement of Meiteis from hill areas, the smaller, quieter dislocation of Pangal families has proceeded with minimal institutional acknowledgement or relief. The informal economies in which many Pangal participate, small-scale trade between the valley and the hills - have been devastated by the effective partition of the state. The severing of valley-hill connections has not only disrupted commerce but has fractured social relationships that took generations to build, relationships of trust and mutual dependence across ethnic lines that represented Manipur's best argument against its own worst impulses.

***Acts of Survival: Peace Building from Below:*** The narrative of the Pangal in this crisis is not only one of victimhood. It is also one of extraordinary civic agencies in conditions of acute vulnerability. Pangal civil society organisations, women's groups, and religious leaders have been among the most consistent voices in Manipur calling for peace, negotiation, and the protection of all communities, not merely their own. In Thoubal, a district with a significant Pangal presence - local imams and community leaders facilitated quiet, informal communication channels between Meitei and Kuki neighbours at a time when official channels had collapsed. Pangal women's collectives participated in peace marches organised by Meira Paibi (the legendary Meitei women's movement), even as those same movements occasionally excluded or sidelined the Pangal in their political articulations. This persistent commitment to shared civic life, even while navigating discrimination from within their own ethnic community, represents a form of moral endurance that deserves recognition. There is something deeply instructive in this posture. The Pangal's insistence on pluralism is not abstract principle, it is existential strategy. As a minority within a minority, they understand with visceral clarity what happens when the logic of ethnic exclusivity is allowed to run to its conclusion. Their advocacy for constitutional remedies, for dialogue, and for the protection of minority rights within Manipur is simultaneously a demand for their own survival and a vision for a Manipur that does not tear itself apart.

***What the Pangal Question Tells Us About Manipur:*** The invisibility of Pangal in the dominant narrative of the Manipur crisis is not incidental, it is symptomatic. It reveals the limits of an analytical framework that reduces the conflict to a binary between two communities while ignoring the plural, layered social fabric that has always characterised Manipur. Manipur is also home to the Pangal, the Meitei, the Bishnupriya Manipuris, numerous Naga tribes, the Zeliangrong community, and smaller groups whose experiences of the crisis do not fit the Meitei-Kuki frame. The Pangal are perhaps the most symbolically important of these because their very existence refutes the essentialist claim at the heart of the conflict, the notion that ethnicity and religion are coterminous, that being Meitei means being Hindu, and that being Muslim means being Other. For centuries, the Pangal have demonstrated that this is not so that a Muslim can be fully Meitei, that Islamic faith can coexist with Meitei dance, language, and social life, that difference within a community does not necessitate conflict. Their survival as an integrated community is, in a very real sense, proof of concept for the pluralism that Manipur must recover if it is to have a future beyond the present catastrophe.

***Conclusion: Towards a More Inclusive Reckoning***

The Pangal do not seek pity. They seek recognition, recognition of their rootedness in Manipur's soil, their contribution to its culture, their stake in its future. They seek, above all, the protection that the Indian Constitution promises all its citizens: freedom from fear, security of person and property, and equal treatment before the law regardless of religion. Any resolution of the Manipur crisis that does not explicitly address the position of the Pangal that does not include them in peace negotiations, that does not account for their specific vulnerabilities in relief and rehabilitation frameworks, and that does not protect them from both communal violence and the creeping logic of ethnic purism - will be incomplete. A peace that leaves out the Pangal is not peace; it is the consolidation of a new form of exclusion. The story of their Pangal in the current crisis is ultimately the story of

what it costs a community to be seen as neither fully one thing nor the other to be perpetually asked to choose between their ethnicity and their faith, between solidarity and safety, between belonging and survival. That they have, thus far, refused this false choice insisting on being wholly themselves, wholly Meitei and wholly Muslim, wholly part of Manipur's past and its possible future is not a small thing. It is, in the darkest chapter of Manipur's modern history, a form of hope.

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