



# Manipur, India

A First-Person Account from an  
Indigenous Tribal Christian Community



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JOHN'S STORY



## **Thank you for allowing me to share my experiences in the ongoing Christian persecution in Manipur.**

I am a voluntary pastor, teacher, writer, and community worker at the grassroots level. My religious background is primal (indigenous) religion. I came to faith in my early childhood in a remote village, did my theological training in India and abroad, and taught in a seminary for about 20 years. I am now pioneering fresh articulations and expressions of faith in the context of increasing hostility against minority tribal Christian communities in Northeast India.

Having left my position in a seminary in central India in 2019, I returned to my community in Northeast India. There I launched mission projects including an orphanage, school, community medical center, and institute for indigenous studies in collaboration with experienced indigenous leaders from other countries. Currently, more than 600 children are receiving an integral education at our school, several poor villagers receive medical support and four young researchers are enrolled in our specialized Postgraduate Diploma in indigenous studies.

Our specific focus is on Indigenous Christianity and witness in

the context of increasing persecution with the emphasis on re-discovering indigenous wisdom, human dignity, equality, peace, reconciliation, and care for creation. This pioneering work is urgent as the Christian faith we were taught a century ago could not effectively prepare us for our present-day challenges. I am delighted to say that in this short work period, younger church leaders have slowly understood the need and started supporting our efforts.

## **Persecution experienced by tribal Christians in Manipur**

The types of tribal Christian persecution in contemporary India need to be understood in the context of changing ideologies. With the coming of the BJP in 2014, the India which we knew as a secular and democratic country has been replaced with a new vision of Akhand Bharat (undivided India) and Hindu Rashtra (Hindu state). Minority communities have two options: leave the country or convert to Hinduism – which is called ‘homecoming’ as conversion is not encouraged in India. However, because tribal people of Northeast India were never Hindus, they cannot experience a ‘homecoming.’ In such a context, asserting one’s distinct cultural identity and faith is often regarded as anti-national.

Claiming their activities provide only social services, and taking advantage of the Meitei Hindu majority community’s support in Manipur, several organizations from Central India are now openly promoting this new vision of India in Northeast India. In the name of education, they take poor and innocent tribal boys and girls to central India, indoctrinate them with their ideology, and send them back home to start schools and other community services that promote their ideology. In the recent past in Manipur, they also recruited more local people including tribal Christian youth, and reached out to people in the villages with charity work. In several cases in Northeast India, tribal religious sites, their deities, and stories have already been assimilated into the Hindu tradition. The suppression of democratic systems and control is the harbinger of the massive attacks tribal Christians of Northeast India will face unless government policies change.

Currently, Christian persecution in Northeast India, unlike in other parts of India where physical harm, killings, and imprisonment are common, usually has been non-physical. Preparation for open and physical persecution in a Christian region of Northeast India is underway as the new India vision takes deeper roots and becomes a home-grown ideology through the establishment of local schools and marriages. Suffering for one's Christian faith now includes fear of losing permission (because of provisions in the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, FCRA) to receive foreign funds to support projects, intimidation, feelings of insecurity, false allegations, mob attacks, lynching, abuse, harassment and control of freedom and liberty to express one's views.

Due to the ongoing Manipur violence, besides foreign nationals, even many Indian nationals who undertook relief work do not return due to the intimidation and threats they have received for supporting minority tribal Christians. Several foreign nationals who have spoken out for justice for tribal people have had First Information Reports (FIR) filed against them. A FIR sets in motion the criminal justice process. It is a written document the police prepare when they receive information about the commission of a cognizable offense.



There is also unjustifiable neglect from the administration for relief support like medicines, holistic healthcare, and restoration of justice and peace. Several people living in relief camps have committed suicide due to a lack of care and support.

And last, at the moment, the state government is trying to remove central forces from tribal areas so that they can have easy access to tribal areas and also resolved to destroy locally made temporary bridges that were constructed to connect tribal people from one district to another.



Christian persecution can take different and evolving forms. Often people debate if they are genuinely persecuted. The ongoing Christian persecution in Northeast, particularly in Manipur, has been covered up and needs to be seen through the lenses of Hindutva, the new India vision.

The already marginalized Christian tribal peoples are concerned that if the majority Meitei community is allowed to share the benefits of Scheduled Tribal Status (ST) with them, their economic condition will get worse. (On March 27, 2023, the Manipur High Court directed the state Government to consider the inclusion of the Meitei community in the ST through which the government offers certain indigenous and tribal groups special concessions. A single judge rescinded this in February 2024)

All Tribal Students of Manipur (AMSU) had organized a peace rally in connection with the High Court's order to include the majority Meitei community in the list of Scheduled Tribes. On May 3, 2023, Tribals returning from that peace rally were attacked by members of Arambai Tenggol, a Meitei activist organization. The first person killed that day was Pastor Haopu Kipgen. This attack was preceded by concerning

events including the state government destroying a village and churches and cancelling all land and property deeds and recognition of certain villages.

The minority tribal Christians observe that the state government in its second term of power has become more aggressive in its attempt to persecute and destroy indigenous tribal Christian communities in Manipur. The fact that the violence has been sustained for 15 months is an indication that the minority Christian suffering is a well-designed plan.

### **How Christians in Manipur are challenging injustice and persecution**

Christians in Manipur work together in prayer, relief work, and in supporting each other by way of sharing resources. Having said that, we cannot ignore structures that limit our collaborations. For instance, many of our own Meitei church members need our support, but we cannot contact them directly due to their safety. If someone comes to know that we are in contact with them, it is not safe for them. (While a vast majority of Meiteis are Hindus, about 1% are Christian.)

Normally, I call my other Indian friends in Central India and through them I connect with my Meitei Christian friends. Among tribal Christians, besides faith, we share many things in common. For instance, the new India vision affects all tribal Christians. In fact, the Peace Rally on 3rd May was organized by All Tribal (Christian) Students of Manipur for a common cause. This is a much-appreciated collaborative initiative that must be encouraged in the days to come. Similarly, of course, there is still more room for collaboration in the future despite our different tribes and denominations.

### **How you can pray for us**

Please pray for a lasting solution to the ongoing violence in Manipur. We need restoration of peace and peaceful coexistence among all peoples so that we can continue our projects and the name of Christ is lifted up through all these efforts.





Secondly, please pray for us as we begin to explore and rebuild an Indigenous Christian community in the context of increasing hostility against minority tribal Christians in India. Pray especially for church leaders for a new vision and the courage to walk by faith in the face of increasing hostility and threats. Our institute is dedicated to helping restore the people's cultural roots and biblical faith. We undertake workshops, conferences, research, and document indigenous knowledge, publish books, and conduct online public lectures.

Thirdly, please pray for our mission projects for orphans and tribal children who otherwise have no means of getting an education.

Fourth, please pray for the construction of churches. It is Christianity that uplifts tribal people and makes them what they are and it is for the same reason that they are facing persecution just now. The construction of a church is the construction of the future and life of the people.

Last, pray for India, for our government, and for all the communities that we will live together peacefully.