
A Conversation with a Christian Woman from Manipur, India

Anonymous

Interview conducted and edited by Karie Riddle

How do ordinary Christians respond when their neighbors are under attack? In this interview, a Christian woman from Manipur, India, shares stories of friends and family who have housed conflict refugees, prayed with them, cooked for them, and generally maintained community despite the constant threat of violence. These stories illustrate the important difference that ordinary people can make in an armed conflict, and they reveal the importance of maintaining belief in Christ as the Prince of Peace. When resources are scarce and patience wears thin, Christ can inspire us to a renewed commitment to love and care for even our enemies.

The interviewee in this conversation wishes to remain anonymous due to potential danger that might come to herself and her family, if certain groups identify her as speaking out. While she herself does not currently live in Manipur, she is sharing the experiences of close relatives who have lived there throughout the recent violence that sparked in May of 2023. The interviewee also has decades of experience working as a peacebuilder in the long-simmering, low-intensity armed conflict that has troubled the state since the late 1950s, including violence among different ethnic groups and between the state of India and some of the people of Manipur. Her remarks are therefore grounded in both the contemporary conflict and her lifetime of trying to pursue peace as a follower of Christ.

The violence that currently troubles the state began on May 3, 2023, when Kuki and Naga people (two tribal groups, both minorities) held a peaceful rally against the Meitei majority group's recent demand to receive official Scheduled Tribe (ST) status under the Indian Constitution. ST status entails new access to land and special reserved seats in government, jobs, schools, and more. While the Meiteis are indeed a marginalized indigenous group when compared to mainland Indians, they are the majority group that drives and therefore benefits the most from the mainstream economy, the political institutions, and the culture of the small state of Manipur. Tribal groups like the Kukis and Nagas thus argue that ST status for Meiteis would benefit a majority group which is already dominant in the state, undermining its original goal of lifting up marginalized

tribal groups (Hussain 2023; Piang 2023). Violence has sparked primarily between Kukis and Meiteis, with human rights abuses occurring at the hands of militant groups on both sides. Tribal groups and Meiteis alike have called for more intervention from both the state and national levels of government, to little avail (Viswanath 2023; Rajkumar 2024). Human rights actors and peacebuilders have been attacked by militant groups, and there appears to be no relief in sight for over 70,000 displaced people (Nepram, Taha, and Inman 2023; "Manipur Violence..." 2023).

In this context, we hear our interviewee reflecting on what has worked for her in the past and what seems to be effective right now. She particularly emphasizes the importance of face-to-face relationships and trust-building work; the dependence that peacebuilders have on Jesus as the Prince of Peace; and the place for radical generosity in the face of need. She speaks primarily about the kind of informal work that ordinary Christians can do in the midst of conflict, although she also mentions the role of some non-profit organizations.

What are some of the things that you are aware of that religious, and particularly Christian, people are doing to help protect one another when they are surrounded by violence?

The moment the news [of the violence of May 3] spread in several areas, when Kukis whose houses had

been burned came to Naga places, in the initial stage, they cannot just go to Kangpokpi, or Lamka, or even to Moreh [all cities or regions in Manipur]; they had to find immediate neighboring places, meaning they have to go to Naga villages to take shelter. Many of the different Naga and Kuki villages are close together, so that's how they go to take shelter.

They would shelter in churches, in schools, in homes; lots of people open up their homes. One Naga village I heard about, the next day, they took a truckload of people donating bags of rice or clothes or utensils, anything they have, to go down and help. That's not just one village, but all the neighboring villages were able to do that and host people. The Kukis cannot run to the group that's attacking them [the Meiteis], so they have to find other tribal groups that are not in the conflict to take shelter.

[Both Kukis and Nagas are Christians]; they are believers, so they know they are brothers and they are the ones to help. Despite whatever the condition there, helping the ones who are escaping from the burning villages or attacks, they put those in priority. One lady in my village says she was ordinarily never having any visitors, but she was able to host three to four families. She says it is like a celebration, because when you have Christmas or New Year or Easter, people celebrate in community. We know it is a conflict situation, but having that fellowship with these different families that come from different villages, it was like a kind of fellowship celebration.

My [relative] in the beginning, she was hosting five families with my [other relative]. Daily they would cook, and after a month they also asked the families, okay, now you guys take turns and cook. It was like cooking for a feast, you are cooking for fifty people, for some they cook for 100 people! Whatever you have, you have to share, whatever you need, you go and ask your neighbors, because they know we are there to help.

I think my relatives did this because they have gone through a similar conflict [many years before], where our whole village burned down and we became homeless in a second, and the next day all the houses are just in cinders. In your heart you still see your house and the things you have, but in the physical sense you don't have anything—these people are in the same situation. You don't have any second thought, "oh no I should save this [for myself]." No, you feel that they need it the most. You have to serve them, and you have to share what you have.

That willingness to host conflict refugees is really amazing! How long would people stay; what did that look like?

Some stayed for four or five months; some villages still have them. They are also giving shelter to the ones whose villages are not burned, but they have to escape

because the places where they live, they are just in the buffer zone where you can be attacked any night, or any day, so those people have to escape. Not all places are secure; where armies are stationed the armies would protect people, but that protection is not everywhere so for their own safety they have to leave and take shelter.

In my relatives' house there are four rooms. They cooked in the open with firewood. You cannot cook on small gas for twenty to thirty people. They sleep in four beds, the king or the queen size, just crammed together five or six people in one bed and that way they sleep. Some, they are putting a mattress on the floor, so in all the four rooms they sleep. They have just one toilet at that house, so all of them had to go to my other relative's house, where they have at least three toilets there. They just had to make use of every facility so that everyone gets to do stuff, whether to bathe or to use the restroom, that's how they had to share. In the school setting, if it's a wooden floor, people just give them a mat. They may have a duvet-type blanket, or some other blankets they may spread out and sleep on. So if you are in the hill village, when you have a wooden house that is good, you can lie down on the wooden floors.

Those are really difficult conditions! I remember reading a lot of news articles about how it was hard to get supplies in, to get food and medicine in. But the way you described it earlier, the mood was almost more like a holiday. So how did that feeling arise despite these difficult conditions? How did they maintain this good cheer, especially for four or five months of hosting people in these cramped conditions?

My relative said, they always prayed with them, they'd pray together, every night, sometimes even daytime while doing stuff they still pray. Prayer is something that also really comforts them, not only them, even my people, because my sister said every night there would be more than ten drones flying above our house in our area, there would be a vehicle that comes at 1:00 or 2:00 am and she would pray because we don't know whose vehicle that is, or if it is someone that has come to attack them. She would pray most of the night. There would be some of the ladies, the mothers of those who were there, who would join them to pray. The kids, they would cry, they would laugh, you cannot control the kids because they want to play. They would sometimes nag their parents and cry. Sometimes when the children cry at night she would be so scared; "if people hear us and if people come, because people know that in my neighborhood we are just a few of us, but now when the drone is watching they might even see

us, what is going on,” so she used to be very afraid and she would keep praying all the time.

Were there close pre-existing relationships between the hosts and the refugees?

Of course, they know each other. After the 1990s conflict, there were many new people who had moved in, but we know them, unless there are very new ones who come in, but people who had been there, any of the tribes, they know us, and we also know them.

This is all really amazing to hear, because that 1990s conflict that you’re referencing, known as the famous “Naga-Kuki clash,” caused a lot of deaths. But now you are describing these two tribal groups helping each other and fellowshiping together as Christians. Was there no lingering animosity there, from that older conflict?

I think people just felt the need to help. If they were still like, “I don’t even want to talk to you, I can’t be with you,” if that sense ever arose, then people might not even help to the extent that they helped. I know there are people who write still today [about] hatred, trying to spread hate and lies, but then, for those people I feel that they haven’t really forgiven one another or that they still bear grudges.

To me even back then [in the 1990s] I would say, whatever they have done it is done, but me or my family or other people, what we need to do is offer forgiveness, because when God asks us to forgive seventy times seven, even if you are in anger, you shouldn’t let the anger continue beyond sunset. So when we say we are a follower of Christ, if we still have grudges and do not forgive the other, how can we say we are a believer? As a believer in Christ if you have that heart to forgive, that is where you are able to go beyond your tribe, your affinities, because as the children of God, every nation, every tribe, every tongue, for God we will be all one and that is his plan that we will be all together. So you are brothers and sisters in Christ. That should be the most important thing that we need to take on. And unless you forgive, you cannot move on. I think because of genuine love people have come out to extend help as a family, to your family.

And in those days in the 1990s I said we need to learn to live together, because we cannot say “you go away and I will live on my own.” My people, they even gave the land and that’s how the village got established [for the other group], so we have to live together. Some people in my tribal group think I’m speaking for the other group. But to me I said, “I know my house was burned, my village was burned, and we lost everything, but I must learn to forgive, I must learn what Christ has

taught us, how he forgives the sinner, how he asks that we should also be able to forgive.” So many people would say you are siding with the other group, but me, I feel that is what needed to be done.

Do you think that these kinds of Christian values that you’re describing—the need to forgive seventy times seven, the need to look beyond your affinities because of the ideal of heaven—does that extend to non-Christians? Does that extend to Hindus in Manipur?

Very much! God said love your enemies. In such a violent conflict now, you are being told that others are already your enemy. But then my family, we have pastors that we knew from even the Meitei families, so we called them, we tried to send them whatever help we could, so it was not just to the tribal groups but to the Meitei families that we knew who were affected, whose church was burned down. So love shouldn’t be only to your own people or the believers as such, but to those who didn’t believe.

I’ll ask you now to take a step back and reflect a little bit on some potential lessons for our journal’s audience. As you are thinking about people working in development all over the world, primarily through Christian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), do you have any advice based on your many years of Christian peacebuilding work? What are some things that have worked for you, some sources of inspiration that keep you going, or some things that you think are really important?

1. I think, the first thing is, as a believer, when you see Jesus’ command to love our enemies, to love your enemies as yourself, that’s difficult, but he already also forewarned us that we will have all these hardships in life. So I think we know that only Jesus himself can give us true peace. We may do things [in our churches or in our organizations] to say, “this is peacebuilding, this thing may even work.” But I see true dependence on Christ; I believe that he’s the true prince of peace. He only can give us peace. I need to have that peace myself, and unless I’m having that peace within me, it’s going to be difficult to work for peace, especially in this situation where you know you have one group as a believer and then you have the other who are not believers in Christ. You cannot just give things, the material things, and that suffices as peacebuilding, but that building trust, I think trust is very

important here. How can I build trust? Well, who sees me as his enemy? Building that relationship is very important and it cannot be done in one meeting, one day, one month, it is going to be a long-term process and I think there will be failures. Right after the peace deal there will be some killings that happen. You may say, oh this doesn't work; if you give up, then there won't be a chance to move ahead. Despite whatever attacks we may face, we have to have that faith that this will work for our betterment.

2. I think acceptance of others is also something that has to be put as a priority because we know we are different. I cannot make Meitei to be like a tribal or the tribal to be like a Meitei or the Christian to be like a Hindu. So we may have our cultural differences, we may have all other differences, but to the believers I would say, when you put Christ first as your example then we will have that faith in us, whatever the challenges may be in building the trust to gain acceptance. In all the circumstances I'm facing I still won't give up because people have to truly see that I genuinely love them, I genuinely mean for their good or our collective good. Because if they see me as working for my own good, for my own benefit, they will never accept it.
3. Aid is also important, but in our part of the world we never talk about trauma counseling, all the traumas we face from living under a militarized regime. Trauma counseling is very much needed. Even myself, how I got healed, it was just learning and exposing myself to different people who are also going through similar conflicts. My exposure to the truth and reconciliation work in South Africa, that trip where we visited people, the victims' families, talking to parties, meeting the NGOs that work there, meeting the government officials, hearing their stories, how they worked. That was something that helped me because we never go through any trauma counseling. Here I also want to focus on how biblical trauma counseling can be incorporated for the region, if the organizations can support sponsoring people who can be trained or people who can be sent to work in that area, that can be helpful apart from the aid. We don't need just developmental aid, but the psychological part, the counseling part would be very important, that can really benefit people to overcome.
4. There is an organization that is doing really good development work in Manipur, the Rural Women Upliftment Society (<https://rwus.org/>), if people want to support what they are doing to help the refugees. Having a connection with people on the ground is needed and helpful; only then can you know who is the neediest, who can get help from what we are doing.

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