

# Investing in Women and Praying for Peace in Manipur

BY JUDITH WASON

In India's northeastern state of Manipur, a genocide has been raging for months with minimal awareness or attention from the rest of the world. The villagers in the mountainous areas are predominantly Christian members of the Kuki people. As a minority group, they have been previously protected by the Indian constitution. In the valleys, most people are members of an ethnic group called the Meitei, who are primarily Hindu. Certain government benefits and land are reserved for the Kukis as minorities, but the Meiteis, who are 53 percent of Manipur's population, are demanding to share in the benefits and to expand into land reserved for the minority.\*

When a court ruled in early May 2023 that Meiteis had rights to these benefits, Kukis organized protest marches in 10 of Manipur's 16 districts. Meiteis responded with armed violence. Since that time nearly 200 people have died. More than 350 churches and 7,000 homes have been destroyed. At least 60,000 people have fled their homes, plus others have been displaced who are now staying with family. More than 12,000 have left Manipur entirely.

A video of the assault of two naked Kuki women, and the murders of the brother and father of one of them by a mob, shown on Indian TV almost three months after the event, was considered too horrific to be shown on US television. (It turned up on Twitter (X).)



Photos courtesy of Rev. Mangmuanthang

**In the village of Singngat, residents collect water from the storage tank of a well installed in 2018, rather than making frequent trips to a local stream or a tank filled by one. Recently the flow of surface water has been diminishing, possibly as a result of climate change.**

Other photos show a Meitei man with a large knife in one hand, and in the other, the severed head of a Kuki man, later displayed on a fence. Rather than attempting to restore peace, state government troops and police have aided the Meitei. The national government of Prime Minister Modi's BJP Hindu Nationalist party seems to be, at the least, silently complicit, if not encouraging the barbarity. In recent days, the violence has spread to Muslim-Hindu conflict in Haryana, a

state close to New Delhi. The government's regular practice of shutting down the internet has made information difficult to obtain, and business and education more difficult to maintain.

Why are we in PW so painfully aware of this? Through a string of Facebook connections, in 2016, Presbyterian Women of Hudson River Presbytery (PWHRP) encountered a very determined minister member of the Presbyterian Church of India. Rev. Mangmuanthang and his family had deeded land in the village of Singngat in Manipur to develop the Gary Prayer Mount, inspired by Stony Point Center, the Hudson Valley facility owned and operated by the PC(USA).

Participation in the UN Commission on the Status of Women has taught us much about the importance

of programs that directly benefit women and girls. After completing our due diligence, we honored Rev. Mangmuanthang's request for funds to purchase sewing machines and instruction in how to use them. A women's sewing center was established, which prospered for a short time. Unfortunately, while sewing machines and lessons are useful tools, the huge amount of clothing sent from donation bins in the U.S. means that locally made clothing is far



**Left to right: The church that Rev. Mangmuanthang serves in Imphal, the capital of Manipur, has been destroyed in the 2023 violence. Presbyterian Women in Hudson River Presbytery helped enlarge fish ponds in Manipur that provide both food and a source of income. Funds from PW in the Synod of the Northeast and PW in Hudson River Presbytery helped make possible construction of modern toilets for women near the sewing center.**

more expensive to purchase, and the sewing machines are now rarely used.

However, over the next few years PWHRP support for women's enterprises in Singngat continued, including funding purchases of chickens and bees in Heifer Project-type microenterprise programs. The livestock are given to grandmothers and mothers, as they are more likely to make sure their family members share in the benefits, rather than simply building up flocks. Avian viruses regularly decimate the birds, so replacements are occasionally needed. Hudson River's Presbyterian Women also helped fund the purchase of cookstoves that are better for individuals' health and the environment.

PW in the Synod of the Northeast joined the work of their Hudson River Presbytery by contributing offering money received at their 2017 triennial gathering. Those funds allowed for the construction of modern toilets for women in the vicinity of the sewing center, an area where open defecation was the dangerous norm. Other groups and individuals have provided for the construction of facilities for sports like soccer; we have encouraged the use of the fields by girls' teams! Pre-pandemic, while we had requests for funds for laptops, we did not respond to them. Typically, boys learned computer skills, and then disappeared into the bigger towns to find work, leaving no improvement in the home community. Hopefully 2024's CSW attendees will learn more about

the current situation, and whether remote learning has led to an increase in female STEAM students!

Probably the most significant contribution by PWHRP was helping to make clean water more accessible. Investing in the construction and upkeep of water tanks and pumps meant women and girls would make far fewer trips to collect water from an unreliable local stream. In 2018, PWHRP helped pay for the drilling of a 250-foot deep well, and a generator to power it during frequent power outages. Having a reliable source of water nearby has been truly life-changing for women and their families. More recently, PWHRP has given money to help enlarge some nearby wet areas to develop a fish farm, which provides food and employment for the villagers. On the larger projects, we have had the privilege of joining with the First Presbyterian Church of Plattsburg, Missouri, and Rev. Gary Myers, who has made several trips to Manipur.

Rev. Mangmuanthang, the two churches he serves and those church communities have been directly impacted by the violence and destruction in Manipur. His church in the capital of Imphal was shattered. He cannot reach his other assigned church near the border with Myanmar, because the bridge on the only road to the church is controlled by the Meitei. Rev. Mangmuanthang and his wife and two children barely escaped when their

home in the village of Sugnu was burned down. After spending some time in a refugee camp, Rev. Mangmuanthang, his wife, children and in-laws were able to reach the Prayer Mount in Singngat, where his children will attend school, and he will pastor a nearby church. Young men are required to join the defense force for the village, which fortunately has so far not come under attack.

At this time, there is a possibility that a separate state government will be established for the Kukis. It remains to be seen whether the violence can be curtailed, and the Prayer Mount can then resume its good work. Prayers for peace are crucial, and long-term plans and funding are needed. Any greatly appreciated donations should be made out to Presbyterian Women of Hudson River Presbytery, and sent c/o Julia Coss, 39 Emerson Ave., New Rochelle, NY 10801. It has been truly astonishing to see what can be accomplished by one faithful person with a vision, and disheartening to see it all threatened by senseless violence, especially when both sides already lead such challenging lives.

Judith Wason is part of Presbyterian Women in Hudson River Presbytery.

### Notes

\* Praveen Donthi, "Ethnic Clashes Roiling Mainpur Pose Test for India's Modi," International Crisis Group, July 26, 2023; [crisis-group.org/asia/south-asia/india/ethnic-clashes-roiling-manipur-pose-test-indias-modi](https://www.crisis-group.org/asia/south-asia/india/ethnic-clashes-roiling-manipur-pose-test-indias-modi).