Bemtre Ji talks about the decades long Discrimination, Hate and Ethnic Cleansing faced by the indigenous Meitei people in ChuraChandpur

PRELUDE:

I am Bemtre, a daughter of ChuraChandpur. My family have made Churachandpur their home for 3 generations. I saw my beloved hometown change in front of my eyes.

The discrimination against us started right from our school days. We were taunted regularly by our Kuki Classmates as “stone worshippers”. Our culture and customs were ridiculed constantly. Regularly we were urged or pressurised to convert to Christianity. Most of the fights and discrimination were centered on religion. During my school days the Kukis have threatened our teachers multiple times on gunpoint for punishing them.

The hills surrounding ChuraChandpur where we used to go to collect wood, herbs and water changed with passing times. The security in the hills and forests of ChuraChandpur are non-existent. Even the administration and control of the schools in the hills have been taken over by the Christian Kukis. The extremely high corruption there have ruined the education system.

I got the first indications of illegal immigrations during high school in the 2000s. Many of my newcomer classmates told me that they were from places like Assam and Moreh but they could not speak any Hindi or Manipuri. Special classes had to be arranged for them as they spoke only rudimentary, broken English.

The sacred hill Khumujamba Pug where we used to go for our yearly Cheiraoba prayers was taken away from us. I got to know from my classmate that the local Mahr (a subclan of the Kukis) “tribal” chief gave the land away to their widows in 2006. My classmate, her voice full of sympathy, told me that I would never be able to pray there again. Till date I never got another chance.

I started seeing armed Kuki militants only after the clashes of 97. We used to own a small business and the Kukis would often take things on gunpoint without paying. During my school days, pamphlets were dropped in Market Places and in front of our shops telling us Meiteis to leave ChuraChandpur. No group name was specifically mentioned in the pamphlets. Anticipating trouble, my family shifted all the valuable things to our relatives in Imphal. However, there was no disturbance afterwards and we Meitei, believing in brotherhood, took this incident very lightly.

The Manipur Land Act of 1960 already prohibited us Meitei from buying land in the hills of ChuraChandpur. On top of that, it is extremely difficult for us Meitei to buy land anywhere because the Kuki militant groups actively discourage Kukis from selling their land to us. They give punishment to both the buyer and the seller in such cases with no regard for the law. We Meiteis have to buy land in the name of mortgages, organisations, clubs and societies.

During the period of 2008 to 2016, I was away from Manipur pursuing my higher education and working. During my yearly visits at that time, I started observing that villages have cropped up in the hills surrounding ChuraChandpur. With full support of the local Kukis, the Burmese illegal immigrants have captured land there, destroying the greenery. Even the rivers, like Mata River became narrower with time until they were like nullahs. I started seeing more

and more people dressed in the Burmese style (like I saw in places like Tamu) in the streets of New Lamka and Mata. They were driving motorbikes of Burmese origin.

From 2017 onwards the illegal immigration in ChuraChandpur was at its peak. The illegal immigrants came through the extremely porous Burma borders and through Mizoram. The CM of Mizoram called them “brothers” and considered it his duty to provide them with food and shelter. Having a similar language, the local Kuki-Chin-Mizo people gave them shelter in ChuraChandpur. After COVID, they approached all of us for jobs. They were easily identifiable due to their language barrier and accepted that they were Burmese, not Bharatiyas. Sometimes they were even caught during random checks by the police. I have no idea whether they were deported or not.

2023 Violence the attempted Final Blow:

We were confident that, despite the unrest and tension after the March High Court Order, things would not come down to actual violence. During April 2023, I was in ChuraChandpur enjoying my usual yearly vacation. On the evening of 27th April, I saw in social media that the New Lamka gym had been burnt down. Commandoes were deployed by the State Government in all the Meitei localities of Churachandpur including mine. That night there were clashes between the State Security Forces and the Kuki youth in places like Lower Lamka. The situation was brought under control by the security forces firing tear gas. We could hear the Kuki mob retreating from our house.

Despite this, we did not discuss about self defence or organising ourselves. We were living our normal lives. In the village Thingkangphai on the 29th of April the SALAI TARET PHIRAN (the flag

with 7 coloured bands representing the 7 Meitei clans) was taken down, ripped apart and spat on by the Kukis. The Meitei CSOs (Civil Society Organisations) issued statements demanding strict punishment of the people involved. The Thingkangphai Village authority issued a press release condemning the incident and apologising for it.

On the evening of 2nd May, announcements were made regarding the planned rally and merchandise like printed T-shirts were sold. Before the "Peace Rally" organized by the ALL TRIBAL STUDENTS UNION of MANIPUR (ATSUM) on the 3rd of May, the Kukis announced that all non-participates should either stay indoors or face the consequences. All the shops were closed and we remained indoors during the rally. Many of the participants were heavily armed with sophisticated weapons and they abused us Meiteis and the Honourable CM Biren Singh in the worst possible language.

Around 5 p.m. my aunt from Torbung called us, telling us to be extremely careful and to leave ChuraChandpur if possible. Me and my extended family live in 3 adjoining houses. My aunt, her in laws and her three children were forced to leave their home at Torbung and walk towards Moirang in search of safety. Her shop at Torbung Bazaar and her house were both burnt down by a murderous Kuki mob. I saw the terrifying and heart wrenching videos of the Kuki mob burning down houses and attacking the Meiteis at Torbung in social media (till then the Wi-Fi was working). We contacted both the local police and the Assam Rifles. We were reassured that nothing would happen and any law and order situation would be swiftly brought under control.

After the rally ended more and more Kukis started roaming the streets of Churachandpur. Their numbers just kept on growing. By 7.30 Kuki mobs started roaming all over the main road of ChuraChandpur, loudly shouting and abusing us Meiteis. They were inviting their Kuki

brethren to join them in the streets by banging the Lamp posts making a loud, terrifying ringing noise. Even today that sound haunts me and my 2 year old daughter. Then they started looting and vandalising the shops of the Meitei. Even the shops of Kukis which were given to Meiteis on rent, were looted and vandalised. We heard the loud noises as the Kuki mob looted and smashed the Jewellery and mobile shops near our house. It was no longer safe for us to remain at home and we took shelter in the house of our Kuki neighbour. Other Meitei families came there seeking shelter and soon 50 of us were hiding in the unused rear section of our neighbour's house.

By 9.30 our entire colony was surrounded by Kuki mobs. They asked our neighbour multiple times that whether any Meitei were there in his house. I am extremely grateful that he did not tell anything about us. We were trying to contact the police and the Assam Rifles for nearly 4 hours but only received empty reassurances.

My cousin from Old Bazaar, called me at around 10.30 p.m. In a voice filled with panic, he told me that his younger brother had been shot in the chest and he was in critical condition. He asked if I could arrange for an ambulance. With the bloodthirsty Kuki mob roaming around us, I could not help him in any way. Weeks later, I came to know that he managed to reach the District Hospital and the Doctors managed to save him.

As the terrifying hours dragged on, heavily armed Kuki mobs started to burn down the houses in our neighbourhood. From our hidden places we could see the heavily armed Kukis entering our 3 adjoining houses. They systematically looted each of them and then burnt them down to the ground.

The smell of smoke and burning wood overwhelmed our senses. My 2 year old daughter was incredibly brave and she kept

totally silent as the gun wielding mob outside went on a rampage smashing down the gates of houses and beating lampposts making that terrible ringing noise. The loud taunts and shouts still send chills down my spine. Loud ringing noises still terrify my 2 year old daughter. I could only make a video as my house was burnt down in front of my eyes. I had never ever felt so helpless in my life. At that time there was no electricity in the whole town of Churachandpur. However, our Kuki neighbour who sheltered us had a generator and we could still access the Wi-Fi.

Around 1 a. m. the Assam Rifles came to the nearby main road, looking to rescue us. They called me but I did not pick up their call. We were surrounded by a murderous Kuki Mob and it was not possible to go out of the house without drawing attention to ourselves. There was no way to reach the Assam rifles safely. We would bring the remaining Meiteis and our Kuki neighbour in grave danger if we were caught.

Around 2.30 a.m. the mobs started to disperse. I called the Assam Rifles and told them to wait for some time. Our Kuki neighbour went to check whether it was safe to come outside. Only after his confirmation, we came out and requested the Assam Rifles to take us upto Moirang. We were evacuated by the Assam Rifles and kept at the Conventional Hall Tuibong. The soldiers of the Assam Rifles tried to assure us that we were safe but within 5 minutes a Kuki mob assembled outside and entered right through the main gates. The Assam Rifles did nothing as the mob started pelting us with stones and breaking windows. We were around 300 people there at that time.

The Kuki mob reached us and began to segregate the men from the women. They snatched everything we had and burnt them. Only one person among the Kuki mob was sympathetic to our pleas and

requests. He tried to convince the mob that there is no point in further attacking us. Thankfully the mob did not attack again. The officers of the Assam Rifles talked and negotiated with the leaders with the mob for around 30 minutes. After the negotiations were completed, the mobs started to disperse.

We were shifted to Mini Secretariat office (New DC office ChuraChandpur, Tuibong) where we saw our fellow Meiteis with gunshot wounds and catapult wounds. It was already dawn by then. I could only arrange for one roti and some water for my daughter. Shocked and traumatised, she could only drink a little water.

We left for Kwata Relief Camp at around 12.00 p.m. with a convoy of Assam Rifles. All along the Tiddim Road, the Kukis were there abusing and throwing stones at us. They called us cowards and yelled at us to never come back. My brother-in-law was already there in Kwata waiting for us. All this time my husband was in Maharashtra. We reached Moirang with my brother-in-law. There was extreme fear among the Meiteis there and each arriving vehicle was thoroughly searched.

We stayed in Moirang with our relative at their house. However, targeted killings by groups of Kuki terrorists started to happen around Moirang. We did not feel safe there and we could not stay at our relatives' house for a long time. They was no scope of work or earning there. We had to leave our beloved Manipur and now we are in Maharashtra looking for work.