
Understanding the Violent Conflict in Manipur: The Roots and Repercussions ¹

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This article examines the ethnic conflict that erupted in Manipur in May 2023 and continued to destabilise the state through 2026. Using a qualitative documentary case-study approach, the paper draws on secondary sources, official statements, court and government documents, human rights reports, and recent journalistic accounts to trace the conflict's origins, dynamics, and consequences. The analysis shows that the violence cannot be reduced to a single trigger. Rather, it emerged from the interaction of land grievances, uneven development, identity politics, migration anxieties, weak institutions, and competing claims over political representation. The paper also demonstrates that the conflict has produced large-scale displacement, destruction of property, severe psychological trauma, and economic contraction. Finally, it argues that militarised containment alone cannot generate durable peace. A sustainable settlement requires inclusive dialogue, equitable development, accountability, disarmament, rehabilitation, and trust-building across communities.

Keywords: conflict, communal tensions, ethnic violence, identity politics, Kuki-Meitei conflict, Manipur.

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This study adopts a qualitative case-study approach to examine the violent conflict in Manipur that began in May 2023. The case study method is employed because it allows an in-depth examination of the historical, political, social, and economic dimensions of a contemporary conflict within its specific regional context. It is based on a structured reading of secondary sources, including academic literature, peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, court-related reporting, human-rights documentation, selected media accounts, and publications of civil society organizations. Sources were selected for relevance to three analytical questions: the fundamental causes of the conflict, the forms of violence and harm produced, and the responses of the state and civil society. Priority was given to peer-reviewed academic publications, official government documents, reports from international organizations, and established news agencies. Media reports were used primarily to document specific incidents and recent developments where academic literature was not yet available.

The study relies primarily on secondary sources and therefore faces several limitations. First, the absence of primary fieldwork restricts direct verification of events and perceptions among affected communities. Second, casualty figures, displacement estimates, and accounts of violence may vary across sources due to the dynamic nature of the conflict. Third, media reports often reflect particular institutional or ideological perspectives. Thus, findings are interpreted as an analytical synthesis of available evidence rather than as definitive conclusions regarding all aspects of the conflict.

Nevertheless, given the highly polarized nature of the conflict, the study adopted a triangulation strategy. Claims and events were cross-checked across multiple categories of sources, including academic publications, government documents, human rights reports, and independent media accounts. The analysis focuses on identifying recurring patterns and areas of convergence across sources rather than privileging any single narrative. The study primarily focuses on the period from May 2023, when large-scale ethnic violence erupted in Manipur, to April 2026. However, to understand the structural roots of the conflict, historical developments relating to land ownership, ethnic relations, political representation, and state formation from the colonial and post-independence periods are also examined.

Conceptual Framework

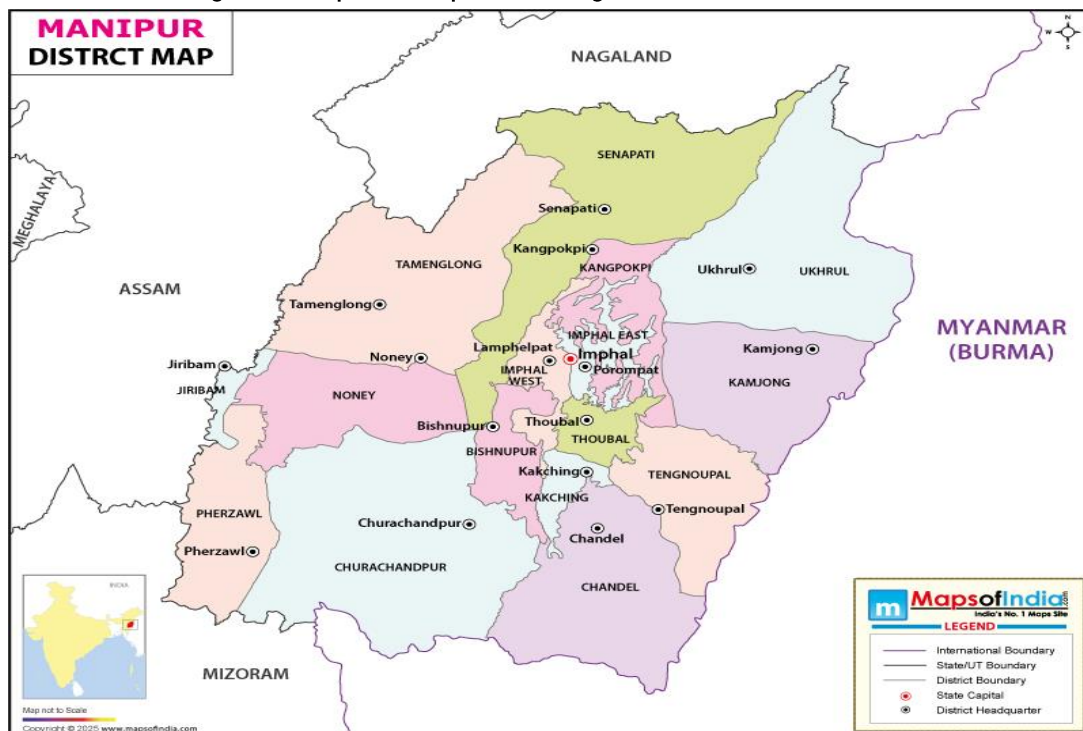
The paper uses political violence as the primary analytical lens rather than generalized violence alone. Violence here refers to intentional coercive action that produces physical, psychological, social, or material harm. The conflict is better understood as ethnic and political violence because the mobilization of groups is connected to access to territory, status, representation, and state power. This study employs Samuel P. Huntington's cultural fault-line thesis and Ted Robert Gurr's Relative Deprivation Theory as analytical frameworks. Huntington's perspective helps explain how cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities have reinforced group boundaries and intensified identity-based mobilization. Gurr's Relative Deprivation Theory is used to understand how perceived inequalities in development, political representation, resource allocation, and access to opportunities generated collective grievances among tribal communities, thereby increasing the likelihood of political mobilization and violent conflict. These perspectives are not treated as universal explanations; instead, they provide a framework for understanding why long-standing structural inequalities became politically explosive in Manipur (Mahakul, 2014).

Contextualizing Manipur

An examination of historical demographic boundaries reveals that prior to British colonization, Manipur was ruled by a hereditary *Maharaja* exercising autonomous authority over the valley region, which was inhabited by the Meitei community (Kipgen, 2025, p. 04). In contrast, the hill areas were inhabited largely by Naga and Kuki-Zo communities with different political traditions and patterns of settlement. Among the Naga tribes, "political organization was based on village autonomy and practiced direct democracy. Whereas, the Kuki political system was more centralised and led by a hereditary caste of chiefs. Over time, villages developed larger associations of communities and a confederation of villages. However, the emergence of the modern state antagonised these indigenous institutions of self-governance (Leth, 2023; Kalita, 2011). In the post-Independence period, Indian policymakers wanted to integrate the North-East region with the rest of the country. On 21 September 1949, an agreement of merger was signed between the *Maharaja* Budhachandra Singh of Manipur and the

Government of India. The state of Manipur was formally inaugurated as a federal state of India on 15 October 1949 (Singh, 2011, p. 146). Furthermore, it became a Union Territory in 1956. In 1963, Manipur was provided a legislative assembly, with a council of ministers headed by a chief minister. Finally, it became the 20th full-fledged state of India on 21 January 1972 by the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971 (Sinha, 1987).

Figure 1: Map of Manipur showing all the district of the state



Source: Maps of India.com

Today, the state is geographically split between the Imphal Valley, inhabited mostly by the Meitei community and the surrounding hill districts are home to the Naga and Kuki-Zo communities, a division that remains central to its political economy (Singha and Singh, 2016). Manipur's population was recorded as 2,721,756, with Meitei constituting approx. 59 per cent of the population, followed by various tribes (Naga and Kuki-Zo) with around 41 per cent. The Meiteis are either unreserved or Other Backward Class (OBC) categories Hindus, whereas the Kuki-Zo and Nagas are Scheduled Tribes (ST) and mostly Christians (MyGov, 2023; Wikipedia, 2026). This spatial distribution is important because conflict in Manipur is not only ethnic;

it is also territorial, administrative, and developmental. Huntington's cultural fault-line perspective is also useful in understanding these developments. The conflict rooted in competing ethnic identities, historical narratives, religious affiliations, and territorial claims. The Meitei community, predominantly Hindu and concentrated in the valley, and the largely Christian Kuki-Zo tribes inhabiting the hills increasingly viewed one another through distinct cultural and political lenses. Consistent with Huntington's argument, these cultural fault-lines became powerful markers of political mobilisation and collective insecurity.

Deep-Seated Grievances and Disagreements

Territorial Control and Unresolved Grievances over Land & Resources

The Meitei, who are concentrated in the valley, have long regarded the territorial integrity of Manipur as inseparable from the unity of the state. Many hill communities, by contrast, have viewed the valley-centric state structure as a source of exclusion. In 1971, the 27th Amendment to the Indian Constitution gave Manipur a special status to protect the hill tribes but their implementation was widely perceived as weak (Mawon, 2022). Conversely, in the recent past, from 2020 to 2023, the state's recent programs to safeguard the environment by getting rid of people from forests, and crack down on opium poppy farming (for the Kuki-Zo in the hill districts, poppy farming was a major way to make a living) (Financial Express, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2024). From the perspective of Relative Deprivation Theory, these policies deepened feelings of marginalisation among the Kuki-Zo tribes. The disruption of traditional livelihoods, especially through anti-poppy cultivation drives and forest eviction measures, heightened perceptions that state policies disproportionately burdened hill communities while favouring valley interests. The resulting sense of deprivation increased distrust toward state institutions and contributed to conflict escalation.

Ethnicity, Migration, Identity Politics, and State Complicity

Another significant factor is the Myanmar civil war of 2021, between 5,000 and 10,000 Chin refugees of Myanmar has been forced to take shelter in Kuki-dominant areas in Manipur further complicated demographic and security narratives, allowing migration to be framed as a political threat (Duo, 2023; Bobichand, 2025). The issue was therefore not migration alone but the way migration was interpreted through already polarised identity categories. Furthermore, the Kuki-Zo and Nagas account for forty percent of the population of Manipur and hold over ninety percent of the land, whereas the Meiteis, with the majority of the population, are limited to ten percent of the land. Likewise, at present, the Meiteis hold 40 out of the 60 seats in the state assembly, whereas the tribals, who constitute forty percent of the population, merely occupy 19 seats (International Crisis Group, 2025). Over the years, infrastructure development in Manipur is largely confined to the Valley. The difference is very clear in the allocation of the budgets by the Manipur state government: the total budgetary allocation of the Imphal Valley stood at INR 21,481 crores against a very modest INR 419 crores of the hills in the period between 2017 and 2020 (International Crisis Group, 2025). This disparity can be interpreted through Ted Robert Gurr's Relative Deprivation Theory. Gurr argues that violent conflict often emerges when a group perceives a significant gap between its legitimate expectations and its actual socio-economic conditions. The stark imbalance in budgetary allocations between the valley and hill districts reinforced among the tribal communities a perception of systematic exclusion from development benefits. Such perceived deprivation generated frustration, resentment, and a sense of injustice, contributing to the deep-seated grievances that eventually facilitated ethnic mobilisation and violent confrontation.

Immediate Trigger for the Violence

The immediate catalyst was the controversy surrounding Scheduled Tribe status for Meiteis. The application for the Meitei scheduled tribe status was brought forth in the year of 1982 and, a second time, in the year of 2001 but rejected on

constitutional grounds (Abhimanyu & Yogesh, 2025; Lakshman, 2023). However, on April 14, 2023, the Manipur High Court's order to consider the demand renewed tribal fears that affirmative protections for hill communities could be diluted (Ibid.; Baruah, 2023). The legal decision itself did not cause the violence on its own; rather, it activated pre-existing anxieties about land, status, and the balance of power. Since the Scheduled Tribe label has significant implications in the Indian Constitution, which grants beneficiaries special treatment in government jobs, schools, and other business organisations. The ATSU Manipur was deeply concerned that these new developments would further marginalize the historically disadvantaged tribal population, potentially stripping them of their existing legal protections and rights (Zainab, 2024). Huntington's framework suggests that when communities perceive their cultural identity and collective interests to be under threat, they are more likely to mobilise politically. The Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe status was interpreted by many tribal groups not merely as an administrative issue but as a challenge to existing protections safeguarding tribal identity, land rights, and political autonomy. Consequently, on May 3, 2023, the All-Tribal Student Union Manipur (ATSUM) organised a tribal solidarity march in ten districts of Manipur against the order (Rihmo, 2025). The Indigenous Tribal Leaders' Forum (ITLF) and Joint Coordination Committee on Tribal Rights Manipur (JCCOTR-M) supported this initiative. After knowing that the Anglo-Kuki War centenary memorial had been burned, which is of historical importance to the tribal community, the two communities engaged in the conflict when the Meiteis faced off against an armed tribal group in the foothills of Churachandpur (Sharma and Mohanty, 2024, pp. 68-69). Once attacks spread from the hills to the valley, retaliation escalated rapidly and the conflict crossed from protest into sustained ethnic warfare. Hence, identity-based fears transformed a legal dispute into a broader ethnic confrontation. Therefore, the causes of the conflict were cumulative rather than instantaneous. They included land and resource disputes, protection anxieties, demographic change, competition over political power, and the perception that state institutions were uneven in their treatment of communities.

Environmental evictions and the crackdown on poppy cultivation were interpreted by many hill residents as measures that ignored livelihood dependence and reinforced valley-centric priorities.

The Consequences of Violence

Mortality, Displacement, and Property Destruction

According to the Times of India (TOI) report, the ongoing conflict in Manipur has cost 260 lives and over 1,500 injuries since May 2023 (Times of India, 2025). An Amnesty International report indicated that about 50,000 have been displaced in Manipur and over 58, 000 lives are under 281 relief homes since 3 May 2025. There is a high possibility that the injuries are even higher than what the records show. People were also forced to move to the neighbouring states, such as Mizoram and Meghalaya, due to Safety concerns (Amnesty International, 2025).

Figure 2: A destroyed house after conflict between Kukis and Meiteis along a highway in Torbung village in Churachandpur district, Manipur, May 3, 2023.



Source: Human Rights Watch

Figure 3: Homes have been vandalised and burned in the ethnic clashes and rioting that have gripped Manipur in India for nearly a year.



Source: Aljazeera

Besides, the destruction of the property was on a massive scale. A large number of business infrastructures, academic institutions, medical centres, and agricultural estates were burned down. According to Observer Research Foundation (ORF), the number of arson incidents resulting from the conflict has been about 5,000, including 4,700 homes being burned down and 386 religious locations vandalised, 254 churches (mostly Kuki) and 132 temples (Behera, 2023).

Physical and Psychological Impact

There is also a great deal of sexual violence due to the conflict. Many women have been targets of rape as well as physical assault by both communities as a way of provoking terror and humiliation. One prominent incident occurred on May 4, 2023, when a group of Meitei men publicly abducted and allegedly gang-raped two Kuki women. These instances of gender-based violence operated as instruments of terror, intended to destabilize the targeted population and inflict profound psychological trauma (Lohan, 2024). Subsequently, in November 2024, another

severe escalation took place when roughly 35-armed Kuki militants launched an assault on a Central Reserve Police Force camp and a police paramilitary unit. During this attack, the insurgents killed and sexually assaulted three women and three children - including an eight-month-old infant - from the Meitei community, while also fatally burning two elderly male residents (Human Rights Watch, 2025). According to reports, on May 15, 2023, an 18-year-old girl was kidnapped, said in her First Information Report (FIR), "I was taken to a hill where they tortured and assaulted me. Whatever miserable things they could do to me, they did," According to her family and Kuki organisations, the injuries and trauma she suffered never healed, leaving her physically fragile and psychologically withdrawn until her death (SabrangIndia, 2026). Moreover, women in the relief camps have reported persistent intrusive memories of those moments: "I still hear the screams" or "Every time I close my eyes, I see our house on fire," as some have expressed in interviews (Hasan, Singh, & Singh, 2026, p. 35). Consequently, the continuous state of fear and high stress has triggered various psychological conditions, including depression, anxiety, PTSD, and chronic sleep disturbances like insomnia. For instance, during a violent confrontation with security forces attempting to evacuate Meitei people from Churachandpur on May 5, 2023, a young woman named Bonny was shot. Although, with the medical treatment, her physical injuries are healed, but she is still troubled by the nightmares, difficulties when talking in her sleep, and overwhelming PTSD irrespective of her medication and treatment (Das, Kamei, & Gangmei, 2024). The prevalence rate is highest with 19.9 per cent, which is nearly twice the national prevalence rate of 10.6 per cent, showing the necessity of addressing mental health agencies to the population in question (Kapoor, 2024).

Figure 4: A Kuki-Zo community-run relief camp inside a cemetery compound in Manipur's Churachandpur district, for displaced communities in March 2025.



Source: Human Rights Watch

It is hard to endure such trauma as to be deprived of their homes and not know their future either, by adults or children. Most of the displaced individuals who stayed in camps were frightened and anxious. Furthermore, the camps are congested, lacking in basic food, sanitation waste, and employment. This heightens health issues in the camps because privacy and sanitation at the camps are lacking. The camps did not possess health care in the form of medicine and physicians and nurses to assist people. The delivered assistance was not sufficient, and the food was inadequate most of the time. Moreover, there were transportation and warehousing issues, so sometimes the orders were received in poor conditions (Lohan, 2024).

Figure 5: Internally displaced persons (IDPs), living in relief camps, react during a protest rally demanding their resettlement in their native places, in Imphal, Manipur, August 1, 2024.



Source: Agarwala, T. (November 7, 2024). Ethnic violence in India's Manipur escalates, six killed. Reuters.

Economic Impact and Loss of Livelihood

The initial impact of the conflict was experienced in the form of displacement leading to an economic catastrophe, as people from various industries had to lose their sectors and businesses and focus on safety. Firstly, the agricultural sector was largely affected because approximately 52 per cent of Manipur's population engages in agriculture. Rice is the chief food that is grown in the hills and in the plains in Manipur. The persistence of violence has dealt a massive blow to farmers, forcing numerous farmers to abandon their villages and fields, particularly in the most violent areas (Das Et. al., 2024, p. 1181). Likewise, the fisheries industry, especially around Pumlen Lake, has also been severely affected. Fishing is the primary source of livelihood for many families in the region. Prior to the eruption

of ethnic violence, the average daily income of fishing households was INR 496.67, ranging from INR 350 to 600. Following the conflict, market excavations were closed provisionally, and economic activities were halted altogether. Today, fishing households receive an average income of INR 253.33, and the minimum and maximum are INR 100 to 400 in income and sales. There has been a steep decline in both income and sales (Meitei, 2024). Furthermore, the ongoing unrest has dealt a severe blow to the textile industry. Traditional Manipuri fabrics such as Miraing pee, Rirum, Singpee, and Panthenek – which typically see strong international demand in the United States, Europe, and Singapore – have faced sharp declines. The violence has triggered a staggering 80% drop in exports across hand-woven textiles, medicines, and food items. This downturn heavily impacts a massive economic sector that supports over 462,000 weavers (the second-largest artisan population in India) and operates more than 280,000 looms (ranking fourth nationwide) (Ghosal, 2023). Also, the state tourism department indicated, the number of tourists that visited the state decreased significantly in 2022-23 by 1,61,420 to fewer than 37,000 tourists in the subsequent year. Such a radical fall shows how the conflict affected the Manipuri economy and its positive image as a touristic attraction site (Mukherjee, 2024). Above all, the conflict has led to inflation level that has never been witnessed before. Inflation has reached 11.63 per cent in the retail sector; this has impacted the locals as well as the companies. The Secretary of the Manipur Chamber of Commerce and Industry claims that the business environment is ruined to an extent of zero (Singh, 2024). The GST collection made by the state is also subject to economic pressure, as it has gone down by 24 per cent to INR 1,095 million during the first quarter of 2024. This is unlike the general growth of GST in India, which has shown a good percentage increase of more than 10 per cent. The overall effect of such unrest in different sectors reflects the great economic cost of the unrelenting violence that has been exerted on Manipur, threatening its present and future development (Das Et. al., 2024, pp. 1182-83).

Response of the Government and Civil Society

The study distinguishes analytically between the actions of the Manipur State Government, Union Government institutions, security forces, and the higher judiciary to avoid treating the State as a single, homogeneous actor. Therefore, the security response should be understood as involving multiple institutions rather than representing the actions of a single, unified state apparatus.

Security Force Deployment and Military Strategy

The BJP run state government, which is headed by the Chief Minister, N. Biren Singh, has gained much criticism with regard to how it has managed the situation. On May 4 2023, the Manipur State government ordered the shoot-at-sight (Karmakar, 2023). The state government resorted to oppressive acts which included curfew and internet blockage in eight districts, which included non-tribal dominated Imphal West, Kakching, Thoubal, Jiribam, and Bishnupur districts, and tribal areas of Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, and Tengnoupal districts (Das, 2023; Dhillon, 2023). These actions significantly disturbed normal life as most of the locals were unable to move by traveling, socialize with other human beings, travel to work, or even to school. It was a challenge to the individuals in the state that was socially and economically harsh (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2024). When the violence began, Singh alleged a lack of ethnic dimension of the violence instead he shifted the blame for this violence to the terrorists and the intruders (Sen and Sarkar, 2023).

Figure 6: Armed forces in action



Source: India: Ethnic Clashes Restart in Manipur. Human Rights

Furthermore, the Prime Minister Modi took 79 days to respond to the existing violence. However, it was reported that by May 14, 126 columns and 62 companies of paramilitary forces were deployed in the region by the central government (Hindustan Times, 2023). It was among the largest security operations Manipur has experienced in the last few years (Sen and Sarkar, 2023; Vivekananda International Foundation, 2023). As a result, 50 weapons recovery interventions have been concluded in 2026, 390 in 2025, 310 in 2024, and 139 in 2023. The fact that 3,134 arms have been recovered during the President's rule, including 2,035 of the weaponry in the valleys and 1,099 in the hill groups, signifies the meeting of the efforts by the Manipur Police, the Central Armed Police Forces, the Assam rifles, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) and the Indian Army in slowly defeating the violence resources (Old SATP, 2017; Shaheen, 2026).

Figure 7: Armed forces deployed in the conflict zone in Manipur



Source: The Economist. Ethnic conflict festers on India's eastern frontier

Figure 8: Joint Columns of Security Forces have recovered a huge cache of arms and ammunition in combing operations in the general area Sagolmang of Imphal East district in Manipur



Source: Manipur: Security forces recover huge cache of arms, ammunition. The Assam Tribune

As per a report by the Manipur state Government, 665 members of 25 different militant groups were arrested and 3,134 guns were seized on August 11, 2025 by the combined effort of the state and central security forces (Old SATP, 2017). Among the arrested, only 19 were tied to hill-based organizations like the Manipur Naga Revolutionary Front (MNRF), the United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF), among others. The majority of them were, on the other hand, related to valley-based organizations, including the Kangleipak Communist party (KCP), the Revolutionary people front (RPF)/ People's Liberation Army (PLA), among others. By March 7, 2026, 149 terrorists have been caught in 123 different cases, 1,146 arrests in 797 incidents in 2025, and 378 arrests in 162 incidents in 2024 (Shaheen, 2026). Here, the arrest statistics appear inconsistent with allegations of state bias because security forces arrested substantially larger numbers of members belonging to

valley-based militant organisations than hill-based groups. However, these figures largely reflect the operational role of Union security agencies – including the Army, Assam Rifles, Central Armed Police Forces, and central intelligence agencies – which increasingly assumed responsibility for restoring order after the breakdown of state administration. Therefore, arrest statistics should not automatically be interpreted as evidence regarding the political neutrality or otherwise of the Manipur State Government. Rather, they illustrate the differentiated roles performed by various institutions within India's multi-layered security architecture.

Agreement between the Government and insurgent groups

The Kuki-Zo insurgent group signed a subsequent joint operating agreement with the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (UMHA) and the Government of Manipur on September 4, 2025. Cadres were validated, a specified camp was designated, and ground rules were updated, as well as the location of the camp. Meanwhile, special legal measures persisted (Singh, 2025). The September 2025 Joint Operating Agreement must be understood within the broader history of the Suspension of Operations (SoO) arrangements signed in 2008 between the Government of India, the Government of Manipur and several Kuki-Zo insurgent organisations. The original SoO agreements were intended to suspend armed hostilities, confine insurgent cadres to designated camps, prohibit movement with weapons outside camps, and facilitate political dialogue while reducing violence (Ibid., 2025). However, relations between the Manipur Government and several SoO groups deteriorated in the years preceding the 2023 ethnic conflict. The state government accused certain insurgent organisations of violating ground rules and assisting illegal migration and poppy cultivation, while Kuki-Zo organisations alleged that the government was politicising the agreement and targeting tribal communities. This mutual distrust contributed to the effective breakdown of cooperation before the outbreak of violence in May 2023. Against this background, the Joint Operating Agreement signed on 4 September 2025 represented a revision rather than an

entirely new SoO arrangement. Instead of replacing the 2008 framework, it sought to strengthen implementation by introducing stricter verification of cadres, compulsory Aadhaar-based identification, reaffirmation of designated camps, revised monitoring mechanisms, and tighter enforcement of movement restrictions under updated ground rules. The revised framework aimed to restore confidence in the ceasefire mechanism and reduce opportunities for armed mobilisation after the breakdown witnessed during the 2023 violence. However, even with a high number of security forces deployed, violence was witnessed over a period of a few months. Clashes and tensions continued even after the arrival of army and paramilitary personnel, and conflict monitoring organizations were reported. This means that the mere existence of security forces is usually insufficient to settle bitter ethnic and political disputes. Human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have also addressed the problems caused by the security forces, such as not being able to provide security to civilians and arresting people without reason. The Supreme Court of India has also said that the situation is out of control and cannot be solved by using security measures alone (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2023). While curfews and movement restrictions did reduce some violence, the internet blockade and restrictions on activities made people frustrated and angry. Hence, these security measures were not all successful (SATP, 2024).

Accountability Failures, Investigative Limitations and Judicial Actions.

It was reported that the state police sometimes take a longer time to register complaints or do not write down important information given by the victims. In some cases, police officers refused to register the complaints of minority groups, even when they were hurt by mobs. For example, there was a case of violence in Kangpokpi that was reported on May 4, 2023, where a woman was allegedly gang-raped by a group of men. The local police knew about the incident but did not act accordingly, and only some cases have had FIRs filed (Sen and Sarkar, 2024; Outlookindia, 2024). The survivor, who was abducted and gang-raped in May 2023

during the initial days of the Meitei-Kuki ethnic clashes, passed away on January 10, 2026, while undergoing treatment in Guwahati. Her death – without arrests, without accountability, and without closure – now stands as a stark indictment of the state’s response to sexual violence in conflict zones, and a reminder of the human cost of prolonged inaction (SabrangIndia, 2026). The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) only stepped in after intense pressure built up when a video of the event finally surfaced – that reveal delayed for months by a regional internet blackout. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court began reviewing investigation records linked to political conspiracies. This development aligns with claims from a former official regarding a forensic audit of 2025 recordings, which reportedly expose senior government figures orchestrating attacks on Kuki villages while guaranteeing immunity for the perpetrators (Prakash, 2026). On June 4, 2023, the central government increased the scope of the three-member Inquiry Commission led by Ajai Lamba, the former Chief Justice of the Gauhati High Court. This commission is mandated to look into the cause and spread of ethnic violence that occurred in May 2023, its deadline is set to May 20, 2026. The Commission will investigate administrative failures and provide recommendations to avoid future occurrences (MHA, 2023). Moreover, on September 26, 2025, UMHA extended the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), whose extension included the entire state, except 13 of an estimated 276 jurisdictions of police stations in five districts, terming the rest of the areas as being disturbed (The Hindu, 2025). Furthermore, the NIA is attempting to prosecute high-profile cases, such as the prosecution of the KNA Chief on February 2, 2026, for an alleged conspiracy to separate and wage war, and convicting a person on January 29, 2026, for the kidnapping and killing of six Meitei civilians in the District of Jiribam in November 2024 (Lakshman, 2025). The accountability process also reflected important institutional differences within the Indian state. While allegations of administrative bias and delayed responses were primarily directed towards the Manipur State Government and sections of the state police, judicial institutions and central investigative agencies assumed an increasingly active role in reviewing the handling of the conflict. The intervention

of the Supreme Court, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), and the Commission of Inquiry demonstrates that different institutions responded in distinct ways to the crisis.

Towards Peace-building in Manipur

The reaction of the government and the security agencies was not enough in the eyes of many local communities. Consequently, the civil society organisations and community groups came out to offer relief and foster peace at the ground level.

Women's Organisation Initiatives

Women's organisations played a special role. One famous movement is the Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network, which was established by an activist, Binalakshmi Nepram. The network operates with women survivors of gun violence in Manipur, as well as other Northeast region of India. The organisation multiplied its work to assist the displaced communities in hundreds of villages in the course of the violence that started in May 2023. One of them was the creation of the so-called Peace Gardens in displacement camps, by which the families could be given the opportunity to grow their vegetables and fruits to access food and nutrition. The network held health and wellness training in some of the relief camps in 2024. Physical and psychological needs were addressed in the form of medical professionals and counsellors being invited to work with the survivors (Nepram, 2025). Other artistic activities that were put up by the organisation included music and painting classes. They were directed towards contributing to the emotional healing of people and the cohesion of the community among the displaced families. Psychosocial and livelihood recovery is also an issue of concern to the network. Volunteers provide counselling and corruption-free locations, whereby the survivors may tell their stories. In the meantime, there are skill development courses such as weaving, tailoring, food processing, and basket making, offered by the organisation. Through such programmes, displaced women can not only

improve their livelihoods, as they obtain income; they also feel independent once again, once deprived of homes, livelihoods, etc (Nepram, 2025).

Figure 9: Meira Paibis from across Manipur have come together to protest against the potential arrest of Arambai Tenggol leader Korounganba Khuman.



Source: Land is Life. (October 30, 2023). Indigenous Women Particularly At Risk in Brutal Inter-Ethnic Conflict in Manipur.

The other noteworthy programme is the Meira Paibi movement, usually translated as women torch-bearers. These groups consist of village women who work to protect their communities from crime and other problems. During times of unrest in the past, they have done things, like patrolling at night, helping families in need, and trying to prevent violence. During this 2023 conflict, on one hand, it was supplying night patrols, mediated at least not to resort to violence, and assisted suffering families. However, Conversely, the Meira Paibi has faced serious allegations of shielding Meitei militia members and attackers. According to the International Crisis Group (2025), the group has actively pressured the military into releasing detained insurgents. Furthermore, a First Information Report (FIR) filed by an 18-year-old kidnapping survivor from May 15, 2023, explicitly accuses

members of the organization of handing her over to her abductors (SabrangIndia, 2026).

Bridging and Bonding Civil Society in Ethnic Conflict

Civil society is often viewed as an important actor in conflict resolution because it can provide humanitarian assistance, facilitate dialogue, and rebuild trust among conflict-affected communities. However, scholarship on ethnic conflict demonstrates that civil society is not a homogeneous entity. In deeply polarised societies, civil society organisations frequently mirror the social and political divisions existing within society. Consequently, some organisations perform a bridging role by fostering cooperation across communal boundaries, while others perform a bonding role by strengthening in-group solidarity and defending the interests of their own ethnic communities. Although both forms provide social support, their implications for peacebuilding differ significantly. The experience of Manipur illustrates this dual character of civil society. The Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network represents an example of bridging civil society. Its initiatives, including Peace Gardens, psychosocial counselling, livelihood support, and trauma healing, focus on reducing human suffering and rebuilding resilience among conflict-affected populations. Rather than promoting the interests of a single ethnic group, these programmes address common humanitarian needs and contribute to rebuilding trust, social cohesion, and long-term peace. By contrast, sections of the Meira Paibi movement illustrate characteristics of bonding civil society. Historically, the organisation has played an important role in protecting local communities, preventing crime, and supporting families during periods of unrest. However, during the 2023 ethnic conflict, allegations that some members shielded valley-based militants, pressured security forces to release detained insurgents, and interfered with criminal investigations suggest that ethnic solidarity may, at times, have taken precedence over the principles of impartial justice and the rule of law. Such actions demonstrate how civil society organisations can become embedded within the conflict itself rather than

functioning as neutral peace actors. This divergence reflects the broader dynamics of protracted ethnic conflict. As trust in state institutions declines and communities increasingly perceive existential threats, civil society organisations often become more accountable to their own constituencies than to broader democratic or humanitarian principles. Under such circumstances, organisations that originally emerged for community welfare may gradually evolve into defenders of collective ethnic interests, thereby reinforcing existing social divisions. Therefore, the case of Manipur demonstrates that civil society performs both constructive and contradictory functions. While bridging civil society contributes to reconciliation, humanitarian relief, and inter-community cooperation, bonding civil society may reinforce ethnic polarisation, legitimise communal mobilisation, and unintentionally obstruct peacebuilding and formal institutions of justice. Recognising this dual character is essential for understanding both the opportunities and limitations of civil society in deeply divided societies.

Civil Society Relief Provision and Camp Management

Despite the divergent roles played by different civil society organisations, several humanitarian and community-based groups served as important bridges between conflict-affected communities, security forces, and government agencies by coordinating relief, communicating local needs, and supporting displaced populations. These organisations were mostly closely aligned with the local churches, youth associations, and networks (Das, Et. al., 2024, p. 1180). Particularly, church-based organisations acted as significant sources of humanitarian aid. They provided temporary shelters, food, clothes, and healthcare services to the displaced individuals of other ethnic and religious communities as well (Hasan, Singh, & Singh, 2026, p. 36). Nevertheless, the capacity of the church organisations and grassroots groups to carry on with relief activities weakened due to financial weaknesses or challenges in the way they operated.

Figure 10: Community in action in relief camp management. Source: Ethnic conflict drags on in Manipur in India's north-east.



Source: The Economist

Ultimately, Union Home Minister, Shri Amit Shah, on 3 April, 2025, said that online arrangements for technical and medical education have been made, and for primary education, classes have been set up inside the camps, where arrangements for their studies have been made (MHA, 2025). It was only in July 2025, over two years after violence broke out, that the state government declared a three-phase rehabilitation plan. The rehabilitation programme consisted of three broad stages. The first phase focused on facilitating the safe return of families to villages where security conditions had improved. The second phase targeted households whose homes had been destroyed, providing financial assistance in instalments for reconstruction together with basic infrastructure support. The final phase was designed for families who could not safely return to their original villages because of continuing ethnic segregation or security concerns, with the government proposing the construction of approximately 1,000 permanent housing units in alternative locations. To this effect, the government hopes to shut down all relief camps by 2025. The scheme involves financial contributions for the

reconstruction of houses. An initial amount of 130,000, and later 173,000, was given to families (Kalita, 2025; Hindustan Times, 2025). Nevertheless, implementation fell considerably behind schedule. By early 2026, a substantial number of displaced families continued to remain in relief camps despite the government's target of closing them by the end of 2025. Several factors contributed to this outcome. First, recurring episodes of violence and the absence of mutual trust prevented many displaced persons from returning to ethnically mixed localities. Second, reconstruction of damaged houses progressed more slowly than anticipated despite financial assistance, while many villages lacked adequate security guarantees. Third, communities increasingly became territorially segregated, making voluntary return politically and socially difficult. Finally, repeated protests, highway blockades and renewed violence further interrupted rehabilitation efforts and demonstrated that humanitarian recovery could not proceed independently of political reconciliation. Consequently, although the rehabilitation framework represented an important policy initiative, its implementation remained incomplete because the underlying causes of conflict had not yet been resolved.

A Way Forward

After three years of conflict, Manipur is still on edge. On 7 April 2026, violence has erupted yet again in Manipur killing two children, aged five and six, from the Meitei community and injured their mother in an afternoon bombing at a house in the Tronglaobi Awang Leikai area in Manipur's Bishnupur district. Following the incident, Organisations called for shutting down towns, and men, women and youth came out in protests, setting up blockades and clashing with the police. Some demonstrators set oil tankers on fire. The main road linking Bishnupur to Kuki-dominated Churachandpur has remained blocked for two weeks. The clashes between protesters – who were demanding the arrest of killers – and security forces have left at least seven people killed, over dozen people injured and more than a twelve arrested. The Meitei leaders accused the Kuki fighters of this. However, the Kuki groups denied involvement, saying the village was not close to

their areas of access. Nonetheless, a fragile peace was shattered again in the state (Sharma, 2026). Moreover, the persistence of displacement despite the rehabilitation programme illustrates that physical reconstruction alone cannot restore normalcy without parallel progress in security, inter-community trust and political dialogue. These continuing shortcomings became evident in the renewed violence witnessed during April 2026, as discussed above. Hence, the study finds that a long-term peace must involve dialogue among all conflict-affected parties. Local actors are usually in a better position to interpret the conflict dynamics than the external actors and can be used to foster trust between communities. Likewise, farmers who used to rely on poppy farming as a source of income should also be given special treatment. The transition programmes can assist such farmers to switch to the legal crops by offering the farmer seeds, training, market access, and analysis of funds in the transition period. Environmental and forest management policies must also consider having the local communities participate in decision-making. In addition, the situation should also be stabilised through disarmament. Disarmament programmes may be voluntary, and the governments may provide incentives like giving money or even assisting in the development of the people who give up arms. Most importantly, sustainable peace in Manipur must tackle the socio-economic inequalities that are causing resentments and instability. The development gaps in many of the hills are quite high compared to the valley areas. By enhancing access to education, healthcare, infrastructure, and livelihood opportunities, it is possible to ease the economic grievances and ensure social stability. The implementation of development programmes should be done in an inclusive and fair manner in order to benefit all the communities. Communities that feel the positive results of the improvement of their living conditions can more easily contribute to peace programmes and are less inclined to get involved in violence in the future.

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