

# The Role of Media in Shaping Narratives of the Ongoing Ethnic Conflict in Manipur

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## Abstract

*The deep-seated identity politics, the issue of land rights, and government governance greatly fuelled the ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki-Zomi in Manipur that erupted on May 3, 2023. The Kuki-Zomi tribes opposed the demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status by the Meitei community as they felt this might undermine their autonomy and land protections. Many people were displaced, houses were burned down and lives were lost due to the violence.*

*The role of media in this crisis has been significant yet contentious. The selective implementation of an internet ban significantly affected the flow of information, which amplified the narratives of the Meitei-dominated valley while silencing voices from the hill districts dominated by Kuki-Zomi. Mainstream Indian media were criticised for sensationalism and bias, often reflecting valley-centric perspectives aligned with agendas supportive of the government and Hindu nationalism. This characterisation brought the Kuki-Zomi into the categories of "outsiders" and "illegal immigrants," increasing their marginalization and escalating the conflicts.*

*The independent platforms attempted fair reporting; however, their limited reach was unable to counter the dominant narrative shaped by TRP-driven outlets. Lack of fair coverage with the absence of ethical journalism doubled the spread of misinformation, deepened mistrust, and thus prolonged the crisis.*

*To address such conflicts, media outlets need to put more emphasis on ethical reporting. The key is equitable access to communication infrastructure and media in all communities by policymakers. Media will be an effective tool in peace building through an empathy-driven narrative that humanizes everyone involved and encourages dialogue.*

*Ultimately, what is required is both systemic reform and constructive engagement across media to build understanding between diverse bodies and bridge divides for Manipur to finally forge a path towards peace. Ethical journalism plays a crucial role in shaping narratives that promote social cohesion and sustainable resolution in places like Manipur.*

**Keywords:** Manipur, Meitei, Kuki, ethnic conflict, media, misinformation, internet ban, social media

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2023, the northeastern Indian state of Manipur witnessed ethnic violence between the communities of Meitei and Kuki-Zomi. These communal clashes symbolise long pending historical grievances and play on identity politics (Krishnan, 2023). The predominantly Hindu Meiteis of the valley have been demanding ST status, which the largely Christian Kuki-Zomi tribes in the hills strongly oppose, fearing losing their rights over land and other resources. The conflict escalated into severe violence, leading to loss of life, destruction of property, and mass displacement of people.

Amidst the chaos, there is growing criticism over the role of the media. The selective internet ban by the state government hindered information flow, with news and narratives becoming skewed. Ostensibly aimed to stop misinformation, the ban has promoted a ground where biased narratives dominated. Valley-based media outlets are often accused of supporting the Meitei view (Konwar, 2024). These stories have labelled the Kuki-Zomi as "outsiders" and "illegal immigrants," that suit Hindu nationalist agendas, hence adding to division.

The media has been accused of sensationalism and bias. Major news channels have been alleged to cater to the views of the ruling party. They make the Meiteis appear as victims while the Kuki-Zomi tribes are highlighted as perpetrators of various immoral activities, such as drug peddling and even rebellion

(Sharma, 2024). This framing dovetails into a larger nationalistic agenda while shifting the attention away from governance failure in resolving the crisis. The case has also been further muddled by right-leaning outlets due to suspicions of foreign interference and migration from Myanmar.

Some independent platforms have made serious attempts to provide balanced narratives by covering the perspectives of the Kuki-Zomi community, but such journalism can only reach a limited number of people and not the millions of users who go by TRP-driven mainstream news.

The selective depiction of the Manipur situation has been suspected of further deepening communal division, prompting criticism from conflict experts. Scholars argue that there is no boundary between media sensationalism and bias undermining the critical responsibility of journalists in a conflict zone. Instead of talking about the root causes, such as land rights and governance, they have been more communicating with restricting communal discourse (Doungel, 2023). This type of approach fosters mistrust among communities and extends the duration of the conflict.

The internet ban has further silenced victim voices, among others from the hill districts, and minimized their spread, thus keeping tribal grievances largely unheard within national platforms. This has generally kept with valley-based narratives that have dominated the ethnic violence in Manipur. The selective and partial coverage of ethnic violence in Manipur therefore deserves media reforms that prioritise accountability, fact-finding, and inclusivity in reporting conflict.

Ultimately, solving the Manipur crisis depends on resolving the deep-seated issues of equitable land rights, political representation, and ethnic reconciliation. With this regard, the media is in a position to transcend sensationalism and polarization, playing a constructive role in fostering dialogue and mutual understanding. Ethical journalism can, therefore, be a powerful tool for bridging divides and fostering lasting peace in Manipur.

## 2. CONTEXT OF THE CONFLICT

Northeast India's Manipur state has been battling ethnic turmoil that dates back to numerous old grievances, identity politics, and resource-based competition. The flare-up arises from the demand for Scheduled Tribe status by the Meitei people, a move that the Kuki-Zomi tribes consider a threat to their land rights and autonomy (ZSF, 2023). The conflict over this issue left it in full-scale violence, total displacement, and huge casualties and loss of property.

The Manipur government had imposed a statewide internet ban amid escalating violence, to prevent the spread of misinformation and keep the situation calm. The implementation of this shutdown was not even. While on the hill districts, where the Kuki-Zomi population mostly lived, access was extremely limited, Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley enjoyed continual broadband and other unofficial channels of access. This unequal enforcement of the internet ban created a biased media environment, silencing the Kuki-Zomi voices online while allowing Meitei narratives to dominate public discourse (KReF, 2023).

The debate has evolved beyond the local level and has become a national debate. It further sees the surge of media narratives in the country. Indian media as a whole has been criticized over biased reporting, with some showing more favouritism to the Meitei version of events because of proximity to power structures and better access to media platforms. Sensationalist reporting has often buckled nuanced analysis to present the complex conflict in simplistic dichotomies (ITLF Media Cell, 2023).

This biased reporting has exacerbated polarization and disrupted peaceful initiatives. Meitei's claim over ST status is framed by its supporters as a just cause seeking equity in land rights and resource utilization. But for the Kuki-Zomi, it is an attempt to seize their constitutionally safeguarded land resources and undermine their culture. The media's concentration on the heated discourse of the issue rather than the systemic failures makes it exaggerate their grievances.

In the context of reporting on conflict, the ethical burden places major responsibilities on journalists and the media. The outcome of such reporting is that it could potentially accentuate divisions and alienate marginalized communities. The fact that equitable representation within the national discourse has not been observed highlights just how challenging it is for the Kuki-Zomi community to counter the prevailing narrative.

The media landscape is uneven, reflecting wider systemic inequities. While the Kuki-Zomi community was restricted from accessing communication channels during the internet ban, it only underlines the

marginalized nature of the community. It defines the significance of communication infrastructure in conflict resolution and, by extension, ensuring equitable access to the media for all parties involved.

The Manipur conflict underlines the need for responsible and balanced media reporting. A nuanced approach that prioritizes fact-based analysis over sensationalism can help bridge divides and foster mutual understanding. The role of the media, both local and national, is crucial in shaping public discourse, highlighting systemic issues, and supporting efforts toward a sustainable resolution. Without ethical journalism and equitable representation, the Manipur conflict risks being exacerbated by the very platforms that should be fostering dialogue and reconciliation.

### 3. MEDIA HOUSES IN MANIPUR

The media landscape in Manipur is marked by ethnic divisions and uneven development, reflecting the broader dynamics that feature in Manipur's social and political lives. The Meitei community dominates the media institutions while the Kuki-Zomi and Naga tribal communities have a low representation of media outlets (Editors Guild of India, 2023). This unevenness, therefore, promotes an unequal presentation of stories, with the valley-based view gaining more prominence.

The Imphal Valley hosts a more developed media infrastructure, featuring numerous newspapers, radio stations, television channels, and online platforms. Media houses like The Sangai Express, Imphal Times, and Tom TV as well as Impact TV dominate public discussion. These media generally print in Meiteilon and are often biased towards the mindset of the majority Meitei community. They have the power to influence both local and national perceptions about the ethnic and political issues that keep rising, diminishing tribal voices in the process.

**Table 1.** Comparison of Media Platforms by Region and Community in Manipur

Type of media	Valley-based (Imphal-based)	Hill-based (Kuki-Zomi)	Hill-based (Naga)
Newsprint/ Digital	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Sangai Express (English/Meitei)</li> <li>2. E-pao (English)</li> <li>3. Imphal Times (English)</li> <li>4. Imphal Free Press (English)</li> <li>5. Poknapham (Meitei)</li> <li>6. People’s Chronicle (English)</li> <li>7. HueyenLanpao (Meitei)</li> <li>8. NaharolgiThoudang (Meitei)</li> </ol> Government: DD Imphal (in Meitei)	Eimi Times (in Thadou dialect - defunct since 2012)	Ukhrul Times
Broadcast	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tom TV (731k subscribers)</li> <li>2. Impact TV (691K)</li> <li>3. ISTV Live (476K)</li> <li>4. Elite TV (162 K)</li> <li>5. MAMI TV Network (157K) (All news reporting is in the Meiteilon language, but most telecast daily news in English before the conflict).</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Hornbill (YouTube): Weekly show</li> <li>2. TC News Network (fully functional since July 2023, 1 news broadcast/day)</li> <li>3. ISTV (One talk show a day)</li> </ol>	
Radio	AIR Radio (Meiteilon news)	AIR news (Thadou news, Paite news, Hmar news). All defunct since May 3, as the AIR station is in Imphal and cannot be accessed by Kuki-Zo news readers.	

**Source:** Editors Guild of India (EGI)

The Kuki-Zomi and other tribal communities in the hill districts face many more obstacles in creating strong media houses. Tribal-focused media have little outreach and impact on the undeveloped infrastructure of the state (Pautunthang, 2024). In these hill districts, most media publications are in the local dialects, Thadou, Paite, and Hmar, and most exist only as single-page leaflets. Examples include smaller outlets and now-defunct publications like Eimi Times, which aimed at promoting the Kuki-

Zomi perspective. Recent attempts at adapting to digital platforms, such as TC News Network, indicate efforts by tribal communities to bridge the gap, though they remain in their early stages.

The valley-based Doordarshan Imphal and All India Radio are the government-controlled media which continue to undermine hill districts. These media houses frequently give preference to stories related to valley-sourced narratives, giving limited space to the voices of the hill's indigenous groups.

The implication of such an imbalance in media ownership and accessibility, however, is tremendous. Valley-based outlets tend to frame narratives on issues of interest to the Meitei community, leaving the perspectives and grievances of hill communities mostly invisible. More particularly, in the ongoing conflict, a media vacuum in the hills meant that Kuki-Zomi communities could hardly voice their version of the narratives through the limited channels available.

#### 4. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE INTERNET BAN

The internet ban in Manipur since the outbreak of violence in May 2023 has many ethical and practical implications. While justified to curb disinformation by the authorities, it has selectively discriminated in its practice, deepening inequalities and worsening the crisis.

The imposition of the internet ban was also definitely disproportionate. Mobile internet services were completely cut off in the hill districts dominated by Kuki-Zomi. However, partial access continued in the Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley through broadband. Such inequitable access silenced the Kuki-Zomi narrative, which cannot effectively counter misinformation or propaganda (Parasnis, 2024). It made the community voiceless, allowing valley-dominated narratives to dominate public opinion both locally and nationally.

Internet ban further marginalized the community in the presentation of media and visibility. Through a limited means of reporting updates or airing grievances on digital platforms, the voice of the Kuki-Zomi group was overshadowed by those widely connected through Imphal Valley. This has perpetuated a lopsided narration of the conflict, defying efforts at discourse and public understanding.

Despite its intention to curb the spread of fake news, the embargo was counterproductive in some ways. As partial internet access persisted in the Imphal Valley, social media and digital platforms were used for hate speech and misinformation. These unchecked narratives escalated tensions and perpetuated hostilities, undermining peacebuilding efforts.

The selective enforcement of the ban raises significant ethical concerns regarding freedom of speech and equal access to information (Maheshwari, 2023). Silencing a vulnerable group while allowing partial access to another perpetuates systemic bias and undermines democratic principles. Moreover, the inability to effectively counter misinformation has deepened mistrust and divisions among communities.

#### 5. MEITEI PERSPECTIVE ON THE MANIPUR CONFLICT

The media in Imphal was originally meant to serve as the voice of the people of Manipur as a whole. However, with the outbreak of ethnic conflict, almost all channels have shifted toward a Meitei-centric approach to telling their narratives. This is an ethnic conflict whose roots are historically deep. Meitei media and political actors are key to these narratives, which often depict the community as the greatest victims of the current crisis.

The Meitei perspective frames the Hill-Valley divide as a matter of economic and territorial inequality. Much has been said about this divide, but recent politicization has fueled the spread of false and misleading information, often driven by valley-based media and political actors seeking to justify expanding Meitei settlements into tribal lands. While the narrative claims that Meiteis are disadvantaged, confined to just 10 per cent of Manipur's land, critics argue that it overlooks systemic inequalities. The tribals' 90 per cent land share is crucial for their livelihoods, and historical protections safeguard their autonomy, which such arguments threaten to undermine.

The Meitei narrative often ties poppy cultivation and drug trafficking to the hill districts, particularly targeting the Kuki-Zomi communities. Such framing has been used for government crackdowns by highlighting environmental degradation, exploitative economies, and links to cross-border insurgency. It has also helped build dangerous communalist sentiments against the Kuki-Zomi community. Valley-based media amplify such claims, legitimizing calls for more stringent land and forest management

policies. The tribals, however, are very adamant in their denial, contending that systemic neglect and economic deprivation are the driving factors for isolated criminal activities in the hills.

The Meitei view of illegal immigration is driven by the fear of a spate of Kuki-Zomi refugees from Myanmar and their settlement in all these hill districts where they constitute a majority. Media, especially valley-based ones, attribute the conflict to the influx and portray the refugees as a demographic threat to the valley that is predominantly Meitei. The narratives usually connect immigrants to the encroachment of land, poppy cultivation, and narco-terrorism. This framing supports the demands of tighter border controls and labels Kuki-Zomi as outsiders when in fact they share historical and cultural relations with the region.

The other significant focus of the Meitei narrative is the accusation of forest encroachment. Tribal communities are blamed for massive deforestation due to settlement expansion and poppy cultivation, which they frame as violations of environmental laws. The Meitei media relates these activities to problems of governance and security and emphasizes the need for stringent forest conservation policies.

Narco-terrorism is portrayed as a grave threat, with Kuki-Zomi people constantly being involved in drug dealings. The narrative further explains that cross-border networks fuel drug peddling in the hills and disrupt the entire region. This narrative sets up a discourse for strong measures against the tribal population, claiming the Meiteis to be the saviours of the state's integrity.

The conflict is often couched in religious terms, with Meitei Hindus becoming the protectors of their religion from an increasingly Christianising Kuki-Zomi and other tribal groups. Allegations of foreign influence through the Myanmar refugees are frequently thrown around to further fuel the religious divide. This narrative positions the Meitei community as protectors of Hindu identity and traditions, while an increasing Christian tribal presence is portrayed as a threat to the region's cultural and religious landscape. It frames the conflict as a struggle between Hindu Meiteis and Christian Kuki tribes in a more sympathetic manner. The narrative enables people to mobilise support for the Meitei cause, tapping into broader religious and nationalist sentiments.

The use of derogative terms such as "hao" and "minai" to refer to hill communities reflects deep prejudices. Recent alleged remarks by the Chief Minister of Manipur referring to the Kuki community as "monkeys" have fueled communal tensions. Although such words reinforce ethnic divisions, it also underlines the fragility of inter-community relationships.

The Meitei community was projected as a victim of riots in the valley-based media after the eruption of riots. Such a portrayal goes against the actual reality on the ground. The reporting was sensational and created public anger against the Kuki-Zomi community, converting passive into active participants in the conflict. The politicians and the leaders fed on such narratives to fan hatred further and fake stories were widely circulated, fuelling tensions across the state. Media highlighted threats from alleged illegal immigration and land encroachment by the Kuki-Zomi community, as well as attacks by armed groups under Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreements while downplaying the grievances of the Kuki-Zomi community. Allegations of collusion between central paramilitary forces like the Assam Rifles (ARs) and the Kuki-Zomi added to the volatile environment, fostering a one-sided narrative that deepened ethnic divisions.

### 6. KUKI-ZOMI COUNTER NARRATIVES

During the initial months of ethnic clashes in Manipur, Imphal-based media generally corresponded to the Meitei narrative, as access to Hill areas was severely restricted. The bias was presented in the way the news was framed, with tribals barely emerging in the reports.

The narrative that Meitei is disadvantageous by occupying only 10 per cent of Manipur's land while the tribal community occupies the other 90 per cent is misleading (ZSF & KSO, 2023). More than half of the hill areas are not inhabitable in any way. Meiteis dominate the economy and politics, with fertile lands, better infrastructure, and more political representation. A large population of Meiteis inhabits hill areas, such as colonies like Meitei Leikais in Lamka (Churachandpur) and Kanggui (Kangpokpi). Tribals also have colonies in the Imphal Valley, but only a few can afford the high living costs. Meiteis can legally buy land in the hills, requiring approval from the District Council and Deputy Commissioner.

**Table 2.** Comparative Analysis of Geographic, Socio-Economic, and Cultural Aspects of Hills and Valley in Manipur

COMPARISON	HILLS	VALLEY
Per cent of Geographical Area	90 per cent	10 per cent
Settlement Rights	All communities: There is in fact a sizeable Meitei population in hill areas. Meitei Leikais (colonies) are a common feature in hill towns like Lamka (Churachandpur) and Kanggui (Kangpokpi).	All communities: There are tribal colonies in Imphal Valley. But only a few tribals can afford to settle here due to high living costs.
Buying Lands	Permitted to all under due procedure: The only restriction is that the prospective buyer of land who is a non-ST has to take approval from the District Council and the Deputy Commissioner concerned.	Permitted to all under due procedure
Land Productivity	Very low, infertile, hilly and inhospitable	Highly productive, fertile, plain area and conducive to living.
Mode of Farming	Shifting cultivation, which is labour-intensive, non-remunerative, and requires larger areas to maintain the Jhum cycle.	Settled/permanent farming which can be done in small areas. This is highly remunerative, and the government provides immense support in terms of capital and subsidies.
Reasons for Congestions	Forest, Protected Forest, Wild Life Sanctuary, National Parks, etc. If rules of these frameworks were to be implemented, there would no longer be sufficient land for the habitation and livelihood of tribals. Tribals are predominantly agriculturalists. However, as the hills are characterized by low fertility and inhospitable terrain, they also depend on forest produce as a part of their sustenance.	Over-concentration of government institutions and offices, educational, technical and medical institutions, infrastructure projects, etc. in the Imphal Valley.
The People	Tribals, low income, low social status, and suffering from decades of institutional and systemic injustice	Gen/SC/OBC, advanced community, high-income groups, with disproportionate control over political power and economic resources.
Protections Available to the People	The tribals are protected by Art 371C. But the Hill Areas Committee (HAC) formed under it is only a recommendatory body and therefore ultimately powerless.	The Meiteis have 40 out of 60 total seats in the State legislature – a disproportionate share as they account for just half of the total population. The State not only protects their culture, language, and political interests but also imposes it on other communities of the State.

**Source:** *The Inevitable Split, Vol-I*

Declarations of Reserve Forests, Protected Forests, Wildlife Sanctuaries, and National Parks further aggravate the situation for tribal communities since they reduce available land for habitation and livelihoods. As the tribals practised agriculture, they needed high-fertility lands and forest resources for their living. On the other hand, over-concentration of government institutions, infrastructure projects, and educational and medical facilities in the Imphal Valley have resulted in favouring Meitei development at the cost of hill areas, thereby increasing inequality and threatening the Kuki-Zomi communities' very existence.

The entire Kuki-Zomi community was subjected to unfair accusations, paying no heed to the relevant realities. Poppy plantation and drug trade were stoutly opposed by the chiefs and severe actions were

undertaken against those indulging in them. Civil society organizations and groups signing Suspension of Operations agreements, such as ZRO and KNO, condemned openly poppy plantations in the hills. While the poor of Manipur, such as some of the Kuki-Zomi, cultivate poppies, the mastermind kingpins are in the Imphal Valley. The fact is, they have excellent relations with political leadership and many laboratories are there in the valley. Weaving this tale only to malign the tribal land ownership and promote stereotypes. The fact of the matter is that it is not a question of the community but a failure in the system, as Meiteis and Nagas are also involved in this nefarious trade. No community must be condemned for the acts of a few. The narrative has to shift from talking about the systemic drivers to assigning personal blame, regardless of ethnicity.

**Table 3.** Number of People Arrested in Manipur Drug Case, Community Wise, 2017-2023

Year	Number of People Arrested	
	Kuki-Chin	Muslim
2017	82	93
2018	54	223
2019	122	201
2020	127	177
2021	151	163
2022	288	210
2023	49	16

**Source:** *The Inevitable Split Vol-II*

The Kuki-Zomi argue against the assumption of the generalization that they host illegal immigrants. Of course, a few of these refugees fled Myanmar due to the coup d'état of the army, but that number is minimal and not enough to begin with new settlements. The Kuki-Zomi emphasize long-time residence in the land before the British invasion, coupled with their patriotism in bringing about India's independence and establishment of the nation. They find labelling attempts at naming them undocumented immigrants to be invalid as well as detrimental to their history and heritage.

Claims of forest encroachment against tribal communities often stem from a lack of understanding about their traditional land-use practices. Tribes such as the Kuki-Zomi have subsisted on shifting cultivation, a practice increasingly misinterpreted due to expanding protected areas and restrictive policies. Furthermore, the claim that illegal immigrants or refugees are building new towns in the hills dismisses tribal customs. According to Kuki-Zomi traditions, new villages are established when population growth necessitates, stemming from existing villages. Labelling these culturally-rooted expansions as encroachment is both misleading and culturally insensitive.

Accusations of narco-terrorism unfairly stigmatize entire tribal communities, such as the Kuki-Zomi (Rathore, 2023). While some individuals from the community may be implicated in illegal activities, it is unfair to generalise and stigmatise the entire community for alleged involvement in drug trafficking. The Kuki-Zomi people emphasize that the root causes lie in the dearth of economic opportunities, systemic neglect, and regional instability pushing individuals into illegal trades. They demand a more subtle interpretation, disassociating the whole ethnic group from the wicked acts of a few.

The Kuki-Zomi tribes assert that the Manipur conflict is not a religious battle but is, rather an ethnic, political, and territorial conflict (CSI, 2024). Using religion as a lens misses the more extensive cultural, linguistic, and organizational differences between Meiteis and tribal groups. For example, Meiteis include followers of the Sanamahi religion, Muslims (Pangals), and Christians, which contradicts the simplistic religious binary. Hindu worshipping spaces in tribal areas remained untouched, even of the Meiteis, with evidence of ethnic rather than religious conflict. In another predominantly Christian community, the Nagas, their churches also were not attacked and hence not damaged.

The Meiteis' present understanding of their Hindu identity, using it for sympathy with the national Hindu population is in contradiction to their history of driving apart themselves from mainland Hindus. It includes banning Hindi films and language since the 1980s and enforcing ILP to curtail the entry of mainland Indians who are mostly Hindus into the state. Critics argue that this narrative obliterates ethnic violence against tribals and maligns the inclusive principles of Hinduism. The resurgence of militant Meitei-ism and Sanamahi revivalism: a reflection of the complexity in the ethnic motivation behind the conflict, as opposed to religion alone. This kind of manipulation of the narrative will serve to mask the nature of the conflict while also misleading public understanding and national discourse.

The derogatory remarks made by the Chief Minister of Manipur regarding the Kuki community as "monkeys" found vehement condemnation from the Kuki-Zomi community. The Committee on Tribal Unity (COTU) described such comments as "absurd and immature" by violating human rights and undermining the leadership of the Chief Minister. Such remarks deepen communal divides and disrespect the dignity of the Kuki-Zomi people, further exacerbating ethnic tensions and hindering reconciliation.

The Kuki-Zomi community asserts that they have been the most affected in terms of loss of life and property during the conflict. Many Kuki-Zomi villages, homes, and churches have been destroyed, displacing thousands. They argue that this suffering is compounded by state-sponsored violence and biased media narratives. But facts indicate that extremist Meitei groups, such as the Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun, planned and executed this ethnic cleansing with the full support of the state government. They were allowed to freely access arms from police stations to target innocent tribal civilians. Months before the violence occurred, young men claiming to be government agents but with no identification visited tribal neighbourhoods in Imphal. They marked houses belonging to Kuki-Zomi families with red paint, which was later identified as part of a premeditated plan for ethnic cleansing. When the violence occurred, all marked houses were systematically destroyed.

Contrary to media portrayals that framed the Kuki-Zomi as aggressors, evidence shows they operated mainly in self-defence. Data reveals over 90 per cent of casualties were Kuki-Zomis, and they account for more than 80 per cent of displaced persons (Tonsing, 2025). The disparity highlights false narratives favouring a particular group, while the Kuki-Zomi endured the brunt of human and property losses. In Imphal and surrounding areas, mobs destroyed Kuki-Zomi homes and looted abandoned properties (Roy, 2023).

Moreover, over 4,000 sophisticated arms and five lakh rounds of ammunition were taken away from the armouries by Meitei mobs with the help of a largely Meitei police force. Rather than trying to stop the looters, the police often looked the other way, showing a clear bias. They acted aggressively against Kuki-Zomi mobs but surrendered their positions when confronted by Meitei rioters, thus allowing unbridled violence (Singh, 2025). This trend of arson and looting is indicative of systemic bias and planned attacks against Kuki-Zomi communities.

### 7. THE NATIONAL MEDIA STANCE

The Manipur conflict underscores the fragmented and biased approach of national media in shaping public discourse. Initially, national outlets relied entirely on valley-based media, amplifying Meitei narratives while sidelining the voices of tribal communities like the Kuki-Zomi (Suante, 2023). As a result, mainland India largely accepted the Meitei perspective. However, the narrative shifted after a viral video showing two Kuki-Zomi women being paraded naked drew nationwide outrage. It made the entire journalists fraternity in India travel to Manipur, and consequently, there was more balanced mainstream coverage as reporters obtained perspectives from both sides of the conflict.

The pro-government lean of several national networks, such as Zee News and Republic TV, exacerbated the situation. These channels often adopt a Hindu nationalist perspective, portraying the predominantly Hindu Meitei community in a positive light while framing the Christian majority Kuki-Zomi communities in a prejudiced and negative manner. This biased representation exacerbates communal divisions by reinforcing stereotypes and marginalising the voices of the tribal groups (Staff Correspondent, 2024). Such reporting does not only misrepresent the tribal populace but also acts to propagate narratives that intensify ethnic and religious divisions. Supporters of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) join themselves with narratives such as "protecting Hindus from illegal Christian immigrants" further promoting divisive rhetoric. These alliances reinforce religious and ethnic tensions, presenting the Meitei community's concern as a defence of Hinduism while portraying the Kuki-Zomi tribes negatively. This framing plays into broader political agendas, deepening communal divides and sidelining more complex issues like governance and land rights. Despite the Kuki-Zomi community's long-standing presence in Manipur, such rhetoric has further marginalised their voices, labelling them as outsiders. This has undermined their legitimate claims to cultural and territorial rights, effectively portraying them as threats rather than acknowledging their historical and rightful connection to the state.

These are further aggravated by the state government's mishandling of the situation, which has been shifted away from by right-leaning media outlets framing the conflict. The media channels have instead focused on issues such as alleged "foreign interference" from Myanmar and accusations of illegal immigration. However, land rights and governance were at the heart of the conflict. In doing so, they

reinforce a tale that accommodates State-wise draconian policies but ignores the grievances of the tribal communities.

Independent platforms like Scroll. in and The Wire have done commendable work to provide balanced coverage of the Manipur conflict, amplifying the voices of the marginalized and shedding light on the larger socio-political context of the violence. However, their reach is much less than mainstream outlets driven by TRP ratings, which favour sensational stories and dominate public discourse (Staff Correspondent, 2024). The dominant Meitei narrative thus skews public opinion against balanced reporting from independent media. The NFIW and EGI, neutral entities, further challenge this Meitei-centric narrative, which has been very upsetting for the Meitei people as it contradicts the very narratives endorsed by Meitei civil leaders, the Manipur government, and allied media (Sridevi, 2023). It is also important to note how these findings debunk valley-based media's efforts to narrate the conflict and hence the importance of unbiased, fact-based reporting.

Critics argue that the media's focus on religious identity, rather than addressing key issues such as land rights, ethnic tensions, and historical grievances, has intensified communal polarisation in Manipur. Experts have pointed out the dangerous consequences of such biased reporting. The demonization of the Kuki-Zomi community by some sections of the media fits a larger trend of this type of polarization that ignores the root causes of the problems to reinforce stereotypes and divisions.

Selective representation is further emphasized in the reporting of violence. Tribal grievances, be it displacement or destruction, receive very little coverage compared to occurrences that fit into the valley's narrative. Such imbalance creates a skewed perception of victimhood and responsibility, leaving the tribal communities further on the periphery in the national discourse.

The fact-finding report by the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) triggered a backlash, and L. Liben Singh of Imphal filed a police complaint. Thereafter, an FIR was lodged at Imphal Police Station on July 8, 2023. Likewise, the Manipur Government, the All Manipur Working Journalists Union (AMWJU), and the Editors' Guild of Manipur (EGM) lodged FIRs against members of the Editors Guild of India (EGI) after their report. Additionally, the International Meitei Forum (IMF) filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Manipur High Court to quash the EGI's findings (Lakshman, 2023). These reactions discouraged mainstream media from extensively covering the violence, with only a few correspondents reporting, leading to limited national attention on the Manipur conflict.

The Manipur crisis underscores the ethical responsibility of the media to ensure balanced reporting, especially in conflict zones. By prioritizing sensationalism and political alignment over factual and impartial journalism, mainstream media outlets have not only failed to inform the public but also contributed to prolonging and exacerbating the conflict. Addressing these biases is essential for fostering a more balanced understanding of the issues in Manipur. It is important to ensure that all communities are heard and represented, allowing for a comprehensive view that encompasses the diverse perspectives of both the Meitei and Kuki-Zomi communities. This balanced approach is crucial for bridging divisions and promoting dialogue, ultimately contributing to conflict resolution and a more equitable social framework in the state.

### **8. MEDIA ETHICS AND RESPONSIBILITY**

The media plays a critical role as a first responder in conflict situations. Beyond merely reporting facts, it has a responsibility to act constructively by providing accurate, fair and balanced coverage. The role of the media became crucial in the Manipur conflict as information was characterized by misinformation, polarized narratives, and communal tensions (Abbas & Chikwari, 2023). Ethical journalism in such a situation would thus contribute to solving a conflict by ensuring accuracy, fairness, and sensitivity to the situation.

In a highly polarised environment, unverified information often fuels conflict and violence. Journalism can only be effective if fact-checking becomes a priority, especially when rumours and propaganda dominate public discourse (Desk, 2023). Responsible reporting demands serious cross-verification of sources to distinguish between truth and falsehood. Much of this challenge was compounded by the internet ban in Manipur, which further restricted access to reliable data. By rigorously verifying sources and ensuring accuracy, journalists can counter misinformation and prevent the escalation of tensions, fostering trust and credibility in their reporting.

Fair representation should represent the conflicting groups in ways that foster understanding and empathy between them. The media would need to represent the underrepresented communities equally and allow these people to be heard. Narratives of tribal communities, such as the Kuki-Zomi, have been neglected by mainstream valley-centric narratives in Manipur. Ethical reporting means a resistance to bias and a refusal to engage in sensationalism that creates division (Aiko, 2024). This makes the media provide more balanced narratives, hence giving a more comprehensive understanding of the conflict's causes as well as its implications on all communities.

Media outlets often fall prey to external compulsions, such as political biases, commercial interests, and safety risks in volatile situations, that compromise ethical reporting. For example, in Manipur, national media outlets' proximity to political narratives has warped the coverage of marginalized groups. Ethical reporting demands resistance against such pressures and the tenets of neutrality and truthfulness (AC, 2024).

Media ethics and responsibility are important in conflict zones such as Manipur (Moirangthem, 2024). The media can play the part of mediation rather than watching on by verifying information, providing balancing narratives, and promoting peace leading to conflict resolution and social cohesion.

### 9. CONCLUSION

The Manipur ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki-Zomi communities has proven to be transformative and contentious for the media. In terms of influencing the public narrative, media coverage has always tended to exacerbate the ethnic divide. These are clear in the selective imposition of an internet ban that muted the voices of the hills while amplifying valley-centric perspectives. This imbalance allowed misinformation and propaganda to spread, further increasing mistrust and hostility between the two communities.

Mainstream media has often been criticised for aligning closely with national interests, while local media in Manipur have also faced allegations of biased and tendentious reporting. The coverage of Meitei-centric reporting often fueled the narrative against Kuki-Zomi grievances and realities. These provocative narrations fueled the prolongation of the conflict, further crippling empathy from the wider sections of the public. Local media in tribal areas have been notably inadequate, further marginalising the voices of hill communities.

These are some of the issues that should be addressed by multifaceted actions. Media should embrace ethical journalism by highlighting accuracy, impartiality, and sensitivity in conflict reporting. Balanced reporting is also important as there should be equal representation of all communities involved in such conflicts. Media literacy equips individuals with skills to critically assess information, helping them distinguish between credible facts and misinformation. By fostering analytical thinking, media literacy enables people to reject divisive rhetoric, challenge biases, and engage constructively with diverse perspectives. Indeed, the media can become a powerful tool for peacebuilding and reconciliation in conflict zones like Manipur. Highlighting narratives of coexistence and human resilience can shift focus from division to understanding. Empathy-driven reporting that humanizes all communities involved can foster dialogue and mutual respect.

In conclusion, though the media has played a controversial role in the Manipur conflict, it also possesses the capacity to contribute positively to its resolution. Through responsible practices, balanced narratives, and a commitment to inclusivity, the media can become an agent of change, promoting peace and reconciliation in this deeply divided state.

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