

# **Fabricated Reality**

The role of Social Media during  
the Manipur violence in 2023



**South Asians for Human Rights**



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## Abbreviations

Bharatiya Janata Party	(BJP)
Denial of Service	(DoS)
Domain Name System	(DNS)
Deep Packet Inspection	(DPI)
Editors' Guild of India	(EGI)
First Information Report	(FIR)
Gross Domestic Product	(GDP)
Human Rights Defenders	(HRDs)
Information and Communication Technology	(ICT)
Other Backward Class	(OBC)
Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum	(ITLF)
Right to Information	(RTI)
Suspension of Operations	(SoO)
Scheduled Tribes	(ST)
Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur	(STDCM)
United States Dollar	(USD)

## Executive Summary

Manipur is a state in northeastern India (capital city Imphal). It borders the Indian states of Assam to the west, Mizoram to the south and Nagaland to the north. Manipur shares an international border with Myanmar.

Ethnic violence erupted in Manipur on 3 May 2023, between the Meitei people—a majority that lives in the Imphal Valley—and the Kuki-Zo tribal community from the surrounding hills. As a result, according to government figures, 258 people were killed and 60,000 people were displaced, as of 22 November 2024.

The violence that convulsed Manipur in 2023 revealed how tensions between communities can be framed as a conflict over long-standing political objectives and a statist position believed to have the support of the dominant, majority community.

The violence can also be framed as an ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities that can be rapidly weaponised in the digital sphere. What began as political disagreement over a demand for ST status and the use of lands for poppy cultivation<sup>1</sup> was amplified online into a series of polarised narratives that led to violence on the streets.

*The conflict was intensified by the rapid circulation of disinformation and hate speech across Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter) and other online platforms, originating in the months previous to the violence, which broke out in May 2023.*

Social media played a dual role: as a mirror of offline tensions, and as an accelerant that deepened mistrust, spread disinformation and incited hate-fuelled violence. The government's response—which included an unprecedented internet shutdown lasting 212 days—was blunt, counterproductive and devastating for democratic freedoms and human rights as well as the state's economy.

### **Social Media as a Conflict Accelerator**

The conflict was intensified by the rapid circulation of disinformation and hate speech across Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter) and other online platforms, originating in the months previous to the violence, which broke out in May 2023.

False stories of atrocities such as alleged rapes or attacks that never occurred spread virally and inflamed communities. An examination of these harmful discourses revealed a few concerning categories: direct incitement to violence, dehumanisation, threats and

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Climate Change, 16 December 2024, [https://sansad.in/getFile/loksabhaquestions/annex/183/AS299\\_6ZDAkk.pdf?source=pqals](https://sansad.in/getFile/loksabhaquestions/annex/183/AS299_6ZDAkk.pdf?source=pqals) (Accessed on December 30, 2024)

intimidation, hateful disinformation and discriminatory narratives portraying the Kukis as ‘undocumented immigrants’ or ‘narcoterrorists.’

Gendered hate speech was a particularly alarming dimension, which weaponised sexualised insults, threats and rumours to dishonour women and undermine female-led organisations.

Social media thus served not only as a platform for political mobilisation but also as a tool of psychological warfare, entrenching animosity and legitimising violence.

Despite attempts to moderate these exchanges, social media platforms failed to act swiftly or effectively. Automated systems failed to pick up coded hate speech in local languages and algorithms often amplified polarising narratives. The creation of hundreds of new accounts after May 2023, suggested that there existed organised campaigns to sustain division and manipulate public sentiment.

### **The Internet Shutdown: Costs Without Gains**

As violence broke out, the Manipur government resorted to a blanket internet shutdown - the longest ever in a democracy in recent years. Initially imposed for five days, the shut-down was extended repeatedly up to December 2023 with an intermittent lifting of the ban.<sup>2</sup>

*Gendered hate speech was a particularly alarming dimension, which weaponised sexualised insults, threats and rumours to dishonour women and undermine female-led organisations.*

This shutdown was justified as necessary to prevent rumour-mongering and mob mobilisation, but in practice it achieved neither. Those who were intent on spreading hate circumvented the ban through alternative connections, while civil society, journalists and Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) were blocked from essential communication.

The indefinite internet shutdown was unjustified, and it was used by the government in power to tacitly endorse their chosen agents of violence while avoiding accountability for not taking swift action to prevent the escalation of violence.

The consequences were severe. The systems for factchecking and counter-speech collapsed, while the perpetrators of online hatred continued to have intermittent access to the internet.

The local media outlets struggled to report from conflict areas. Humanitarian relief was obstructed and displaced persons found themselves disconnected from support networks. Even the mainstream media could not gather information from their field reporters.

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<sup>2</sup> Government of Manipur, Secretariat, Home Department, Orders, 25 July 2023, <https://manipur.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/07-25.pdf> (Accessed on September 20, 2023)

*Human dignity and rights are the first casualties of internet shutdowns. The shutdown curtailed fundamental freedoms of expression, information and assembly. Citizens were deprived of timely information, students missed educational updates and medical communication was disrupted.*

The shutdown effectively isolated Manipur from the rest of the world, producing a news blackout that shielded the ongoing atrocities from scrutiny and enabled an environment of impunity.

The economic toll was equally stark. The shutdown also undermined ‘*Startup Manipur*’ (a state government project offering financial support to startup companies and entrepreneurs), and digital services were halted, which significantly contributed to an estimated national GDP loss of USD 19 billion, from May to December 2023.

Thus, for a state aspiring to build its Information and Communication Technology (ICT) ecosystem, the costs of this strategy were nothing short of disastrous.

### **Human Rights and Democratic Implications**

Human dignity and rights are the first casualties of internet shutdowns. The shutdown curtailed fundamental freedoms of expression, information and assembly. Citizens were deprived of timely information, students missed educational updates and medical communication was

disrupted. Selective government access allowed state-aligned narratives to dominate while dissenting voices were silenced. The Courts intervened to mandate partial relaxations, but these were insufficient.

Many human rights violations—including sexual violence—remained hidden until months later, when several videos surfaced, shocking the nation.

It was also not possible to document abuses in real time and this created the perfect conditions for impunity.

Interviewees characterised the shutdown not as a security measure but as an instrument of state control that aggravated grievances, rather than restoring peace.

### **Lessons and Recommendations**

The Manipur case demonstrates that blanket internet bans are ineffective tools for conflict management. They suppress constructive voices, obstruct accountability and deepen humanitarian crises. What is needed instead is a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach that addresses both online and offline drivers of violence.

#### *For Media and Civil Society*

- Facilitate impartial inter-community dialogue through independent mediators and civil society actors, rather than political elites aligned to either community.
- Address underlying structural grievances over land and resources, to combat manipulation.

- Promote balanced reporting and support fact-checking hubs in local languages.
- Partner with platforms to develop culturally conscious moderation, while leading digital literacy campaigns to protect communities against disinformation.
- Advocate for nuanced state responses that avoid blanket bans and instead strengthen monitoring and rapid counter-narratives.

#### *For Technology Platforms*

- Invest in local language and culturally literate moderation teams.
- Develop conflict-specific content policies targeting coded slurs and disinformation narratives.
- Proactively disrupt coordinated hate networks, rather than reacting post-crisis.
- Collaborate with civil society and governments to share information and enable rapid responses.
- Reform algorithmic amplification to reduce polarisation and prioritise constructive, fact-checked content.
- Build regional crisis response units trained in conflict sensitivity.

#### *For Central and State Governments of India*

- Phase out reliance on internet shutdowns, which carry massive economic and democratic costs.
- If restrictions are unavoidable, ensure they are evidence-based, time-bound, transparent and subject to public oversight.

- Stop inflammatory rhetoric by state officials, which legitimises hate.
- Consistently investigate and prosecute online incitement, regardless of community affiliation.
- Facilitate inclusive peace dialogues addressing land rights, resource distribution and political representation.
- Provide humanitarian support during periods of state/national digital restriction and strengthen resilience through public education.

#### **Conclusion**

The violence in Manipur exposed the dangerous synergy between political elites and their opposing objectives, involving resource delegation and digital amplification. Social media discourses magnified existing mistrust, while the government's heavy-handed response silenced accountability and deepened suffering.

Going forward, the challenge is to balance security concerns with human rights and democratic freedoms. It is essential to use targeted, collaborative and context-sensitive strategies rather than blunt shutdowns, if we are to prevent the recurrence of such tragic events and build a more resilient digital and social ecosystem in Manipur and beyond.

## Introduction

### Background and Scope

The violence that erupted in Manipur in May 2023 underscored the dangerous interplay between political demands and the accelerating power of social media. Rooted in different readings of official history and the ethnicised political objectives of the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities, this conflict was triggered by a controversial court ruling on the ST status and aggressive government eviction drives. These fault lines were quickly exacerbated in the digital space, where social media became both a battleground and an accelerant of hostilities.

Despite the internet ban, online digital media platforms played a decisive role in amplifying anger and entrenching polarisation. Fake news stories, such as claims about the burning of a Kuki memorial<sup>3</sup> or alleged assaults on Meitei women, spread virally and inflamed outrage. A torrent of hateful and violence-inciting posts in English and local Manipuri languages mirrored and reinforced the violence unfolding offline. This rhetoric took multiple forms: direct calls for killing and annihilation, systematic use of dehumanising language (portraying opponents as ‘poppy planters,’ ‘animals,’ ‘demons,’ or ‘murderers’), and coordinated disinformation campaigns. Prominent among these was how Kuki-Zo communities objected

*Rooted in different readings of official history and the ethnicised political objectives of the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities, this conflict was triggered by a controversial Court ruling on the ST status and aggressive government eviction drives. These fault lines were quickly exacerbated in the digital space, where social media became both a battleground and an accelerant of hostilities.*

to the use of ‘undocumented immigrants’ or ‘Narco Terrorists’, a branding coined by the Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI) to refer to those Kuki-Zo tribals who are armed as Chin-Kuni Narco Terrorists. Later, it was clarified that the ‘national war’ declared at the People’s Convention in Imphal on 7, June 2023 was ‘against Narco Terrorists but not against every Chin-Kuki.’<sup>4</sup> This has been read as, “to delegitimize their political claims, countered by accusations against the state government of ‘state-sponsored violence’.”

A notable dimension of this rhetoric was gendered hate speech, which targeted women with sexualised insults, defamatory rumours and threats. Such attacks sought not only to dishonour the opposing community but also to undermine the authority of women-led social

<sup>3</sup> Army Chief Gen Upendra Dwivedi says Anglo-Kuki War Centenary Gate wasn’t burnt | News9, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ke2Ry4mXuKQ>

<sup>4</sup> The Frontier Manipur, 8 June 2023. Convention declares ‘war against narco terrorists’, <https://thefrontiermanipur.com/convention-declares-war-against-narco-terrorists/> (Accessed on July 10, 2025)

institutions, particularly the women's groups from both communities - the Meiteis<sup>5</sup> and the Kuki-Zo.<sup>6</sup> These dynamics illustrate how online harm is not confined to the digital space but contributes directly to the escalation of offline violence.

The government's primary response of an extended internet shutdown was intended to prevent the circulation of incendiary content. However, while it temporarily curbed the flow of harmful posts, the shutdown also disrupted critical communication, hindered humanitarian assistance and imposed heavy costs on fundamental freedoms and economic activity. This dual-edged measure highlighted both the challenges that governments face in regulating digital spaces and the urgent need for more nuanced approaches.

This report is structured in three parts. First, it examines the role of social media in escalating the violence in Manipur, with an in-depth analysis of a corpus of online comments and posts in both English and local languages.

Second, it assesses the government's imposition of an internet shutdown, situating it within broader debates on governance, rights and security.

Third, it presents actionable recommendations for media and civil society organisations, technology platforms and government bodies. In bringing these perspectives together, the report fills a critical gap in the literature, which has so far concentrated largely on the role of traditional media in communal violence. By combining a textual analysis of surviving online content with insights from interviews and community perspectives, this report demonstrates how social media both reflected and intensified the conflict. Ultimately, the findings point to the urgent need for collaborative, context-sensitive strategies to counter disinformation, hate speech and online incitement, while strengthening democratic institutions and promoting inclusive dialogue.

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<sup>5</sup> The Times of India, 25 July 2023, War against narco terrorists, not Chin-kuki: Cocomi, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/war-against-narco-terrorists-not-chin-kuki-cocomi/articleshow/102094564.cms> (Accessed on August 12, 2024)

<sup>6</sup> The Hindu, 27 June 2023. Women activists aiding rioters are blocking routes in Manipur: Army, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/women-activists-accompany-armed-rioters-and-blocking-routes-and-interfering-in-operations-says-army/article67013135.ece> (Accessed on June 22, 2024)

## Methodology

This report is a qualitative study based on literature, interviews and social media content. For data collection, this study resorts to a combination of sources, including a literature review about social media and Manipur.

It also analyses news reports, academic journals and articles dating to the period between April and October 2023, including interviews with activists, academics and journalists. All the interviewees requested anonymity.

Third, with the help and guidance of a key contact person from the region, the study incorporated an audit of social media posts—specifically on Facebook—during the period under review, in order to make sense of how social media facilitated the violence that erupted in Manipur. Recommendations are drawn based on an analysis of data and interviews with experts familiar with social media governance.

The analysis of social media posts presented in this report is based on a systematic examination of a corpus of social media comments collected for the study in late 2024. To ensure that the analysis remained rigorous and contextually aware, a multi-stage methodology was employed which included the following parts.

### Linguistic Analysis

The dataset contains comments in English as well as local languages, primarily Meiteilon (also known as Manipuri) and Tangkhul, the language of the Naga community. For non-English comments, a multi-pronged translation approach was utilised.

Initial translations were generated using publicly available online tools and dictionaries. These translations were then cross-referenced and refined, based on the linguistic and situational context of the conflict, in order to capture colloquialisms, slang and coded language. This process is crucial, as automated systems often fail to detect the nuanced and severe nature of hate speech in less-resourced languages. The presence of such content highlights a significant enforcement gap on major social media platforms, where moderation systems optimised for global languages can easily miss direct calls for genocide articulated in local dialects.

For example, a comment like “*Kuki hatse hek uubaga*”, translates to “*Kill Kukis as soon as you see them.*” Similarly, expletives like “*Biren Sakthu*”<sup>7</sup> and “*Meitei Sakhu*”<sup>8</sup> are also unambiguous incitements that would likely

<sup>7</sup> E-pano.net, 15 July 2025, Kuki women prevent search ops in Churachandpur, <https://e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=5..160725.jul25#:~:text=Kuki%20women%20prevent%20search%20ops,search%20operation%2C%20said%20the%20sources>. (Accessed on December, 2025)

<sup>8</sup> Post from the X platform, <https://x.com/Kasubadotcom> (Accessed on July 3, 2024)

bypass standard filters. This vulnerability allows the most virulent rhetoric to persist and directly contribute to the cycle of violence.

### Categorisation Framework

A five-category framework was developed to systematically classify the nature of the harmful content. This framework allows a nuanced understanding of the different ways in which language is weaponised in the conflict:

**1. Direct Incitement to Violence:** Comments containing explicit calls for killing, physical harm, assault or other violent acts against individuals or groups.

**2. Dehumanisation and Degrading Language:** The use of slurs, metaphors or descriptions that strip a group of its human qualities, often comparing them to animals, demons or objects, thereby making violence against them seem more permissible.

**3. Threats and Intimidation:** Statements that issue direct or veiled threats of future harm, or that aim to create an atmosphere of fear and enforce territorial control or social compliance.

**4. Hateful Disinformation:** The propagation of false or misleading information that is deliberately inflammatory and designed to vilify an entire community, such as fabricated atrocity stories or assigning collective blame for specific acts.

*“Every time when an internet shutdown is going to [be announced], I always write [on] my Facebook page [that] internet shutdowns [are] not the solution. That is not the solution. For one or two days they may control the situation, but that is not the solution. You know like it’s, it’s giving more harm to the general masses. More harm like terrorising the whole society and when such kinds of things happen the government should have a clear, you know, strategy to maintain law-and-order situation in the state, but internet shutdown is not the solution.”*

- A Rights Activist

**5. Discriminatory Narratives:** The promotion of harmful stereotypes and political tropes aimed at justifying discrimination, exclusion or violence against a group. This includes the use of differently interpreted and politically charged labels such as ‘undocumented immigrant’ or ‘narco-terrorist.’

Each identified comment was assigned to one or more of these categories to build a comprehensive picture of the anatomy of hate speech in the Manipur conflict.

There were several limitations while conducting the research. It is hoped that these will be addressed in subsequent studies.

First, the available literature, in particular investigative reports into the media’s role in the violence in Manipur, has run into significant

criticism over perceptions of bias against one community. Second, while interviewees provided insights into the violence in Manipur, primary data collection from social media platforms was limited to what was available on social media at the time of the launch of the study. Third, the situation in Manipur is evolving rapidly, as recent elections show. These can have major ramifications for the Conclusions and Recommendations of this report.<sup>9, 10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mazumdar, J. (2023, September 5). Why the Editors' Guild of India report on Manipur comes across as biased and politically motivated. Swarajya. <https://swarajyamag.com/north-east/why-the-editors-guild-of-india-report-on-manipur-comes-across-as-biased-and-politically-motivated>

<sup>10</sup> Arora, V. (2025, January 19). Study: Media's coverage of Manipur violence biased, superficial. Newsreel Asia. <https://www.newsreel.asia/articles/manipur-violence-media-coverage-bias>

## Social Media and the Violence in Manipur

### The 2023 Manipur Conflict: A Synopsis

Manipur became a part of India in 1949 and emerged as a full-fledged state within India in 1972. The state has a history of inter-ethnic tensions, beginning with the violent Naga-Kuki clashes in the 1990s.<sup>11</sup>

The violence in Manipur in 2023 was driven by a combination of factors, including conflicts among communal and ethnic groups; strategic narratives deployed by powerful political elites and groups, often with access to state power, to promote divisions among communities; perceived and highly publicised threats of changing demographic shifts linked to the undocumented migration of the Kuki tribe from the civil unrest in Myanmar; pressure on land use due to population growth and high unemployment<sup>12</sup> and escalating tensions between the Meitei, Kuki and Naga militias over conflicting homeland demands and religious differences.

The conflict is rooted in decades of historical fault-lines over land ownership, political representation and control of resources. The Meitei community which constitutes about 64% of the population but occupies only 10% of the state's landmass in the valley, argues that Scheduled Tribe (ST) status is necessary to protect their ancestral land, culture and identity from marginalisation.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, the Kuki-Zo and other tribal communities fear that granting ST status to the more populous and politically dominant Meiteis would allow them to purchase land in the constitutionally protected hill areas, leading to the tribals' displacement and the loss of their cultural and economic rights.<sup>14</sup>

On May 3, 2023, the northeastern Indian state of Manipur descended into devastating chaos and violence<sup>15</sup> between the majority Meitei community who are concentrated in the Imphal Valley and the Kuki-Zo tribal communities who predominantly inhabit the surrounding hill districts.

<sup>11</sup> Scroll.in, 14 Sept. 2018. 25 years after Naga-Kuki clashes in Manipur, reconciliation is still elusive, <https://scroll.in/article/894324/25-years-after-naga-kuki-clashes-in-manipur-reconciliation-is-still-elusive>

<sup>12</sup> TOI Edit. (2023, May 9). Land of quotas – Manipur is another example of agitation stemming from shrinking land holdings & few regular jobs [Editorial]. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-editorials/land-of-quotas-manipur-is-another-example-of-agitation-stemming-from-shrinking-land-holdings-few-regular-jobs/>

<sup>13</sup> Violence over ST Status | Economic and Political Weekly, accessed on July 18, 2025, <https://www.epw.in/journal/2023/20/letters/violence-over-st-status.html>

<sup>14</sup> The ensuing violence has been catastrophic. As of late 2024, official figures reported over 250 people killed, more than 1,000 injured, and over 60,000 internally displaced. The conflict has led to widespread arson, with thousands of homes and hundreds of religious structures, including both churches and temples, being vandalized or destroyed.

<sup>15</sup> Behera, A. (2023, November). The social and political dimensions of ethnic conflicts in Manipur (Issue Brief No. 671). Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-social-and-political-dimensions-of-ethnic-conflicts-in-manipur>

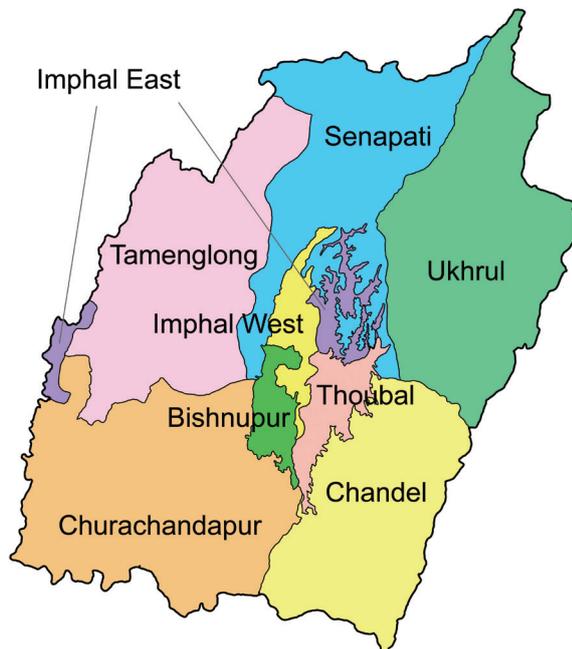


Figure 1: Map of Manipur and its Districts  
 ([https://incubator.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MANIPUR\\_district\\_map.svg](https://incubator.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MANIPUR_district_map.svg))

The violence erupted following a ‘Tribal Solidarity March’ organised by Kuki-Zo and Naga groups to protest the Meitei community’s long-standing demand for inclusion in the ST<sup>16</sup> status. A directive from the Manipur High Court to the state government to consider this demand acted as the immediate trigger for the protests. The exact directive under Para No. 17(iii) reads: *“The first respondent shall consider the case of the petitioners for inclusion of the Meitei/Meitei community in the ST list, expeditiously, preferably within a period four weeks from the date of receipt of a copy of this order in terms of*

*the averments set out in the writ petition and in the line of the order passed in WP(C) No. 4281 of 2002 dated 26.05.2003 by the Guwahati High Court.”<sup>17</sup>*

The state of Manipur is now effectively partitioned along ethnic lines, with a near-total segregation of the Meitei and Kuki-Zo populations into the valley and hills respectively, separated by buffer zones manned by security forces. This physical division reflects the deep chasm of mistrust and animosity that defines the conflict and this is powerfully echoed in the online discourse.

It is generally held that the Meitei community chose not to be included in the list of STs in 1956<sup>18</sup> or the Backward Classes Commission of 1956 chaired by Kaka Kalelkar, when all states and union territories were called upon to submit a list of tribes to be included in the ST (modifications) list. But there are notable nuances to this generalisation. Meities have pointed out that it is not about Meiteis opting to stay out but rather that there was manipulation in the communication of the final position of the Meiteis to the Commission.

Subsequently, petitions were filed for the inclusion of the Meitei community in the ST list of the Indian Constitution as a *“tribe among*

<sup>16</sup> SCC Online Times, 23 February 2024. Manipur High Court deletes its 2023 direction for considering inclusion of Meitei community in scheduled tribe list, <https://www.scconline.com/blog/post/2024/02/23/manipur-hc-deletes-direction-for-considering-inclusion-of-meitei-community-in-scheduled-tribe-list-legal-news/> (Accessed on July 4, 2024)

<sup>17</sup> When the first Backward Classes Commission (1956) requested a list of tribes to be included in the Scheduled Tribes (modification) list from each state and union territory, Meities did not include themselves. There is however difference of opinion on whether they actually excluded themselves or were deliberately not included.

<sup>18</sup> In the High Court of Manipur - At Imphal (2023) - WP(C) No.229 of 2023 dated 2023.04.19

*The Meiteis and Meitei Pangals reside in the central valley—which accounts for about 10% of the state’s land area—while comprising 64.6% of the population. In contrast, the surrounding hills—covering the remaining 90% of the region—are inhabited by around 30 of the larger, recognised tribes, including the Nagas, Paites, Thadous, Simtes, Vaipheis, Raltes, Gangtes and Hmars, which legally fall under the Other Backward Class (OBC) category, who make up approximately 35.4% of the state’s population.*

tribes of Manipur”, premised on the fact that the tribal status of the Meiteis existed before the 21st of September, 1949 - before the signing of the Merger Agreement - and formed part of the terms and conditions of the Merger Agreement of Manipur into the Indian Union.<sup>19</sup>

The Meiteis therefore, argue that as they were recognised as a tribe before 1947, they have a right to seek ST status to protect their community, ancestral land, culture and language. Government records show that this demand was made in 1982 and again in 2001<sup>20</sup> but they were turned down both times.<sup>21</sup>

The process however, had not been closed and the matter resurfaced in 2023.

The Meiteis and Meitei Pangals reside in the central valley—which accounts for about 10% of the state’s land area—while comprising 64.6% of the population. In contrast, the surrounding hills—covering the remaining 90% of the region—are inhabited by around 30 of the larger, recognised tribes, including the Nagas, Paites, Thadous, Simtes, Vaipheis, Raltes, Gangtes and Hmars, which legally fall under the Other Backward Class (OBC) category, who make up approximately 35.4% of the state’s population.<sup>22</sup>

As one interviewee put it - at the end of the day, the issue is that of land and space. *“The current [BJP] government has been quite persistent in evicting people from forest lands, and this has impacted Kuki villages in particular.”* The eviction of Kukis from their traditional homelands has been seen as part of a wider campaign to entrench an already privileged ethnicity, the Meiteis.<sup>23</sup> As the interviewee put it, these disparities reflected a wider structural rift between the communities, in terms of land ownership and freedom to purchase property.

<sup>19</sup> The Hindu, 18 October 2023. ST status for Meiteis was considered and rejected in 1982 and 2001, government records show, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/st-status-for-meiteis-was-considered-and-rejected-in-1982-and-2001-government-records-show/article67420818.ece>

<sup>20</sup> Imphal Times, 23 October 2023. Abhinay Lakshman’s observations on the status of Meiteis are misleading and incorrect, <https://www.imphaltimes.com/guest-column/abhinay-lakshmans-observations-on-the-st-status-of-meiteis-are-misleading-and-incorrect/>

<sup>21</sup> Bag, A. (2023, May 20). Violence over ST status. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 58(20). Retrieved from <https://www.epw.in/journal/2023/20/letters/violence-over-st-status.html>

<sup>22</sup> Baig, Z., & Khan, M. A. (2023, August 29). Exploring the BJP’s role in the Manipur conflict. *South Asian Voices*. <https://southasianvoices.org/exploring-the-bjps-role-in-the-manipur-conflict/>

<sup>23</sup> Sangai Express, 17 Aug 2024. Meiteis are indigenous tribes but not ST, <https://www.thesangaiexpress.com/Encyc/2024/8/17/Free-ThinkerIn-the-social-media-and-WhatsApp-groups-a-message-is-widely-circulated-to-prove-that-Meiteis-wer.html>

*“... the Meitei community [occupies] 10% of the land of the state because they live in the valley and they do not have a right and are not entitled to buy land in the hills. The hill people can buy land in the hills, of course, but they can also buy land in the Meitei areas. So, it is not a reciprocal relationship.”*

The Meiteis, under the Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur (STDCM), have been demanding ST status since 2012. The Indian government requested a recommendation from the Manipur state government in 2013 and again in 2022, but there was no response, exacerbating tensions further.

However, the demands for recognition saw a rise—especially on social media—after the victory of Biren Singh - the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) candidate for Chief Minister of Manipur, who belongs to the Meitei community.<sup>24</sup>

Following the Manipur High Court’s order in April 2023 for the state government to consider granting ST status to the Meitei community, the All-Tribal Students’ Union of Manipur organised protests on May 3 across 16 districts in Manipur.<sup>25</sup>

Clashes erupted between Kuki and Meitei groups in Torbung, Churachandpur, leading to the burning of houses. Aggravated by social media activity and misinformation which fuelled violent reprisals, the violence quickly spread, affecting Kuki-majority Churachandpur and Meitei-majority Imphal Valley - resulting in 77 Kuki and 10 Meitei fatalities within a week.<sup>26</sup>

The socio-political issues underlying the ethnic conflicts in Manipur, particularly between the Kukis and the Meiteis, have led to decades of inter-communal mistrust.<sup>27</sup> The indifference of governments<sup>28</sup> to the genuine grievances of the people, uneven resource distribution, asymmetric political representation, a significant governance deficit, deliberate<sup>29</sup> polarisation among communities and the inability of the competing ethnic groups to find a negotiated solution have all contributed to the ongoing tensions. The next section looks at how these tensions are exacerbated by the unequal news landscape in Manipur.

<sup>24</sup> The Supreme Court of India criticised this order, and the Manipur High Court reversed this order in February, 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Between May and December 2023, reports indicate that the violence has resulted in over 200 deaths and displaced 50,000 people. Additionally, over 4,000 homes were destroyed, and 350 religious sites, including temples and churches, were vandalised. Unofficial estimates suggest even higher figures.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group, 14 February 2025. Finding a way out of festering conflict in India’s Manipur, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/india/346-finding-way-out-festering-conflict-indias-manipur>

<sup>27</sup> South Asian Voices, 29 August 2023. Exploring the BJP’s role in the Manipur’s conflict, <https://southasianvoices.org/exploring-the-bjps-role-in-the-manipur-conflict/>

<sup>28</sup> Progressive International, 24 December 2024. How state repression and deliberate ethnic polarisation made Manipur boil over, <https://www.himalmag.com/politics/manipur-ethnic-conflict-bjp-biren-singh-politics-meities-kuki-zomi-hmar>

<sup>29</sup> Today Online, 22 April 2018. Where Countries are Tinderboxes and Facebook is a Match, <https://www.todayonline.com/world/where-countries-are-tinderboxes-and-facebook-match>.

## The Landscape of News and Information in Manipur

Access to information in Manipur has been shaped by linguistic, cultural and technological factors. Information disseminated through electronic media (television and radio) dominates the news landscape, while newspapers also play a major role. Increasingly, digital platforms including news websites, news media and social media platforms play a vital role in the sharing of information.

While Manipuri (or Meiteilon) serves as the most commonly spoken (and official) language in the state, English and other regional languages such as Hindi and tribal languages (like Tangkhul, Hmar and Paite) also play a role in bridging information access across diverse linguistic communities.

The main languages of news are Meitei and English. There are also about 35 newspapers in circulation in total, with various degrees of independence and impartiality. While news reporting wields substantial power over public sentiment, sensationalised or biased coverage has been a challenge in the context of existing tensions, sparking further violence and disorder. Adding to this challenge, misinformation—particularly on social media—presents a serious concern. The potential of social media

to go viral by spreading unverified and hateful content has been observed in Manipur (2022), Myanmar (2017) and Sri Lanka (2018).<sup>30</sup> This is not surprising when considering how social media is infamous for using platforms from which, lies—imbued with anger and hate—disperse much quicker and farther, than facts.

Given the fact that rumours in Manipur can swiftly incite unrest and that competing narratives about the conflict frequently surface on traditional and social media, community-based platforms such as Facebook or WhatsApp often serve as conduits for fake news, which fuels divisions. These differing accounts often reflect and exacerbate the underlying political and ideological biases in the region.

The state is also known for violence against journalists and the maintenance of barriers to impartial reporting from rival communities and insurgent groups. Moreover, pressure from state authorities creates a dangerous environment for journalists seeking to uncover the truth. Manipur's long history of conflict includes cases where journalists have been threatened, targeted or even killed due to their work.

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<sup>30</sup> Imphal Times, 25 April 2024. Preserving press freedom upholding democracy in Manipur, <https://www.imphaltimes.com/editorial/preserving-press-freedom-upholding-democracy-in-manipur/#>.

This climate of intimidation often results in self-censorship, as media outlets may steer clear of certain topics or adjust their reporting to avoid controversy, ultimately limiting a fair understanding of complex issues by the public (Moirangthem, 2024).<sup>31</sup> Given the fact that most of the news production happens in the Meitei-dominated Imphal valley area, there is a noticeable bias in news coverage, information gathering and reporting (Deutsche Welle, 2023). Further, the media in Manipur tend to reduce the problem to a binary of two conflicting views, instead of bringing out the historical underpinnings of the current conflict (Phanjoubam, 2016).

The lack of transparency and unresponsive nature of the officials, in fact, was identified as a major hindrance to the transparency of the government, and according to the editorial team of the Imphal Times: *“... erosion of press freedom in Manipur is exacerbated by the disregard for the Right to Information (RTI) Act. Government officials, instead of embracing transparency and accountability, resort to loopholes and bureaucratic hurdles to evade public scrutiny”*.

The impact of all this has been not just to promote exclusivist agendas among sections of these communities but also to silence the moderate voices among them. One human rights

*The impact of all this has been not just to promote exclusivist agendas among sections of these communities but also to silence the moderate voices among them.*

activist who spoke to the authors of this report recalled being blindsided by the proliferation of disinformation after May 3. While he had been critical of communalism within his community - the Meiteis, the upsurge of violence in May resulted in him becoming a potential target.

An activist in Manipur mentioned that he was out of the country when the violence started and added that radical Meitei groups such as Arambai Tenggol have been gaining influence in recent times. He opined that there was broad continuity between the popular narratives of the Kukis that were being peddled in March and the violence in May. Platforms like X, Instagram and Facebook were at the forefront of disseminating these narratives, he added.

In an environment where disregard for factual correctness or institutional integrity is common, the definition of the Kuki people as ‘narcoterrorists’ or ‘undocumented immigrants’ has fuelled anger and resentment among the Meitei population, resembling patterns seen in communal conflicts elsewhere, such as in Sri Lanka’s anti-Muslim riots of 2016-2018.

<sup>31</sup> The Sangai Express, 22 September 2024. Role of media in the ongoing Manipur ethnic conflict. <https://www.thesangaiexpress.com/Encyc/2024/9/22/Adison-MoirangthemNews-and-social-media-have-been-used-as-a-medium-to-exacerbate-the-ongoing-conflict-in-Man.html>

Deutsche Welle, 8 September 2023, India: Biased media coverage compounds Manipur’s woes. [https://www.dw.com/en/india-manipur-media-violence/a-66473187?utm\\_source](https://www.dw.com/en/india-manipur-media-violence/a-66473187?utm_source)

Phanjoubam, P. (2016, July 23). Manipur and mainstream media lost in the rhetoric. Economic and Political Weekly. <https://www.epw.in/journal/2016/30/commentary/manipur-and-mainstream-media.html>

### Social Media and the Escalation of Violence in Manipur

The Manipur conflict was not confined to physical spaces; it was aggressively waged on digital platforms, which have served as potent tools for mobilisation, propaganda and incitement.<sup>32</sup> This was perhaps the first armed conflict in India to be heavily influenced by online platforms. In the initial days and weeks of the violence, social media became a primary conduit for information, but also a fertile ground for disinformation campaigns that reinforced hostilities and, in some cases, directly led to further atrocities.<sup>33</sup>

This digital dimension of the conflict is characterised by the emergence of ‘social media warriors’ from both communities, dedicated to shaping the public narrative. An analysis of social media activity revealed a significant increase in new accounts on platforms like X, created specifically after the violence began, indicating organised and coordinated efforts to disseminate partisan views. These accounts were instrumental in spreading a deluge of content filled with hate speech, claims of victimhood and calls for solidarity, while simultaneously trolling and discrediting journalists and reports that challenge their preferred narratives.<sup>34</sup>

The impact of this online warfare has been severe. The viral circulation of graphic images and videos acted as ‘superspreader events,’ aggravating tensions and sparking retaliatory violence. For instance, a video showing two Kuki-Zo women being paraded naked by a Meitei mob and images depicting the killing of two Meitei students, both went viral and led to widespread outrage and further polarisation. These incidents demonstrate a direct link between online content and offline harm, establishing social media not merely as a mirror of the conflict but as a powerful accelerant.

In the absence of a comprehensive audit of social media posts during the period under discussion in this report, it is difficult to show a causal relationship between social media and the offline violence in Manipur. However, the parallels and correlations that are evident prompt two questions: what is the type of content that was amplified at the peak of the violence, and what were the platforms that were used to amplify it?

When looking at social media posts and user-handles that are still active, certain convergences and intersections can be noted. From the Meiteis’ side, the posts portray the Kukis as encroachers and undocumented immigrants who are somehow not Indian enough. Some

<sup>32</sup> Al Jazeera, 27 October, 2023. In India’s strife-torn Manipur, narrative battle is fought on social media. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/10/27/in-indias-strife-torn-manipur-narrative-battle-is-fought-on-social-media>

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>34</sup> Sitlhou, H. (2023, July 20). REPLUG: How fake news created pretexts to lynch Kuki-Zo women in Manipur. Newsclick. <https://www.newsclick.in/replug-how-fake-news-created-pretexts-lynch-kuki-zo-women-manipur>

posts call upon the Meiteis to rally together to protect their kind. This is reflective of social media posts at times of inter-ethnic conflicts elsewhere, the best known being arguably the anti-Muslim riots in Sri Lanka of 2018. In Manipur, posts were shared of Meitei people, including women, being assaulted or raped. These were debunked by online news sources, as well as officials and authorities.<sup>35</sup>

According to one interviewee who was based in Dhaka at the time of the violence, the main source of disinformation appeared to be Facebook and WhatsApp. *“After that, it was through SMS, where people were forwarding fake news.”* Given the inaccessible nature of messaging apps such as WhatsApp because of their encryption and person-to-person communication technologies, it is difficult to assess the level of impact of such platforms in inciting violence.<sup>36</sup> However, online behaviour is quite complex, and it was difficult to discern the links to an outbreak of violence by a general observation of social media, as another analyst suggested. He was based in Manipur prior to and during the violence and the internet shutdown. According to him, *“This debate around Manipur, the Meiteis getting included into the [Scheduled Castes and ST list], was always there online.”*<sup>37</sup>

However, these gaps show the need for the timely documentation of developments on social media, to understand the role of social media platforms in amplifying anger and inciting violence. According to one source, *“... there was and has been a significant link between the hate speech and the violence in Manipur [in the] incitement of violence.”* She pointed to an influential ethnic group-based Facebook profile and noted that *“Whenever [the handle] posted saying that he/she would ‘blow them [the other community] up’, there would be incidents on the ground.”* While she admits that it is difficult to establish a *“definite causality”*, a study and an audit should be made *“to ascertain the links.”*

However, anecdotal evidence suggests serious connections. One interviewee recalls her son *“Exploring any other places where [the internet could] be connected.”* Once he accessed the web, *“He saw the burning of houses, the burning of temples, the burning of churches.”* What is clear from all this is that, on the flipside, the bans hid painful, provocative and harmful content from reaching those who would otherwise have had access to the internet.

<sup>35</sup> Atlantic Journal of Social Sciences, (2023). Unraveling the impacts of WhatsApp messaging on interpersonal communication dynamics: A study of university students. Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences, 4(4), 259–267. <https://doi.org/10.55737/qjss.716834311>

<sup>36</sup> NDTV.com, (2025, March 5). Manipur’s Meitei, Kuki groups trade barbs over Centre’s order to ensure free movement of people. NDTV. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/manipurs-meitei-kuki-groups-trade-barbs-over-centres-order-to-ensure-free-movement-of-people-7847977>

<sup>37</sup> NDTV.COM, 8 September 2023. Entire colony razed, Manipur’s Churachandpur’s Meiteis at crossroads, seek justice, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/entire-colony-razed-manipur-churachandpur-meiteis-at-crossroads-see-justice-4370551> (Accessed on December 3, 2024)

### Hate Speech and the Narrative Ecosystem in the Manipur Conflict

The social media discourse surrounding the 2023 Manipur conflict went far beyond ordinary abuse, functioning as a deliberate instrument to deepen ethnic divisions, legitimise violence, and instill fear in targeted groups. The online environment reflected a structured ecosystem of hate, combining direct incitement, dehumanisation, intimidation and coordinated narratives to mobilise communities, justify aggression and reinforce territorial segregation. A particularly alarming feature of the discourse was the prevalence of explicit calls for physical violence, including murder and ethnic cleansing. Comments in both local languages and English revealed a complete erosion of inter-communal restraint, normalising extreme violence as an acceptable response to the conflict. For example, a Meiteilon comment, *“Kuki hatse hek uubaga”*, translates as *“Kill Kukis as soon as you see them,”* representing a precise genocidal directive rather than a generalised expression of anger. In English, a similarly unambiguous statement reads: *“Fights well kill them all...”*

Another comment, *“Kill all meira paibi,”* targeted a specific group of Meitei women activists, illustrating that incitement extended not only to broad ethnic categories but also to influential subgroups. Such messages signal a high degree of radicalisation among segments of the online population, sanctioning and encouraging real-world atrocities.

*Dehumanisation formed a central component of this digital ecosystem, systematically stripping target groups of their humanity and eroding moral and psychological barriers to violence. Groups were labeled with subhuman traits—described as ‘animals,’ ‘demons,’ or ‘bloodthirsty’—thereby framing subsequent calls for extermination as rational acts rather than moral transgressions.*

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Comments such as *“...when Man becomes Animal no animals will tolerate... Man flesh eaters be alert,”* labeled the opposing community as animals and flesh eaters while providing justification for violence. In another instance, *“Rapist community meitei terrorist and meitei demon women”* combined dehumanisation with gendered hate, portraying Meitei women as demons and the entire community as rapists, constructing a narrative in which the targets were monstrous and deserving of punishment. This pattern demonstrates that dehumanisation functioned as the ideological groundwork for incitement,

necessitating equal attention in moderation and counter-speech strategies.

Beyond explicit calls for violence and dehumanisation, a substantial portion of comments sought to intimidate individuals and reinforce ethnic segregation, reflecting the physical and psychological realities on the ground.

Statements like *“Don’t try to come out from that 700sq km,”* served as digital checkpoints, confining communities to designated territories such as the approximate 700 square kilometers of the Imphal Valley and warning of violent consequences for transgression. Similarly, the seemingly benign directive *“Come back to your villages.”* carried a menacing undertone in a context marked by ethnic cleansing and forced displacement, signaling that presence outside designated ethnic zones was unwelcome and unsafe. These threats expanded the climate of fear into online spaces, making violence appear omnipresent and inescapable.

The discourse was further shaped by structured, divisive narratives that strategically justified each community’s stance while delegitimising the other. Meitei-affiliated accounts and reportedly state actors—promoted the highly inflammatory depiction of the Kuki Zo community as ‘undocumented immigrants’ from Myanmar and ‘narco-terrorists.’ Hashtags like #kukiterrorists #narcoterrorist facilitated viral dissemination, while comments such as *“Send illegal.kukkies”* translated this framing into

*Beyond explicit calls for violence and dehumanisation, a substantial portion of comments sought to intimidate individuals and reinforce ethnic segregation, reflecting the physical and psychological realities on the ground.*

direct calls for ethnic cleansing and expulsion. By portraying the Kuki-Zo as foreign invaders involved in the drug trade, this narrative sought to invalidate their historical land claims and constitutional rights, rationalising both state and non-state violence as a matter of national security rather than an ethnic conflict.

In counterpoint, Kuki-Zo affiliated accounts advanced a narrative of victimhood, portraying themselves as targets of a state-sponsored campaign orchestrated by the Meitei-led government and allied militias. Comments directly implicated state forces, such as *“The situation of Manipur is such, state forces itself are the attackers of Kuki villages. What a shame on Birain and State force and meiteis....!!!”*

The government was labeled a perpetrator of terrorism in remarks like *“Meitei govt terrorists are attacking kuki\_zo tribals,”* and specific militias allegedly supported by the state were identified - for example, *“Arambai going for attacking kuki public civilian house.”* This narrative of persecution was critical to the Kuki-Zo community’s political strategy, garnering sympathy and legitimising calls for

*Gendered hate speech and disinformation formed a central component of the online conflict, used to terrorise, dishonor and undermine the opposing community. Women were targeted strategically, reflecting the broader pattern in which sexual violence functions as a tool of warfare.*

a *“Separate administration for kuki\_zo tribals is the only solution.”* Meanwhile, the reports of the destruction of Meitei properties went largely unnoticed. Following the outbreak of violence, numerous houses belonging to the Meitei community in the Kuki-dominated Churachandpur district—specifically in areas like Khumujamba Leikai—were destroyed, flattened, and in some cases, bombed.<sup>38</sup>

Gendered hate speech and disinformation formed a central component of the online conflict, used to terrorise, dishonor and undermine the opposing community. Women were targeted strategically, reflecting the broader pattern in which sexual violence functions as a tool of warfare. The Meira Paibis, a respected institution of Meitei women activists, were attacked with slurs such as ‘kasubi’ to weaken their moral authority, while defamatory rumors about Kuki women aimed to collectively dishonor them and cast suspicion on the security forces protecting them.

Illustrative examples include: *“AR should have let those kasubi meira paibi come in, would have been a target practice for the kuki”* and *“Kuki lady are available at AR camp...”* The sexualized mockery of women trivialised them even in life-threatening situations. The frequency and intensity of such attacks reveal that dishonoring women was a key psychological weapon, facilitating real-world sexual violence and highlighting the urgent need for targeted moderation and counter-speech strategies addressing gendered disinformation.

The systematic deployment of these strategies underscores the necessity of nuanced moderation, evidence-based counter-speech, and interventions that address both the ideological and gendered dimensions of online hate.

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<sup>38</sup> Imphal Times, 13 June 2025. Editorial – The high cost of silence: Unpacking the internet shutdown in Manipur, <https://www.imphaltimes.com/editorial/the-high-cost-of-silence-unpacking-the-internet-shutdown-in-manipur/>

## Efforts to De-Escalate Violence in Manipur

### The Internet Infrastructure in Manipur

India records the highest number of internet shutdowns in the world, with 771 bans imposed between 2016 and 2023 - more than all other countries combined. The longest shutdown on record occurred in the Indian state of Manipur, where internet services were suspended for 212 days, from May to December 2023.<sup>39</sup>

Initially announced as a five-day measure, the government justified the shutdown as essential to prevent the violence that followed the outbreak of ethnic clashes on May 3, triggered by a Tribal Solidarity March protesting the recognition of the Meitei community as a Scheduled Tribe. Official notices argued that the shutdown would prevent 'anti-social elements' from using social media to incite unrest, spread rumours and share hateful content.

The shutdown was implemented in phases. From May 3 to June 15, all internet services were suspended. Limited access was later restored at designated locations after a High Court ruling on a petition filed by human rights activists and entrepreneurs. This access was confined to state-controlled areas and primarily served public needs such as student admissions and essential services. In July 2023, broadband

services were permitted, but mobile internet remained blocked.

Despite these relaxations, the shutdown had far-reaching consequences. It severely disrupted communication, hampered journalists' ability to report from conflict zones, hindered humanitarian relief efforts and complicated law enforcement responses.

The internet is a vital infrastructure for media freedom, human rights protection and economic growth. Manipur had been building its startup ecosystem since 2018 under the '*Startup Manipur*' initiative, which allocated 150 crore rupees (around USD 18 million) over five years to support incubators, accelerators and local entrepreneurs. The prolonged shutdown undermined these efforts, stalling economic activity and innovation.

Manipur has relatively high internet penetration compared to other states in Eastern India, with overall access at about 57.5%. However, usage is uneven. Only 44.8% of women in Manipur have internet access, compared to 73.9% of men. Access is also geographically unequal: penetration is far higher in the Imphal Valley than in surrounding hill areas, where tribal communities form the majority.

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<sup>39</sup> Financial Express, 8 June 2025. Manipur imposes internet ban in 5 key districts to curb misinformation amid law-and-order concerns. The Financial Express. <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/manipur-imposes-internet-ban-in-5-key-districts-to-curb-misinformation-amid-law-and-order-concerns/3872293>

### The Government's High-Handed Approach

The official government rationale for the internet shutdown in Manipur in 2023 centered on the risk of social media platforms being used to spread false information and hate content that could incite ethnic violence.

India depends on the internet to operate its social welfare system 'Aadhaar', and the costs of such a total and extended shutdown of the internet are therefore incalculable, in terms of the resources that need to be mobilised, in order to fill the void in service delivery.

The authorities argued that restricting online communication could prevent misinformation which would exacerbate communal tensions.<sup>40</sup> While this justification is partly valid, it is overly simplistic. Falsehoods are not unique to digital platforms; mainstream media also circulate misleading narratives.

Another justification presented by the authorities in Manipur was that the tribal leaders themselves called for an internet shutdown on April 27, 2023, citing fears about the role of social media in escalating the ethnic conflict between Meitei and Kuki communities.

The government's response involved two measures: a total internet ban in the five most affected districts, followed by partial restoration limited to fixed-line connections, as directed by

the state courts. While these measures reflected the government's heavy-handed attempts to manage digital communication, they also revealed the tensions between the intended objectives and real-world outcomes, which often include violations of human rights and hinder the documentation of such abuses. These justifications and pretexts need to be evaluated against the outcomes that are achieved, after implementation.

First, internet bans are aimed at controlling the narrative in terms of what is shared. Second, the bans try to intervene in the speed at which content is shared, in order to reduce the viral impact of social media in turning online comments into violence on the streets, with large, spontaneous gatherings of mobs.

Misinformation and disinformation can spread like a virus through social media and this can be clearly explained through the theory of 'Three Degrees of Influence'<sup>41</sup> which suggests that an individual's influence on social networks extends to their friends, their friends' friends and their friends' friends' friends; three degrees of separation, before dissipating.

In relation to social media, this theory helps explain how misinformation can spread rapidly, echoing through a network even from distant sources and highlighting the potential reach of an initial falsehood. While the first type of

<sup>40</sup> Networks. (2015, October 19). Three degrees of influence – How far can you reach people? Cornell University Blog. <https://blogs.cornell.edu/info2040/2015/10/19/three-degrees-of-influence-how-far-can-you-reach-people/>

<sup>41</sup> Access Now. (2022). A taxonomy of internet shutdowns: The technologies behind network interference. <https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/A-taxonomy-of-internet-shutdowns-the-technologies-behind-network-interference.pdf>.

intervention leads to long internet bans, the second type of intervention is measured and short-lived.

The official statement by the Manipur government emphasised the risk of social media platforms becoming tools for spreading fake news and hate content that could incite ethnic violence. The problem with this approach is that falsehoods are spread not only on internet-based platforms but also through traditional media - primarily because of people's preference for sensationalism over objectivity.

However, this issue is now mostly associated with social media platforms, especially when considering the power, they have over traditional media and the ease with which social media can be weaponised.

In the spectrum of news production and information sharing, stringent editorial checks and mechanisms of accountability are vital to prevent social media platforms from being used to spread falsehoods or incite violence. Internet-based news platforms that are small and lack established editorial processes and systems of accountability can be more vulnerable to being used with malicious intent. The authorities often use such vulnerabilities to justify internet bans, with limited success.

However, with permanent internet bans in place, the Manipur government was left groping in the dark with regard to the issues of misinformation, as there was no way to monitor trends. This is quite important for a government that means to conduct its own monitoring of social media in planning a response, or in seeking assistance from internet-based social media and networking platforms, which can help the authorities to monitor and prepare quick responses.

Manipur lacks a transparent internal governance framework to assess the impact of its internet shutdowns. The decisions relating to the continuance or lifting of such restrictions are largely assumption-based, further threatening freedom of expression and prolonging the duration of the shutdowns. The absence of mechanisms of accountability further exacerbates these challenges, leaving both citizens and authorities uncertain about the effectiveness of such interventions.

However, the authorities have multiple ways by which to reach their policy objectives in controlling online violence. 'Access Now' (an international non-profit organisation focusing on digital civil rights) defines an internet shutdown as the intentional interference with electronic systems used for person-to-person communication, rendering them inaccessible or unusable.<sup>42</sup> This can involve throttling internet

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<sup>42</sup>Frontline, The Hindu.com, 13 September, 2024. How conflict is bleeding Manipur dry <https://frontline.thehindu.com/columns/manipur-internet-shutdowns-arson-inflation-protests-small-scale-industry-lok-sabha-election/article68637703.ece>

*Governments often resort to less severe measures such as Domain Name System (DNS) blocking, in order to restrict access to specific websites or platforms. While such methods allow continued internet use, they aim to limit exposure to particular content, for instance during periods of escalating tensions.*

speeds, blocking social media platforms, or a complete infrastructure shutdown. India's approach in Manipur involved the latter, a fundamental infrastructure shutdown resulting in the suspension of virtually all internet-based services across the affected districts.

Governments often resort to less severe measures such as Domain Name System (DNS) blocking, in order to restrict access to specific websites or platforms. While such methods allow continued internet use, they aim to limit exposure to particular content, for instance during periods of escalating tensions. The total internet shutdown in Manipur meant that the state government had very little communication with tech platforms. In the absence of cooperation among key stakeholders, the overall ecosystem adjustments and improvements that make social media safe become impossible.

### **Online Traffic Control: The Case of Manipur**

An often-quoted reason for internet bans in conflict zones is to disrupt the rapid mobilisation of crowds driven by hate narratives targeting vulnerable groups. Social media platforms and messaging apps, powered by engagement-

maximising algorithms, can quickly spread inflammatory content and fuel the formation of mobs. In such situations, the authorities may attempt to curb violence by closely monitoring online activity and taking adaptive measures, such as slowing data transfer in high-density areas, intermittently blocking apps, or shutting down communication towers. These measures aim to reduce the speed at which groups gather online and subsequently assemble in potentially violent locations.

In Manipur, however, the authorities opted for a complete internet shutdown, limiting their capacity to monitor trends or respond strategically. Notably, the call for social media controls came even before the violence erupted; community leaders requested a shutdown on April 27, 2023, highlighting concerns about the role of social media in the escalating ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki communities. Prior incidents had already underscored the risks of an unchecked information flow.

To implement these measures, the Manipur government employed two approaches: first, a total internet ban across five districts and second, a partial restoration for fixed-line connections following court orders. These methods illustrate the gap between the intended objectives of the shutdowns and their real-world outcomes, which often include human rights violations and greater difficulty in the documentation of abuses.

The state lacks a transparent governance framework to assess the impact of shutdowns, which leaves the authorities more inclined to make assumption-based decisions on the continuation or lifting of such internet blackouts. This opacity threatens freedom of expression and contributes to prolonged restrictions.

Technically, there are eight types of internet shutdowns:

- 1) Fundamental infrastructure shutdown
- 2) Routing
- 3) Domain Name System (DNS) manipulation
- 4) Filtering
- 5) Deep Packet Inspection (DPI)
- 6) Rogue infrastructure attack
- 7) Denial of service (DoS) and
- 8) Throttling

In Manipur, the government employed a fundamental infrastructure shutdown—the most severe option—which blocked all internet-based communication, including critical services such as banking, emergency responses and digital welfare programs.

Less extreme measures like DNS blocking are commonly used elsewhere to restrict access to specific websites such as pornography or gaming sites or during periods of escalating tension, social media platforms. While partial measures reduce the exposure to harmful

content, some users may still circumvent them, though the majority remain affected, limiting the spread of misinformation.

In 2023, India's approach in Manipur prioritised the most comprehensive form of internet restriction, effectively halting all digital activity in affected areas. This included not only social and communication services but also business operations, banking and participation in state-managed digital welfare systems, demonstrating the profound societal and economic impact of blanket shutdowns.

Not surprisingly, the Manipur shutdown had a devastating impact on the regional and even national economies. One estimate puts the figure at \$585.4 million.<sup>43</sup> When combined with the shutdown in Punjab, the figure almost quintuples to \$1.9 billion. Income sources, particularly for small and medium-sized businesses, including freelancers and delivery services, were left high and dry. When calculating the Manipur and the Punjab shutdowns together, the result is that nearly \$118 million worth of foreign investments and more than 21,000 jobs were adversely affected.<sup>44</sup>

### **Counterproductive Outcomes of Social Media Bans**

Despite the internet shutdown in Manipur in 2023, social media continued to influence

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<sup>43</sup> Business Today. (2023, June 29). Internet shutdowns in Manipur, Punjab reportedly cost Indian economy \$1.9 billion. Business Today. <https://www.businesstoday.in/technology/news/story/internet-shutdowns-in-manipur-punjab-reportedly-cost-indian-economy-19-billion-387591-2023-06-29>

<sup>44</sup> Centre for Financial Accountability. (2023, July 2). Pocket Money [PDF]. <https://www.cenfa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Pocket-Money-Jul-2-2023.pdf>

the conflict, as illegal access allowed misinformation and divisive narratives to circulate, further intensifying tensions between the Meitei and Kuki communities. Two primary narratives emerged during this period: one promoting hate and fear, and another advocating peace, though the latter struggled to gain traction. These dynamics underscore the limitations of blanket internet bans; while authorities aim to curb misinformation, digital platforms remain central to both escalating and mitigating communal tensions. Given the high proportion of youth reliant on online communication, this situation highlights the need to craft strategic approaches that address online hate speech and misinformation while considering the humanitarian consequences of broad internet restrictions in conflict-prone regions.

### **A Strategy of State Control**

The selective internet access maintained by certain government departments during the shutdown allowed state-aligned narratives to dominate, while alternative perspectives were suppressed. The extended shutdown resulted in isolation, curtailing freedom of expression and preventing citizens from verifying information or contacting loved ones. Students' access to examination updates and essential services, including medical and economic communications, were disrupted. Interviewees also highlighted delays in content moderation on social media platforms; misinformation was often removed only after violence had already escalated, demonstrating the reactive, rather than proactive, nature of digital oversight.

*Internet shutdowns such as those implemented in Manipur, affect the entire online ecosystem, including all social media and other internet-based news platforms. People rely on platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp and online news websites of the mainstream media houses for information. When the internet is completely blocked, this entire ecosystem of digital news disappears.*

The shutdown enabled the state government to control the flow of information and promote a one-sided narrative. However, this strategy backfired, one expert saying: “[The internet shutdown] was a very short-term measure. The authorities thought that if the internet was shut down, violence would be controlled. However, this made the people even more angry as they felt that they could not do anything.”

Internet shutdowns such as those implemented in Manipur, affect the entire online ecosystem, including all social media and other internet-based news platforms. People rely on platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp and online news websites of the mainstream media houses for information. When the internet is completely blocked, this entire ecosystem of digital news disappears. Consequently, the shutdown effectively disconnected Manipur from the rest of the world, a measure that was crucial for the authorities seeking to strangle the flow of information about the ongoing violence. Even mainstream media outlets were unable to obtain information from their reporters in

conflict-affected areas, demonstrating how effectively the shutdown worked to isolate the region.

One case study that has been extensively discussed illustrates the news blackout effect of the shutdown. On May 4, 2023, a day after the violence began, three tribal (Kuki) women were assaulted, groped and paraded by a mob of close to 1,000 men, some carrying weapons.<sup>45</sup> One of the women was reportedly raped. The incident came to light three months later, on 19 July 2023. It caused outrage and, in the words of one interviewee, *“Shook the conscience of the nation”*, compelling intervention from prominent officials.<sup>46</sup>

Partial measures such as blocking social media while keeping online newspapers accessible allow the outside world to monitor events on the ground. However, a total shutdown means that the live documentation of violence becomes largely impossible, giving local actors unchecked power to operate with impunity. In this context, internet shutdowns often appear less as neutral tools to curb misinformation and more as mechanisms of state control.

### Restricting constructive voices

While some interviewees recognised the initial rationale of curbing misinformation, many criticised the prolonged shutdown, asserting that it was used to manipulate

*Moreover, blocking internet access in order to curb harmful social media communication also silenced the constructive voices of community leaders, religious authorities and respected local figures who strived to disseminate calming messages.*

narratives and silence dissent. One expert argued that the state was *“part of the problem,”* systematically exacerbating ethnic divisions and hatred. They also contended that the violence was *“well-orchestrated,”* citing the government’s withdrawal from the tripartite Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement and the transportation of food grains from Churachandpur to Imphal, as evidence of a planned attack.

Moreover, blocking internet access in order to curb harmful social media communication also silenced the constructive voices of community leaders, religious authorities and respected local figures who strived to disseminate calming messages. It also restricted government communications intended to restore public order and offer reassurance. These limitations make it difficult to determine whether the use of an internet ‘kill switch’ is ever the optimal response in situations of violent social conflict.

An interviewee argued that leaving the internet open would have allowed citizens to counter

<sup>45</sup> Scroll.in., 2023, 19 July 2023. Video shows Kuki women being paraded naked by a mob; Manipur police confirm FIR filed. Scroll.in. <https://scroll.in/article/1052938/video-shows-kuki-women-being-paraded-naked-by-a-mob-manipur-police-confirm-fir-filed>

<sup>46</sup> BBC.Com, 20 July, 2023. Manipur: India outrage after women paraded naked in violence-hit state. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-66253389>

disinformation, access help and share their experiences, emphasising the importance of digital communication in promoting peace during crises.

The Manipur experience clearly illustrates that internet shutdowns are counterproductive. They may intensify grievances, restrict access to vital information and services and enable state-controlled narratives to dominate, while simultaneously hindering constructive interventions from civil society. Effective conflict management requires nuanced approaches that balance the need to curb harmful content with the imperative to preserve communication channels for peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance and accountability.

As the rights activist noted, *“They [the Meiteis] are [seen as] part of a supremacy [sic], kind of a dominant and dominating [hegemonic group]. They want to push [Kukis] from their [the Kukis’] homeland.”* On the other hand, from the Meiteis’ side, *“Perceptions of the Kukis have been coloured by the fact that Kukis were used in the past by the Indian security forces as part of their counterinsurgency programs.”* They have also been framed as ‘forest-encroachers’, a stereotype which, in the view of another activist, has made Kukis *“be seen as undocumented immigrants.”*

*When high quality impartial fact-checking is not available, platform algorithms further complicate things. Designed to maximise engagement, these algorithms can amplify polarising content. One interviewee noted that different communities receive curated narratives, creating echo chambers that reinforce existing biases.*

One of the most significant casualties of the 2023 Manipur internet ban was fact-checking. Interviews with stakeholders in Manipur highlighted this challenge. One interviewee emphasised the near absence of fact-checking during the shutdowns. This happened because most news agencies had limited access to their reporters and fact-checkers who relied on the internet to share information and images. Another aspect of this is the lack of professional fact-checking in general, illuminating the need for dedicated organisations that understand the region’s historical context. Another interviewee expressed skepticism about the feasibility of fact-checking when the state machinery itself is allegedly implicated in the conflict, noting that, *“When the involvement of the state machinery itself is so deep and large, where is the question of fact-checking?”*

When high quality impartial fact-checking is not available, platform algorithms further complicate things. Designed to maximise engagement, these algorithms can amplify

polarising content. One interviewee noted that different communities receive curated narratives, creating echo chambers that reinforce existing biases. Some activists observed a surge in newly created accounts specifically designed to disseminate hate speech, suggesting that the structural features of social media platforms may actively contribute to the entrenchment of communal polarisation. In the context of Manipur, since some people in the region still had access to the internet, matters were further aggravated. Often, it is the voice of reason that goes unheard.

During the violence, one could discern that hate speech targeting specific communities was being amplified by government officials as well. As one interviewee from the Kuki community put it, *“None less than the Chief Minister of the state went to the extent of calling Kukis ‘monkey people’ in his speeches. He even called us [Kuki people] ‘Zangli’ or foreigners or refugees, which was unbecoming of people holding such positions.”* Although apologies for these remarks were later tendered<sup>47</sup>, they were seen as too little and too late as the damage had already been done. Moreover, the apology was framed in terms of achieving ‘normalcy’ and ‘peace’ rather than ensuring justice<sup>48</sup>, a forgive-and-forget approach that skimmed over the scale of the violence.

*While internet shutdowns may appear effective in the immediate aftermath of violence or before a potential outbreak of violence, they are inherently short-term measures.*

As one rights activist interviewed for this report said, there is a need to document things as and when they happen and the lack of internet access hampers this. She added: *“People started taking stock of what happened in Manipur [because of the video released on 19 July 2023]... Nobody would have ever known what happened to them. Nobody would have ever woken up to the fact of something as brutal as that.”*

There were other incidents which did not gain traction on social media, but which were accessed by journalists. In another incident, a Kuki woman reported as ‘mentally imbalanced’ in the press *“Went from home to home,”* after she began fleeing from the ensuing violence. While the official reporting reduced her to a ‘mentally challenged person’, as a rights activist told the authors of this report, *“Her story never really made it beyond [reductionist] framings,”* that dehumanised her. The implication here is that had such stories gained traction or been amplified online, it would have helped raise awareness of the scale of violence in the region. The activist noted moreover, that *“There were stories on both sides, Kuki as well as Meitei.”*

<sup>47</sup> The Indian Express, 1 January 2025. Manipur CM Biren Singh caps 2024 with an apology: ‘I feel regret and I want to say sorry to the people of the state’. The Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/manipur-cm-biren-singh-apologises-for-ethnic-conflict-9753192/>

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*

### The short-termism of shutdowns

While internet shutdowns may appear effective in the immediate aftermath of violence or before a potential outbreak of violence, they are inherently short-term measures. By prioritising control over communication, rather than addressing underlying grievances, shutdowns often deepen the trust deficit between citizens, communities, tech platforms and the state.

An interviewee stated that *“Every time when an internet shutdown is going to [be announced], I always write [on] my Facebook page [that] internet shutdowns [are] not the solution. That is not the solution. For one or two days they may control the situation, but that is not the solution. You know, like, it’s doing more harm to the general masses. More harm like terrorising the whole society and when such kinds of things happen the government should have a clear strategy to maintain the law-and-order situation in the state, but internet shutdown is not the solution.”*

In Manipur, where ethnic tensions are volatile, the digital landscape has been an amplifier of violence. For instance, in anticipation of an adverse use of the internet, the Indigenous Tribal Leaders’ Forum of Manipur called for an internet ban on the 28th of April, 2023. As the protesters were mobilised, the government responded by shutting down the internet, first in some districts and then as a total clamp-

down, saying that there was a request from the tribal leaders. The state government then kept renewing the ban until December, at various degrees of restriction, amid judicial interventions to relax the ban.

All in all, it is questionable whether the shutdowns were effective in the long run. As one interviewee noted, *“There are services like JioFiber through which people were able to bypass the shutdown.”* She had been part of a WhatsApp group that went *“Completely blank for me until we regained internet access.”* When she did, the group was *“Full of messages that were tilted or biased to one community at the expense of the other.”* In other words, the shutdown had achieved the worst of both worlds, enabling those who could access the internet to amplify disinformation while preventing those in civil society—who could have intervened as a counter against hateful, harmful content—from accessing it altogether.

In October 2023, the State government moved to *“restrain the act of spreading such videos/images/pictures as a positive step towards bringing normalcy in the State.”*<sup>49</sup> The problem is whether this ban was effective. There is no doubt that disinformation campaigns exacerbated the conflict. Widely shared images of a woman falsely claimed to be a Meitei victim, and a video misrepresented as depicting violence against a Kuki woman were

<sup>49</sup>The Hindu. (n.d.). Manipur bans sharing of videos or photos of violence on social media. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/manipur-bans-sharing-of-videos-or-photos-of-violence-on-social-media/article67409441.ece>

debunked by fact-checking platforms, revealing that the content originated elsewhere.<sup>50</sup> These campaigns not only deepened mistrust but also reinforced hostilities between the communities. The absence of fact-checking was particularly felt at the peak of the violence, and a robust fact-checking climate has yet to emerge in the region.

In other words, despite the seriousness of these posts, the long internet shutdowns introduced by the government did not, in the long run, prevent hateful content coming online through unlawful connections, while preventing people from legitimately accessing the internet to connect with their families or to conduct business.

Further, studies have shown that the worst effects of the shutdown were felt by vulnerable groups like women.<sup>51</sup> Three months into the shutdown, videos of women being dragged and groped by armed men, in what appeared to be a gang rape, awakened authorities and made it clear just how serious the situation was. Essentially, the shutdown made it more and more difficult for journalists, activists and public and law enforcement officials alike to access information and be alerted to incidents that these stakeholders could otherwise have intervened in.

*The production of news on social media differs significantly from traditional media, often with little to no editorial oversight. This lack of oversight fosters an environment prone to misinformation, disinformation, and biased or inflammatory narratives - more so because social media is well-known as an unmatched weapon in information warfare.*

### **Platform Accountability and Content Moderation**

The production of news on social media differs significantly from traditional media, often with little to no editorial oversight. This lack of oversight fosters an environment prone to misinformation, disinformation, and biased or inflammatory narratives - more so because social media is well-known as an unmatched weapon in information warfare. The news production models and the weaknesses in social media-based platforms also play a key part in the arguments advanced by state authorities.

One interviewee emphasised the “Close to zero” fact-checking in Manipur, stating that “There was and is nobody doing fact-checking except putting counter narratives.” He emphasises the need for “Professional fact-checking organisations focused on Manipur,” that understand the historical context of the conflict.

<sup>50</sup> Parthasarathy, A. (2023, August 4). Fact check | Misleading social media posts add fuel to the fire in Manipur. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/fact-check-misleading-social-media-posts-add-fuel-to-the-fire-in-manipur/article67149442.ece>

<sup>51</sup> Reuters.Com, 27 July 2023. FEATURE— India internet shutdowns hurt women more, Manipur assaults show. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/business/media-telecom/feature-india-internet-shutdowns-hurt-women-more-manipur-assaults-show-idUSL8N39B0AR/>

This is mainly related to the matter of responsibility for the platforms and the creation of echo chambers by social media platforms, the technologies of which are increasingly based on addictive algorithm models. These concerns about the limitations in content moderation and polarisation on such platforms were raised in the interviews: although some tech companies reached out to civil society to help identify hate speech, overall, the capacity for content moderation on social media platforms is seriously limited, especially in local languages. Moreover, the platforms' algorithms often appeared to amplify polarising content. One interviewee said that algorithms might have segregated narratives to align with each community, worsening the polarisation. He expressed concern that *"The algorithm is working in such a way that Kukis get one particular narrative and Meiteis get one particular narrative and polarises the narrative."* This concern about the creation of echo chambers is further supported by another interviewee's observations about the rise of new accounts created specifically to spread hate speech.

### **Implications for Democracy and Human Rights**

Despite the internet shutdown, social media continued to shape the conflict in Manipur, as illegal internet access allowed misinformation and divisive narratives to circulate, intensifying tensions between the Meitei and Kuki communities. Interviews revealed two primary narratives: one promoting hate and fear, and

*Despite the internet shutdown, social media continued to shape the conflict in Manipur, as illegal internet access allowed misinformation and divisive narratives to circulate, intensifying tensions between the Meitei and Kuki communities.*

another advocating peace, though the latter struggled to gain traction. The shutdown exposed the limitations of such policies, as digital platforms remained influential in both escalating and de-escalating the conflict.

Given the high youth population dependent on social media for information, the situation highlights the tension between combating online hate speech and misinformation and preserving fundamental democratic freedoms. Internet blocks like the one in Manipur do not distinguish between social media and other internet-based services. People rely on Facebook, WhatsApp, and online news sites for updates, alongside traditional media. When the internet is completely shut down, the entire online news ecosystem collapses, leaving only geographically limited print and broadcast sources accessible. This not only restricts citizens' access to timely information but also blinds the outside world to events on the ground, preventing live documentation of violence and creating conditions for impunity.

Many observers viewed the shutdown as a tool of state control. While some acknowledged the initial rationale of curbing misinformation, interviewees criticised the prolonged ban,

*Selective access during the shutdown further exacerbated democratic concerns. Certain government departments retained internet connectivity, enabling state-aligned narratives to dominate while alternative viewpoints were suppressed.*

arguing that it manipulated narratives and silenced dissenting voices. One interviewee noted that the state was *“part of the problem,”* systematically amplifying ethnic divisions and hatred. This highlights a central dilemma: while shutdowns are intended as preventive measures, they are often ineffective in controlling misinformation and simultaneously violate fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of expression.

Selective access during the shutdown further exacerbated democratic concerns. Certain government departments retained internet connectivity, enabling state-aligned narratives to dominate while alternative viewpoints were suppressed. Extended shutdowns also created social isolation, limiting the citizens’ ability to verify information, contact loved ones or access essential services such as medical care, exams and financial transactions. Interviewees emphasised that platform moderation was reactive, with content removed only after the violence had escalated, underscoring the limitations of both government-imposed shutdowns and platform-based interventions.

The shutdown also curtailed the ability of community leaders, religious figures and other trusted voices to provide reassurance and counteract hate narratives. Government communications aimed at restoring calm were similarly hindered. Media outlets—dependent on the internet for sources and fact-checking—faced severe constraints, weakening editorial oversight and accountability.

In effect, the internet ‘kill switch’ served to control information and enforce a one-sided narrative. However, this strategy was counterproductive. One interviewee observed: *“[The internet shutdown] was a very short-term measure. The authorities thought that if the internet was shut down, violence would be controlled. However, this made people angrier, as they felt powerless. Assuming that peace prevailed simply because there was no internet was clearly mistaken.”*

By cutting off access to both harmful and constructive communications, the shutdown impeded democratic processes and human rights protections. Platforms could have been leveraged to counter misinformation, provide assistance and allow citizens to share their experiences safely. Instead, the shutdown curtailed freedoms of speech, assembly and information, demonstrating the inherent risks of broad internet restrictions in conflict contexts.

In conclusion, while intended to prevent violence, the Manipur shutdown illustrates how

*In conclusion, while intended to prevent violence, the Manipur shutdown illustrates how blanket internet bans undermine democratic governance, restrict human rights and often fail to address the root causes of misinformation.*

blanket internet bans undermine democratic governance, restrict human rights and often fail to address the root causes of misinformation. Strategic, targeted approaches that preserve communication channels for credible sources, fact-checking and civic engagement may be more effective in balancing security concerns with democratic imperatives.

## Detailed Policy Recommendations

Addressing the weaponisation of social media in the Manipur conflict requires a concerted, multi-stakeholder approach. The following recommendations are directed at social media platforms, civil society organisations, and government bodies.

### Recommendations for Media and Civil Society Organisations

The conflict in Manipur is rooted in long-standing ethnic contestations, further complicated by new dynamics such as undocumented migration, drone attacks and the presence of militant groups. These factors, combined with increasing polarisation, have intensified demands for separate rule among minority communities and deepened mistrust across groups. In this context, the media, civil society, and fact-checking organisations have a critical role to play in de-escalating tensions, fostering dialogue, and countering harmful narratives.

- **Facilitate impartial inter-community dialogue:**

Civil society, academics and independent mediators should step forward to initiate dialogues between ethnic communities, instead of leaving this process to leaders or organisations directly aligned with conflicting parties. Such impartial facilitation creates safer spaces for open discussion, trust-building,

and problem-solving. At the same time, efforts should be made to promote the disarmament of militant groups, as their continued presence sustains a volatile environment. Governments should also be pressed to control the smuggling of weapons across international borders, which fuels violence.

- **Address grievances around resources and land:**

Civil society actors must work with conflicting communities to engage constructively with ethnic grievances, including disputes over land and perceptions of unequal resource distribution. Addressing these deeply rooted issues is essential to reduce resentment and prevent manipulation by polarising actors.

- **Strengthen balanced and responsible media practices:**

Encourage accurate and balanced reporting in both mainstream and social media by engaging community leaders, citizen journalists and professional news outlets. It is crucial to build trust in information sources in order to reduce polarisation and to discourage divisive rhetoric and majoritarian narratives that often escalate tensions.

- **Collaborate with technology platforms:**

Civil society should partner with tech companies to improve algorithms so that polarising content

is not amplified. This includes pressing for the employment of local content moderators who are knowledgeable about Manipur's socio-political dynamics. Such collaboration is key to preventing the creation of harmful echo chambers and to ensure context-sensitive responses.

- **Build counter-speech and fact-checking infrastructure:**

Establish a multilingual fact-checking and counter-speech hub that can rapidly debunk disinformation and false claims circulating in local languages. This hub should also produce and disseminate counter-narratives that emphasise peace, coexistence and shared humanity. Partnerships with local journalists and digital activists are vital for credibility and reach.

- **Promote digital literacy campaigns:**

Civil society groups, in partnership with local community leaders, should launch targeted digital literacy campaigns across Manipur. These campaigns should train citizens to identify disinformation, verify sources, and understand the real-world consequences of spreading online hate. Such initiatives can empower communities to resist manipulation and reduce the viral spread of divisive narratives.

- **Support nuanced state responses to online harms:**

Instead of advocating blanket bans on social media or internet services, civil society organisations should encourage the authorities

*Technology platforms play a decisive role in shaping public opinion and social dynamics during conflicts. In Manipur, their algorithms, gaps in moderation and reactive approaches have aggravated divisions, enabled the mobilisation of mobs for violence, and forced governments to resort to blunt instruments such as internet shutdowns.*

to adopt more targeted and evidence-based monitoring of online activity. Capacity-building for state institutions is critical, so that they can counter fake news and hate speech, contain mob mobilisation and deploy limited resources effectively - without resorting to excessive securitisation, which often produces negative outcomes.

### **Recommendations for Tech Platforms**

Technology platforms play a decisive role in shaping public opinion and social dynamics during conflicts. In Manipur, their algorithms, gaps in moderation and reactive approaches have aggravated divisions, enabled the mobilisation of mobs for violence, and forced governments to resort to blunt instruments such as internet shutdowns. Platforms must adopt conflict-sensitive, locally informed and proactive strategies to mitigate harm and contribute to peacebuilding:

- **Invest in robust local language and cultural moderation:**

Deploy and scale up dedicated content moderation teams fluent in Meiteilon, Kuki

dialects, Tangkhul and other local languages. Moderators must also possess cultural and political awareness of Manipur's dynamics in order to identify context-specific hate speech, coded language, and disinformation. Over-reliance on automated systems or non-specialist global moderators has proven ineffective.

- **Develop conflict-specific content policies:**

Standard global hate speech frameworks are insufficient. Platforms should design and enforce conflict-sensitive content rules that explicitly address locally relevant terms and narratives—such as derogatory slurs ('kasubi') or disinformation tropes ('undocumented immigrant,' 'narco-terrorist'). These should be flagged as severe violations with swift takedowns.

- **Proactively disrupt harmful networks:**

Move beyond reactive, post-by-post moderation by proactively detecting and dismantling coordinated, inauthentic entities. Particular attention should be paid to networks of accounts created in the aftermath of May 2023, which systematically spread hate speech and disinformation.

- **Collaborate with governments and civil society for rapid response:**

Establish collaborative frameworks with state institutions and civil society groups to enable information-sharing, fact-checking and quick action to prevent harmful content being used to incite mobs or escalate violence. This will also reduce the reliance of states on extreme measures such as internet shutdowns.

- **Build community capacity for resilience:**

Partner with local civil society organisations to strengthen the communities' ability to fact-check, verify information and counter divisive narratives. Civil society partnerships can extend reach, build trust and provide credibility in contexts where platforms are viewed with suspicion.

- **Promote peace-oriented and fact-checked content:**

Actively boost fact-checked reporting and harm-reducing counter-narratives on user feeds in conflict-affected areas. Algorithmic curation should be used to amplify constructive voices rather than divisive rhetoric.

- **Evaluate and reform algorithmic amplification:**

Critically examine how existing engagement-driven algorithms have contributed to the creation of echo chambers and polarisation. Develop alternative, context-sensitive models that prioritise safety, balance and conflict sensitivity over maximal engagement.

- **Strengthen the internal crisis response capacity of online platforms:**

Establish dedicated teams with regional expertise and training in conflict-management to anticipate and respond to emerging crises more effectively, instead of relying on ad hoc interventions.

*The Manipur conflict illustrates how government responses can either escalate or de-escalate violence. While internet shutdowns are often used as a tool to contain unrest, the resulting losses suffered by human rights, democratic freedoms and economic activity are severe.*

### **Recommendations for Central and State Governments of India, Policymakers and Law Enforcement**

The Manipur conflict illustrates how government responses can either escalate or de-escalate violence. While internet shutdowns are often used as a tool to contain unrest, the resulting losses suffered by human rights, democratic freedoms and economic activity are severe. At the same time, inflammatory rhetoric by political leaders and inadequate law enforcement responses to incitement have deepened distrust among communities. A more balanced, accountable, and inclusive approach is required.

- **Phase out reliance on internet shutdowns:**

Governments should prioritise building strong, resilient democratic institutions capable of addressing disinformation and hate speech without resorting to blanket shutdowns. Given the serious harm to fundamental rights and the heavy economic costs (ie: India's GDP loss from shutdowns between May and December 2023 is estimated at USD 19 billion), shutdowns must not be the default tool.

- **Adopt evidence-based, limited interventions when absolutely necessary:**

If temporary restrictions are deemed essential for national security or social harmony, they should follow a clear, evidence-based needs assessment in consultation with state institutions, civil society and community leaders. Any intervention should begin with the least disruptive form of restriction and be regularly reviewed.

- **Ensure transparency and accountability in shutdown governance:**

Introduce checks and balances requiring implementing agencies to provide frequent public reports on the scope, rationale and impacts of internet shutdowns to representative bodies such as legislative assemblies.

- **Coordinate with platforms and law enforcement:**

Strengthen partnerships with social media companies to increase capacity for moderation in local languages, reduce response times and enable proactive information-sharing (e.g., advance notice of unusual activity). This type of cooperation could help prevent mob mobilisation and reduce reliance on blanket bans.

- **Stop inflammatory rhetoric from officials:**

Political leaders and government representatives must immediately stop deploying unsubstantiated or inflammatory labels that vilify entire communities. Such rhetoric

legitimises discrimination, fosters hostility, and can directly trigger violence.

- **Investigate and prosecute incitement to violence:**

Law enforcement agencies, under impartial oversight, must consistently investigate and prosecute credible threats and incitement to violence on online platforms - regardless of the community affiliation of perpetrators. This is critical to breaking cycles of impunity.

- **Support inclusive peace dialogues:**

Recognising that the root of online hate lies in offline grievances, governments must actively facilitate third-party mediated dialogues between Meitei and Kuki-Zo community leaders, including women's groups such as the Meira Paibis and tribal women's organisations. These dialogues should address the core drivers of the conflict, including land rights, political representation and historical grievances.

- **Provide humanitarian support during interventions:**

Welfare arms of the state, alongside community leaders and civil society, must continuously assess the humanitarian impact of any security or digital restrictions and deliver assistance where needed.

- **Strengthen public resilience through education:**

Collaborate with civil society organisations to design awareness campaigns and capacity-building programmes that help communities identify and resist fake news, misinformation and polarising narratives.



SAHR is a democratic regional network with a large membership base of people committed to addressing human rights issues at both national and regional levels. SAHR seeks to contribute to the realisation of South Asian people's right to participatory democracy, good governance and justice by strengthening regional response, including regional instruments, monitoring human rights violations, reviewing laws, policies and practices that have an adverse impact on human rights and conducting campaigns and programmes on issues of major concern in the region.

SAHR comprises both institutional and individual members. An elected bureau works as the organisation's executive body while the membership committee oversees enrolment of members. The SAHR Chairperson and Co-Chairperson are Dr Radhika Coomaraswamy of Sri Lanka and Dr Roshmi Goswami of India respectively. The Secretariat is located in Colombo, Sri Lanka.



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