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## EDITORS' GUILD OF INDIA

### REPORT OF THE FACT-FINDING MISSION ON MEDIA'S REPORTAGE OF THE ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN MANIPUR

Sep 2nd, 2023



The Editors Guild of India (EGI) received several representations that the media in Manipur was playing a partisan role in the ongoing ethnic conflict between the majority Meitei community and the Kuki-Chin minority. On July 12, 2023, when the conflict had already been going on for a little over two months, the EGI also received a written complaint from the Indian Army's 3rd Corps headquarters citing specific examples of the media in Manipur suggesting that it may be playing "a major role in arousing passion and not letting sustainable peace to come in".



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They claimed that the media outlets of Imphal Valley have been indulging in “outright misrepresentation of facts” and in the process may be “one of the major contributors to the instigation of further violence” as the “bias of the media in favour of one community and against the other community emerges clearly in their reportage”.

The EGI had expressed its concern about the ethnic clashes in Manipur but after receiving representations about the uneven and biased reportage of the local and national media, it decided to send a fact finding team to Manipur. The EGI wanted to investigate whether there were other instances as well of incidents of the media’s incorrect reporting, purveying wrong facts and spreading fake news. A three-member team comprising Ms. Seema

*For example, the leadership of the state labelled the entire community of Kuki-Zo tribals as “illegal immigrants” and “foreigners” without any reliable data or evidence.*

Guha, Mr. Bharat Bhushan and Mr. Sanjay Kapoor was sent to Manipur to examine the media reportage in the state. The team visited Manipur from August 7 to 10.

Its terms of reference were to examine the reportage of the violence by the media, to examine whether media was indeed ‘biased and divisive’ as alleged by several stakeholders, to understand and document the way media’s coverage deepened the fissures and the impact of internet shutdown on the ability of the media to function.

The team met a cross-section of reporters, editors, representatives of the Editors Guild of

Manipur, All Manipur Working Journalists Union, civil society activists, public intellectuals, women affected by the violence, tribal spokespersons and the representatives of the security forces operating in Manipur.

### **Social And Political Context Of The Ethnic Clashes**

It was not the mandate of the EGI team to examine the causes of the ethnic clashes in Manipur. However, it would be difficult to understand the media’s behaviour, without understanding the overall social and political context within which the ethnic violence took place.

Much before the violence erupted on May 3, Manipur’s tribal tensions, especially between the majority Meitei community and the minority Kuki-Chin-Zo community, were already reaching their boiling point. The state government seems to have facilitated the majority’s anger against the Kukis through several seemingly partisan statements and policy measures.

For example, the leadership of the state labelled the entire community of Kuki-Zo tribals as “illegal immigrants” and “foreigners” without any reliable data or evidence. This despite the fact that the decadal census from 1901 to 2011 has not shown any unusual growth of the non-Naga (the other minority tribal community) tribal population.

The fact that there was a military coup in Myanmar which led to an inflow of about



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40,000 refugees to Mizoram and reportedly about 4,000 to Manipur was used to brand all Kuki-Zo as illegal immigrants. This was presented as pressure on resources but was also a war for political space, with the Meitei leadership of the government using the fear of the outsiders to consolidate its political position.

In addition, without following proper procedure as laid down in the Hills Area Committee Act of 1972, the N. Biren Singh government declared parts of Hills as “reserved” and “protected” forests and “wetland reserves”. All land ownership documents within these areas were cancelled and a drive started to evict them in December 2022.

This led to violent confrontation between the state authorities and the Kuki-Zo community which had been living in these villages. The demolition drive which began in the Kangpokpi district, a Kuki-dominated area, extended by February 2023 to Churachandpur and Tengnoupal districts which also had a preponderance of the Kuki-Zo community.

What is significant is that the forest surveys, inquiries, evictions and demolitions were carried out only in the non-Naga inhabited tribal areas, once again leading the Kuki community to believe that it was being singled out.

In an inexplicable move, on March 10, 2023, the Biren Singh government took a Cabinet decision to withdraw from the tripartite Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement (a kind of a ceasefire agreement) with the Kuki

insurgent groups, Kuki National, the Zomi Revolutionary and the Kuki Revolutionary, with whom the Union government wanted a peaceful negotiation.

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Two weeks later, on March 24, the state government removed the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) selectively, only from the Imphal Valley even though the Kuki insurgent groups were in peace talks with the Centre while the Meitei insurgents active in the Imphal Valley were outside any process of negotiation for peace. In retrospect, this was seen by the Kuki-Zo tribals as a partisan move in preparation for violence against the Kukis, which came a few weeks later.

Simultaneously, a state government committee headed by the Chief Secretary on April 3, 2023, cancelled all land/property deeds and recognition of villages within the designated reserved and protected forest areas. All this was done without any rehabilitation plan for the evicted tribal population.

On April 19 it was revealed that in an unusual order the Manipur High Court had ordered on March 27 that the state government recommends the inclusion of the Meitei community in the Scheduled Tribes List to the Centre. This



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was seen by the Naga as well as Kuki-Zo tribals, as a Meitei land-grab move, as once they got ST status they could buy land in the tribal areas of the Hills, which is currently forbidden.

This was not appealed by the Biren Singh government immediately even though the order had been issued without hearing the State or the tribal stakeholders. This once again made the tribals angry and raised suspicions about the state government's motives.

Yet another layer to the complex issue was Biren Singh's so-called "war on drugs". In this the Kuki-Zos were painted as villains who indulged in illegal poppy cultivation in the Hills. Manipur borders Myanmar and is a major route for drug smuggling through its border town of Moreh.

Experts claim that the 'Golden Triangle' of yore has shifted from the Myanmar-Thailand-Laos trijunction to the borders of Myanmar, India and Bangladesh. The trafficked drugs of choice are:

heroin, brown sugar, prescription painkillers, cough syrups and Yaba or WIY ("World is yours") pills. Biren Singh government's focus has targeted poppy growing to the detriment of the other components of the drug trade, the smuggling of synthetics to Myanmar and the smuggling in of drugs and their distribution through Manipur.

Poppy growing, done by the poorest farmers with financial advances for fertiliser and pesticides given by the drug mafia, has also shifted towards Manipur from Myanmar because of extensive satellite observation by

the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's illicit crop monitoring in Myanmar, which does not cover India (as poppy growing is licenced in the country).

Illegal poppy cultivation is done by all, Kuki-Zos, Nagas, as well as Meiteis. Yet Biren Singh popularised the epithets "poppy cultivators" and "narco-terrorists" only for the Kuki-Zos. That dangerous public posturing became evident when a highly decorated IPS officer, Thounaojam Brinda, filed an affidavit in court stating that the Chief Minister and the top police brass in the state forced her to let off a person from whose premises drugs worth Rs.27 crore had been recovered by her team.

Civil society activists claim that the annual revenue from the drug business in Manipur is

*The night of May 3 saw the almost total destruction of Kuki-Zo churches, houses and other property in the Meitei dominated areas. This was also accompanied by looting of police armouries in the Imphal Valley, imposition of curfew and internet shut down.*

estimated to be to the tune of Rs.50,000 Crore while the state's annual budget is only about Rs.30,000 Crore. The implication being that the drug network is extensive and cannot thrive without political support.

These complex factors together stoked Meitei-Kuki ethnic tensions till they reached a combustion point on May 3. The All Tribal Students' Union Manipur (the apex body of the state's tribal students) had organised a solidarity rally on that day, against the Meitei demand for ST status in Churachandpur.



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As a counter to this, Meiteis blockaded all roads leading to the Hill districts. Rumours in the afternoon of some Meitei miscreants setting fire to the Anglo-Kuki War Centenary Memorial Gate (some reports say only a few tyres were burnt next to the gate) led to the tribal rallyists returning home to rush to the site. This became the spark that ignited violence between the two communities.

Rumours of some Meitei women at Churachandpur Medical College being raped led to 'counter-molestation and rape' of Kuki women, arson and killing of Kukis in the Imphal Valley. The night of May 3 saw the almost total destruction of Kuki-Zo churches,

houses and other property in the Meitei dominated areas. This was also accompanied by looting of police armouries in the Imphal Valley, imposition of curfew and internet shut down.

Over the next few days Meiteis from Kuki areas and Kuki-Zo tribals from Meitei areas either escaped or were escorted by the security forces to areas dominated by their ethnicity. The role played in rescuing civilians irrespective of their ethnicity by Assam Rifles, whether it was rescuing nearly 1,000 Meiteis from Churachandpur, about 500 Meities from Moreh or tribal women students and non-Meiteis from Manipur University, was exemplary.



Smoke rises from a Kuki house on 5 May

Image: ANI



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Although an attempt was made to suggest that the Assam Rifles was only protecting Kukis later by Meitei radicals, that seems far removed from the reality. Violence continued sporadically thereafter but with a clear geographical division being established between the Meiteis and the Kuki-Zo areas.

The Central government neither imposed President's Rule in the state nor did it invoke powers under Article 355 to take over the law and order machinery. And yet the Governor issued shoot at sight orders, and the Centre appointed a Security Advisor reporting to the Chief Minister who had proved incompetent to control the violence. Some would say the CM's partisan actions had in fact pushed the state into turmoil.

The Union Home Minister created a unified command, once again reporting to the CM. In addition to the Manipur police forces under his command he also had Assam Rifles reporting to him. Having caused the problem he was

blocks created by the Kukis. When they wanted to do the same on the Meitei side, they were apparently "refused permission". The state bureaucracy, police and political leadership got divided along ethnic lines and started behaving as such. The Chief Minister announced that while he and the Manipur Police would be responsible for law and order in the Valley, Union Home Minister Amit Shah had assured him that he would ensure peace in the Hills, presumably through Assam Rifles which reports to the Home Ministry. This further crystallised the ethnic divide with two different law enforcement regimes in place in the same state.

What was clear to the EGI team was that the division along ethnic lines was not only in terms of people's consciousness, but a physical division or geographical separation had also taken place between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo inhabited areas.

The first thing that grabs the attention of

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visitors trying to reach the Hill areas from the Valley is the 'buffer zone' that divides the two communities, with women protesters on each side. Huge posters asking people to boycott Meitei goods have come up in the Hill areas. Women

rewarded by making him in-charge of finding the solution.

The first thing that the unified command did was to demolish the defensive structures/road-

protesters were everywhere, checking vehicles, stopping trucks but not stopping cars carrying the media.

At check posts manned by the Meira Paibis, Meitei women agitators, it was seen that



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Assam Rifles vehicles were prevented from entering. There have also been reports that trucks carrying supplies were looted by mobs. The Indian Tricolour is also seen at all Kuki protest sites, around checkpoints and public spaces, perhaps in a bid to emphasise the point that the Kuki-Zos are not asking for separation from India, but an autonomous administrative set-up where finances are not controlled by Imphal. A constant refrain from the Hill areas is that funds for development are mostly spent in the Valley and just about 10 percent reach the Hills.

Much as people in the Valley pointed fingers at the surrendered Kuki militant groups brought in to join the mobs that went on rampage in Churachandpur and other places against the Meites, people in the Hills said that former militant groups like the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), the PrePak, and People's Liberation Army (PLA) insurgents armed with sophisticated weapons, led the frenzied Meitei mob attacks in Imphal.

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Two other Meitei groups, the Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun have also been at the forefront of the violence. Reporters from Churachandpur said that the Meitei Leepun, an organisation committed to preserving Meitei culture and tradition, took active part

in attacking Kuki homes and killing tribals. Many civil society representatives as well as tribal journalists say it's patronised by Chief Minister N. Biren Singh.

The Armabai Tenggol, another vigilante group made up of aggressive young men who ride motorbikes and openly carry arms, is said to be patronised by the ruling leadership in the state. The general perception in the Hills is that these vigilante gangs, Manipur police

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commandos and former Meitei insurgents form the vanguard of marauding Meitei mobs are bent on displacing Kuki villagers from their habitations.

Over 180 people had died up to the time of writing this report, and over 54,000 were displaced running for safety to the majority areas of their ethnic community. Many had no hopes of ever returning to their homes as they had been destroyed in arson.

Although the violence came in phases and waves, the two communities now live in separate areas. The hatred is kept alive by activists from the two communities, most of all by Meitei women who seem to have taken to the frontline as defenders of their community.



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Meira Paibis block personnel from the Rapid Action force from intervening in the violence

Image: Suraj Singh Bisht / ThePrint

## Meira Paibis And Women In Conflict

Manipur's Meira Paibis are well-known civil rights activists much admired in the past for taking up progressive causes. Meira Paibis are embedded in Meitei society and have arisen organically, coming to the notice of the world in 1977. At that time, carrying burning torches they fought for the removal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act and holding the paramilitary forces accountable for human rights violations .

Meira Paibis hit the national headlines in a big way in 2004, after the rape and murder of a 32-year old Manorama, when she was detained on suspicion of being a militant. A dozen Meira Paibis stripped in front of an

Army camp at Kangla Fort and held a banner that stated "Indian army rape us".

Forgetting their feminist past, the Meira Paibis show no remorse for what has allegedly been done to Kuki women. The idea is that there was now a "war" for the survival of the Meiteis, and the normal rules no longer applied.

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The Meira Pabis have been accused by the Assam Rifles and Kuki media and civil society organisations of complicity in several mob





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attacks. They have blocked security forces from discharging their duties by surrounding soldiers so that they are unable to prevent Meitei youths indulging in violence.

They have even forcibly freed 12 Meitei insurgents of KangleiYawolKannaLup (KYKL) who were detained by the security forces for indulging in arson and violence. This included a known insurgent, self-styled Lt Col MoirangthemTamba alias Uttam, the “mastermind” of a 2015 ambush on a convoy of 6 Dogra Regiment in which 18 soldiers had been killed.

The Meira Paibis believe that they are doing nothing wrong and are merely protecting their “sons” by obstructing the Assam Rifles. They shout slogans, surround the vehicles and ensure that the ring leaders of the arsonists are protected. The Army and Assam Rifles have no idea how to deal with this kind of resistance. “We can’t shoot at Indian citizens and civilians,” a senior officer told the EGI team.

Apart from preventing the security forces from working, the Meira Paibis also check ID-cards of the Assam Rifles men and women and search their vehicles in a bid to hunt for Kukis hiding with them.

On June 26, the Spear Corps of the Indian released a 2.12 minute video showing that Meitei women helped rioters flee, obstructed their operations, accompanied armed civilians in vehicles ostensibly going on violent raids to shield them from the security forces.

The Meira Paibis pose a significant challenge to the Assam Rifles and the military. Rooted as they are to the protection of Meitei society, the Meira Paibis believe they are fighting a just cause much as Meitei women did in the past against the British.

Women and children are often the worst sufferers in a conflict. The ethnic conflict in Manipur is no exception. The clip circulated of the undressing of three Kuki women by a mob is ample evidence of the torture and humiliation that women have to face.

Expectant mothers went through harrowing times. The pain and trauma in the faces of expectant mothers, and those who had just delivered babies was apparent, in the camps for the displaced that the EGI team visited.

Historically, the women in Manipur have played an important role in society. The Kuki women are also out in numbers holding vigils in tribal areas. The Wall of Remembrance for the dead in Churachandpur is managed largely by women. Kuki women also check vehicles at barricades that they have set up on the highways and other roads leading to the Hills.

## **Manipur Media And Its Post-Truth Narrative**

The media in Manipur was not left untouched by ethnic loyalties and the deepening divide between the Meiteis and the Kuki-Chin-Zo tribals. Manipur’s media is largely Meitei owned.

While the EGI team met a cross-section of print (both English and vernacular), digital, TV and cable TV news media representatives, it was handicapped in terms of not being able to read the local language news platforms, or go through the archives of cable TV and TV news, which were not available.



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



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While the EGI team met a wide cross-section of journalists and media-practitioners, in Manipur's post-truth world it was very difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. Competing and diametrically opposite narratives were spun out by the two sides.

There is extreme pressure on journalists whether Meitei or tribal, to reflect the dominant view of their ethnic societies. The situation in Manipur was made more difficult with the ban on the internet, that is an essential tool of modern journalism.

### **Imphal Media Transformed Into Meitei Media**

The Imphal Valley is much more developed and there are many more daily newspapers, television channels and digital platforms than

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in the Hill districts of the state. When violence broke out on May 3, a liberal senior Meitei editor said, "The local media in Imphal were left in total confusion. This would be the scenario in Churachandpur as well."

"The violence reached Imphal by 7pm, provoked by images of unrestrained arson of Meitei settlements first at Churachandpur and then Moreh by the Kuki mobs, but it was still not extensive and confined to only a few pockets of the city.



Burnt down houses in churachandpur district, on 31 May

Image: Saumya Khandelwal



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“But mob violence intensified and saw some of the worst carnages on May 4 and 5. In response, the government shut down internet

It is not known if it was the rumours, that propelled the mob to tear off the clothes and parade three Kuki women naked, and rape the

*Many Valley newspapers had correspondents in the Hill areas, but the reporters could not get through to their offices because of the internet suspension. Later, perhaps there was so much anger that the Kuki, and other tribal journalists, did not wish to contribute to any Meitei publication.*

young girl in the video clip that went viral. However, the Meitei journalists the EGI team met claimed that they did not know about the terrible incident till it went public on the eve of the

service, first mobile data only and then broadband cable lines were shut down as well,” he recalled.

This had a devastating effect so far as news flow was concerned. It meant that there was no way to cross check narratives and distinguish rumours from facts, by journalists on both sides of the ethnic divide.

“Our duty to inform the public was severely handicapped by the lack of phone and internet facilities during the initial days of the violence. The distinction between facts and disinformation was blurred. This ensured there was no filter and rumours circulated by interested quarters held sway,” an executive editor of a digital platform said.

On May 4, rumours began circulating in the Valley that Meitei women doctors/students in Churachandpur Medical College hospital had been raped and that several women from the Valley were molested by angry Kuki mobs. These rumours were accepted as the gospel truth, and led to retaliatory action in the Imphal Valley.

Monsoon Session of the Parliament.

As it turned out, no Meitei doctor or any other Meitei women/ girl was raped or molested in the Churachandpur Medical College. This was confirmed by the Assam Rifles as well as the family members of the women. While Meitei houses were set on fire and there was looting and destruction of Meitei property, no physical harm came to the Meiteis residing in Churachandpur.

Later when the two sides were shooting at each other, Kukis and Meites were killed but in the first cycle of mob violence there was no physical harm done to the Meiteis living in Kuki-dominated areas. Although now one Meitei woman has claimed that she was raped in Churachandpur, this had not been firmly established till the time of writing this report.

It is also a fact that the Meitei journalists have condemned the Kuki women’s molestation. They are ashamed that the miscreants had tarnished the image of all Meiteis.

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get through to their offices because of the internet suspension. Later, perhaps there was so much anger that the Kuki, and other tribal journalists, did not wish to contribute to any Meitei publication.

The latter could be due to social pressure from society or that their reports were being not used or were shortened to make them devoid of any meaningful reporting. At least one reporter from the Hills confided in the EGI team that even when he was able to send in his reports, they were “used selectively” by his Imphal-based newspaper.

For these reasons, the ground reporting from the districts in Churachandpur, Kangpokpi and Tengnoupal disappeared. This applied to All India Radio and Doordarshan as well. “Newspersons informed me that their correspondents in the Hill districts had even stopped answering phone calls from around mid-May,” a senior civil society leader in Imphal said.

The Executive Editor of a local English daily said that the Hill reporters were “mostly untrained”, and even before the violence, the copies they filed had to be heavily edited and rewritten. Whether this became an excuse not to use the version of the tribals or the reports from the Hill districts was unclear.

However, such was the lack of trust in the reporters from the Hill districts that the EGI team was told that whenever a “major” story broke, reinforcements were sent out from the Valley. This time, however, because of the conflict, no Meitei journalist could risk

venturing out to the Hills, nor could the tribal journalists come down to the Valley.

At the moment, there is a clear divide in Manipur. The tribals in the Hills remain on their side of the divide, and the Meiteis are confined to the Valley.

Like in most regional media, advertisements

*In the Kuki areas, the general view is that the Imphal press is biased. “Media houses in Imphal, owned by Meites reported their version of events. They showed little responsibility as newsmen as the papers and television reflected the majority community’s version in the initial days of the violence,” a local Kuki reporter explained.*

for newspapers, television and digital media come mainly from the government in Manipur. Keeping the powers that be happy is a given for local media outfits that will sink without the state and ruling party’s support. For example, a popular Imphal newspaper group belongs to a ruling party MLA.

Despite revenue compulsions, newspapers are still peppered with criticism of the government on many issues including drug trafficking and poppy cultivation. However, as a senior editor put it, when it comes to drug trafficking everyone, Kukis, Meiteis, Nagas and politicians, were involved.

### **Kuki-Zo Media Perspective**

In the two months of the ethnic clashes, the Imphal-based media by and large appeared to toe the majority Meitei line, as access to the



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Hill areas was restricted. The narrative changed as the viral clip of two naked Kuki women grabbed eyeballs around the country.

Journalists from across the country poured in, and access for the mainland media was much better as reporters were welcomed by both sides. The tribals were better organised when dealing with reporters, giving details of each incident, using their mobile phone cameras to record events and providing facts and figures to support their views. In the Hills there are just a handful of English newspapers. Most newspapers are in tribal languages: Kuki, Paite and Hmar. Many are no more than one-page leaflets that cater to various ethnic tribal communities scattered across the Hills.

Every journalist the EGI team met in the Hills said that he/she reported what they saw on the ground. “We do not rely on rumours or heresy. The minute we hear of a firing incident or homes being burnt, we rush to the location and report from Ground Zero. We file what we see with our own eyes,” a reporter of a local daily claimed.

In the Kuki areas, the general view is that the Imphal press is biased. “Media houses in Imphal, owned by Meites reported their version of events. They showed little responsibility as newsmen as the papers and television reflected the majority community’s version in the initial days of the violence,” a local Kuki reporter explained.

He pointed out that when Home Minister Amit Shah was in Manipur, had travelled to

Kangpokpi and held meetings with officials and representatives of the people, firing was still going on in the city.

“As far as I understand, the reporting in the first few days of the violence was not fair. The

*The Meites were unhappy with the ‘parachute journalism’ of the national press. They believe that the mainstream media have portrayed the ethnic conflict as a religious one and pitted the Hindu Meites against Christian Kuki-Zos. This was far from the truth, according to Imphal editors.*

riots in Imphal Valley where Kukis were living were torched and looted, including the homes of the well-to-do. There was nobody to report that story from our side,” a volunteer of the Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum in Kangpokpi told the EGI team.

“Most of the newspapers and news channels in the Valley took ‘dictation’ from Chief Minister Biren Singh’s office. The blame for the violence was always on us, the Kuki-Zos.

“The narrative from Imphal was that the riots were engineered by the SoO groups( the surrendered Kuki militants, covered under Suspension of Operation, or SoO), next the blame was on poppy cultivators and drug cartels operating in Kuki areas and across the border in Myanmar.

“Then suddenly the explanation was that the violence was because of illegal migrants coming in with arms from Myanmar and settling in forest land and finally they hit on a new phrase – ‘Narco-Terrorism’,” a reporter explained.



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## The National Media

The Meiteis were unhappy with the ‘parachute journalism’ of the national press. They believe that the mainstream media have portrayed the ethnic conflict as a religious one and pitted the Hindu Meites against Christian Kuki-Zos. This was far from the truth, according to Imphal editors.

Also, the national press was most reluctant to send their correspondents to report from

tribals and the majority targeting the minority.

“These initial impressions were force-multiplied by seemingly organised social media campaigns. So overwhelming did this narrative become that even the European Union debated and drew up a resolution condemning the targeting of Christian minorities in the state by the majority Hindus,” a senior journalist explained.

Angered at what the Meites’ believe to be a one-sided view presented by the national



Imphal. Very few publications sent their correspondents during the ongoing violence.

Portrayal of the conflict in Manipur in the national media was mired in confusion. In the initial few weeks, the national media narrative was of the Hindu majority targeting the Christian minority to non-tribals persecuting

media, an editor of an influential daily read out a note addressed to all media persons covering the Manipur conflict to the EGI team.

He claimed that it was from a popular social media handle: “Did you observe the Meitei community’s lethargic response to your



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coverage request? Do you feel that you are not getting the kind of treatment you “deserved”? Well, that’s because we don’t care. We just hope that you do your duties as responsible journalists. Meiteis don’t have a central war

was a steady slide in journalistic ethics and principles since.

The May 3 Tribal Solidarity March by All Tribal Student Union (ATSU) was a peaceful one asking their detractors to “come now let us reason together”. Their agitation was against the majority Vaishnavite Hindu Meitei community suddenly demanding a Scheduled Tribe status.

On May 4, Imphal’s most widely read newspaper, ‘The Sangai Express’ described them as “agita-

tors” and “protestors” rather than naming their ethnic identity. On Day-1, the newspaper report was compiled from different parts of the state and the newspaper was careful in not identifying perpetrators of the violence. This was perhaps one of the few occasions when its reporting was representative of the demographic profile of the state.

This changed dramatically when the videos of violence began to circulate widely through WhatsApp. Attacks and counter attacks began at settlements of both the communities, seemingly after the videos began to circulate in Imphal and other parts of the state.

A report in ‘Nikkei Asia’ said: “On the afternoon of May 4, Mark Sonjalien was at home in Manipur’s capital of Imphal when he saw an irate mob approaching one of the few Kuki neighbourhoods in the city. He took out his phone and started recording footage, which went viral on social media before the internet went dark. His clips appear to show uniformed police standing by as houses and a church go

*Except for the early days of the unprecedented violence that swept Manipur when the media followed the Press Council guidelines in not identifying the warring communities, there was a steady slide in journalistic ethics and principles since.*

room coordinating all the pieces. We leave it to professionals like you to do the right thing.

“Did you observe that the VIP treatment you get from the Chin-Kuki groups is well coordinated. The contents always ready in your WhatsApp/ email, 24x7? Why is that? Who’s cooking the contents so fast, so well prepared?”

This reflected both their anger with the national media, and lamentation at not being as well-organised as the tribal groups (who were the larger sufferers in the violence and arson). Perhaps this also reflected how deep the Meitei ethnic identity, and resentment, had been etched even in the minds of Meitei journalists and editors.

## Media Failure

Except for the early days of the unprecedented violence that swept Manipur when the media followed the Press Council guidelines in not identifying the warring communities, there





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up in flames, some of the first evidence of what critics allege is "state-sponsored violence".

The internet cut on May 4 had a dramatic impact on reporting. It actually indirectly helped in constructing a majoritarian narrative. The reasons were obvious.

Imphal hosts all the eight newspapers of the state. More importantly, though, it "hosts the most subscribed and the viewership digital broadcast media houses in the state. The most subscribed broadcast media are 'TOM TV' with 731k subscribers, 'Impact TV' with 691k subscribers, 'ISTV LIVE' with 476k subscribers, 'Elite TV' with 162k subscribers, and 'MAMI TV NETWORK' with 157k subscribers"(East Mojo).

*The internet ban did not yield the expected peace dividends for the state government, as the law and order situation continued to spiral out of control. What was worse was that the narrative began to blame those who did not have a voice in this conflict. media to function.*

Shutting down the internet ensured that the Imphal based newspapers were denied any reporting from preponderantly Kuki townships/districts like Churachandpur, Kangpokpi and Moreh. Newspapers like 'The Sangai Express' and 'Imphal Free Press' or online publications like 'Frontier Express' realised that their correspondents could not send their reports from Churachandpur, Kangpokpi or Moreh.

The correspondents could not respond to

instructions from their editors. The internet ban dried up the alternative perspective, or other points of view, and the narrative from Imphal began to dominate.

## Banning The Internet

On May 4, the government of Manipur shut down mobile data services for five days. The reason cited for internet suspension was that it was meant to "thwart the design and activities of anti-national and anti-social elements by stopping the disinformation and false rumours, through various social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. on mobile phones". Next day, broadband services were also banned.

'Ukhrul Times' is considered to be a neutral media outlet located in Naga Hills. It had a satellite link due to its office in Delhi. According to Asia Nikkie report (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/India-s-deadly-Manipur-conf->

lict-highlights-impact-of-internet-cuts) when the newspaper reported in early May, 2023 an attack on Naga women by a Meitei mob in Imphal, the state government issued a notice calling it a "rumour" that was "absolutely false, and there is no incident as such." The next day, the government backtracked, saying it had never "officially issued" the notice.

The Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) wrote to the state Chief Secretary highlighting the length of the suspension order and the legal, economic and social harms of the internet



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suspension. The IFF also pointed out the news reporting over the medium of internet was crucial in combatting disinformation and fake rumours as such disinformation may equally well travel through offline means.

The IFF stated that the primary exercise of fact-checking and up to date verified information is carried out over the internet, and social media platforms. The IFF mentioned an empirical study by researchers Jan Rydzak and Nishant Joshi that found the internet shut-downs as an ineffective tool in pacifying protests, and often have unintended consequences of incentivising violent forms of collective action which require less communication and coordination.

The IFF reminded the Manipur government of the Anuradha Bhasin judgement of the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court had ruled that an order suspending internet services indefinitely is impermissible under the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Service) Rules, 2017.

Though broadband services were partially restored on July 25, 2023, which impacted only three percent of internet users in the state, the ban on mobile internet services has continued far beyond 100 days. The IFF found this endless internet ban illegal and in violation of the Supreme Court's judgement in the Anuradha Bhasin case. The judgement limits the ban to 15 days.

The IFF found that the Manipur government had not observed any of the guidelines ordered by the SC in its judgement. It was during the internet ban, that the chilling video of three Kuki women being paraded naked went viral outside the state. It conveyed to the rest of the world what was really happening in Manipur.

The internet ban did not yield the expected peace dividends for the state government, as the law and order situation continued to spiral out of control. What was worse was that the narrative began to blame those who did not have a voice in this conflict.

This is despite the fact that the Imphal-based newspapers like 'The Sangai Express' had been pleading to the state government for the restoration of the internet, arguing that their publication was not getting any reports from the areas that were under the Kukis' control.

The internet ban, accompanied by violent face-offs between Kukis and Meiteis began to change the nature of reporting from the ground. All moral restraints were given a go by. Was this due to the internet ban or the fact that all the media entities were located in Imphal, where the majority community lived?

Suddenly, newspapers led by the video channels started claiming that the culprits were the 'Kuki militants' or those militant groups that had given up arms under the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with the Centre and the State. In 'The Sangai Express' and other local newspapers there was a steady demand that the SoO should be scrapped.

The Kuki militants were accused of taking away their weapons from the camps and engaging in exchange of fire with either the Manipur Police or the Meitei militia group.

On many occasions these reports were contrary to the facts on the ground and they were severely contested by the Assam Rifles (AR). The AR claims that the weapons of the surrendered militants are greased rendering them unusable and kept under a triple locked armoury: one key with the militants, one with



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the civilian administration and one with the Assam Rifles.

During Home Minister Amit Shah's visit to Manipur, the demand from the civil society organisations in the Imphal Valley was that the SoO with the Kuki militant groups be scrapped.

The ethnic divide in the media was so deep that news stories, as well as editorials, began to blame Assam rifles for protecting the Kuki tribals. The Kuki tribals were described as "narco-terrorists" trying to enlarge their space in land strapped Manipur by liberally using drug money.

Chief Minister N Biren Singh in one of his press briefings had used the term "narco-terrorists", thus further legitimising its use to malign the Kuki-Zo communities.

The opposition to Assam Rifles was ratcheted up in a concerted campaign run by the Imphal media. They were accused of helping the Hill tribes who were "poppy planters". There has been a long list of denials that has been shared by Assam Rifles with the EGI team against these news stories that hold them responsible for all that is going wrong in Manipur.

The Assam Rifles needs to be commended for saving Meitei lives in Churachandpur and Moreh, and the lives of tribal students trapped in Manipur University.

The EGI team would especially like to mention their rescue of Afrida, a journalist from 'India Today (NE)', who had exposed Meitei militants, Arambai Tenggol vigilantes for its alleged role in violence against the Kukis. Amob came looking for her and surrounded the hotel she was at. A call to AR for help led

to her being whisked away to safety.

## Fake News And Disinformation

While the early days of killings and the role of social media has been well documented, it is now visible that the ethnic divide deepened progressively through fake news, which finds space only in Imphal media. The Kuki side has begun to put together publications, but they are far too spartan to get any visibility.

Some instances of fake news, and these are by no means exhaustive, are given below:

- July 14: 'The Sangai Express' carried comments of Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (Cocomi) saying that "visibly, the presence of Assam Rifles rankles the majority Meitei community and they want it to be removed at all costs." This fed into the public perception that the Assam Rifles was opposed to the Meiteis.
- July 8: July 8: An edit page article written by one T. Biren Singh in 'The Sangai Express' claimed that whatever was playing out in Manipur was pre-planned and part of a long term conspiracy to create a separate home land (for the Kukis).

The article is granular in detail about how the drug trade linked Kuki village chiefs hoped to achieve this objective, which stated simply includes infiltrating the bureaucracy and the army with the Kukis. The article also charged the Assam Rifles of allowing infiltration of Kukis from across the Myanmar border.



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*A woman sleeps in a relief camp for Meiteis, at school in Moirang, in Bishnupur district*

*Image: Saumya Khandelwal*

The author wants the Assam Rifles posted in Manipur to be replaced by battalions posted in some other north eastern states like Nagaland. The rebuttal of the Assam Rifle made it clear that its recruitment took place from different backgrounds and ethnicities from all over the country.

- July 11 : There was a report in the 'Imphal Free Press', which claimed that Myanmar nationals had been treated at the district hospital of Churachandpur, a Kuki stronghold. The implications of this report was that those treated in the hospital were infiltrators from Myanmar who had been injured in the violence with Meitei. The AR found no merit in the story and felt that this fake

news was initiated by inimical elements.

- June 13: There was an attack on Kuki villages of Khamenlok and adjoining areas on June 12, supported by Meitei women folk in the mob. Some members of both sides, without any intervention of the security forces, were blocked by the Meitei womenfolk from reaching the burning villages. Few amongst those who got killed were not locals and had been killed elsewhere in the counter-attacks the following day by the Kukis.

The Manipur media inverted the role of the Meitei mobs and reported the incidents as being instigated by "Kuki



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militants” who attacked and killed Meiteis.

- June 9: Armed miscreants in police uniform attacked the Kuki village of Khoken at 4 AM on June 9, and three persons were killed. When news of the incident spread, a mob of Meitei women gathered in an adjoining village.

The Imphal media reported the incident once again reversing the role suggesting that “Kuki militants” had attacked the (Kuki) village and that all those killed were all Kuki militants, the victims included a 67-year-old woman, and a 70-year-old man.

- June 4: In a shameful incident in the Iroisemba locality of Imphal, a seven-year-old Kuki boy, being taken to hospital in an ambulance with his Meitei mother and another woman relative, were attacked by a Meitei mob. As the father of the boy was Kuki, all of them were branded as a Kuki family and burnt alive inside the ambulance.

The Manipur media blacked out the incident as it showed the Meitei community in poor light. The national media picked up the story but even there an attempt was made to suggest that a Kuki mob had set fire to the ambulance. They were forced to retract the report after protests on social media.

- June 20: There was a claim in ‘People’s Chronicle’ that 29 Meira Paibis were injured in a major scuffle with the

Assam Rifles. What was not reported was that the local police had asked for help from AR as they were on the verge of being overwhelmed by the protesters.

- June 25: The ‘Imphal Free Press’ in an article claimed that the Committee to Preserve the Integrity of Manipur had asked for the removal of Assam Rifles as it had close ties with illegal immigrants and narco-terrorists and was not stopping the flow of immigrants to the state.

In its reply Assam Rifles said, “Assam Rifles has played a crucial role in capture of many illegal immigrants. In Manipur only approximately 5500 such individuals have been apprehended in the past 2 years.

“Through strict observation, some 4200 individuals have been motivated to voluntarily return to their home countries, while a total of 1290 remain under close scrutiny in the state and their details shared with appropriate offices. These actions aim to ensure national security while addressing the complexities surrounding the challenges of porous international border.”

The Assam Rifles reply debunks allegations of helping narco-terrorism by claiming that they had seized some Rs.6000 crores worth of drugs since 2016.

- May 30: ‘The Frontier Express’ published a comment written by Yoihen baNingthouja targeting the Assam Rifles which suggested that it was engaged in setting up non-designated



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camps for Kuki militants to attack Meitei militants. This provocative claim was rebutted.

- August 4: The Assam Rifles pointed out that four versions of the same event were reported by the Imphal press, including 'The Sangai Express', where the troops allegedly fired blanks to stop a group of women belonging to the Meira Paibis group.

The facts of the case according to Assam rifles are different. "At around 11:50 AM, a crowd of violent men and women aggressively started pelting stones, while miscreants in various Police Uniforms and Black Dresses present in the crowd fired at Security Forces with small arms and CHilli Grenades. In response to the threat, RAF used smoke grenade to disperse the agitated mob."

Assam Rifles claimed that the mob tried to breach the buffer zone to reach the (Kuki) people in Kangvai. It accused the media of spreading misinformation.

- August 3: 'The Sangai Express' reported that Kuki "narco-militants" "desecrated a temple" in Gwaltabi that was guarded by the army. A rebuttal by AR suggested that there was no activity of Kuki militants in that area and no damage was done to the temple. In the army's view it was clearly a report meant to "disturb the fragile peace of Manipur".

## Conclusions And Recommendations

Several things became abundantly clear about the reportage from Manipur during the present conflict:





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1. During the ethnic violence, journalists of Manipur wrote one-sided reports. In normal circumstances, they would be cross-checked and monitored by their editors or Chiefs of Bureaus from the local administration, police and security forces. However, this was not possible during the conflict.
2. The internet ban made matters worse. Communication blockade by the government had a deleterious effect on journalism as it directly impacted the ability of journalists to communicate with each other, their editors and their sources.

It also affected the media because local news gathered without any communication links was not sufficient to give a balanced view of the situation and often, even that was not enough to fill their pages or meet their news requirement.

3. The Meitei media, for that is what Manipur media seemed to have become during the conflict, acted collectively with editors consulting each other and agreeing on a common narrative e.g., agreeing on common language to report an incident, referring to certain use of language or even not reporting an event. This the EGI team was told was because they did not want to inflame the already volatile situation further.

This practice apparently originated from the days when insurgent groups were active in the Valley and threatened newspaper editors for any adverse reporting. However, the downside of

such an approach during ethnic violence is that it can easily slip into forging a common ethnic narrative and lead to a collective downslide of journalistic principles by deciding what to report and what to censor.

This seems to have happened to some extent during the present cycle of ethnic violence between the Meiteis and the Kukis.

4. With the internet suspended, and communication and transport in disarray, the media had to rely almost entirely on the narrative of the state government. This narrative under the N. Biren Singh dispensation became a narrow ethnic one playing up to the biases of the majority Meitei community.
5. The Meitei media became a party to the vilification of the security forces, especially the Assam Rifles. It failed in its duty by constant propaganda against the Assam Rifles claiming that it was only purveying the views of the public.

It failed to verify the facts, weigh them and then use them in its reportage. The state government also tacitly supported this vilification by allowing Manipur Police to file an FIR against the Assam Rifles, suggesting that one hand of the state did not know what the other was doing or this was deliberate action.

6. There are clear indications that the leadership of the state became partisan during the conflict. It should have avoided taking sides in the ethnic



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conflict but it failed to do its duty as a democratic government which should have represented the entire state.

7. This directly affected governance which was also seen as partisan. The net result is that the executive, its instruments (the police and other security forces of the state) and the bureaucracy are today divided along ethnic lines. There is a Meitei government, Meitei police and Meitei bureaucracy in Imphal and the tribal people living in the Hills have no faith in them.
8. The State made a mistake in banning the internet. An internet ban only feeds rumours and blocks the views of the disadvantaged community as has clearly happened in Manipur.
9. The State has to be careful while imposing an internet ban. If ban becomes absolutely necessary, then

news platforms should be exempted from the ban and a committee comprising the media representatives, civil society organisations and government representatives should monitor the ban and its duration.

In no circumstances should the state government go against the guidelines laid down by the Supreme Court in the Anuradha Basin case.

10. If curfew is imposed, the government should make provision for the distribution of credible news through newspapers, TV channels and online publications.

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