

Ethnic Territorialization, Infrastructure Erasure, and the Governance Failure vis-à-vis Internally Displaced Persons in Manipur.

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ABSTRACT

3rd May 2023 marked the beginning of the most devastating ethnic conflict between the Meitei community and the Kuki-Zo tribe of Manipur. It was triggered by the Manipur High Court Order on the recommendation of ST Status for the Meitei community. The clash took more than 260 lives and led to the displacement of around 60,000 people who were forced to leave their homes. Using qualitative content and narrative analyses of secondary data, this paper examines, under various sub-headings, how ethnic conflict and internal displacement in Manipur function as a mechanism of ethnic territorialization. The conflict saw not just displacement but also the forced removal of entire communities from the land that they had once called home for generations. It further argues that the violence has resulted in the collapse of essential infrastructure and human displacement, and those who remain are unable to return to their original places. The destruction of built infrastructure is interpreted as a process of erasing the social, cultural, and territorial presence of ethnic communities that have inhabited these areas for generations. The study points out that the conflict erupted from the long-standing unresolved issues over unequal distribution of resources among the communities and the failure of the governance system since the colonial era.

Keywords: Ethnic Conflict, Infrastructure, Internal Displacement, Internally Displaced Persons, Meitei-Kuki.

INTRODUCTION

The 3rd May 2023 saw the worst ethnic conflict between the Meitei community and the Kuki-Zo tribe of Manipur in India's northeastern state of Manipur. This conflict was triggered by a protest march organized by the All-Tribal Students Union Manipur (ATSUM) against the Manipur High Court order recommending the ST category to the Meiteis. This tragic situation led to the deaths of more than 260 people, and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre reported that the Manipur ethnic-conflict alone displaced up to 67,000 out of 69,000 people from South Asia, the highest number of conflict-induced displacement in India after 2018 (IDMC, 2024). As a consequence, people fled and took shelter in government-provided relief camps, and thousands of houses and religious places were turned into ashes (Government of Manipur, 2024; Parashar, 2026). It has been three years; the crisis is far from resolved amid occasional outbursts of conflict from time to time. The families left in panic settled in makeshift relief camps, their homes were destroyed, their livelihoods were devastated, and their future was deeply uncertain. For many displaced families, the prospect of return remains uncertain due to the destruction of homes, loss of livelihoods, and continuing insecurity.

Manipur is a small border state in the north-eastern part of India, having an international border with Myanmar in the south-East, bounded by Nagaland in the North, Mizoram in the South, and Assam in the west. It has a total area of 22,327 km² and a population of 28.56 lakh (Census, 2011). It has three major groups of people: the Meiteis in the valley, the Nagas, and the Kuki-Chin tribes in the hills. The Meitei community makes up about

53% of the population, including the Meitei-Pangals, concentrated mainly in the Imphal valley. While Kukis (25%) and Nagas (15%) represent 40% of the population located in the hilly areas, most of whom are tribal people. There are 33 tribes in Manipur, and they are either Nagas or Kukis. These tribes of Manipur are different from each other because they speak different languages, wear different clothes, and have their own customs and traditions.

Geographically, the State is divided into two regions, viz., the hill and the valley. The valley lies in the central part of the state, surrounded by hills. The valley region consists of four districts, viz. Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal, and Bishnupur. These districts have a small area, but are very populous. Imphal is the capital city of Manipur. The hill region comprises five districts, viz. Senapati, Tamenglong, Churachandpur, Chandel, and Ukhrul, and the hill districts occupy about 90 percent or 20089 sq km of the land area, while the valley dwellers live in only about 10 percent or 2238 sq km of the land area, of the total area of the State (Manipur State Profile, 2026). This geographic imbalance has led to structural inequities in political representation, economic growth, and access to state resources that have simmered over decades (Baruah, 2005; Verghese, 2004).

The immediate driver of the violence that occurred on the night of 3rd May 2023 was the Manipur High Court order of 14th April 2023 on the recommendation of granting the Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the dominant Meitei community, which threatened the hill tribes' land rights and affirmative action entitlements guaranteed under the Constitution. All Tribal Student Union Manipur (ATSUM) called for a solidarity march, which later got into violence near Churachandpur, and quickly spread across the state on 3 May. In just a few days, an informal ethnic partitioning had occurred, with Imphal Valley being emptied of its Kuki-Zo residents, and the Kuki-Zo-dominated hill districts losing their Meitei residents (Mamo, 2023).

The events that followed resulted in significant human, social, and material losses. As of 20 March 2026, official data showed that 58,881 people have been displaced, 217 people have died (20 of whom were recorded in compensation claims), and 7,894 households were completely destroyed, while 2,646 households were partially damaged (Parashar, 2026). An unofficial report states that the death toll has surpassed 280 people, and there are estimates that even more people were displaced than died. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2023) expressed concern about extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, forced displacement, and destruction of homes and places of worship, stating the humanitarian response was wholly inadequate. The paper further seeks to develop the concept of Ethnic Territorialization as an analytical framework for understanding the relationship between displacement, infrastructure destruction, and territorial reorganization in conflict-affected societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly discussion on the Manipur ethnic conflict has increased since May 2023, but it has not been comprehensive. There is also a considerable amount of pre-existing knowledge dealing with political and constitutional aspects of the ST status controversy, such as in the article titled "Manipur's ethnic divide and the impact on India's national security" in Sociological Bulletin Kipgen and Ganie (2025) discussed the impact of the conflict on India's national security, noting that the ethnic division of Manipur has caused the state to be affected on its relationship with the border region. In a related study, Singh (2025) examines questions of displacement, belongingness, and migrant mobility, providing important insights into how conflict reshapes experiences of home, identity, and social attachment. These perspectives are useful for understanding the displacement experienced by communities affected by the Manipur conflict.

In terms of the socio-economic dimension related to displacement, there has been increased attention in the academic discussion, with Library Progress International (2024) providing one of the first comprehensive accounts of the impact of the conflict on over 50,000 displaced people residing in 349 relief camps. The article highlights the depth and complexity of the impacts on economic livelihoods, health, and social unity, and the extent to which communities are being drawn apart in overcrowded prefabricated shelters. In the meantime, Kumar (2024) has reported that more than 41,000 displaced, and reported that at least 207 people from the Kuki Zo community died. In terms of health, Khadka et al. (2024) analyzed the health situation five months after the onset of violence in IDP camps; likewise, Rajkumari et al. (2024) collected some of the most important psychological data so far and found that 65.8% of a systematically sampled IDP population showed symptoms

of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). All of these studies start to map the outline of a crisis, whether mental or psychosocial, as it is physical.

In addition, the Civil society organizations have played an indispensable role in bringing the Manipur crisis into public view. Bodies such as Amnesty International (2025), Human Rights Watch (2025), and OHCHR (2023) have collectively documented alleged extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, religious persecution, and the systematic denial of rights to internally displaced persons (IDPs), providing a shocking record of abuse and neglect. Without this work, the crisis would have remained almost entirely invisible beyond the borders of the state. However, as highlighted in (Devi & Devi, 2025), even well-intentioned civil society interventions have at times reinforced, rather than dissolved, the underlying precarity of displaced communities, often framing them as passive victims rather than as agents with complex histories and aspirations.

Whereas the literature on this issue is filled with structural explanations for displacement, there has been no integrated analytical framework that connects the structural causes of displacement to the intentional destruction of infrastructure (Graham, 2010) and the everyday lives of IDPs in a single critical argument. This paper endeavors to synthesize, regarding displacement not as a by-product of conflict but as a process of conflict, embedded in its territorial, political, and socio-economic context.

Rationale of the Study

To understand why this study matters, it is worthwhile to first understand the scale of violence that happened in Manipur. Manipur, since 2023, is undergoing a humanitarian emergency, with more than 58,000 people from the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities living in relief camps for more than two years, and a formal rehabilitation plan only arrived in the 2025-26 Budget, nearly two years after the violence began (Amnesty International, 2025). These displaced people have faced severe socio-economic devastation. They have lost their farms, agricultural land, markets, weaving livelihoods, and trade networks, which are the very foundations of their daily lives. (Library Progress International, 2024). Although the governance response has been deeply inadequate, the situation has led to the resignation of Chief Minister N. Biren Singh on February 9th, 2025, and the imposition of President's Rule on February 13th, 2025. Subsequently, a Rs. 523 crore rehabilitation packages for around 60,000 displaced people were announced in the Manipur Budget 2025-26; altogether revealed that the state was reactive, politically paralysed, and slow to honour its obligations to displaced citizens (Parashar, 2026).

It needs to be stated that during this ongoing conflict, casualties have always occurred both in human and material terms. This conflict produced not just an internal displacement, but also a systematic targeting of the material foundations of one's community life. As per official RTI disclosures data, 2646 houses were partially destroyed, while 7894 permanent residents were completely vandalised, and more than 386 religious structures were demolished. This can be considered as a deliberate attempt to erase the cultural, spiritual, and social presence of the entire community from the contested territory (Mamo, 2023; Bues, 2023). The conflict has resulted in an immense humanitarian crisis, and yet it is very marginally studied in academic literature. Therefore, the paper attempts to locate on how this infrastructure destruction became a mechanism of displacement. It further argues that the displacement in Manipur is an act of deliberate ethnic territorialization, the systematic removal of communities to reshape the demography of contested land, and that understanding it as such is essential for any meaningful policy or academic response. It further argues that the destruction of infrastructure was not incidental but rather intentional: a strategy of erasure designed to dismantle the physical, spiritual, and economic foundations upon which these communities' identities and futures were built. This dimension remains theoretically underdeveloped in existing literature on the Manipur conflict and represents a significant analytical gap.

Ethnic Territorialization: A Conceptual Framework

While Galtung's theory of structural violence helps explain why conflict erupted from the long-standing inequalities, the accumulated grievances, and the unequal distribution of power and resources. But it does not explain how conflict alters shared territories into ethnically segregated spaces. To address this gap, this study develops the concept of "**Ethnic Territorialization**". It refers to a conflict-induced process through which violence, displacement, infrastructure destruction, and territorial reordering combine to transform shared spaces

into ethnically exclusive territories. The concept emphasises that displacement behaves as a means through which demographic and territorial realities are restructured. It is a collective transformation: as people are displaced, as homes and institutions are destroyed, as territorial boundaries are redrawn, the landscape itself is reorganised, and the demographic realities change over time. The possibility of return narrows. What was mixed becomes separate, and what was contested becomes, over time, settled not through agreement, but through the facts that violence leaves behind.

The concept has four interconnected dimensions. The first is the population displacement, which refers to the forcible removal of communities from their places of residence through violence, fear, or sustained insecurity. This results in the gradual concentration of populations along ethnic lines. Next is infrastructure erasure, or the destruction or abandonment of homes, places of worship, markets, schools, and other community infrastructures, a process that systematically destabilises the material basis upon which community life and eventual return depend. The third is spatial homogenisation, and refers to the process by which multi-ethnic areas become increasingly dominated by a single ethnic group, to the point where territorial boundaries increasingly overlap with ethnic identities. The fourth and final dimension, barriers to return, includes destruction of infrastructure, loss of livelihoods, security concerns, and continued ethnic polarisation, which create conditions that make the return of displaced populations difficult or impossible. Hence, Ethnic Territorialization operates as a sequential process in which conflict produces displacement, displacement facilitates territorial separation, infrastructure destruction consolidates ethnic division, and the resulting territorial reorganization reinforces long-term segregation. Through this process, conflict reshapes the social relations as well as the demographic and spatial organization of territory. The concept is informed by broader discussions on territoriality, ethnic boundaries, and spatial control (Sack, 1986; Brubaker, 1996; Yiftachel, 2006).

Overall, the notion of Ethnic Territorialisation extends existing explanations of ethnic conflict by demonstrating how conflict not only produces violence and displacement, thereby shaping the spatial realities through the expulsion of populations, destruction of infrastructure, and the creation of ethnically exclusive spaces. In this sense, displacement is conceptualized as a way through which territorial rearrangement is accomplished, not merely as a humanitarian outcome of conflict. For instance, the de facto division between Meitei-dominated valley districts and Kuki-Zo-dominated hills residing predominantly in the south of Manipur, such as the Churachandpur districts, in which each side is increasingly being cleared of the presence of the other (Mamo, 2023), is a pattern of ethnic territorialization practice in Manipur. It can account for how the grievances that had been festering over time in the context of a long-standing, entrenched inequality were rendered into the operationalization of reordering territory, by controlling and actually reshaping its demography and identity. Both frameworks see the conflict as the result of a series of structural drawbacks and as the ongoing and spatialized struggle of ethnic boundary-making.

Objectives of the Study

This paper pursues four specific objectives

1. To examine the structural factors underlying the Meitei-Kuki-Zo ethnic conflict and the resulting patterns of internal displacement in Manipur since May 2023.
2. To analyse how conflict-induced displacement and the destruction of residential, religious, and economic infrastructures contributed to the territorial reorganization of communities in Manipur.
3. To develop and apply the concept of Ethnic Territorialization as an analytical framework for understanding the relationship between displacement, infrastructure destruction, and the emergence of ethnically segregated territories.
4. To assess the socio-economic, psychological, and governance challenges experienced by internally displaced persons and evaluate the adequacy of rehabilitation and protection measures.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts qualitative content analysis and narrative analysis of secondary data to identify recurring themes related to displacement, infrastructure destruction, territorial reorganization, and governance responses. The concept of Ethnic Territorialization was developed through an inductive analysis of evidence drawn from multiple secondary sources. The recurring themes, such as forced displacement, destruction of residential and

religious buildings, spatial separation of communities along ethnic lines, and obstacles to return, were identified across the data sources. These interconnected processes were used as empirical sources of understanding the concept as an analytical tool to explain how conflict transforms territorial and demographic realities. The study relies on five types of data sources: (i) official government documents such as parliamentary statements, RTI disclosures, and state government reports; (ii) peer-reviewed academic publications; (iii) reports by international human rights and humanitarian groups; (iv) civil society and advocacy reports; and (v) credible media documentation. Given the conflict context, discrepancies exist among official, independent, and civil society estimates of the toll in terms of casualties, displacement, and damage to infrastructure. However, a triangulation strategy drawing on multiple data sources gives a fuller picture of the dynamics of displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and territorial re-organization in Manipur. Accordingly, the findings should be understood as an interpretive analysis of the conflict and its consequences, grounded in triangulated secondary evidence rather than primary empirical investigation.

MAJOR DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Roots of Rupture: Structural Origins and Scale of Displacement

Internal displacement is not new or unprecedented in Manipur. Lessons from Bosnia and the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar demonstrate how unresolved ethnic grievances, forced displacement, and the destruction of community infrastructure can contribute to long-term territorial reorganization. These comparative cases provide a useful context for understanding the dynamics of displacement and territorial transformation observed in Manipur. The displacement is bilateral in Manipur, affecting both the Kuki-Zo and Meitei communities simultaneously, and the territorialization it produces is therefore more entrenched, more contested, and significantly more difficult to reverse.

The Deep Structural Roots

To understand the ethnic conflict in Manipur, which broke out in May 2023, one has to look beyond the immediate triggering phenomena of the conflict, which is the Manipur High Court judgement order No. WP(C) No. 229 of 2023 delivered on 27 March 2023 by the Acting Chief Justice M. V. Muralidharan. The order of the judgement was that the state government of Manipur shall forward its recommendations to the Ministry of tribal affairs for inclusion of Meitei/Meitei community in the Scheduled Tribe (ST) list. The court also directed the state government to take an expeditious decision on the case of inclusion of the Meitei community in the ST list, preferably within four weeks. Instead, the conflict was the product of deep-rooted historical, political, and territorial grievances that have shaped relations between communities for decades.

These tensions have their roots in the colonial period, when the British ruled the hills and valleys with separate legal and administrative systems. The valley was under the charge of the Maharaja and the Manipur Durbar, while the hill areas were administered as frontier tribal regions under separate administrative arrangements. These policies entrenched territorial and ethnic divisions that persisted after independence and shaped the governance structures in the state (Mamo, 2023). This hill-valley division largely remained in post-colonial governance. Special constitutional safeguards and land laws under the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act, 1960, restricted the transfer of tribal land to non-tribals. Although these measures were intended to protect tribal communities, they also reinforced ideas of unequal access to land, resources, and political power. Over time, these arrangements contributed to mistrust, competing claims over territory, and the emergence of various ethnic movements and insurgencies (Baruah, 2005; Haokip, 2015).

Another matter of dispute was political representation. The hill districts comprise nearly 90 per cent of the land mass of Manipur, but the representation in the State Legislative Assembly is based largely on the distribution of population, and the Assembly consists of forty seats from the valley and twenty from the hill districts. As a result, many tribal communities feel politically underrepresented despite occupying a large part of the land in the state (Das, 2023). This misalignment between territorial claim and political representation has been a constant grievance. Against this background, the demand for Scheduled Tribe status for the Meitei community became highly contentious. Since 2012, the Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur (STDCM) has been demanding the ST status for the Meiteis. However, the demand was viewed by many Kuki-Zo and Naga

organisations as potentially threatening constitutionally protected tribal land rights and affirmative action provisions. Tensions were intensified when the Manipur High Court directed the state government in April 2023 to consider and expedite the recommendation for Meitei inclusion in the ST list (Das, 2023; Kipgen & Ganie, 2025).

The May 2023 Eruption and Territorial Separation

The immediate outbreak of violence followed the ATSUM-organized Tribal Solidarity March held on 3 May 2023 across the hill districts. What began as a protest rapidly escalated into widespread ethnic violence affecting both the valley and hill regions. Within days, incidents of arson, killings, and forced displacement were reported across the state, leading to the large-scale movement of populations along ethnic lines (Mamo, 2023). The violence produced an informal territorial division between the valley and hill regions. Kuki-Zo residents residing in the valley relocated to Kuki-majority areas, while Meitei populations living in parts of the hill districts moved towards the valley. Although never formally recognized, this territorial separation increasingly shaped patterns of mobility, security, and everyday interaction between communities. The resulting spatial reorganization laid the foundation for what this study conceptualizes as Ethnic Territorialization.

The breakdown of law and order further fuelled the conflict. State armouries and police stations were raided for thousands of weapons, adding to the militarisation of the conflict and extending the period of insecurity (Human Rights Watch, 2025). The presence of advanced weaponry changed the nature of the localized violence into something more prolonged and organised, making the peace-building efforts more difficult. The political consequences of the confrontation were equally serious. All ten Kuki-Zo legislators demanded a separate administrative arrangement for their community due to ongoing displacement and declining confidence in state institutions. Whatever the way this demand was understood, it signaled a profound crisis of faith in the existing political institutions and the extent to which the conflict had changed the relationship between communities and the state.

Scale of Displacement

The ongoing Kuki Zo-Meitei conflict has resulted in an untold human misery, leaving hundreds of thousands displaced from their original inhabited places. The displaced people include both the Kuki Zo tribe and the Meitei community. It is suggested that, as of April 2026, the official RTI disclosure stated that there are as many as 58,881 individuals reported to be displaced starting from 3rd May 2023 to 30 March 2026, with 174 active relief camps and 3,000 prefabricated housing units built as temporary shelters (Parashar, 2026). The government officially recorded through its compensation claims that 217 fatalities, while independent organizations claimed the death toll was over 280, with the injuries suffered by thousands, and at least 32 people remain missing. The Kuki Students Organization reported that at least 41,425 Kuki-Zo people are displaced, and 207 Kuki-Zo people died, suggesting that the Kuki-Zo community faced a disproportionate burden in the casualties (Kumar, 2024). Out of the total displaced figures, the UN Human Rights experts estimated that there were at least 10,000 displaced children (Mamo, 2023). Several families or individuals migrated to neighboring States, especially Mizoram and Meghalaya. Nearly three years after the conflict started, more than 50,000 people were still in camps in early 2026 (Westerby, 2026). The large-scale displacement of Meitei and Kuki-Zo populations contributed to the territorial separation of communities. Areas that previously accommodated mixed populations increasingly became identified with a single ethnic group, laying the foundation for a process of ethnic territorialization.

Infrastructure Destruction and Ethnic Territorialization

Acts of Erasure: Patterns and Effects of Infrastructure Destruction

Galtung (1969) identifies a form of violence that is subtle, indirect, and embedded in social structures: unequal resource distribution, political marginalization, and the consistent inability to fulfil basic human needs. This form of structural violence is reflected in the scenario of Manipur as the long-standing inequalities in the distribution of resources between hill and valley regions, the unequal constitutional rights and protections available to different communities, and the political marginalization that reduced the possibility of a dignified life for significant sections of the population before the violence of 2023.

When infrastructure is destroyed in conflict on purpose, the built environment becomes a weapon. Homes, roads, markets, places of worship: these are not just tangible products. They are the things that make it possible for people to live somewhere, to belong somewhere. Destroying them causes material loss as well as alters the conditions through which communities sustain themselves and hold a claim to a place (Rodgers & O'Neill, 2012; Graham, 2010). For internally displaced persons, the destruction of infrastructure creates what Farmer (2004) means by a structural impossibility of return without the material conditions for reconstituting life in a place of origin are removed, and displacement becomes chronic and irreversible. By removing the physical foundations of community life, such destruction reinforced territorial separation and reduced the possibility of return, thereby consolidating ethnic territorialization.

In the Manipur conflict, the destruction of houses was along ethnic lines with a precision that strongly indicates a deliberate purpose. As each community was ejected from the territories and their tangible infrastructure was destroyed to ensure that they would not come back, and to make it clear that the territory had been changed forever. According to RTI disclosure reports, it is claimed that as of March 2026, there were 7,894 houses that were destroyed permanently and 2,646 houses that were partially damaged (Parashar, 2026). Along with religious institutions, violence was perpetrated against cultural and religious communities. Even in the first four days alone, the Churachandpur District Christian Goodwill Church reported 121 churches belonging to 15 denominations being destroyed (Matters India, 2023). By September 2023, it was confirmed by UN experts that 253 churches had been destroyed, and the United Christian Forum estimated that more than 500 churches had been destroyed (Bues, 2023). According to the government's own numbers, there were 386 religious buildings, and both community religious spaces were vandalized (Government of Manipur, 2024). For the community, the church and temple are not only a place of worship, but it is also the institutional and social heart of village life, a place for community decisions, a place for records, and a place for education and welfare. So, the destruction of such an institution is indicative of the collapse of community governance. In this regard, the destruction of religious infrastructure was a measure of ethnic eradication.

Economic Infrastructure and Agrarian Disruption

Besides homes and places of worship, the conflict caused severe damage to economic infrastructure. Roads were blocked or made impassable by isolating the communities from commercial networks on which they depended for income generation from agricultural produce, handicrafts, and labor (Das, 2023). Historically, local markets in border areas have been sites of inter-community exchange, but these markets were left vacant and destroyed. Destruction of irrigation infrastructure, such as burning, abandonment, and in some instances, intentional destruction of irrigation facilities, caused damage to agricultural land. The farmers who fled their villages left standing crops unharvested, livestock unattended, and fields uncultivated, resulting in compounded losses across multiple growing seasons.

In the case of the rural agricultural population, most of the displaced people were affected by the destruction of the home and household economy. For those who practice agriculture as their main livelihood, the house is not only used for shelter; it also serves as a hub for agricultural activities, a storage area for seeds, farm implements, and produce, and a location for small-scale livestock rearing. With its demise, its household's productive capacity was cut off in one fell swoop. The OHCHR (2023) has remarked on the deliberate effects of the conflict on infrastructure, including the destruction of farmland, loss of crops, and the collapse of livelihoods.

Spatial Homogenization and Ethnic Territorialization

An important aspect of the Manipur conflict that has been under-appreciated is the territorial reorganization of communities along ethnic lines. Before the violence broke out in May 2023, Meiteis, Kuki-Zo, and other communities lived in harmony in various localities in the state, albeit with some grievances and tensions. Much of the violence, forced displacement, and destruction of residential infrastructure, however, took place and caused the mass migration of populations to places where their respective ethnic groups were the majority.

Gradually, the shared spaces transformed into ethnically separate areas through the displacement process. The Kuki-Zo residents who had lived in Imphal Valley for centuries were forced to relocate to the Kuki-dominated hill districts, and the Meitei people residing in parts of the hill districts were similarly forced to shift to the valley.

Consequently, many localities where several ethnic groups once existed became increasingly homogeneous in their demographic composition. The emergence of informal buffer zones separating Meitei-dominated valley areas from Kuki-Zo-dominated hill regions. While not formally recognized as administrative areas, these security-controlled zones have restricted movement between communities and reinforced territorial segregation. The presence of such buffer zones demonstrates how conflict can reshape spatial relations and contribute to the consolidation of ethnically differentiated territories; a process conceptualized in this study as Ethnic Territorialization.

This transformation was exacerbated by the destruction of displaced communities' homes, religious buildings, and economic infrastructure. The absence of these material bases lessened the potential for return and helped to consolidate ethnic boundaries. In many instances, the displacement was not only a humanitarian problem directly stemming from the conflict, but became a mechanism through which territorial separation was institutionalized. Here, Ethnic Territorialization is a process of reorganization of space that results from a conflict, through the displacement of populations, the destruction of infrastructure, and the establishment of conditions that prevent or hinder the return. Through this process, territories become increasingly associated with a single ethnic identity, while the presence of other communities is reduced or erased. The emergence of ethnically segregated zones across Manipur illustrates how conflict can reshape both demographic and territorial realities beyond the immediate violence. The ongoing nature of relief camps, security issues, and the absence of large-scale return further indicate that this process remains ongoing. As a result, it is understood that the conflict displaced populations, in turn, the spatial structure of communities has been changed, creating new territorial demarcations that are increasingly defined along ethnic lines.

Living Conditions and Challenges of IDPs

Surviving Without a State: The Lived Struggles of IDPs in Relief Camps

The conflict-led displacement forced many families to seek shelter in schools, community halls, and religious institutions that had been set up as emergency shelters. Thousands of families continue to live in these same buildings for more than two years. Later in April 2026, the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) documented over 50,000 IDPs in inhumane conditions, who had limited access to health services, sanitation facilities, and adequate nutrition (Westerby, 2026). In its report from May 2025, Amnesty International cited a community worker as saying that the relief camp was experiencing regular outbreaks of measles, dysentery, and fever, as well as patients requiring dialysis and cancer treatment that were unable to access the inadequate local government hospital (Amnesty International, 2025).

Recognizing the poor and miserable conditions of the emergency shelter, the government announced Rs. 523 crore rehabilitation packages in the 2025-26 budget for internally displaced persons (IDPs). A phased resettlement plan was initiated, where Phase I was targeted at the families with partially damaged houses and Phase II was targeted at the beneficiaries of the PMAY. For families living in areas where security conditions have not improved, and for families whose homes were entirely destroyed, the resettlement timeline is still a big question. However, the governments acknowledge that the resettlement process depends on security conditions, land availability, and the feasibility of livelihoods (Prokerala, 2026).

Wounds Visible and Invisible: Health and Psychological Consequences

The health effects of the displacement in Manipur are dire and well-documented. Poor sanitation and overcrowding further increase physical health risk: communicable diseases spread within camp populations without adequate health care to stop them. In camps where there is no access to specialist care, individuals with chronic health issues like TB, cancer, and kidney disease are especially vulnerable (Amnesty International, 2025).

One of the serious health issues that needs to be taken seriously is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A cross-sectional study conducted by Rajkumari et al. (2024), among IDP residents in the Imphal East District from October to December 2023, has been published in the Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care. The study discovered that 65.8% of people exceeded the international comparative standards for extreme levels of post-

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on the PCL-5 diagnostic instrument. 24.8% experienced moderate anxiety and 15.2% severe anxiety using the GAD-7. A significant association was found between PTSD and female gender for the age of 20-59 years, and post-conflict unemployment, with economic precarity and psychological distress being particularly intertwined.

There has been an increasing trend of suicidal thinking, attempts, and suicides among the residents of the camps, which are related to livelihood deterioration, prolonged uncertainty, and the breakdown of social support systems (Devi, M. P., & Devi, M. P., 2025). Further, documented that the lack of believable and realistic resettlement plans was one of the main causes of the chronic despair: if it is not possible to come back to the country, the psychological state of displacement turns into permanent and not ephemeral.

Idle Hands, Empty Tables: Livelihood Collapse

The failure of livelihoods is one of the most common issues faced by IDPs in Manipur today and is one of the least addressed ones. Displacement removed the connection between a productive asset and the land of a rural household for farming families overnight. The loss of shops, equipment, and existing relationships with customers as a result of their businesses meant that the economic capital that commercial families had accumulated was lost in an instant.

The opportunities for income generation are very constrained in relief camps. The Imphal Review (2025) cited IDPs making some money from selling candles, incense sticks, and detergents as a form of economic activity that is not sustainable in the medium to long term. Vocational training programmes by the government and NGO such as kouna mat weaving, pickle making, and textile production, are organized. In several reported instances, NGOs offered IDPs work opportunities to produce products by promising them collection and sales, but the offer never materialized, and the IDPs were left without any payment for their labour, thereby showing further distrust in institutional support (Devi, M. P., & Devi, M. P., 2025).

On a per capita basis, the amount that the Union government has allocated for relief and rehabilitation to the displaced in FY 2024-25 is less than USD 5 per person for an entire fiscal year (Amnesty International, 2025). One of the more integrated livelihood interventions available was the ICMC-supported CCBI programme in 2024-25, where 100 women were provided with poultry for their small-scale income generation needs, and 200 children were supported in education; however, this only covered a small portion of the need (Westerby, 2026).

Governance Response and Protection Gaps

Rights Without Remedy: The Legal and Governance Vacuum

The legal situation of Manipur's IDPs is defined by a striking absence: India has no specific domestic legislation for the protection of internally displaced persons. Unlike refugees, who benefit from international protection frameworks, IDPs are entirely dependent on the state whose failure may have produced their displacement, a structural dependency that becomes particularly acute in Manipur, where state government involvement in the violence has been the subject of judicial scrutiny. Unlike refugees, who enjoy protection under international law, IDPs rely completely on the state. In 2025, Amnesty International (2025) has clearly called out the denial of "adequate housing, water, sanitation and healthcare" for IDPs as a legal contradiction that is binding on India under its ICESCR obligations from 1979. The Supreme Court of India has been the main check on the State's actions, declaring in August 2023 that there is an 'absolute breakdown of law and order' and sending six judges to the IDP camps in March 2025. The precedent of *Maneka Gandhi v Union of India* (1978) that the right to life guaranteed by Article 21 now includes dignity and meaningful living and not just the ability to survive, raises the bar for demonstrating that the living conditions in Manipur's relief camps are an infringement of fundamental rights. But, two-plus years into the conflict, no high-ranking official or militia leader had been held to account, and the culture of impunity reported by all major human rights groups has not been challenged (Amnesty International, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025).

These factors collectively impede the return of displaced populations and contribute to the permanence of territorial separation.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between ethnic conflict, internal displacement, infrastructure destruction, and governance failure in Manipur following the outbreak of violence in May 2023. The results show that the four dimensions, such as displacement, infrastructure destruction, spatial segregation, and barriers to return, are interrelated processes that collectively reshape territorial and social realities. The impacts of the conflict are reflected through these four dimensions, which collectively illustrate the broader concept of “Ethnic Territorialization”. Furthermore, the analysis shows that the roots of the conflict lie in long-standing structural inequalities associated with historical aspects of governance, disproportionate political representation, contested land rights, and competing claims over identity and resources. These unresolved grievances created conditions in which the violence of 2023 resulted in large-scale human displacement as well as the fragmentation of previously shared social spaces. The displacement of Meitei and Kuki-Zo populations and the loss of residential, religious, and economic infrastructure have led to the territorial disjunction of communities and the consolidation of ethnic boundaries.

The study broadly demonstrates that infrastructure destruction extends beyond material loss. Conflict undermines the social and material foundations of community life and severely disrupts social relations by destroying homes, places of worship, markets, and livelihood assets, thereby weakening the social and economic foundations necessary for community recovery and return. Return can only be made possible once territorial and identity claims that prompted the original expulsion have been answered and negotiated politically in the framework of constitutional negotiations. But in Manipur, those talks started in March 2026, three years after the outbreak of the conflict. Consequently, reconstruction should be understood as a process closely linked to questions of security, justice, community coexistence, and long-term peace-building.

The experiences of internally displaced persons reveal the multidimensional consequences of conflict. Prolonged residence in relief camps, livelihood disruption, inadequate access to healthcare, psychological distress, and uncertainty regarding rehabilitation continue to affect thousands of displaced individuals. The results indicate that recovery needs humanitarian assistance along with sustainable livelihood support, mental health care, and avenues that facilitate social reintegration and community reconstruction. The study also identified significant governance and protection gaps. Despite widespread displacement and humanitarian need, responses have often been slow and inadequate. The absence of a dedicated national framework for the protection of internally displaced persons further exposes affected populations to prolonged vulnerability. Therefore, robust rehabilitation policies, ensuring accountability, and developing institutional arrangements for the protection of displaced populations are essential roles of durable recovery.

The conceptual basis of this study is the notion of Ethnic Territorialisation, which is useful to understand how ethnic conflicts can alter demographic and territorial realities, by involving displacement, destruction of infrastructure, spatial homogenisation, and obstacles to return into a single analytical framework. From the context of Manipur, the result implies that displacement was a mode of reorganisation of territories and consolidation of ethnically distinguished spaces. To achieve sustainable peace in Manipur, the structural conditions that led to the conflict must be addressed, trust between communities must be rebuilt, equitable development must be ensured, and conditions must be created to enable the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of displaced people. Without dealing with these underlying issues, reconstruction efforts may alleviate immediate suffering but are unlikely to produce long-term stability and reconciliation.

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