

# The Battle of Narratives: The Role of Media in Shaping Manipur's Conflict

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## Abstract

This paper is divided into two parts; the first deals with the origin of the conflict, and the second investigates how the media plays a significant role in explaining the ethnic strife and sway public opinion at the national level. The time frame of this study is that one particular incident occurred on May 4th. This paper analyses the coverage of newspapers at every level, i.e. local( The Sangai Express), national(The Times of India ) and international(Aljazeera). It evaluates the narratives set by different people. Narratives refer to retelling an event or a happening that is not mutually exclusive. Depending on the individual's community, one party or an individual may have a different narrative of the same event in a conflict. In a conflict, one side's narrative is not necessarily identical to the narrative of the other side (Dajani et al., 2013). So, the title is self-explanatory in the sense that this article critically evaluates the different narratives that are linked up with the ethnic conflict and decode the media narratives.

**Keywords:** ethnic, culture, ethnic cleansing, narco-terrorism, filter bubble, echo chamber.

## INTRODUCTION

Manipur( Land of Jewels) or Kangleipak (Abode of Gods), one of the northeast states in India, sandwiched between Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Myanmar, was known for its natural beauty, its immense representation in sports, its culture, and ethnic diversity and richness in food, religion and people. It is also a well-known fact that Manipur was one of the first states in India to draft a constitution for itself and the first to hold an election in an Indian state. However, in the past few decades, Manipur's image has been daunted by different ethnic and cultural issues. This research paper aims to decode ethnic violence, a conflict between the two ethnic groups, the dominant and the subordinate (Tepfenhart, 2013), the Meitei and the Kuki-Zo community. This article also provides a historical analysis as to why the ethnic clash happened in the first place. Moreover, it also decodes the different narratives associated with the issue, people's narratives, the unheard voices of the displaced people, and, most importantly, why the central government failed to understand and solve the problem.

The critical understanding of the different narratives associated with any issue or conflict is fundamental and necessary. Depending on the individual's community, one party or an individual may have a different narrative of the same event in a conflict. In a conflict, one side's narrative is not necessarily identical to the narrative of the other side. Often, it is designed to support specific positions and views that, once endorsed by a critical mass of people, become national narratives (Dajani et al., 2013). This article also aims to analyse the differences in opinions of people inside and outside the region.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper makes use of two analysis theories. The first part employs the theory of S. Alekseev to explain the origin of conflict from various perspectives, such as ethno-cultural, ethno-territorial, ethno-economic and many more, which tends to analyse a conflict from such diverse perspectives. The second part uses the framing analysis of William A Gamson and Andre Modigliani to analyse the different sections of news framing, breaking down the news into certain sections like metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images.

## RESEARCH PROBLEM

There are limitations to this research paper. First, a study of this conflict's different narratives and retelling might not be applicable and accepted by either of the groups. It could be one of the other narratives associated with the conflict. Second, the author does not have access to official archives of historical data that could explain the origin of the discussed tribes, which limited the research. Third, the article also uses statistical data that describes how much the conflict has escalated, which is not per official records but is based on only on approximation. Moreover, the existing literature does not have solid statistics for the same, which is accepted by all.

## OBJECTIVE

- a. The primary objective of this research is to decode the historical context of why the violence started in the first place. This objective seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the conflict's origins and is relevant to studying ethnic conflicts and media narratives.
- b. To retell the different narratives that are associated with the conflict, which includes both regional and national.
- c. To analyse the different factors that led to the conflict, including land disputes, narco-terrorism, and Myanmar's civil war, which contributed to the conflict.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### a. **ETHNIC CONFLICT IN INDIA: A Case Study of the Kukis and the Nagas in Manipur by Nehginpao Kipgen.**

The Indian Journal of Political Science, Vol. 72, No. 4 (OCT - DEC., 2011), pp. 1043-1060 (18 pages)  
The article discusses the 1992 ethnic conflict that emerged between the Kuki and Naga communities, which resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives, the destruction of hundreds of houses and the displacement of thousands of people (Kipgen, 2011). The primary purpose of this article is to discuss the origin of the Kuki-Zo community, explaining the term 'Kuki'. The article also describes the cause of the conflict. He argues that people who share the same ethnic origin can either subside or escalate tensions between different ethnic groups (Kipgen, 2011). He also blames the action of the government for failing to understand the distribution of ethnic identity as they only mentioned umbrella terms like Kuki Naga in the Indian Constitution of Scheduled Tribes order, 1951.

### b. **The Politics of Identifying with and Distancing from Kuki Identity in Manipur by Vibha Arora, Ngamjahao Kipgen**

Sociological Bulletin, Vol. 61, No. 3 (September – December 2012), pp. 429-449 (21 pages)

This article discusses the causes and manifestations of transformations in ethnic identity and tribal affiliations, as well as the marriage and the divorces that reconstruct Kuki identity in contemporary Manipur

(Arora & Kipgen, 2012). It also discusses the population of Manipur using different sources, including a combination of historical linguistics, racial similarity, and some archaeological evidence. He rightly ends the research paper by arguing that “The masses live in a 'metaphorically opiate state' and state of terrorism while the state is perpetually engaged in countering militancy. Thus, ethnicity is the opium deflecting both attention and resources from human development in Manipur” (Arora & Kipgen, 2012).

**c. Patterns of Ethnic Conflict in the North East: A Study on Manipur by Bhagat Oinam**

Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 38, No. 21( May 24-30,2003), pp. 2031-2037 (7 pages)

This article demonstrates that the Naga- Kuki conflict and later the Kuki- Paite conflict demonstrates identity conflict and claims that the conflict is not only brought about by the questions of land, immigration and settlement but also by the overweening fear of loss of identity (Oinam et al., 2003). He further asserts, "The logic behind targeting manipur as the laboratory of the experiment lies in seeing the state as ‘miniature Indian state’” (Oinam et al., 2003).

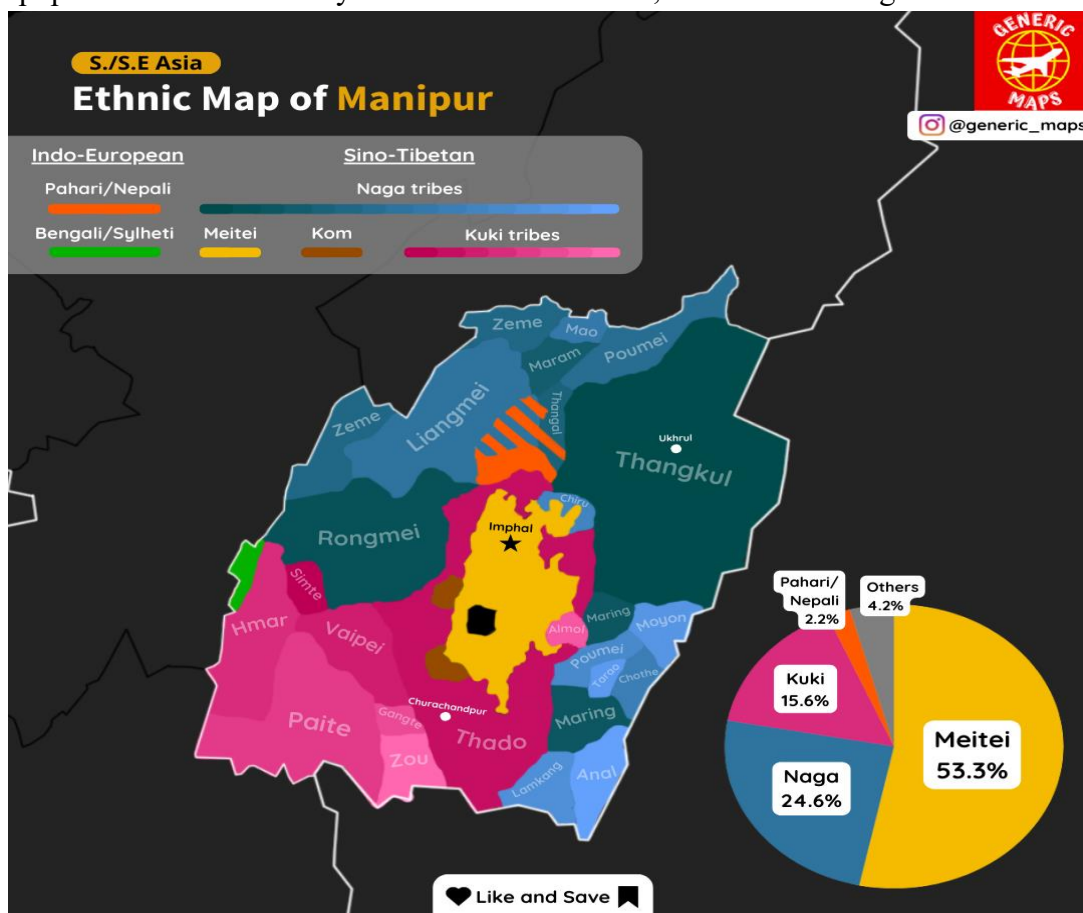
**d. India: Understanding the Hills-Valley Divide and Meitei-Kuki Conflict in Manipur by N. Pautunthang**

Conflict Studies Quarterly, 2024, Issue 48, p72

This Article proposes the notion of the hill-valley divide in Manipur and its consequences on ethnic conflict. This paper might be one of the first articles written at length about the ongoing issue in Manipur.

**ARE KUKI A PART OF MANIPUR HISTORICALLY?**

Manipur’s population can be broadly divided into the Meitei, Kuki and the Nagas.



**Figure 1: Map of Manipur based on ethnic division**  
**Source: Generic Map on Instagram**

Meitei people today constitute 53% of the total state population and are Tibeto-Burman Mongoloid with Australoid, Aryan and Thai admixture and still blended with some Negrito and Dravidian elements (MAS-TEC Admin, 2024). Out of all the theories provided, the Aryan origin was the most vehemently rejected by the opponents as the theory resulted from the people's adoption of Hinduism during the 18th century A.D. The meaning of the term 'meitei' can be very subjective. T.C Hodson, the social anthropologist, decided it was derived from mixing two words: 'mei' means man or people and 'tei' means separate: meitei translated into separate people (Kamei, 2015, p17). Another Indigenous explanation would translate 'meitei' into 'made after God's shadow'.

The Kukis have claimed that they came from the Khongsai village in Burma. They are mainly divided into the old Kukis and the new Kukis, as their movement inside Manipur was done intermittently. It seems like they have a history of settling in an unauthorised manner as their movement was recorded starting from the extreme South Asian region, i.e. Malay Peninsula (*RK Rajendra Manipur after the Coming of Kukis by Salam Rupachandra*, 2022). It is to be noted that their origin is uncertain.

### **WHY DID THE CONFLICT EMERGE IN THE FIRST PLACE?**

According to the spheres of manifestation, S. Alekseev identified the following ethnic conflicts: ethno-territorial, ethno-economic (monopoly of various types of economic action, natural resources, etc.), ethno-social (social stratification and status of ethnos), ethno-political (claims to self-determination and secession); ethnocultural (monopolisation of cultural activity and the imposition of language, culture, traditions of one ethnos to representatives of other ethnic groups); ethnoreligious (agitation of religious hostility, prevent from the performance of religious ceremony by believers of other religions, a ban on the construction of house of worship); ethno-demographic and ethno-migration (change in the ratio of the number of Indigenous people and migrants); mass psychological (hostility and cognitive dissonance) [Luchsheva, 2015]. If you ask about the type of conflict Manipur is undergoing, I would say all of the above. Explaining a conflict between two communities cannot be limited to one event or instance. It takes a series of events for a conflict to emerge between two entities. Now, we will break down the different and diverse aspects of the conflict:

#### **i. Ethno-territorial**

Geographically, Manipur can be broadly divided into the plains and the valleys. The distribution is done so that the plains dominate but are less in population and the way otherwise for the valleys. The valleys cover 90% of its geographic area and 10% of its plains. The thing noted here is that 53% of the population resides in that 10% of the area. Half of the valley areas are not residable in any way. This topographic and territorial division also leads to a disparity between the people. Moreover, corporate houses' interest in the vast reserves of minerals and resources in the valley areas leads to a very close nexus between the state and the corporation (Mamo, 2023).

#### **ii. Ethno-economic**

Ethnoeconomics includes all the monopolies of various types of economic action, natural resources, etc., limited to one ethnic group, often leading to ill hatred towards the dominant one. The later part discusses how one group control everything and usually excludes the other.

#### **iii. Ethno- social**

Ethnosocial can be defined as social stratification, which is a system that divides society into groups based on socioeconomic factors such as wealth, race and education (Conerly et al., 2017) and the status of ethnos. It is absurd to know that the Kukis have been involved in an armed conflict with another ethnic group over

the last decades to protect their identity, which they scare is dwindling. However, the point of social stratification does exist. Historically, the British colonial government planted the seed of division between the plains and the valley people with the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874. The British used to sign a social contract, known as the Posa system, with the tribal people, giving them security and food in return for administrating over them. The areas they could not manage were declared ‘excluded areas’ or ‘non-regulated areas’ (Mamo,2023).

The struggle of Indigenous people for their identity and their rights against post-colonial oppression and exploitation has been very vocal through the years. Various provisions in the constitution of India safeguard these rights. The fifth schedule of the constitution says that the state says that state governments must frame laws to “prohibit or restrict the transfer of land by or among members of the Scheduled Tribes” in the Scheduled areas. Moreover, the Sixth Schedule provides for administering tribal areas in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram (Mamo,2023). This is regarded as one of the root causes of how the conflict started in the first place. Tribal people, especially Kukis, feared that granting Schedule tribe status to the meitei people might lead to the loss of job opportunities and any other benefits that come with it. So, all this time, it was a conflict of struggle for identity.

**iv. Ethno- political**

Manipur has a unicameral legislature comprising 60 members. As per the formation of the 12th Manipur Legislature Assembly on March 10, 2022, the division is as follows:

<b>S. No</b>	<b>Political Party</b>	<b>Year 2022</b>
1.	Bharatiya Janata Party	32
2.	National People’s Party	07
3.	Janata Dal United	06
4.	Indian National Congress	05
5.	Naga People’s Front	05
6.	Kuki People’s Alliance	02
7.	Independent	03
8.	Lok Jan Shakti Party	00
9.	All India Trinamool Congress	00

**Table 1: 12th Manipur Legislative Assembly division.**

The demarcation of the assembly is done in such a manner that the ratio between the population of each constituency and the number of seats allotted to it is the same throughout the state (Laksmikant ). In short, the Indian constitution ensures that equal representation exists in a state; however, if you look at the case of Manipur, it is far from being equally represented. The minority tribals comprise 40 per cent of the

state’s population and have only 19 seats in the State Legislative Assembly, indicating that their representation is not proportional to their population size (Telangana Today, 2023).

**v. Ethnoreligious**

As per government data, over 220 churches have been destroyed (though the United Christian Forum claims the destruction of over 500 churches)[5], and about 4,694 other properties have so far been destroyed. The capital, Imphal, has been cleansed of the Kukis, and the second-largest town of Churhandpur has been cleansed of the Meitei. A few remaining Kuki families who were residing in Imphal’s New Lambulane area were forcefully evacuated by central and state forces on the night of 2 September 2023 (*The Manipur Crisis in Numbers: Four Months of Unending Violence*, 2024). The idea of ethnoreligion is brought about by the existence of diversity, which is the essence of the Indian state. However, the imposition of language culture might lead to hostility between two groups. For instance, when the Manipuri (Meitei) language was added to the eighth schedule of the Indian constitution, making it an official language on 20th August 1992, the attempt of the state government to impose the Manipuri language on the tribal people made it yet another cause which deepened the plain-valley divide leading to ethnic clash (Pautunthang, 2024).

**vi. Ethno-migration**

A very disproportionate increase in a state's population might lead to conflict. Tribal people, particularly kukis, have been involved in armed rebellion and were continuously asked for help. So when the British demanded 2000 labour corps to serve in the Indian Labour Corps (ILC) during World War 1 (Prasun Sonwalker, 2017), the Kuki tribe refused and started an armed rebellion against the British. So, the Kukis are not indigenous but were brought into Manipur through these means.

The bitter 19 months of ethnic conflict in Myanmar also lead to the illegal migration of Kukis inside Manipur.

**ROLE OF MEDIA**

This section employs the framing analysis of William Gamson and Modigliani, using a constructive paradigm approach to see media representation in news and articles. Frames, as defined by Gamson, are a central organising idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue (Kuypers, 2009).

In this, we will consider news articles, each from local, national, and international, and we will break down their framing analysis.

**INTERNATIONAL NEWS: AL JAZEERA**

TITLE- *“Outrage in India over video of Manipur women paraded naked, raped”*.

Now, using the framing analysis of Gamson and Modigliani, the analysis and breakdown are as follows:

Frame	Outrage in India over video of Manipur women paraded naked, raped.
Metaphors	The sentence “outrage in India” tends to bring everyone’s attention to the issue by starting with aggravating sentences.
Catch-phrases	In this, the catchphrases would be words like ‘naked’, ‘raped’. Emphasising such words makes the news article emotionally charged and makes people synthesise more

Exemplar	The article makes use of exemplar of how the video of the assault went viral two months later, which created an outrage. They even quoted DY Chandrachud and PM Modi’s remarks on the issue.
Depiction	Sensory details made here were statements like, “My husband was killed by the mob. We pleaded with the police to rescue us,” made by the mother of the survivor
Visual Images	The main image used was an image of women protesting sideways over the video of the women being abused.
Roots	Aljazeera explained the roots of the issue to be a deadly ethnic riot that broke out between the mainly Hindu Meitei and predominantly Christian Kuki-Zo tribes in the remote state in India’s northeast and mentioned its ruling party, BJP.
Appeals to principles	A sub-topic titled, ‘We have been dehumanised’, explains how the incident not only affected the survivor or their family but was a threat to society as a whole.
Consequences	The Supreme Court of India directed the union and state governments to take steps against the videos of women being stripped and paraded in Manipur in a tweet.

Table 2

Table 2 explains that Aljazeera reported on 20th July 2023 through the framing analysis using its different elements of rhetorics.

**NATIONAL NEWS- THE TIMES OF INDIA**

TITLE- *Disturbing viral video sparks outrage as two Manipur women are seen being paraded naked.*

Using the framing analysis, the breakdown is as follows:

Frames	Disturbing viral video sparks outrage as two Manipur women are seen being paraded naked.
Metaphor	A metaphor like ‘disturbing video’ evokes a sense of discomfort and distress. When videos go viral over the internet, they will spark controversies among the people.
Catch-phrases	It uses emotionally charged phrases like ‘heinous atrocities’ to make sure that the audience knows how much of a contentious issues this is.
Exemplar	An example used here would be how the Indigenous Tribal Leader's Forum condemn the issue as evidence of heinous atrocities and infringement on human rights.
Depiction	Here, nuances like ‘mob killed two men’, ‘forcibly stripped’, and ‘victim’s brother also losing his life while trying to protect her’ evoke a sense of sympathy towards the victim and ill hatred towards the perpetrators

Visual images	NA
Roots	The roots of the event would be mob violence, which followed after the burning of a village in Kangpokpi district.
Appeals to principles	The Indigenous tribal leaders forum condemned the issue and appealed to the authorities to bring the perpetrators to justice.
Consequences	NA

The reporting was done in Times of India, analysed using the framing analysis, and reported on July 20th, 2023.

**LOCAL NEWS- THE SANGAI EXPRESS**

TITLE- *“The police left us with the mob: Kuki woman”*

The breakdown is as follows:

Frames	The police left us with the mob: Kuki woman.
Catchphrases	Here, catchphrases like ‘We were given to them (the mob of men) by police’ evoke the feeling that even the police were involved in such crime and tell the audience that even the state is involved in such issues.
Exemplar	This is an example of how using women as an instrument to penetrate violence in a charged environment is unacceptable.
Depiction	Local news provided much more detailed coverage of the incident than international and national news.
Visual images	NA
Roots	The roots of the incident can be traced to how the village of B Phainom Village in Kangpokpi district was burnt down, and the incident occurred afterwards.
Appeals to principles	Appealing to principles was the declaration of the viral video as a gross constitutional violation and infraction of human rights.
Consequences	Consequences would be manipur police making an arrest, N Biren Singh making a statement, and the Supreme Court asking the centre and Manipur government to take immediate action.

**DISCUSSION**

The role of media in today’s world is very impactful. News articles, being the primary source to gain information, play a central role in shaping public and personal opinion (Hamborg,2022). However, the

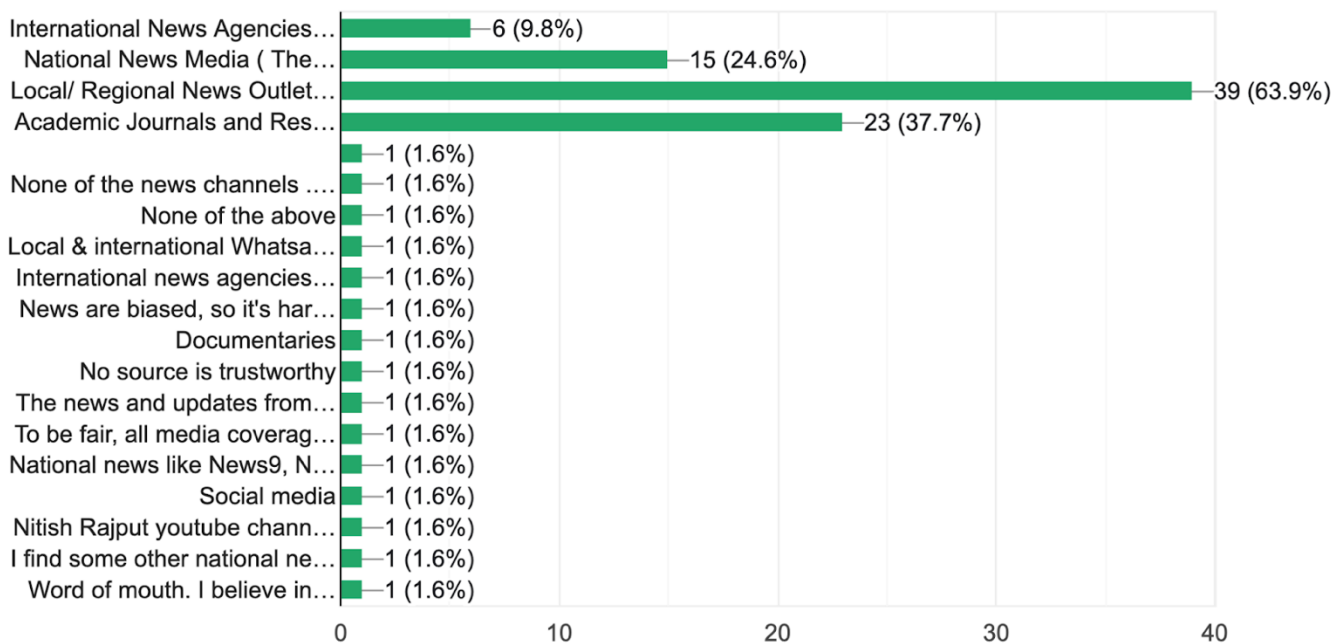


point to be noted here is how media, when covering certain events, can exhibit an internal bias, referred to as media bias (Hamburg,2022).

If you analyse and closely see the coverage of news articles from three different levels, local news gives a very detailed, precise and often attacks the state for the event. It is emotionally charged and shows the discontentment of local people. The effect of this would be swaying people’s opinions as they are subjected to what they see or hear from these local news. As a matter of this research, a survey was conducted, and a questionnaire based on what people think about the coverage was asked. Moreover, the most trusted source of information they get is through local news.

### What is the most trusted source of information regarding updates on the issue?

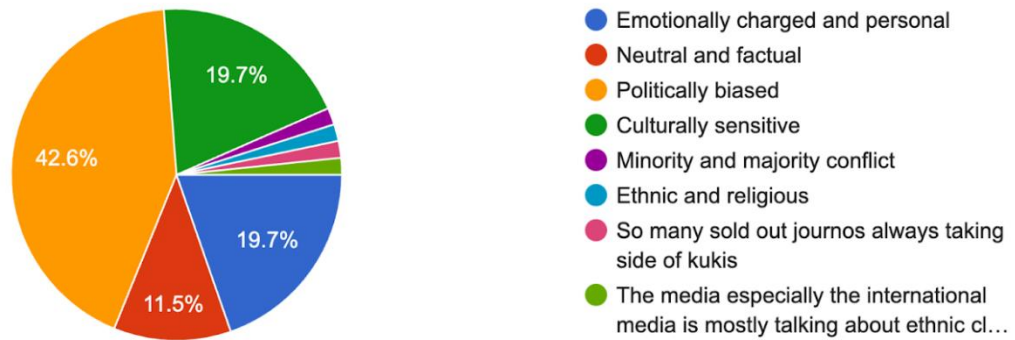
61 responses



At the local level, people believe that the whole blame of this issue is due to political tension and, as Augustine said, that the state benefits from such issues; they are also of the same belief that the state has something to do with the unending crisis. Moreover, as rhetoric is used in media framing, most people believe that the conflict is not ending because of political tension.

In your opinion, what kind of rhetoric does the media use to describe the conflict?

61 responses



**Fig- pie chart of responses.**

The international and national news covered a very bleak coverage of the event that happened to make people guess what happened. The portrayal of ethnic conflict in Manipur reveals critical insights into how media influences public understanding and policy responses. Local media often highlight specific grievances of the Meitei or Kuki-Zo communities, focusing on issues like land rights, cultural identity, and resource allocation. This micro-level reporting resonates with the sentiments of the local population but can unintentionally deepen divides by perpetuating exclusive narratives.

In contrast, national media outlets frame the conflict within the larger context of Indian federalism, governance challenges, and law and order. Such framing may dilute the localized nuances but broaden the issue to a national audience, potentially eliciting state intervention. However, oversimplifying complex ethnic dynamics often reduces the conflict to binary narratives, sidelining the root causes.

International media, driven by a global audience, frequently adopt a human rights-centric approach. While this perspective highlights critical humanitarian concerns, it risks alienating the local stakeholders by appearing detached from the socio-political realities of the region. The divergent approaches by these media platforms underscore the complexity of narrative formation and its implications on conflict resolution.

Moreover, the role of social media as an alternative information source cannot be ignored. It is both an amplifier of existing tensions and a platform for marginalized voices. However, spreading misinformation and sensationalism on these platforms further complicates the discourse, often leading to polarization and mistrust.

The discussion highlights the pressing need for media ethics and balanced reporting in conflict zones. A comprehensive and empathetic approach, which integrates local realities with broader policy implications, is essential for fostering understanding and facilitating resolution.

## CONCLUSION

The ethnic conflict in Manipur is a multifaceted issue rooted in historical, cultural, and socio-political complexities. The clash between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities reflects deeper ethno-territorial, economic, and demographic disparities exacerbated by historical grievances and inadequate conflict resolution mechanisms. This study highlights the importance of understanding the divergent narratives

constructed by various media outlets—local, national, and international—and their influence on public perception.

Media framing is critical in shaping narratives and, consequently, the discourse surrounding such conflicts. While local media often focus on regional grievances, national and international platforms may prioritize broader themes like human rights and state interventions. This disparity underscores the need for nuanced reporting that respects the perspectives of all stakeholders while promoting conflict resolution.

Ultimately, the Manipur conflict calls for a comprehensive approach that addresses underlying grievances, ensures equitable resource distribution, and fosters community dialogue. It also emphasizes the responsibility of media in creating balanced narratives that can pave the way for peace and reconciliation. As this paper demonstrates, decoding the battle of narratives is essential to understanding and addressing the root causes of ethnic strife in Manipur and beyond.

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