

# Understanding Conflict through the Eyes of Youth: Reflections on Ethnic Tensions in Manipur

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines how the ongoing ethnic conflict in Manipur has reshaped the educational trajectories, psychosocial well-being, social relationships and peace perspectives of displaced youth from the Meitei and Kuki communities. The research was conducted in the conflict-affected districts of Thoubal, Imphal West, Churachandpur and Kangpokpi, where large-scale displacement has occurred. Adopting a qualitative design, the study draws on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with displaced youth stakeholders, including research scholars, college teachers and student leaders, selected through purposive sampling to ensure direct experiential knowledge of violence and displacement. All participants were residing in relief or temporary accommodations during data collection. Thematic analysis revealed pervasive psychological distress marked by fear, anxiety and disrupted aspirations. Displacement emerged as a key factor linking conflict to educational discontinuity and unemployment, forcing youth to migrate, suspend studies or bear significant economic and emotional burdens. While participants demonstrated resilience through education, faith-based practices and community solidarity, such resilience often coexisted with fragile coping and inter-community mistrust. Peace was largely understood as the absence of violence rather than reconciliation. The study concludes that sustainable peace in Manipur requires trauma-informed, youth-centred and relational approaches that promote psychosocial healing and inclusive participation

## INTRODUCTION

The ongoing conflict in Manipur is deeply rooted in historical ethnic divisions and has been compounded by political strategies that manipulate group identities and competition for resources. The state's primary communities, Meitei, Kuki, and Naga, have a long history of rivalry, often shaped by colonial-era boundaries, post-independence political restructuring, and claims to land and autonomy (Leth, 2023). Recent years have seen these tensions

re-escalate due to perceived inequalities in access to state resources and governance, leading to repeated cycles of conflict and population displacement. Understanding Manipur's current crisis necessitates a comprehensive examination of the intersection of historical context, ethnic identity politics, and contemporary governance challenges (International Crisis Group, 2025). Historical ethnic divisions and political strategies have profoundly contributed to the ongoing conflict in Manipur, shaping a complex and volatile socio-political landscape. Manipur was an independent princely state that came under British rule in 1891 and regained independence in 1947. In

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1949, Maharaja Bodhchandra signed a Treaty of Accession, merging Manipur into India, a move considered by many to have been made under duress. This treaty sowed the seed of dissatisfaction among some sections. The United National Liberation Front (UNLF) was formed in 1964, aiming for an independent, socialist republic in Manipur and the liberation of the entire Indo-Burma region from “colonial occupation” (Ahanthem, 2014). Other Meitei groups, such as the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and People’s Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), also emerged with similar goals, often viewing the Indian state as an “external agent” or “colonial power” (Bhaumik, 2007). Manipur is a multi-ethnic state primarily inhabited by three main groups: the Meiteis (majority in the Imphal Valley), the Nagas (inhabiting the northern hills), and the Kukis (residing in the southern hills). The geographical division between the fertile valley (10% of the land, predominantly Meitei) and the mountainous hills (90% of the land, inhabited by various tribal communities including Nagas and Kukis) has historically led to economic disparities and complicated inter-ethnic relations (Arora and Kipgen, 2012). Meiteis are legally restricted from settling in tribal hill areas, while tribal people can reside and purchase land anywhere in Manipur. This land law regime is a source of contention (Hameed and D’Rozario, 2024). The region has seen a proliferation of insurgent groups, each asserting its ethnic identity and demanding various forms of autonomy, from separate states to complete secession (Bhaumik, 2007). The National Socialist Council of Nagaland—Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM) has a strong base in four of Manipur’s five hill districts (Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong, Chandel). Their primary demand is for “Greater Nagaland” (Nagalim), which aims to integrate all Naga-inhabited areas, including major chunks of Manipur’s hill districts, with the neighbouring Nagaland state (Ahanthem, 2014). Kuki outfits like Kuki National Army (KNA) and the Kuki National Front (KNF) have been struggling for a separate “Kukiland” within the Indian Union since the late 1980s. They also demand the upgrading of the Sadar Hills Autonomous District Council into a full-fledged district, a long-standing grievance (Kipgen, 2011). Meitei groups like UNLF, PLA,

PREPAK, KCP, and KYKL aim to restore Manipur’s pre-merger sovereign status and protect its territorial integrity.

Ethnic conglomerates such as the Nagas and Kukis, though internally diverse and territorially dispersed, have mobilized collective identities that threatened the territorial integrity of Manipur. The instrumental use of ethnicity by elites has transformed cultural distinctions into mechanisms of political mobilization, leading to the proliferation of overlapping and contradictory territorial ambitions. The British colonial categorization of tribes into broad ethnic blocs laid the foundation for current inter-community rivalries, where each group strives to expand its boundaries and project others as outsiders or threats. Internal leadership struggles, land competition, and the politics of recognition perpetuate cycles of violence rather than resolution. Territorial autonomy alone cannot mitigate ethnic conflict in Manipur, as it fails to account for internal heterogeneity and the dynamic processes of identity negotiation within these conglomerate groups. Thus, ethnic nationalism in Northeast India is an ongoing process of elite-driven construction that reproduces fragmentation rather than fostering integration (Meetei, 2016).

The construction and assertion of exclusive ethnic identities (e.g., Naga, Kuki, Meitei) are central to the conflict, often leading to mutual opposition and a struggle for territorial and political power. Manipur’s ongoing conflict is rooted in a complex interplay of historical grievances from its accession to India, deeply entrenched ethnic and geographic divisions, and the emergence of multiple insurgent groups with competing demands. These factors are intensified by partisan state policies, economic disparities, and the instrumentalization of ethnic identities for political gain, making the situation incredibly challenging. The protracted conflict in colonial and postcolonial policies laid the groundwork for intercommunal rivalry by entrenching ethnic boundaries and enabling elite-driven mobilization, transforming fluid social structures into sites of contestation. As contemporary developments show, questions of land, autonomy, and resource distribution remain at the heart of the conflict, intensified by the proliferation of insurgent

groups and contested demands for recognition and statehood. While identity-based mobilization has helped groups assert their rights, it also perpetuates fragmentation and recurring cycles of violence. The ongoing unrest underscores the urgent need for inclusive, locally grounded approaches that address not only territorial and political grievances but also the complex processes of identity negotiation and inter-group coexistence. Sustainable peace in Manipur will depend on forging new frameworks for community engagement, participatory governance, and equitable resource sharing that move beyond divisive historical legacies and foster genuine reconciliation.

## MATERIALS & METHODS

The study employed a qualitative research design using in-depth interviews with respondents drawn from the two primary communities involved in the ongoing conflict in Manipur. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure that participants had direct experiential knowledge of the violence and displacement, and were thus positioned to reflect critically on ethnic tensions and rights infringements. All respondents were youths who had been displaced from their original places of residence and were residing in relief or temporary accommodation at the time of data collection. Respondents belonged to the both Meitei and Kuki community from Thoubal, Imphal West district, Churachandpur and Kangpokpi district, allowing for a balanced representation of perspectives across the major conflicting groups. The participants were further selected based on their roles as stakeholders and academicians (such as research scholars, college teachers, and student leaders), as they combined lived experience of the conflict with critical engagement in public and academic discourse. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews that encouraged respondents to narrate their experiences of displacement, perceptions of ethnic tensions, and understandings of rights infringements in their everyday lives. Interviews were conducted in settings that ensured privacy and safety, with prior informed consent and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. Each interview was audio-recorded (with permission),

transcribed verbatim, and thematically analysed to identify recurrent patterns and divergences in youth narratives across the two communities.

Given the heightened vulnerability of conflict-affected youth, particular attention was paid to ethical considerations. The researcher remained reflexive about positionality and potential power imbalances, and efforts were made to avoid reproducing communal stereotypes by foregrounding the complexity and heterogeneity of youth voices from both Meitei and Kuki communities.

### *The Cycle of Conflict, Displacement, and Unemployment among Manipur's Youth*

Displacement is often a product of complex and prolonged conflicts rooted in historical grievances, socio-political marginalization, land disputes, and state actions. In Manipur, India, the current displacement crisis largely stems from ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki Zo communities, which erupted on May 3, 2023. By May 2023, more than 60,000 people were displaced due to the conflict in Manipur, with 30,000-45,000 displaced persons by mid-May 2023. By November 2024, at least 258 people had been killed, over 1,000 injured, and 4,786 houses burned. The conflict led to *a de facto* ethnic partition, with Kuki-Zo communities driven out of the valley and Meitei communities went tribal-dominated hill areas, resulting in ethnic enclaves. Displaced populations have sought shelter in relief camps within Manipur and in neighbouring states like Mizoram, Assam, Meghalaya, and Nagaland, and some even crossed into Myanmar (People's Union for Civil Liberties, 2025, p. 15). The most crucial factor compelling students to leave Manipur for their studies is the law and order situation, characterized by frequent violence and blockades. Social conflicts and unrest lead to indefinite closures of educational institutions, boycotts of regular classes, and disruptions of normal academic routines. During such unstable periods, students are unwilling to attend school due to fear, a lack of transportation, as roads are blocked, and public vehicles cease service. Some students even reported feeling insecure due to the unpredictable visits of protestors who demand students join rallies, sometimes leading to casualties or destruction of school properties.

This state of fear and insecurity makes it unsafe to attend schools (Singha, 2013). While less significant than conflict, the lack of educational infrastructure and the perceived low quality of higher education in Manipur are also contributing factors. Despite the state's challenges, the youths show great enthusiasm for acquiring better and higher education, often leading them to seek opportunities outside the state where they feel they can get better exposure.

Insurgency in Manipur is a complicated and sensitive topic. Its propagation and sustenance cannot be determined by a single factor. But unemployment and injustice are couple of important ones. The core problem stems from the scarcity of government jobs and the absence of a substantial industrial base or private enterprises. Manipur's economy is marked by low capital formation, inadequate infrastructural facilities, geographical isolation, and communication bottlenecks, which hinder industrialization (Sharma, 2016). The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement underscore the duty of states to provide security and aid to internally displaced persons (IDPs) within their jurisdiction. This includes ensuring secure access to essential food, drinkable water, basic shelter, appropriate clothing, and necessary medical services and sanitation. These principles also highlight the importance of special protection, assistance, and treatment for vulnerable groups such as children, unaccompanied minors, expectant mothers, mothers with young children, female heads of household, persons with disabilities, and the elderly. In Manipur, reports suggest that the government's efforts fall short of these requirements for IDPs in relief camps. There is a recognized need for a comprehensive policy for IDPs in India that aligns with these guiding principles. The United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 32/13 (2016) unequivocally condemns measures that intentionally prevent or disrupt online information in violation of international human rights law. Internet shutdowns in Manipur have been criticized for infringing upon fundamental rights, such as freedom of information, expression, and communication, which are protected under international human rights law. UN experts raised alarms in September 2023 about severe human rights violations in Manipur, including sexual violence, extrajudicial killings,

home destruction, forced displacement, torture, and ill-treatment. They criticized the "inadequate enforcement" to stem violence and hate speech, urging the government to enhance relief efforts and ensure accountability, including for public officials. Attacks on healthcare facilities and personnel are also noted as contravening international humanitarian and human rights law, including Common Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, to which India is a signatory. Deliberate attacks on religious sites by armed groups also constitute serious violations of international humanitarian law (Mohapatra and Das, 2024).

Across respondents, the May 2023 violence appears as a structural rupture that collapses everyday routines and closes down normal pathways to education and work. *Respondent 1* describes how the conflict made youth into taking "frontline" volunteer duty on a rotational basis, making it "compulsory to move out" for duty despite reluctance, with Monday–Thursday duty meaning missed classes and lost wages for those in private employment. This is true for the youths across both the ethnic groups. This militarisation of youth identities converts time, energy, and social capital that might have been invested in study or work into conflict labour, embedding them deeper in a war economy rather than a developmental one. Displacement emerges as the key mechanism through which conflict translates into structural unemployment among Manipur's youth. *Respondent 3* describes displaced youths whose houses were burned and who now live in congested relief camps, finding it impossible to rebuild stable livelihoods as they struggle with mental distress and uncertainty about where to settle. These conditions make sustained education or skill acquisition extremely difficult, as basic survival and emotional coping take precedence. Educational infrastructures themselves are dislocated along ethnic lines. *Respondent 1* notes that 'in a government school, most science and maths teachers, as well as the Principal, were Meitei and could no longer come to Kuki areas after the conflict, leading to irregular classes, delayed admit cards, and marksheets stuck in Imphal.' His own experience of extracting documents from Imphal through third-party brokers at high cost reveals how

conflict territorialises bureaucratic processes and effectively “taxes” access to credentials, making educational progression contingent on resources and networks that many displaced youth lack.

Meanwhile, colleges in safer zones are overwhelmed by an influx of IDP students. *Respondent 2* reports that student numbers jumped from around 3,000 to 5,000, with over 2,000 internally displaced, pushing teacher–student ratios far beyond NEP guidelines and preventing staff from giving enough attention to the IDP students. This overcrowding degrades educational quality, which in turn undermines graduates’ competitiveness in already scarce job markets. *Respondent 4’s* observation that displaced students struggle to adjust in new schools, facing long-term impacts on their studies, further demonstrates how displacement transforms schooling into a fragile, discontinuous process. The interviews show that disruption does not end with degree acquisition; spatial segregation and infrastructural breakdown severely constrain youth transitions from education to employment.

The findings indicate that conflict-induced displacement is a central rupture in the lives of young people. Respondents consistently observed that youth who have been displaced experience a heightened sense of fear, insecurity, and loss compared to those who remain in relatively stable areas. One mental health professional noted that displaced youth live with *“constant fear, sadness, and uncertainty,”* particularly due to *“restricted movement and the tension between the communities.”* Displacement is not described merely as a change of physical location but as a profound psychosocial break, where familiar routines, peer networks, and educational pathways are abruptly severed. Many young people, especially students and early-career youth, were forced to abandon studies or employment opportunities, leaving them in prolonged states of waiting and dependency within relief camps or temporary shelters.

Unemployment emerges as both a consequence and a catalyst within this cycle. The interviews suggest that the loss of educational continuity and livelihood opportunities has resulted in widespread frustration

and hopelessness among youth. Professionals working closely with affected populations shared that young people repeatedly express anxiety about their future, asking whether *“their education still has any value”* and whether *“any stable job is possible after everything they have lost.”* One respondent reflected that many adolescents and young adults are *“constantly worried about their careers, the loss of their belongings, and whether anything can ever be recovered.”* This prolonged economic uncertainty intensifies emotional distress, often manifesting as withdrawal, irritability, or aggression, which further complicates their reintegration into society.

Displacement and unemployment also reshape young people’s sense of dignity and agency. Several interviewees highlighted that displaced youth feel unseen and misunderstood by non-displaced peers. As one respondent stated, *“non-displaced youth will never know how the displaced youth struggles,”* pointing to a growing emotional and experiential gap between these groups. This perceived lack of empathy reinforces feelings of isolation and resentment, making it difficult for youth to rebuild trust across communities. Unemployment, in this context, is not only about income loss but about the erosion of purpose and self-worth, particularly in a society where youthhood is closely linked to productivity and contribution.

The analysis further shows that this cycle sustains the conflict psychologically. Without access to education, employment, or safe spaces for expression, young people remain trapped in environments where trauma is continuously relived rather than processed. Mental health practitioners observed that displaced youth exhibit higher levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and hypervigilance than their non-displaced counterparts, as they have often been *“directly exposed to violence, loss, and repeated displacement.”* These unresolved psychological wounds reduce young people’s capacity to imagine long-term peace or stability, thereby normalizing uncertainty and crisis as part of everyday life.

At the same time, the interviews reveal that the absence of meaningful employment and engagement increases the risk of prolonged dependency and

frustration, which can indirectly feed into cycles of anger and mistrust. Youth who feel abandoned by institutions and policy mechanisms may disengage from constructive peace processes, perceiving them as disconnected from their lived realities. As one respondent emphasized, without targeted interventions, young people remain “*stuck between trauma and unemployment, with no clear pathway forward.*” Overall, the findings illustrate that conflict, displacement, and unemployment among Manipur’s youths are not isolated experiences but interconnected processes that reinforce one another. The cycle undermines psychosocial well-being, fractures social cohesion, and places youth in a prolonged state of liminality, neither able to return to their past nor confidently move toward a stable future. Breaking this cycle, as implied by the interviews, requires addressing not only immediate humanitarian needs but also long-term educational, livelihood, and psychosocial support systems that restore agency, dignity, and hope among young people.

The interplay between conflict, displacement, and unemployment has created a persistent cycle of adversity for Manipur’s youth, fundamentally shaping their opportunities and aspirations. The mass displacement triggered by ethnic violence has fractured families, communities, and social networks, while persistent insecurity and blockades have undermined educational access and driven many students out of the state in search of safety and better prospects. Deep-rooted economic challenges such as limited industrial development, pervasive unemployment, and inadequate vocational training compound the effects of violence, leaving even educated youth vulnerable to disillusionment and, in some cases, militancy. Yet, despite these formidable obstacles, the resilience and determination of Manipur’s youth remain apparent, evident in their continued pursuit of education and community engagement amidst instability. Realizing the potential of this generation will require comprehensive policy responses that address not only immediate humanitarian needs but also the underlying structural drivers of marginalization, ensuring access to quality education, employment, and psychosocial support to foster recovery, reconciliation, and long-term stability.

### *Psychological Distress in the Conflict Zones of Manipur*

Psychological distress in adolescents, particularly in conflict zones, arises from a complex interplay of various factors. The displacement caused by violent ethnic conflict, such as that between the Meitei and Kuki communities in Manipur, significantly disrupts the social and emotional environments that support stability for adolescents. Experiencing and witnessing violence, destruction of property, separation from loved ones, and forced relocation are major stressors. These traumatic events hinder healthy emotional processing and increase the risk of mental health disorders. Beyond the immediate trauma, continuous life stressors can worsen emotional well-being over time, sometimes even more than the original traumatic experience. These include: Uncertainty and Instability about the future, loss of control over their lives, and living in unsafe and precarious conditions in relief camps, due to disrupted peer groups, family routines, and social networks. Mental health remains a highly stigmatized topic in many traditional societies, including Northeast India. This discourages adolescents from seeking help, leading to suppression of feelings, isolation, and worsening symptoms (Mayanglambam and Gautam, 2025). In Manipur, studies have highlighted a significant burden of mental health issues among adolescents. A cross-sectional study among 3200 school children in two districts of Manipur (Imphal-East and Bishnupur) found that 50.7% exhibited severe anxiety, and 33.7% showed signs of moderate depression. The study also reported that 46.2% had moderate to severe depression, 87.5% had moderate to severe anxiety, and 19.2% had moderate to severe stress (Konjengbam *et al.*, 2023). Many youths, especially in Manipur, are susceptible to being manipulated by communal and religious despots, leading to their involvement in anti-social activities, terror, and violence. This vulnerability is often attributed to erratic social structures, political misgivings, and resulting feelings of frustration and arrogance. Young people are frequently marginalized from community decision-making processes, which lead to a deficit in youth-responsive policies and an underutilization of their creativity and vision within

society. This exclusion is particularly pronounced for young women and other marginalized groups. Conflict and forced displacement have severe psychological impacts on adolescents, leading to heightened anxiety, psychological distress, and trauma symptoms. Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage, making these disruptions particularly damaging to emotional processing. There is a notable gap in research and mental health infrastructure tailored for adolescents in conflict-affected regions like Manipur, and social stigma often deters them from seeking necessary support (Devi, 2019).

Respondents consistently describe intense emotional suffering, fear, anxiety, hopelessness, and persistent images of violence among adolescents and young people. Respondent 3 states that the conflict has “*disturbed the minds of the youth to a huge extent,*” and made them choose guns instead of books. Respondent speaks of long-term fear and anxiety even in “older persons,” and infers that youth must experience equal or greater distress. Respondent 4 graphically describes bodies being dismembered, dragged “*like logs and woods,*” and women and children burned inside vehicles, arguing that these images deeply affect young minds and produce a sense that “*humans are not treated as humans,*” a dehumanisation that both traumatizes and brutalises adolescents. Respondent 1 highlights the trauma of those who “*ran for their lives,*” narrating the case of an officer whose house was burned and who was assaulted while his family fled; *the officer later reported sleeplessness, intrusive memories, and suicidal thoughts,* which Respondent 1 links to the broader emotional climate among youth exposed to similar events. Psychological distress is not limited to classic PTSD-like symptoms; respondents also mention cognitive and behavioural changes. Respondent 2 and Respondent 3 both describe becoming unusually forgetful and mentally “foggy,” attributing this to trauma rather than age, and worry that students and young teachers share similar concentration difficulties.

A dominant sub-theme emerging from the interviews is the presence of persistent fear and hypervigilance among youth living in conflict-

affected and displaced settings. Respondents consistently described young people as being mentally alert at all times, even in spaces that are meant to be safe. This constant anticipation of danger reflects how violence has become embedded in everyday consciousness. One mental health professional noted, “*The youth are always on edge; even small sounds make them anxious because they are reminded of the violence they have already seen.*” Another respondent observed that many young people report difficulty sleeping, explaining that “*they keep replaying what happened in their minds and feel unsafe even at night.*” Unresolved trauma, particularly related to loss of life, homes, and community, forms a central dimension of psychological distress. The interviews reveal that youth often suppress grief due to the absence of spaces where emotional expression feels safe or socially acceptable. One practitioner reflected, “*Many of them have seen death closely, but they don’t talk about it. They carry that grief silently.*” Another respondent shared that youth “*have not had the time or space to mourn properly because survival becomes the priority.*” This silence around grief deepens trauma and leaves emotional wounds largely unaddressed. Another respondent stated that youth often express feelings of stagnation, saying, “*They feel stuck, as if their life is not moving forward anymore.*” This loss of future orientation contributes significantly to emotional exhaustion and depressive tendencies. Psychological distress is further intensified by social withdrawal and emotional isolation. The interviews suggest that youth often distance themselves from peers due to fear of misunderstanding, ethnic tensions, or emotional fatigue. As one respondent explained, “*They don’t share their feelings because they think no one outside their situation will understand them.*” Another interviewee noted, “*Many young people prefer to stay quiet and alone rather than explain their pain again and again.*” This withdrawal reduces opportunities for collective healing and peer support.

The data reveal gendered patterns in the expression of psychological distress. Respondents noted that young men often suppress emotional vulnerability, expressing distress through anger or

silence, while young women experience heightened fear and emotional burden, especially in displacement settings. One practitioner stated, *"Boys rarely talk about fear or sadness; they show it through frustration or aggression."* In contrast, another respondent shared that *"girls speak more about fear, insecurity, and emotional pressure, particularly about safety and family responsibilities."* These gendered expressions shape how distress is recognized and addressed. A critical sub-theme emerging from the interviews is the normalization of distress among youth. Prolonged exposure to conflict has led young people to perceive anxiety, fear, and sadness as ordinary aspects of life. One mental health professional warned, *"They think feeling anxious and scared all the time is normal now, so they don't seek help."* Another respondent echoed this concern, stating, *"Distress has become a routine experience for them, not something they identify as a problem."* This normalization poses a significant barrier to early psychosocial intervention.

Distress is not only individual but collective and political, it is shaped by communal narratives, institutional betrayal, and contested memories of victimhood. Adolescents internalise stories of abandonment by the state and betrayal by former friends from the other community, which fuels both mistrust and a sense of moral license for hatred or aggression. Without intentional counter-narratives that validate their pain while opening space for empathy and critical reflection, these psychological patterns risk solidifying into an entrenched "wounded generation" that reproduces conflict attitudes into adulthood. In this sense, addressing psychological distress among adolescents in Manipur is not only a clinical or humanitarian imperative but also a peace-building necessity, as the emotional worlds of today's youth will shape the possibilities of coexistence, justice, and reconciliation in the decades to come.

### *Youth Resilience and Coping Strategies*

Displacement often results in temporary or permanent separation from family members. Interethnic families face severe strain, with physical distance, fractured relationships, and deepening mistrust. Conflict-related displacement and instability disrupt crucial social networks and peer relationships,

which are vital for adolescents' emotional stability and identity formation. Many individuals displaced by violence have lost touch with friends from the opposing community. Conflict and violence destroy unity, foster mistrust, and deepen communal divides, making reconciliation efforts extremely challenging. The segregation of communities, narratives of "othering," and propagation of hate have reinforced emotional and physical distance, making it difficult to rebuild trust (Mayanglambam and Gautam, 2025). The analysis of interview narratives reveals that youth resilience in the context of the Manipur conflict is complex, layered, and deeply shaped by displacement, fear, community structures, and limited institutional support. Rather than reflecting complete psychological recovery, resilience among youth largely manifests as adaptive survival strategies, enabling them to endure prolonged instability while carrying unresolved trauma. Survival-oriented resilience emerged strongly among displaced youth. Respondents described how young people continue their lives under conditions of fear and uncertainty, not because they have healed, but because survival demands it.

Education surfaced as a central coping strategy and symbol of hope. Youth were encouraged to continue studies as resistance against the conflict's destructive impact. As one respondent stressed, *"Let us not let this conflict have a negative impact on the students' studies... without studying, the future is bleak."* Community members often come together in such hour of needs in providing helping hands to those who are affected by the conflict. For youths witnessing such solidarity helps develop a positive sense of cooperation which when properly cultivated could be a template for peaceful co-existence among warring communities. This demonstrates that youth resilience is not solely individual but embedded within communal ethics and mutual aid systems.

Alongside adaptive strategies, maladaptive coping was evident. Substance abuse, aggression, and emotional withdrawal were reported, with one respondent noting, *"If you see the young people in Relief Camp, most of them are drug addicts now. They are not addicted to it before they come to the Relief Camp. But when they come to the Relief Camp,*

*they are so stressed out that they start to indulge in drugs. As some of them lost their homes, some lost their relatives, and the trauma is so strong that they got addicted to drugs. Yes, due to the conflict, the use of drugs and alcohol is increasing.*" This highlights fractured resilience where vulnerability coexists with endurance. A key sub-theme emerging from the interviews is 'emotional endurance', where youth consciously regulate their emotions to continue functioning amid crisis. Respondents noted that many young people suppress fear, anxiety, and sadness to avoid burdening their families. One mental health professional explained, *"They try to stay strong because they feel if they break down, the whole family will fall apart."* Another respondent shared that youth often say, *"We cannot afford to show weakness now,"* reflecting resilience rooted in emotional control rather than emotional expression. Peer relationships play a critical role in helping youth cope with conflict-related trauma. The interviews reveal that young people find comfort and understanding among peers who have undergone similar experiences of violence and displacement. One practitioner observed, *"They feel relieved when they talk to friends who have seen the same things, because no explanation is needed."* Another respondent noted, *"Among themselves, they speak freely, because everyone knows the pain."* These shared spaces foster collective resilience and reduce feelings of isolation. Taking on family responsibilities emerges as both a coping strategy and a form of resilience. Respondents described how many youth, particularly those from displaced households, assume adult roles prematurely. One interviewee stated, *"Many young people have become the backbone of their families after displacement."* Another respondent added that youth often say, *"I have to be strong for my younger siblings."* This responsibility gives youth a sense of purpose, even while increasing emotional pressure.

Faith-based coping is a prominent sub-theme across the interviews. Youth frequently turn to prayer and spiritual practices to manage fear and uncertainty. One respondent shared, *"They say that prayer is the only thing that gives them peace in this situation. When everything feels uncertain, faith becomes their source of hope."* Spirituality provides

emotional comfort and a sense of protection in the absence of external stability. Some youth cope by reframing their suffering as a motivation to help others or contribute to peace. Respondents observed that these youth express empathy and a desire for social change. One interviewee reflected, *"They say they don't want others to go through what they experienced."* Another respondent stated, *"Their pain has made them more sensitive to injustice."* This meaning-making process reflects resilience grounded in moral growth and social awareness. Acceptance of uncertainty and normalization of hardship also function as coping strategies. Respondents noted that many youth adapt by mentally accepting instability as part of life. One mental health professional cautioned, *"They adjust by telling themselves this is normal now."* Similarly, another respondent explained, *"They survive by accepting the situation, even if it hurts."* While this helps youth endure daily stress, it may also mask unmet psychosocial needs. The interviews strongly indicate that youth resilience is shaped by necessity rather than choice. Respondents emphasized that coping strategies emerge due to limited institutional and psychosocial support. One practitioner stated, *"They are resilient because they have no other option, their strength comes from being forced to survive."* This underscores the need to view resilience alongside vulnerability and structural neglect. Overall, youth resilience in Manipur is survival-driven and socially embedded rather than restorative. Without structured psychosocial and institutional support, resilience risks becoming a means of enduring suffering rather than healing.

### *Social Relationships of Youth and Peace Forward*

The interview data reveal that the ethnic conflict in Manipur has profoundly reshaped the social relationships of youth, redefining how they relate to peers, communities, and the idea of peace itself. Youth social worlds have contracted, becoming more inward-looking and community-bound, while inter-community relationships have largely fractured. This transformation reflects not only fear and mistrust but also adaptive strategies adopted by youth to

ensure emotional and physical safety in a highly polarized environment. A recurring narrative across interviews is the collapse of inter-community social relationships. Respondents consistently described how youth who once studied together, socialized freely, and maintained friendships across ethnic lines now avoid contact due to fear, insecurity, and perceived threats. Even after the reduction in active violence, youth remain reluctant to cross geographical and social boundaries. The persistence of fear psychosis has resulted in social withdrawal, where avoidance itself becomes a coping mechanism. From a psychosocial perspective, this withdrawal offers short-term protection but simultaneously entrenches long-term division and inhibits reconciliation. Conflict has reinforced bonding within ethnic and community groups, leading to stronger internal solidarity. Youth increasingly rely on peers from their own community for emotional support, validation, and shared understanding of loss and trauma. Respondents highlighted that collective suffering has fostered a sense of 'oneness' within one's own community. Educational spaces, which traditionally function as sites of social integration, have also been reshaped by the conflict. Colleges and universities that once brought together youth from diverse backgrounds are now largely segregated due to displacement and mobility restrictions. Social relationships play a crucial and ambivalent role in shaping how youth in Manipur imagine, experience, and move toward peace in the aftermath of ethnic conflict. The interviews indicate that while conflict has deeply fractured social ties across ethnic lines, it has also heightened the value youth place on trust, solidarity, and meaningful relationships as foundations for peace. Youth social relationships are therefore situated between rupture and possibility. Respondents consistently noted that youth relationships across ethnic groups have weakened due to fear, suspicion, and lived experiences of violence. Mental health practitioners observed that many young people deliberately limit their social interactions to their own communities as a protective strategy. One respondent explained that youth often say *they "no longer know whom to trust,"* especially after witnessing betrayal or hostility from former

friends. This withdrawal from inter-group interaction reflects how conflict reshapes social boundaries and reinforces ethnic segregation in everyday life. At the same time, the findings show a strengthening of intra-community bonds among youth. Displacement and shared suffering have intensified solidarity within ethnic and community groups, creating strong support networks. Respondents highlighted that youth rely heavily on peers from their own communities for emotional safety and validation. One interviewee shared that young people feel *"most at peace when they are with their own people,"* as shared experiences reduce the need for explanation or self-censorship. The interviews further reveal that youth relationships are shaped by fear of misunderstanding and re-traumatization. Many young people avoid conversations about conflict with peers from other communities to prevent emotional harm or conflict escalation. A practitioner noted that youth often say, *"Talking about what happened only brings pain or arguments."* This avoidance limits dialogue and prevents collective meaning-making, slowing reconciliation processes despite a latent desire for peace. Despite these fractures, the findings highlight a strong aspiration among youth for peaceful coexistence. Several respondents emphasized that young people express fatigue with prolonged conflict and a desire to rebuild relationships based on mutual respect. One practitioner shared that youth frequently state, *"We don't want to inherit this hatred."* This forward-looking orientation reflects peace-forward thinking rooted in lived suffering rather than political ideology. Youth envision peace as the restoration of normal social life, friendships, mobility, shared spaces rather than abstract political agreements.

Youth engagement in informal peace-building practices also emerges as a significant finding. Respondents described how some young people consciously avoid hate speech, challenge divisive narratives, and promote empathy within their peer groups. One interviewee observed that youth try to *"correct misinformation and stop rumours from spreading"* among friends. These everyday actions, though subtle, represent micro-level peace efforts embedded within social relationships.

The findings also indicate that social relationships influence youths' emotional readiness for peace. Youth who maintain supportive relationships whether within families, peer groups, or educational settings demonstrate greater openness to reconciliation and dialogue. Conversely, those who experience isolation or relational loss often struggle with anger and mistrust. A respondent explained that *"when youth feel supported, they think about peace; when they feel alone, they think about survival."* This underscores the relational nature of peace-building among youth.

Overall, the findings suggest that youth social relationships are both affected by conflict and central to peace-forward trajectories in Manipur. While ethnic violence has fractured inter-community ties and fostered mistrust, it has also made youth acutely aware of the importance of relationships in rebuilding peace. The interviews point to the need for youth-centered spaces that facilitate safe interaction, dialogue, and relationship-building across communities, recognizing social relationships as critical pathways toward sustainable peace. The interviews also reveal that community leaders, and civil society actors play a mediating role in shaping youth social behaviour, often emphasizing restraint, obedience, and avoidance of actions that could escalate conflict. Youth are encouraged to follow community directives, refrain from provocative interactions, and prioritize collective safety over individual relationships. While such guidance has contributed to the reduction of overt violence, it has also normalized social separation. Peace, in this context, is understood less as active reconciliation and more as the absence of immediate violence. This framing limits youth agency in imagining and practicing peace beyond coexistence at a distance. Despite these constraints, the data suggest that youth hold a latent aspiration for peace, even if pathways toward it remain unclear. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that youth desire stability, safety, and the ability to pursue education and livelihoods without fear. Peace is articulated not in abstract political terms but through everyday aspirations, freedom of movement, access to education, restoration of trust, and normal social interaction. However,

the absence of structured platforms for inter-community engagement means that these aspirations remain largely internalized rather than collectively expressed. From a peace-building perspective, the findings indicate that youth are currently positioned as passive bearers of peace rather than active agents of reconciliation. Their social relationships are shaped by trauma, community control, and institutional silence rather than by opportunities for dialogue and healing. While youth demonstrate emotional maturity in avoiding confrontation and respecting community boundaries, this restraint should not be misinterpreted as reconciliation. Instead, it reflects a fragile peace sustained by fear and separation rather than mutual trust.

The discussion further highlights that peace forward for youth must be relational, psychosocial, and structural. Rebuilding social relationships requires more than the cessation of violence; it necessitates safe spaces where youth can process trauma, challenge inherited narratives of hostility, and rehumanize the "other." Without addressing the psychosocial wounds underlying social withdrawal, efforts at peace-building risk remain superficial.

## CONCLUSION

The ethnic conflict in Manipur, as refracted through the lived experiences of displaced youth from the Meitei and Kuki communities, unveils a profound human cost that extends far beyond immediate violence to the erosion of stability and collective development. This study, grounded in the intimate narratives of young stakeholders, research scholars, educators, and student leaders, illuminates how displacement serves as a corrosive conduit, linking historical ethnic divisions, insurgent legacies, and governance failures to contemporary psychosocial wounds, educational ruptures, and economic precarity. The findings underscore a generation caught in a vise of trauma and tenacity: pervasive psychological distress marked by fear, intrusive memories, and dehumanizing violence; a vicious cycle of displacement-fueled unemployment that militarizes aspirations and fragments social fabrics; fragile resilience forged through education, faith, and community solidarity, yet shadowed

by maladaptive coping like substance abuse and withdrawal; and social relationships reconfigured into inward fortresses of intra-community bonding, at the expense of fractured inter-ethnic ties. Critically, youth envision peace not as a distant political abstraction but as the restoration of everyday securities, safe mobility, uninterrupted learning, and reclaimed trust, yet they remain sidelined as passive witnesses rather than empowered architects of transformation. These insights compel a re-evaluation of conflict resolution in Manipur, revealing that sustainable peace demands more than ceasefires or resource reallocations; it requires a relational and youth-centric paradigm that confronts the invisible scars of conflict. Policymakers must prioritize trauma-informed interventions, including accessible mental health services destigmatized through community-led models, to mitigate the long-term risks of a “wounded generation” perpetuating cycles of mistrust and aggression. Educational reforms should address segregation’s toll by investing in hybrid, inclusive infrastructures, mobile learning hubs, scholarships for cross-community enrollment, and vocational programs tailored to IDP realities to salvage disrupted trajectories and counter insurgency’s allure. Moreover, peace-building initiatives must create deliberate spaces for youth agency: facilitated dialogues that humanize the “other,” inter-ethnic youth councils embedded in governance, and digital platforms for narrative exchange, all insulated from elite manipulations of identity. By centering youth voices, as this study has sought to do, Manipur can harness their demonstrated resilience not merely as survival but as a foundation for reconciliation, transforming shared suffering into collective empathy.

In the end, the youth of Manipur embody both the conflict’s deepest tragedies and its most potent hopes. Their stories of loss endured, bonds reforged, and peace quietly yearned for remind us that ethnic tensions are not inexorable fates but constructed crises amenable to deconstruction. As these young voices urge, true resolution lies in weaving their aspirations into the state’s fabric, fostering a Manipur where ethnic diversity becomes a source of strength rather than strife. Only through such inclusive,

healing-oriented pathways can the region transcend its fractured past, empowering a generation to build not just the absence of war, but the presence of justice and belonging.

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