



Demographic Faultlines And The Economic Impact Of Internal Displacement In Manipur: A Social-Science Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The violence that unfolded in Manipur in May 2023 exposed deep demographic and political faultlines that had long shaped tensions between the valley-based Meitei community and the Kuki-Zo tribes of the hills. This paper examines the crisis through a social-science lens, combining demographic analysis, political-economy perspectives, and field observations. It argues that the conflict was rooted not in sudden hostility but in longstanding structural divides around land, identity, and representation, further sharpened by perceptions surrounding the state's anti-drug campaign. The displacement of more than 60,000 people has produced severe economic consequences: loss of livelihoods, market fragmentation, educational disruption, deteriorating health conditions, and growing dependency. The paper highlights how displacement risks becoming multigenerational without comprehensive rehabilitation. It concludes by offering policy directions focused on conflict-sensitive governance, rethinking anti-drug strategies, and establishing a national framework for internal displacement.

Keywords: Manipur conflict, internal displacement, demographic faultlines, political economy, livelihood loss

1. Introduction

When violence swept through Manipur in early May 2023, it stunned much of India. From the outside, it appeared as an abrupt collapse of communal relations between the largely valley-based Meitei community and the Kuki-Zo tribes who inhabit the surrounding hill districts. But for those who have followed Manipur's internal tensions for years, the crisis felt less like an unexpected eruption and more like a breaking point in a long, fragile equilibrium.

The Manipur valley, despite covering only about 10% of the state's land area, holds a significantly larger share of the population, with figures from the 2011 Census indicating around 59% of Manipur's total population resides in the valley, while the hilly regions account for about 41%. Manipur's demographic architecture is where one community is concentrated in a land-scarce valley, others dispersed across constitutionally protected hill districts has shaped political claims and anxieties for generations. The question of which communities may buy land where, who counts as indigenous, and how political representation is distributed is never just administrative in Manipur, it cuts to the core of identity. This structural tension formed the backdrop for the protests and counter-protests over Meitei demands for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status in 2023, which escalated into deadly clashes.

The violence displaced more than 60,000 people, redrawing the demographic map of the state. Entire neighborhoods were emptied. People fled with little more than what they could carry. Relief camps sprung up in schools, community halls, and hastily constructed sheds.

The living conditions in many of these camps were and in some cases remain horrible. During visits to several relief camps, the scenes were distressing:

a) Hundreds of people crowded into a single hall partitioned only by bedsheets, if at all.

- b) i) No real privacy, especially for women, children, and the elderly.
 - c) A handful of toilets or washrooms shared by hundreds, often without running water.
 - d) Makeshift classrooms that barely functioned as learning spaces.
 - e) Children sitting idle near doorways, their schooling disrupted for months.
- Families who once had homes, land, and some measure of security now “barely surviving,” dependent on donations and uncertain about their future.

These human realities can often get lost in high-level political discussions, but they are central to understanding the economic consequences of displacement. This paper therefore takes a social-science approach: it combines demographic analysis, political-economy insights, and field-informed perspectives to examine the roots and consequences of Manipur’s internal displacement crisis. It also considers a factor often left partially in the shadows—the state’s war on drugs—and how it inadvertently shaped perceptions before the violence.

2. Literature Review

I) Demographic Conflict Theory

Foundational literature on ethnic conflict (Horowitz, 1985) stresses that violence is likelier when ethnic divisions overlap with territory and institutions. Esteban and Ray (2011) further model how competition between cohesive groups intensifies when each perceives gains or losses as zero-sum.

Manipur exemplifies this pattern: a geographically confined majority group in the valley, and constitutionally protected minority groups in the hills, each interpreting policy changes through lenses of existential concern.

II) Borderland Political Economy

Scholars of Northeast India (Baruah, 2005; McDuie-Ra, 2015) argue that the region functions less like a typical federal state and more like a layered borderland shaped by security concerns, cross-border migration, and uneven state presence. In such settings, administrative interventions such as anti-poppy campaigns take on meanings far beyond official intentions.

III) Displacement and Development

The displacement literature (Cernea, 1997; Ibáñez & Moya, 2010) identifies a predictable set of risks: landlessness, joblessness, marginalization, food insecurity, and social disintegration. Conflict-induced displacement typically results in long-term income losses, reduced educational attainment, and intergenerational poverty traps.

IV) Poppy Cultivation and Anti-Drug Policy

Studies on poppy cultivation in Manipur (Kipgen, 2019; EPW Engage) describe it as a livelihood strategy among marginalized households rather than merely a criminal enterprise. Without substantial investment in alternatives, eradication campaigns can deepen poverty and mistrust.

Together, this literature offers a multidimensional lens through which to analyze Manipur’s crisis.

3. Demographic Structures and the Making of Faultlines

The valley–hill divide is not simply a geographical distinction. It is a lived political and economic separation. For decades, these asymmetries remained manageable, albeit tense. But the debate over Meitei ST status reactivated dormant anxieties.

For Meiteis, ST status was framed as cultural recognition and economic protection. For tribal communities, it signaled a possible threat to land autonomy. Once the High Court’s 2023 order revived the issue, the situation became emotionally charged on both sides. Identity, territory, and constitutional safeguards converged into a single, combustible debate.

4. The War on Drugs: A Secondary but Meaningful Shaping Force

Beginning around 2017, the Manipur government escalated its anti-drug campaign, with a special focus on poppy eradication in the hills. Officially, the campaign aimed to dismantle trafficking networks and rehabilitate the environment. But some tribal communities felt targeted. Evictions for settling in reserve forest areas; poppy fields, some belonging to organized networks and some belonging to marginalized households were destroyed without adequate livelihood substitution; public discourse increasingly linked some hills areas with drugs and illegal immigration.

Even if the campaign’s intentions were mixed, the perceptions it generated were powerful. By early 2023, mistrust between both communities had deepened. When violence erupted, these narratives of victimhood on

one side, and of security threats on the other shaped how communities interpreted and responded to unfolding events.

5. Patterns of Internal Displacement

The displacement that followed was swift and severe. Mixed localities were emptied almost immediately. People fled to districts dominated by their own communities. Camps emerged in schools, auditoriums, and church grounds. Some existed with little oversight. Others relied entirely on volunteers.

The demographic reshaping was stark:

- a) Meitei minorities specially in Churchandpur and Moreh were emptied out where coexistence had previously been routine.
- b) Kuki-Zo populations residing in Imphal and its peripheries were driven out.

This ethno-spatial sorting will have long-term consequences for reconciliation and economic recovery.

6. Economic Impact of Displacement

While the demographic and political dimensions of Manipur's conflict have attracted substantial attention, the economic losses borne by internally displaced persons (IDPs) deserve equal scrutiny. These losses are not temporary disruptions that fade once violence subsides; they reshape household strategies, community networks, and development trajectories in ways that can persist for years.

I) Livelihood Loss

For rural households, whether in the valley or the hills, land is both a productive asset and a form of security. Displaced families lost access to agricultural fields, shifting cultivation plots, and homestead land almost overnight. Paddy fields in the foothills and cash crops were left unattended or deliberately destroyed. Many households fled with little more than their clothes, leaving behind years of accumulated farming equipment, livestock, and tools. In the hills, poppy eradication had already weakened the economic base of certain communities. For some families, poppy had functioned as a high-value crop compensating for limited access to markets and infrastructure. For some marginalized Kuki-Zo households, poppy eradication really did undermine their income, the violence erased some other cash crops they had begun to cultivate in the foothills.

In urban and peri-urban areas, small businesses such as mechanic shops, electronic stores, weaving units, grocery stores, transport services were burnt or abandoned. Tools and inventories vanished. Years of financial investment were lost, often without any formal documentation needed for compensation.

II) Market Fragmentation

Beyond individual livelihoods, the crisis fractured Manipur's economic geography. Prior to the violence, there was substantial interdependence between the valley and the hills. Hill farmers supplied vegetables, forest products, and seasonal goods to valley markets, valley traders supplied manufactured goods, fuel, and processed foods to the hills. Transport workers, intermediaries, and vendors benefited from these flows.

Once violence broke out, these economic circuits collapsed. Roads were blocked, businesses were segregated along ethnic lines, and trust between communities eroded. In some cases, even basic commodities became difficult to move, leading to price spikes or shortages. Such disruptions do not merely pause economic activity, they reshape incentives. Traders and producers begin to orient themselves toward different markets or abandon activities altogether. When a valley merchant, for example, no longer feels safe sourcing goods from a hill district, the commercial link erodes in ways that may not easily be restored.

These matters because Manipur's economy is small, fragile, and already constrained by geography. Market fragmentation increases transportation costs, reduces supply diversity, and can produce structural inefficiencies that outlast the conflict. If unaddressed, these rifts risk entrenching separate ethnic economies rather than a unified state economy.

III) Human Capital Decline

Humanitarian assessments repeatedly highlight the toll on children's education. Schools damaged during violence or repurposed as relief camps forced thousands of children into prolonged educational interruptions. Many lacked school documents, uniforms, or access to online classes. Camps struggled to set up temporary learning spaces, and attendance was inconsistent.

Education researchers have long shown that disruptions of even a few months can reduce long-term earnings and educational achievements. For Manipur's displaced children, some out of school for over a year, the effects could be even more severe. The risk of dropout increases, and girls in particular may face pressure to assume household responsibilities early.

Health impacts compound this picture. Overcrowded shelters facilitate communicable disease transmission; chronic conditions go untreated; maternal health access is reduced. Psychological trauma, though often unmeasured in conflict zones, is substantial. Children display anxiety, sleep disturbances, and behavioral changes; adults face stress, depression, and uncertainty about their future. These forms of human capital erosion are slow-burning, their full consequences may only become visible years from now.

IV) Deplorable Living Conditions Observed First-hand

The conditions of IDPs surviving in relief camps were horrifying

- A. Families packed into rooms without ventilation.
- B. Sanitation facilities insufficient for even a fraction of the population.
- C. Women and girls navigating bathing areas with no privacy.
- D. Elderly residents lying on thin bedding with limited medical support.
- E. Children wandering without structure, unsure when they would return to school.

Such living conditions do not merely reflect hardship, they actively produce new vulnerabilities.

V) Rising Dependency and Poverty Cycles

Savings have disappeared. Many households rely entirely on aid. Without land, tools, or credit, rebuilding livelihoods becomes nearly impossible. The risk of long-term poverty traps is high. Dependency, Debt, and the Risk of Poverty Traps. Relief camps provide immediate safety, but they also impose dependency. Families accustomed to earning daily wages or producing food now rely on donated supplies. Savings evaporate. Some take loans at high interest rates. Returning to their old livelihoods is not always feasible, especially when land boundaries are disputed or tools have been destroyed.

Economists studying conflict-induced displacement in Colombia, Sri Lanka, and Africa emphasize that displaced households often face persistent income penalties even when they eventually resettle. Once the link between households and their productive assets is broken, rebuilding becomes a long, uncertain process. Manipur's IDPs are at similar risk unless targeted rehabilitation programs intervene quickly and meaningfully.

7. Discussion: Intersections of Demography, Perception, and Political Economy

The Manipur crisis mirrors patterns observed globally in ethnically segmented societies: demographic structures create faultlines, and political triggers ignite them. When the Manipur violence is viewed through a social-science lens, a pattern emerges: demographic faultlines create structural vulnerability, and policy interventions, especially when perceived as uneven can sharpen these divides. What distinguishes Manipur is the way policy narratives particularly around poppy cultivation became intertwined with identity

The valley-hill split has shaped Manipur's politics for decades. Land laws, reservation systems, and the geography of governance reinforce identity boundaries. The debate around Meitei ST status became a flashpoint not simply because of constitutional classification, but because it touched long-standing insecurities on both sides.

The war on drugs, while not the central driver of the conflict, operated within this sensitive demographic terrain. For many Meiteis, the campaign promised law, order, and environmental restoration. For some tribal communities, it invoked fears of surveillance, territorial restructuring, and cultural delegitimization. In deeply divided societies, such diverging perceptions create interpretive filters. When violence began, these narratives influenced how communities understood the unfolding events and who they blamed.

The displacement that followed reproduced the underlying demographic geography, valley populations consolidated in the valley, hill populations retreated deeper into hill districts. The result is a more polarized landscape, with fewer shared spaces and diminished opportunities for inter-ethnic economic exchange. This matters profoundly for long-term peace. Political settlements often focus on security arrangements, boundary lines, or institutional reforms, but economic integration and demographic confidence-building are equally crucial. If communities continue to experience the economy through lenses of threat, exclusion, or vulnerability, future tensions may re-emerge even after the violence subsides.

The crisis also reveals the fragility of Manipur's economic architecture. With markets already constrained by geography and infrastructure limitations, the loss of valley-hill interdependence is a serious setback.

Humanitarian assistance is necessary, but the larger question is whether displaced households can reclaim economic autonomy and how they can reclaim what was once a place they called home. Without deliberate intervention, displacement may become multigenerational.

8. Policy Recommendations

The crisis presents an opportunity, though a difficult one, to rethink governance and development in Manipur. Several policy directions emerge from this analysis:

I) Rethinking the Anti-Drug Strategy

The anti-poppy campaign must shift from a primarily coercive approach to an economically grounded one. This means investing in alternative livelihoods, improving hill-valley market connectivity, and engaging communities directly rather than policing them from above. Enforcement without economic substitution only breeds resentment and instability.

II) Conflict-Sensitive Governance

Institutional reforms must include all communities. Land laws, reservation issues, and district reorganization require structured multi-ethnic deliberation, not unilateral decisions. Decisions involving land, autonomy, or reservation must include structured dialogue forums with representation from all communities. Neutral facilitation may help reduce mistrust. Sudden or one-sided moves risk re-igniting tensions.

III) Comprehensive IDP Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation must go beyond short-term relief. Policies should include land for housing schemes, livelihood restoration grants, credit access, school reintegration programs, psychosocial and psychological support, restoration of market linkages, and lastly and most importantly mechanisms for safe and voluntary return.

IV) Towards a National IDP Policy

India's fragmented approach to internal displacement is inadequate. A national framework aligned with international norms is needed to prevent future crises.

9. Conclusion

The Manipur crisis is not simply a story of communal antagonism. It is the product of long-standing demographic divides, institutional asymmetries, uneven development, and competing narratives of identity. The war on drugs, though secondary, shaped the contours of mistrust. The economic impacts, seen most clearly in the suffering of IDPs are profound and long-lasting.

The future stability of Manipur will depend on whether governance shifts from crisis response to structural transformation, ensuring that displaced families can rebuild their lives with dignity and security. For the tens of thousands still displaced, the economic consequences are profound, the loss of land and assets, their emotions and memories associated with the place they once called home, the weakening of markets, the interruption of education, and the psychological toll of uncertainty. These losses cannot be addressed through relief alone. They demand a holistic, long-term strategy that integrates governance reform, economic development, and social healing.

If Manipur's future is to be more stable than its present, the state and the country must confront the demographic and economic realities that underpin conflict. Only by addressing these foundational issues can displaced families rebuild their lives and the state move toward a durable peace.

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