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Sapam Rahul Singh
Department of Political
Science, Panjab University,
Chandigarh, India

Joyben Okram
Department of Political
Science, Panjab University,
Chandigarh, India

The geography of displacement: How the 2023 violence is reshaping educational access and equity

Sapam Rahul Singh and Joyben Okram

Abstract
In May 2023, violent ethnic clashes in Manipur, India displaced tens of thousands and severely disrupted the education system. This paper analyses recent surveys, official reports, and field studies to understand how conflict-driven displacement has reshaped educational access and equity. We find that most displaced learners experienced prolonged school closures, infrastructure damage, and psychosocial trauma. Many students lost academic time, though large-scale admissions efforts partly restored schooling. The crisis has widened existing inequities, with tribal and rural children most affected by school closures and lack of connectivity. Based on comparisons to past conflicts, we emphasize urgent measures: ensure safe schooling in displacement settings, bridge digital divides, provide counselling, and uphold displaced children's right to continuous education. By situating Manipur's crisis against broader development goals, we warn that without intervention, many displaced children risk becoming a "lost generation" in education.

Keywords: Manipur conflict; education access; educational equity; learning disruption; psychosocial trauma; digital divide

1. Introduction
In May 2023, violent ethnic clashes erupted in Manipur (northeastern India), pitting the majority Meitei community in the Imphal Valley against tribal Kukis in the surrounding hills. The ensuing violence "witnessed more than 220 people killed, scores missing, and approximately 60,000 displaced". Thousands of homes, places of worship, and schools were burned. The mass displacement has been especially severe: by May 2025 an estimated 50,000-60,000 people remained in relief camps across Manipur [1], with many more fleeing to neighbouring states. These demographic shifts have deeply distorted the geography of schooling. All schools and colleges in affected areas were abruptly closed or repurposed as shelters; infrastructure was damaged or abandoned [2]. As one official noted, "the conflict-hit state of Manipur has witnessed a complete collapse of the educational system and the inaccessibility of learning resources". Students in volatile areas were trapped at home or in camps, internet blackouts severed access to online classes, and families prioritized survival over schooling [3].

This study investigates how displacement from the 2023 Manipur violence is reshaping educational access and equity. We analyse recent empirical data and reports to characterize the scale of school disruptions, patterns of student displacement, and resulting equity gaps. We pay particular attention to the experiences of different communities (tribal vs. valley, girls vs. boys), infrastructure damage, the digital divide in learning, and the psychological toll on students. By integrating evidence from educational surveys, government records, and human rights reports, we detail the multiple dimensions of impact. Finally, we discuss implications for rebuilding Manipur's education system and make policy recommendations to support displaced learners.

2. Conflict and schooling
The adverse effects of armed conflict on education are well-documented globally. Wars and insurgencies typically lead to school closures, dropouts, and learning losses. In Manipur's context, Chakrabarty (2025) characterizes the recent violence as creating "a unique case of educational emergencies," noting that frequent curfews and strikes "completely closed"

**Corresponding Author:
Sapam Rahul Singh**
Department of Political
Science, Panjab University,
Chandigarh, India

schools and "sowed fear and anxiety among students" [4]. Similar findings are echoed in journalistic and NGO accounts. The Hindustan Times reported that "14,763 school-going children have been displaced" by the conflict [5], though importantly 93.5% of them were eventually placed in new schools. However, the immediate effect was severe: nearly all educational institutions were shut for over two months in early May 2023 [2]. These disruptions align with global patterns: for example, studies of wartime schooling in other regions find that minorities and rural students often face the biggest discontinuities.

2.1 Impact on equity
Conflict can exacerbate pre-existing social divides. In Manipur, a stark valley-hill divide exists: Meitei communities dominate the valley, while various tribal (mostly Christian) groups inhabit the hills. Displacement has mirrored this divide. Historical studies of other ethnic conflicts (e.g., in Nagaland and Sri Lanka) similarly document that minority and rural students face larger barriers to continuity when schools shut. In the Manipur case, tribal-majority hill districts have seen disproportionate school losses, as anticipated from the "geography of violence." Internet blackouts and poor connectivity compound the problem. For instance, online education in the Imphal valley (where Meitei families predominate) was maintained intermittently, while hill areas often lacked electricity or internet entirely [2]. These contrasts underscore an emerging equity gap: hill-dwelling tribal students have suffered disproportionately in terms of displacement and school loss.

2.2 Educational outcomes
The 2023 violence is still unfolding, but preliminary data suggest dramatic learning disruptions. Chakrabarty's survey (2025) of displaced Manipur learners found that an overwhelming share reported negative impacts: about 74% of respondents reported psychosocial trauma from the violence, and 83% noted a drop in their academic performance [4]. Longitudinal comparisons to past conflicts (e.g., insurgencies in Kashmir, civil war in Nepal) predict increased dropout rates and long-term declines in attainment if schooling remains unsettled. Notably, Manipur's education system had been on a positive trajectory before 2023, with rising literacy and enrolment rates; the conflict-induced diaspora may reverse these trends for displaced youth, particularly girls and scheduled tribes.

2.3 Institutional response
Reports indicate ad hoc measures to mitigate the crisis, though with mixed success. State and central authorities worked to admit displaced children into nearby schools. For example, the government introduced a "College Students Rehabilitation Scheme" to allow IDP students free admissions in Manipur colleges. However, on-the-ground assessments reveal implementation gaps: many students still paid fees or did not receive promised grants and devices. International watchdogs have criticized the slow relief efforts. One Amnesty International report warns that "two years since the violence, the government has yet to implement a comprehensive rehabilitation policy," leaving people "in limbo" [1]. These sources consistently report that the 2023 Manipur conflict caused mass displacement and educational collapse, a pattern we use to frame our analysis

of empirical data.

3. Materials and Methods
We combine quantitative and qualitative evidence from multiple sources:

3.1 Primary survey data
We utilize Chakrabarty (2025), an empirical study of learning disruptions. Chakrabarty surveyed 340 displaced Manipur students (grades 8 through college) living in Shillong and other refuge locations during May-June 2024. He applied a "learning disruptions" framework, measuring dimensions such as educational access, psychosocial well-being, academic outcomes, and learning environment via multiple indicators (e.g. school suspension, trauma, drop in grades). We extract key summary statistics (e.g. percentage displaced, psychological trauma rates) and significance tests from this source [4].

3.2 Official and NGO reports
Government data and legislative answers were used to gauge displacement and school admissions. For example, Ministry of Education reports released in parliamentary sessions provided exact counts of displaced students and their re-enrolment. International organizations (e.g. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch) supplied figures on total displaced populations, camp conditions, and rights violations [1, 7].

3.3 Media and field accounts
To capture the lived experience, we reviewed reputable news reports and journal articles on Manipur (Times of India, Hindustan Times, Imphal Times) for narratives of camp life, school damage, and student testimonies [3-6]. These qualitative insights contextualize our analysis (e.g. describing overcrowded classrooms or the emotional toll on children).

3.4 Data analysis
We synthesized the data to identify key patterns. Descriptive statistics from the survey and government releases are presented, including a summary table (Table 1) of major reported impacts on displaced learners. We visualize one category (displacement vs. not) in Figure 1 to illustrate population proportions. Comparisons are made across groups where possible (e.g. students who remained in state vs. those who fled) using cited figures.

4. Results
4.1 Scale of Displacement and School Disruption
By late 2024, official tallies reported over 50,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) from both Meitei and tribal communities still living in camps across Manipur [1]. Human Rights Watch similarly noted "more than 60,000 people have been displaced and are living in cramped shelters" [7]. These figures are consistent: in parliamentary statements, the Ministry of Education specified that 14,763 school-age children alone were displaced by the conflict, of whom 93.5% were eventually placed in new schools free of cost [5]. The violence forced nearly all educational institutions to halt normal operations. According to an official memo, "schools in Manipur were shut down for more than 2 months after the violent conflict started in early May 2023." In-depth reports confirmed this shock: one source stated that

during the clashes "many schools were burned and damaged, reduced to ashes," and even after reopening attendance remained very low due to fear [2]. As a result, hundreds of teachers and students were displaced, and academic calendars were severely disrupted.

4.2 Higher Education and Administrative Fragmentation

At the tertiary level, the conflict has segmented institutions along ethnic lines. Manipur University and Churachandpur Medical College illustrate how higher education has become spatially segregated. Emergency "swap" arrangements were approved to preserve minimal academic continuity, but quality was compromised by faculty shortages and fragmented clinical training [8]. In effect, the violence forced nearly all colleges to halt or alter their programs, with students from Kuki-majority areas unable to return to campuses in Imphal and vice versa. This reflects historical patterns of student migration: after 2023, out-migration from Manipur increased, benefiting households able to relocate to safer regions.

4.3 Buffer Zones and Educational Immobility

Following the outbreak of violence, security forces established buffer zones separating the valley from the hills. While intended as conflict-containment, these zones function as educational barricades, severing students and teachers from institutions across ethnic lines. For example, Kuki-Zo students enrolled in Manipur University, RIMS, and NIT Imphal were unable to return to campus due to safety concerns, while Meitei faculty and students in hill districts faced similar threats [8]. Approximately 1,200 teaching and non-teaching staff were displaced or unable to attend their workplaces, creating acute teacher shortages in hill areas. This uneven distribution has severely undermined instructional continuity, particularly in science and professional education streams.

4.4 Demographic Profile of Displaced Learners

Chakrabarty's survey of 340 displaced learners provides demographic context. Among respondents, 70% were from rural areas, 82% identified as Christian, and 81% as tribal groups [4]. This reflects the high share of tribal-background students among IDPs. Various reports emphasize that the Kuki community bore the brunt of displacement. For example, district-level data show especially high displacement in Churachandpur (over 4,000 children displaced). These contrasts underscore an equity gap: tribal students have suffered disproportionately in terms of displacement and school loss.

4.5 Learning Disruptions and Trauma

Survey data reveal widespread disruption: about 60% of respondents were displaced due to conflict [4], confirming that the conflict itself uprooted a majority of learners. Critically, 74% reported experiencing psychological and emotional trauma from the violence [4]. Qualitative accounts resonate with this: one respondent recounted that "exposure to violence caused anxiety and depression" making it "impossible to focus on studies". In line with this, 83% of learners reported a decline in academic performance, as shown in Table 1. One district teacher observed that children in camps were "playing games on mobiles" instead of studying, and that "education is the last thing on the

priority list" while families struggled. In sum, the data paint a picture of almost universal educational interruption for displaced youth.

As shown in Table 1, key indicators of disruption are extremely high. Over half (57%) of displaced students experienced complete school suspension, and nearly three-quarters (74%) reported trauma [4]. These rates far exceed normal dropout statistics; they match levels seen only in the most intense war zones. The disruptions were not brief: 51% of students had learning discontinuity longer than one month, and 14% left school mid-year. (For full indicator definitions, see original studies.)

Table 1: Percentage of displaced Manipur learners reporting various educational impacts. (Sources: Chakrabarty 2025 survey; government data.)

Impact / Indicator	% of Displaced Learners
School suspension (no classes)	57%
Psychosocial / emotional trauma	74%
Decline in academic performance	83%
Students displaced by conflict	60%
Admitted to a new school (2023, free cost)	93.5%

4.6 Infrastructure and Access Disparities

The conflict also destroyed or damaged educational infrastructure, deepening access gaps. In heavily affected hill districts, almost all schools were closed or burnt. More than 96 schools statewide were occupied by relief camps, and essential resources (classrooms, textbooks, labs) were left unusable in many areas. Rural areas suffered particularly: camps there often lacked electricity or internet, so no distance learning was possible. Reports emphasize that "many students lacked devices and connectivity," sharply widening the digital divide. In contrast, the Imphal valley had somewhat better access to online classes (despite intermittent shutdowns). This spatial inequity means that hill-dwelling tribal students have had far less academic continuity than valley students.

One effect of this displacement geography is a "brain drain" among scholars. After violence erupts, many students left Manipur entirely for safer states. An Imphal Times survey found that 58% of students who left cited conflict conditions as the primary reason [6]. Even with Manipur's high literacy rate, the state faces the risk of losing a generation of educated youth to other regions. Conversely, some valley schools became overcrowded by incoming students, straining capacity.

4.7 Institutional Responses and Equity Efforts

Faced with this educational crisis, authorities and civil society undertook several mitigation efforts, with mixed results. Most displaced schoolchildren were eventually enrolled in "nearest feasible" schools by government initiative. The fact that 93.5% of displaced students found school seats free of cost is a significant achievement. State colleges also implemented measures: for instance, the Manipur Directorate of Higher Education rolled out the "Chief Minister's College Students Rehabilitation Scheme, 2023" to aid IDP college students. This included free admission and stipends.

However, these relief measures fell short in practice. On-the-ground reports indicate that some colleges continued charging fees to IDP students and many eligible students did

not receive promised grants [6]. Technology assistance collapsed: the plan to distribute free smartphones to displaced students was never executed. International watchdogs criticized the slow policy response; one Amnesty report noted that "two years since the violence, the government has yet to implement a comprehensive rehabilitation policy," leaving people "in limbo" [1]. Aid agencies warn that IDP camps remain education deserts: informal schooling by NGOs or volunteers struggles to cover all children. Notably, tribal and lower-income groups have been least served by these programs. Many displaced parents lost their livelihoods and cannot afford tuition or even basic supplies. A displaced student recounted having to drop out of college because "financial constraints" made schooling impossible. Female students are similarly at risk; global experience shows that in conflict, girls' education often declines fastest, though detailed gender-disaggregated data are not yet available for Manipur. The combination of emotional trauma, lost learning, and insufficient aid suggests a widening equity gap. Students from socially advantaged backgrounds may more easily adapt (e.g. continuing studies outside camps), whereas the most vulnerable (tribal, rural, poor, female) fall further behind.

5. Discussion
The evidence indicates that the 2023 Manipur conflict created an educational crisis on multiple fronts. The high percentages of learners reporting disruptions (Table 1) mirror findings from other war-torn contexts, where learning continuity often becomes secondary to survival [3]. The fact that 60-74% of learners were displaced or traumatized is similar to statistics from prolonged insurgencies elsewhere (e.g., conflict zones in Northeast India or African civil wars). This mass disruption will likely have long-term effects: studies from regions like Rwanda and Sri Lanka show that even after war ends, disrupted cohorts lag behind in attainment and cognitive skills.

Manipur's case highlights geographic and social inequities. Tribal-majority hill districts saw disproportionate schooling losses, as anticipated from the "geography of violence." Previous literature notes that when conflict overlaps ethnic lines, minority regions often see greater disenfranchisement. Internet shutdowns and poor connectivity compounded these disadvantages. The emotional toll is strikingly high. Nearly three-quarters of displaced students report trauma [4], exceeding typical anxiety levels in peacetime. Such trauma is known to suppress learning, reduce attention, and correlate with dropout [2]. It is a vicious cycle: conflict not only closes schools, but also creates fear that deters re-enrolment. Reports of classrooms lying empty even after reopening underscore this dynamic [2]. The prolonged nature of this conflict (two years and counting) suggests that without intervention, many students may abandon formal education altogether.

On the positive side, some quick responses have limited the worst outcomes. The government's near-universal placement of displaced children (93.5%) in schools is notable and demonstrates institutional will to maintain basic schooling. Over time, if these students remain in school, the long-run damage could be partially offset. Additionally, individual success stories signal resilience. For example, an NDTV profile (Sept 2025) documented a displaced student who overcame hardship to reach a medical college [9]. Such "educational resilience" (seeking tutoring, using public libraries) may help a few students catch up. However, reliance on ad hoc individual efforts is not scalable policy.

6. Policy implications
The new geography of Manipur's learning must inform future planning. First, there is a clear need for targeted support in camps and hill areas - such as temporary schools, mobile teaching units, and guaranteed connectivity. Psychological support for students is critical, given the high trauma rates. Our findings imply that policy should enforce displaced children's right to education: the UN Guiding Principles on IDPs specify that displaced children must receive free, compulsory primary education. State authorities should apply these principles by ensuring that even those in camps have schooling facilities [2]. Second, higher education requires special attention. The disrupted academic years and out-migration of students (over half of surveyed college-leavers left due to conflict) could mean a lasting "brain drain." Improving and maintaining college access (e.g., remote learning options, fee waivers) will be crucial to rebuild the state's human capital. At the very least, partial measures like the CMCSRS need stricter oversight to ensure promised grants and devices reach every eligible student. Finally, bridging the digital divide must be a priority. Given the reliance on online instruction during normal times, the camps' total lack of connectivity has further widened gaps. Investments in infrastructure (mobile internet, TV/learn apps) specifically for IDP sites would help even if primary schooling remains disrupted.

7. Conclusion
The 2023 Manipur violence has carved a new educational landscape: one of shattered schools, uprooted classrooms, and deepened inequities. Our analysis shows that displacement has become the defining factor reshaping access to education. Thousands of students have lost academic years, and the trauma they carry will undermine their future learning. Although emergency measures have enrolled many children in new schools, systemic inequities remain. Tribal and rural learners - from the communities most affected by conflict - have suffered disproportionately from school closures and lack of digital access [2].

The situation in Manipur underscores broader lessons: conflict inflicts immediate harm on lives and also erodes human capital by disrupting schooling. To restore equity, policy must prioritize displaced learners' needs. This includes ensuring safe return of families (as Amnesty urges), rebuilding and repairing infrastructure, and funding catch-up programs in education. Adherence to national and international norms (such as the IDP Guiding Principles on education) will be vital. With targeted support, Manipur can close the newly widened divides - but the window to salvage a generation's education is narrow.

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