

COUNTER AGAINST FACT FINDING REPORT OF EDITORS GUILD OF INDIA ON Manipur Violence

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I am shocked by the fact-finding report published by Editors Guild of India on Manipur violence. After going through the report, I find it necessary to write this counter. I am not disclosing the name of my media house only because, I do not want to endanger my fellow journalists in the hills for reason mentioned in this document later. This is a personal response to the EGI report and does not have anything to do with the media house where I work.

EGI report says:

For example, the leadership of the state labelled the entire community of Kuki-Zo tribals as “illegal immigrants” and “foreigners” without any reliable data or evidence. This despite the fact that the decadal census from 1901 to 2011 has not shown any unusual growth of the non-Naga (the other minority tribal community) tribal population.

TRUTH:

Nobody labelled the entire community of Kuki-Zo tribal as “illegal immigrants” and “foreigners”. The general statement was “Many of them entered Manipur illegally”. Kuki-Zo community twisted this statement and created the above narrative.

EGI claims that there is no unusual growth of non-Naga tribal population from 1901-2011. But the truth is there have been unnatural decadal population growth mostly in Kuki-Zo populated areas, which is clearly evident in the Census reports. This is the main reason behind the demand to hold off delimitation until 2021 Census while seeking a transparent Census operation.

272	Senapati	1901	N.A	-	-	N.A.	N.A.
		1911	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A.	N.A.
		1921	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A.	N.A.
		1931	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A.	N.A.
		1941	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A.	N.A.
		1951	46,608	N.A	N.A	22,991	23,617
		1961	70,792	+24,184	+51.89	35,371	35,421
		1971	1,02,291	+31,499	+44.50	52,496	49,795
		1981	1,53,091	+50,800	+49.66	79,411	73,680
		1991	2,08,406	+55,315	+36.13	1,07,310	1,01,096
		2001 *	2,83,621	+75,215	+36.09	1,46,548	1,37,073
		2011	4,79,148	+1,95,527	+68.94	2,47,323	2,31,825
273	Tamenglong	1901	N.A	-	-	N.A.	N.A.
		1911	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A.	N.A.
		1921	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A.	N.A.
		1931	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A.	N.A.
		1941	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A.	N.A.
		1951	33,519	N.A	N.A	15,979	17,540
		1961	37,667	+4,148	+12.38	18,303	19,364
274	Churachandpur	1901	N.A	-	-	N.A.	N.A.
		1911	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A.	N.A.
		1921	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A.	N.A.
		1931	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A.	N.A.
		1941	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A.	N.A.
		1951	44,496	N.A	N.A	21,725	22,771
		1961	66,304	+21,808	+49.01	33,092	33,212
		1971	1,00,418	+34,114	+51.45	50,810	49,608
		1981	1,34,494	+34,076	+33.93	69,732	64,762
		1991	1,76,184	+41,690	+31.0	91,218	84,966
		2001	2,27,905	+51,721	+29.36	1,17,232	1,10,673
275	Bishnupur	2011	2,74,143	+46,238	+20.29	1,38,820	1,35,323
		1901	N.A	-	-	N.A.	N.A.
		1911	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A.	N.A.
		1921	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A.	N.A.
		1931	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A.	N.A.
		1941	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A.	N.A.
		1951	57,340	N.A	N.A	28,394	28,946
		1961	79,005	+21,665	+37.78	39,297	39,708

A snapshot of census report showing unnatural decadal population growth in Kuki-Zo dominated districts

EGI report says:

40,000 refugees to Mizoram and reportedly about 4,000 to Manipur was used to brand all Kuki-Zo as illegal immigrants. This was presented as pressure on resources but was also a war for political space, with the Meitei leadership of the government using the fear of the outsiders to consolidate its political position.

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TRUTH:

The matter of concern is not about the documented immigrants but the undocumented immigrants, who have been sneaking inside Manipur and settled there by getting citizenship through fraudulent means taking advantage of corrupt officials, politicians and Manipur natives. Apart from the census, here is a detailed report published in The Print about the corrupt practices in this regard: <https://theprint.in/feature/theyre-taking-over-our-hills-manipur-groups-want-nrc-to-weed-out-myanmar-refugees/1002227/>

Mingling with the locals

The hill communities in Churachandpur have the same ethnic roots as the families fleeing from Sagaing and Chin State in Myanmar. Locals in Churachandpur leased houses and a small piece of land to till while their children were admitted into local schools.

A senior police officer in Churachandpur admitted that it is “very hard” for the authorities to distinguish between refugees and locals. “The village chiefs give letters to refugees saying they are residents of the village. Based on that, they get a domicile certificate. A domicile certificate, a phone number and an introducer are all you need to get an Aadhaar card. Once they have all these documents, it’s difficult to catch them,” said the official who did not want to be named. However, that has not stopped police from attempting to track down and jail refugees under Foreigner’s Act, 1946 after the Centre’s directive.

A snapshot off the report published in The Print

Here’s another Op-Ed which shows a clear picture of demographic change in Manipur:

<https://www.news18.com/amp/opinion/right-word-deeper-fault-lines-need-to-be-addressed-in-manipur-for-permanent-peace-7814401.html>

As per the Gazette status in 1969, the number of villages in the Imphal division, where the Meitei community primarily resides, stood at 587. In 2021, the number came down to 544. In Churachandpur, where the violence started after Kukis held a demonstration, the number of villages increased from 216 in 1969 to 544 in 2021. Overall, the number of villages in Manipur increased from 1957 in 1969 to 2788 in 2021. A major chunk of this increase has been in areas where non-Meiteis reside. This is bound to enhance a sense of insecurity among Meiteis as many of them feel they are getting marginalised in their own home state.

EGI report says:

In addition, without following proper procedure as laid down in the Hills Area Committee Act of 1972, the N. Biren Singh government declared parts of Hills as "reserved" and "protected" forests and "wetland reserves". All land ownership documents within these areas were cancelled and a drive started to evict them in December 2022.

TRUTH:

Declaration of reserved and protected forest areas were done decades ago and there was no new addition in the number of such forests. Some villages cropped up recently in these forest areas and some corrupt officials were found issuing settlement right violating the Forest Act, and the government, after thorough investigation and studying satellite imagery, cancelled a couple of such orders concerning some villages, which cropped up some two or three years ago. Besides, there is no such act as Hills Area Committee Act, 1972.

EGI report says:

This led to violent confrontation between the state authorities and the Kuki-Zo community which had been living in these villages. The demolition drive which began in the Kangpokpi district, a Kuki-dominated area, extended by February 2023 to Churachandpur and Tengnoupal districts which also had a preponderance of the Kuki-Zo community.

It is true that eviction drive in a village in a Kuki village was met with violent confrontation and government showed satellite imagery and other documents to prove that the village came into existence only a couple of years ago. Villagers claim that it was an extension of another existing village but the fact is that the new village is located at a distance of a couple of kilometres from the existing village, which they claimed as the parent village. Forest Act does not allow expansion of settlement area from the already demarcated location.

EGI report says:

What is significant is that the forest surveys, inquiries, evictions and demolitions were carried out only in the non-Naga inhabited tribal areas, once again leading the Kuki community to believe that it was being singled out.

Eviction drives of illegal encroachers in reserved and protected forest areas were taken up in different districts and the most affected community is the Manipuri Muslim and Meitei, in the valley districts, from where the eviction drive began. The finding of EGI is flawed, biased and one-sided narrative. It was only when the drive reached Kangpokpi and Churachandpur district violent opposition begins and there were always violent protests and demand to remove state police from hill areas is raised every single time. The Kuki-Zo community under the leadership of ITLF started a whole new narrative painting communal colour to the operation.



House of a Meetei family in Thoubal district of Manipur demolished for illegal construction in protected forest area by getting land/property deed through corrupt practice, in June 2022.

Number of families belonging to different communities, who were evicted from reserved and protected forest areas

EGI says:

In an inexplicable move, on March 10, 2023, the Biren Singh government took a Cabinet decision to withdraw from the tripartite Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement (a kind of a ceasefire agreement) with the Kuki insurgent groups, Kuki National, the Zomi Revolutionary and the Kuki Revolutionary, with whom the Union government wanted a peaceful negotiation.

TRUTH:

It is true that the state government took a cabinet decision to withdraw from Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement and the decision stemmed from involvement of SoO groups in illegal poppy cultivation and violation of SoO ground rules. The EGI report fails to mention these reasons.

Despite these reasons, it is between the Government and Kuki UG groups but not between Meetei and Kuki.

EGI says:

Two weeks later, on March 24, the state government removed the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) selectively, only from the Imphal Valley even though the Kuki insurgent groups were in peace talks with the Centre while the Meitei insurgents active in the Imphal Valley were outside any process of negotiation for peace. In retrospect, this was seen by the Kuki-Zo tribals as a partisan move in preparation for violence against the Kukis, which came a few weeks later.

TRUTH: Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was removed from some select areas of Manipur by the Central government but not by the state government. Earlier in 2004, UPA government lifted AFSPA from seven assembly segments of Imphal and NDA expanded the area. The decision was taken by the Centre keeping in view of the dwindling UG activities in the valley area but not related with any ceasefire agreement.

EGI wrongly bring in state government and fails to understand that disturbed area is declared based on ground activities but not on ceasefire agreement. The removal is an ongoing progress and bringing tribal card in this regard is a propaganda and EGI falls into the trap.

EGI says:

Simultaneously, a state government committee headed by the Chief Secretary on April 3, 2023, cancelled all land/property deeds and recognition of villages within the designated reserved and protected forest areas. All this was done without any rehabilitation plan for the evicted tribal population.

TRUTH:

Yes, the state government cancelled some land/property deeds citing corrupt practice and violation of forest law in issuing the property deeds. Notice was served and adequate time was given to the affected people counter the finding, which they could not.

Despite the claims and counter claims, this is not between Meetei and Kuki but between the government and affected people. The move was not taken in the interest of Meetei community as they have nothing to gain from the eviction. The community simply supported the government's decision because they are the ones, who are the most affected group of people by climate change and erratic weather condition in the state due to rampant deforestation.

Two to three decades ago, there was normal monsoon and winter lasted from September to March but today winter season in Manipur is only in December and January. People in the state, especially in the valley area are finding it hard to bear the rising temperature and humid climate with each passing year.

EGI says:

On April 19 it was revealed that in an unusual order the Manipur High Court had ordered on March 27 that the state government recommends the inclusion of the Meitei community in the Scheduled Tribes List to the Centre. This

TRUTH:

The Manipur High Court order was not a direction to the government to recommend inclusion of Meitei community in the ST list but a direction to consider the demand and send the recommendation (whether approved or rejected) to the Centre. Kuki-Zo community and some national media twisted the court order.

EGI says:

Yet another layer to the complex issue was Biren Singh's so-called "war on drugs". In this the Kuki-Zos were painted as villains who indulged in illegal poppy cultivation in the Hills. Manipur borders Myanmar and is a major route for drug smuggling through its border town of Moreh.

TRUTH:

Nobody called the whole community as poppy cultivators. There may be some individual or isolated cases but it would be wrong to count it as a mindset of the whole community.

But it is an undeniable fact that 75 to 80 per cent of illegal poppy cultivation takes place in hill areas dominated by Kuki-Zo community. Due to this, it is obvious, if not right, for people to feel anger for their involvement.

EGI says:

cough syrups and Yaba or WIY ("World is yours") pills. Biren Singh government's focus has targeted poppy growing to the detriment of the other components of the drug trade, the smuggling of synthetics to Myanmar and the smuggling in of drugs and their distribution through Manipur.

TRUTH:

Biren's war on drug often get criticised with some alleging of letting free hand on close associates and some claiming of destroying poppy plants after harvesting. A government's policy may give more weight on one factor than another and in the matter of Manipur, the main focus was on illegal poppy cultivation in the War on Drugs 2.0, mainly because of the environmental destruction it entails.



Screenshot of a 2022 video showing the impact of large scale deforestation

Large scale deforestation is an associated issue with illegal poppy cultivation. Another major issue is use of huge amount of urea and salts to make the hilly terrain suitable for poppy cultivation. After a couple of harvest, this land becomes inarable, devoid of any soil nutrients. The once rugged hilly terrain is covered with loose soil resulting in soil erosion, landslide, shift in weather and climatic condition, toxic chemicals flowing into the rivers reaching valley area where paddy farming is carried out. Since rice is the staple food for Manipuris, every individual in the state are consuming this toxic chemicals absorbed by the crops.

One can only imagine the rising number of cancer and other diseases in Manipur, which may have its link with the consumption of

chemically induced crops. Alarmed by the condition, Biren's government put more focus on illegal poppy cultivation. During the course of destroying poppy plants, there were instances of poppy farmers threatening police personnel on duty and one rifleman of Manipur police department's VDF unit was also abducted and killed by poppy planters.

Despite all these reasons, the War on Drug campaign of the Biren government was not implemented in the interest of Meetei community but in the larger interest for the whole state. It would be wrong to bring in Meetei community into this issue or wrong for Kuki-Zo community to blame Meetei for the crackdown on illegal poppy cultivation.

EGI says:

Illegal poppy cultivation is done by all, Kuki-Zos, Nagas, as well as Meiteis. Yet Biren Singh popularised the epithets "poppy cultivators" and "narco-terrorists" only for the Kuki-Zos. That dangerous public posturing became evident when a highly decorated IPS officer, Thounaojam Brinda, filed an affidavit in court stating that the Chief Minister and the top police brass in the state forced her to let off a person from whose premises drugs worth Rs.27 crore had been recovered by her team.

TRUTH:

There's no denial in the involvement of people of different communities in the illegal drug trade and illegal poppy cultivation. At the same time, it is also an irrefutable fact that around 80 per cent of the illegal poppy cultivation is done in Kuki dominated areas. There are indeed some Meeteis, who invest some amount in the illegal activity but no Meetei people are actively involved in illegal poppy cultivation.

District	Destruction (Areas in acres)							Total
	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023		
Imphal East				217	333	187.9		733.9
Bishnupur		95	20	220	130			395
Kakching			32.5	7				39.5
Churachandpur	352	399	29	353	317	1249.8		2699.8
Noney					12	12		
Tamenglong						77		77
Kangpokpi	834	1270	442	535	208	1108.4		4397.4
Senapati	329	37	320	565	320	111		1682
Ukhrul I03		470	1252	786	407	3018		
Kamjong	279	260	30	100	254	125.5		1048.5
Tengnoupal	250	250	613	508	388	566		1982.5
Chandel	92		350	895	185	460.5		
2239	2241	2306.5	4652	2921	4305.1	1866.45		

The term "poppy cultivator" is a common term used against those who cultivate poppy. You cannot sympathise a man who commits a murder for people calling him murderer. As for the term "narco-terrorist", it is a compound word when some groups are engaged in illegal drug trades and also carry out terror activities, which may also involved illegal tax collection, abduction for ransom among others. You can find numerous reports on the involvement of Kuki UG groups in abduction for ransom, obstructing infrastructure projects for extortion, collection of illegal taxes from businesses and shops as well as goods trucks carrying out transport service along the two national highways in Manipur.

Nobody called the whole community as poppy cultivator or narco-terrorist but name calling is only for those who are involved in such illegal activities. When you say Kuki MLAs, you do not mean the whole Kuki people as MLAs. Likewise, when somebody say Chin-Kuki narco-terrorists, it does not necessarily means the whole community as narco-terrorists.

The incident regarding Thounaojam Brinda is a fact, which nobody can deny and in her affidavit, Brinda implicated the chief minister and top police brass. One more detail of that particular case is that the main accused, the former ADC chairman of Chandel, the then BJP member, is a member of Kuk-Zo community. The MLA on whose insistence, the CM got involved, as mentioned in the affidavit of Brinda is a person from a community, which stands in the middle of Naga and Kuki. The community itself refrains from affiliating to either Naga or Kuki. Brinda said in her affidavit

that the main accused, a Kuki tribe, was the right hand man of the tribal MLA.

Despite these facts, the issue, again, is not between Meetei and Kuki in any way. And of course, any major drug ring/cartel/triad cannot run without political support, and the support may not come only from the tribal community but also from the Meetei community and also from those in the higher ups in the national level, something which would be almost impossible to prove despite knowing the truths.

People understand that like Meetei as a community do not support drug trades, Kuki as a community are also against drug trades. The question is about polarisation and polarisation may not always come from the opposite direction but from within one's side by cooking narratives and twisting facts.

EGI says:

These complex factors together stoked Meitei-Kuki ethnic tensions till they reached a combustion point on May 3. The All Tribal Students' Union Manipur (the apex body of the state's tribal students) had organised a solidarity rally on that day, against the Meitei demand for ST status in Churachandpur.

TRUTH:

These are not only the factors that fuelled the violence. There are other more complex factors, which a mere visit for a couple of days and talking selectively to some persons cannot bring out. There are factors like encroachment in religious sites, laying obstruction to Meetei pilgrimage, publishing books or thesis with fake narratives with the purpose to radicalise youths – like the 700 sq mile narrative. This narrative, which purportedly shows the area of Manipur at the time of Merger Agreement was 700 sq mile, was fabricated by persons with doctoral degree who wants to create enmity among the different community living peacefully in the state and it is still used to further radicalise youths.

The rally organised by All Tribal Students' Union Manipur (ATSUM) was peaceful in Naga dominated areas but in Churachandpur, it was a charged rally filled with hate slogans. Before, during and after the rally, several forest offices were either vandalised or burned in Kangpokpi, Churachandpur and Tengnoupal district.

EGI says:

As a counter to this, Meiteis blockaded all roads leading to the Hill districts. Rumours in the afternoon of some Meitei miscreants setting fire to the Anglo-Kuki War Centenary Memorial Gate (some reports say only a few tyres were burnt next to the gate) led to the tribal rallyists returning home to rush to the site. This became the spark that ignited violence between the two communities.

Counter blockade by Meiteis have become somewhat popular after the 200-day economic blockade by UNC in the last part of 2017, just before the 2017 state assembly election. A litre of petrol cost Rs 400 during that time. One can only imagine the cost of essential commodities at that time. Despite that hardships, Meetei endured it as the community understands the sentiments of the protesting group and always wants to maintain a cordial relationship.

However, there is a limit for everything and every time, there is a bandh or blockade, one organisation or another would come up with counter bandh or blockade, which is mostly confined in the peripheral areas. However, such counter measures were never violent in nature and yet nobody could rule out any isolated incidents from either sides.

The burning of Anglo-Kui War Centenary Memorial Gate, which is located deep in Kuki settlement, is filled with rumour when it comes to "who burnt the gate?" Ground reports show that the first witnesses of the arson, numbering around 150 to 200, were clueless who burned the gate.

Large crowd is the perfect fuel for rumours, and as Kuki people gathered there in large numbers, the unknown miscreants, who started the fire, turned into Meetei miscreants from suspicion to definite, as words passed by, it angered the tribal populace, who stormed nearby Meetei settlements of Kangvai and Torbung Bangla, where they started vandalising and burning houses, shops.



Mob in Churachandpur district enquiring two journalists if they know who burnt the gate. The journalists are seen telling them that they don't know and when they arrived there, there were already some Kuki people there and

Meetei people of the village and nearby villages regrouped and retaliated by burning some Kuki houses. In the meantime, more Kuki youths arrived and went on rampage as the outnumbered Meetei villagers had to flee for their safety. The whole world have seen how armed Kuki militants got mixed among the violent Kuki youths and went on their rampage.

EGI says:

Rumours of some Meitei women at Churachandpur Medical College being raped led to 'counter-molestation and rape' of Kuki women, arson and killing of Kukis in the Imphal Valley. The night of May 3 saw the almost total destruction of Kuki-Zo churches,

The report of the rape of Meetei women in Churachandpur, became a rumour when somebody inserted picture of an unrelated incident. For over two months, the survivor remain hidden and came out only recently.

EGI says about total destruction of Kuki-Zo churches in Imphal in the night of May 3 but EGI never mentions the Meetei temples burnt

or vandalised or desecrated by Kuki mobs including the Ibudhou Pakhangba Temple and desecration of Meetei's Salai Taret Flag in Thinkonphai village in Churachandpur district by Kuki mobs in the night of April 27.



The first instance of ethnic violence with involvement of armed Kuki militants

EGI also fails to mention the May 3 afternoon and early evening incidents that took place in Churachandpur, Tengnoupal and some isolated parts of Kangpokpi district, where Meetei population were chased out, some got killed, and their properties were either looted or burned.



Perhaps the first victim of the Manipur violence. Here the mob is shouting "Hatlo! Hatlo!", which is "Kill! Kill!" in Manipuri language. Kuki people claimed the victim as a Kuki taking advantage of the mob speaking Manipur. But the man recording the video is heard speaking in Kuki dialect which clearly suggests that the mob belongs to Kuki and the victim to Meetei.

Selective reporting is not good, especially when it comes from a respected body like EGI.



A Meitei colony in Churachandpur district lying completely burnt/destroyed and levelled to the ground.

EGI says:

houses and other property in the Meitei dominated areas. This was also accompanied by looting of police armouries in the Imphal Valley, imposition of curfew and internet shut down.

TRUTH: Looting of police armouries took place on May 4 but not May 3 and this shows how EGI overlooked an important turning point of the Manipur violence. Yes, looting of arm took place on May 3 but that was in Churachandpur district where Kuki mobs looted arms and ammunition from a Gun House (shop) owned by a Meitei man in the late afternoon of May 3. Besides, looting police armoury took place in Kuki areas too but the numbers were less.



Screenshot of a CCTV footage showing Kuki mob looting a Gun House in Churachandpur on May 3

EGI says:



TRUTH:

EGI is claiming this particular building as a Kuki house being burned. EGI also cropped the image to remove the time stamp of the photo so that it can claim the date of the incident as May 5. The fact is the photo is of a forest office located in Mualtam in Churachandpur district, which was burned by Kuki mobs in the forenoon of May 3.



Original photo shows location and time stamp of the forest office located at Mualtam in Churachandpur district which was burned on May 3.

Although EGI later made a corrigendum in this regard citing mistakes in photo editing, I see it as a lame excuse. The only photo editing done was cropping the image to leave out the time and location stamp. EGI made the corrigendum after they find it impossible to mislead the public as it draws flak from all corners, except for the Kuki community.

EGI says:

The Central government neither imposed President's Rule in the state nor did it invoke powers under Article 355 to take over the law and order machinery. And yet the Governor issued shoot at sight orders, and the Centre appointed a Security Advisor reporting to the Chief Minister who had proved incompetent to control the violence. Some would say the CM's partisan actions had in fact pushed the state into turmoil.

TRUTH:

It is true that Central government neither imposed President's Rule nor did it invoke powers under Article 355. However, as soon as the violence broke out, there was a notion in the whole country that Article 355 was invoked, through which functioning of home department was relegated from the state government and a security advisor was appointed. No, he did not report to chief minister in the initial days. Every appeal made to the chief minister was referred to him at that time. Whether the CM was partisan or not is a matter of perspective and as far as I observed, the CM was rendered powerless until the May 28 attack in Serou and Sugnu village, after which the CM came in the public with a strong statement calling the Kuki militants as terrorists.

EGI says:

The Union Home Minister created a unified command, once again reporting to the CM. In addition to the Manipur police forces under his command he also had Assam Rifles reporting to him. Having caused the problem he was

TRUTH:

Unified Command was already in existence for since Congress rule. Chief Minister is the chairman of the unified command. EGI is not only wrong about the creation of Unified Command but also the statement about the unified command reporting to the CM. The fact is the Unified Command was made to report to the security advisor in the wake of the violence until May 28 attack in Sugnu and Serou village, after which the CM was back in the leadership role of the Unified Command.

EGI says:

The first thing that the unified command did was to demolish the defensive structures/road-

blocks created by the Kukis. When they wanted to do the same on the Meitei side, they were apparently "refused permission". The state bureaucracy, police and political leadership got divided along ethnic lines and

TRUTH:

Removal of highway block was taken up in July not as purported by the EGI report. The situation was so volatile and police as well as central security forces had to take a soft approaches in dealing with the public on either sides. It is true that state police and politicians were divided along ethnic lines on both sides but as far as I observe, there is no such division in the bureaucracy. But such division can no longer be seen in the main valley area.

EGI says:

started behaving as such. The Chief Minister announced that while he and the Manipur Police would be responsible for law and order in the Valley, Union Home Minister Amit Shah had assured him that he would ensure peace in the Hills, presumably through Assam Rifles which reports to the Home Ministry. This further crystallised the ethnic divide with two different law enforcement regimes in place in the same state.

TRUTH:

CM Biren made the announcement, as he was conveying the instruction of Union Home Minister Amit Shah. The move was not welcomed by the Meetei but the Kuki welcomed the arrangement made by the Central government

EGI says:

Manipur police and commando units of the state were also partisan and allegedly openly sided with the civilians and raided Kuki villages in the outskirts of Imphal. "It is well known that the mobs did not loot the police armouries, the weapons were given to them by the police on orders of the state government," a senior member of the Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum in Kangpokpi told the EGI team.

TRUTH:

This is just an allegation made by ITLF, the main organisation spearheading the violence from Kuki side, and allegations does not hold any weight until proven. This organisation manage the whole thing in the civilian side in coordination with militant groups. EGI team is happy to insert a quote from one side but did not think it necessary to balance the narrative by quoting one organisation from the other side such as COCOMI.

Besides, there are scores of proof of ITLF members' involvement with militant groups and in the light of those proofs, ITLF has no ground to project itself as a peaceful organisation. ITLF Drone Squad was formed on May 16, 2023.



Footage of an ITLF member along with armed militants. Second photo shows a close-up of the ID card hanging around his neck.

EGI says:

Assam Rifles vehicles were prevented from entering. There have also been reports that trucks carrying supplies were looted by mobs. The Indian Tricolour is also seen at all Kuki protest sites, around checkpoints and public spaces, perhaps in a bid to emphasise the point that the Kuki-Zos are not asking for separation from India, but an autonomous administrative set-up where finances are not controlled by Imphal. A constant refrain from the Hill areas is that funds for development are mostly spent in the Valley and just about 10 percent reach the Hills.

TRUTH:

Yes, there was a great amount of anger against Assam Rifles, not for protecting the Meeteis, but allegedly for not stopping the armed Kuki militants when they started burning houses and carrying out attack. The confiscation of food items and subsequent distribution to relief camps in Kakching district, was an isolated incident, which the persons responsible had already clarified as "done out of misunderstanding and miscommunication". They claimed that multiple attempts were made to verify the destination of the food consignment. Half of those claimed by Assam Rifles were handed over to the AR team and the remaining half, which later turned out to be those of another AR unit, were distributed

to relief camps. I am not saying if their action was right or wrong, I am simply presenting the facts.

The 10-per-cent-funding-for-hill-area rhetoric is a misleading statement often used by some tribal leaders to instigate the common people to compensate their lack of interest in serving the people, in times of election. The government had already produced a whitepaper showing more than 40 per cent funding in hill areas where less than 40 per cent of the state's population lives. EGI was too lazy to do some digging to verify the statement.

EGI says:

Much as people in the Valley pointed fingers at the surrendered Kuki militant groups brought in to join the mobs that went on rampage in Churachandpur and other places against the Meites, people in the Hills said that former militant groups like the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), the PrePak, and People's Liberation Army (PLA) insurgents armed with sophisticated weapons, led the frenzied Meitei mob attacks in Imphal.

TRUTH:

There are enough video evidences to prove involvement of Kuki militants in the violence since the beginning. On the other hand, involvement of valley-based UG groups is only recent, as pointed out in a report published in Scroll.in

EGI says:

Two other Meitei groups, the Arambai Teng-gol and Meitei Leepun have also been at the forefront of the violence. Reporters from Churachandpur said that the Meitei Leepun, an organisation committed to preserving Meitei culture and tradition, took active part

TRUTH:

Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun may be participant of the crisis but they are not spearheading the situation. Their main priority seems to be safeguarding the territory of the

state. It is same with ITLF on the other side as their main priority is to disintegrate the state for a united Kukiland/ Zoland/ Zalongam, a decades old political dream encompassing Chin-Kuki-Zo inhabited areas of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh despite the fact that they are only seeking for a separate administration (Greater Mizoram) in the current crisis.

EGI says:

Since the latest ethnic clashes began in Manipur, the Meira Paibis have become cheerleaders of the violent mobs attacking Kuki homes. Video clips where Meira Paibis have urged the youth to rape and molest Kuki women have surfaced.

TRUTH:

The statement "Meira Paibis have become cheerleaders of the violent mobs attacking Kuki homes" is a paraphrased statement of a remark made by ITLF and its likes. EGI team also have skipped incidents when Meira Paibi members saved many innocent Kuki people.

Meira Paibi is not an organisation but a symbol or an idea which stems from their identity of keeping night vigil by holding a torch in hand against army atrocities during under AFSPA. Any woman in Manipur, particularly in the Meitei and some other indigenous tribes living in valley area is a Meira Paibi. So an individual act or isolated act cannot be used to tarnish the idea and image of Meira Paibi. EGI needs a clear understanding about term Meira Paibi which translates to torch bearer.

EGI says:

Although the violence came in phases and waves, the two communities now live in separate areas. The hatred is kept alive by activists from the two communities, most of all by Meitei women who seem to have taken to the frontline as defenders of their community.

TRUTH:

Here, EGI is trying to bring one side of the crisis into bad light. Yet, the EGI team, who prepared the report must have difficulty in finding the right words that they ended up saying “as defenders of their community” and you cannot blame anybody for defending their community. The situation is same on the other side as Kuki women are also in the same position, some of whom have even taken up arms.

And the main issue that hurts both men and women in Meitei community is the threat to the territory of the state and everything else is secondary.



Burnt down houses in churachandpur district, on 31 May

Image: Saanya Khandwal

EGI was blunt is misrepresenting a burning forest office as a home of Kuki but in this photo, the EGI team conveniently leaves out the community of the home owner, which is of course a Meitei, who fled the violence in Churachandpur district on May 3.

EGI says:

On May 4, rumours began circulating in the Valley that Meitei women doctors/students in Churachandpur Medical College hospital had been raped and that several women from the Valley were molested by angry Kuki mobs. These rumours were accepted as the gospel truth, and led to retaliatory action in the Imphal Valley.

The report of rape of Meitei women in Churachandpur were considered as a rumour. But it seems to be a mixed of truth and rumour. Somebody added an unrelated photo of a rape survivor in spreading the rumour, which solidified the term “rumour”. Later, a rape

survivor mustered strength and opened up about a gang rape she had.

EGI says:

It is not known if it was the rumours, that propelled the mob to tear off the clothes and parade three Kuki women naked, and rape the

apers had correcters could not get ternet suspension. hat the Kuki, and contribute to any

young girl in the video clip that went viral. However, the Meitei journalists the EGI team met claimed that they did not know about the terrible incident till it went public on the eve of the

Monsoon Session of the Parliament.

TRUTH:

Yes, the incident was not known to any journalists in Imphal before the survivors narrated their story to some national media and later, the video went viral, which was the first time anybody in the media fraternity saw the video.

EGI says:

family members of the women. While Meitei houses were set on fire and there was looting and destruction of Meitei property, no physical harm came to the Meiteis residing in Churachandpur.

TRUTH:

A Meitei truck driver was the first to suffer at the hand of the Kuki mob and the incident took place during the rally before noon. Video of the incident also went viral. There was also another video that went viral in the afternoon of May 3, which purportedly showed a Kuki mob assaulting a Meitei youth while shouting “Hatlo! Hatlo!” which translates into “Kill! Kill!”. The person recording the video was speaking in Kuki dialect. Kukis claim the victim as theirs but that is not the case.

EGI says:

It is also a fact that the Meitei journalists have condemned the Kuki women's molestation. They are ashamed that the miscreants had tarnished the image of all Meiteis.

TRUTH:

Not only the Meitei journalists but the whole Meitei society be it Meira Paibi, local clubs, organisations, CSOs or individuals, also condemned the incident. Some women even vandalised and burnt the house of one of the perpetrators.

EGI says:

The latter could be due to social pressure from society or that their reports were being not used or were shortened to make them devoid of any meaningful reporting. At least one reporter from the Hills confided in the EGI team that even when he was able to send in his reports, they were "used selectively" by his Imphal-based newspaper.

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TRUTH:

I cannot say for other newspaper or media houses as I do not read or watch their reports. But as far as my firm goes, not a single report sent from the hill correspondents were skipped except for some minor editing for grammatical mistakes and sentence structuring. There was only one verbal report that was snubbed and it was about a loot in the Manipur State Cooperative Bank's Churachandpur branch by Kuki mobs. Our Churachandpur correspondent said over the phone that the loot was in a liquor shop in the same building but there was adequate evidences of the bank loot including FIR copies. Ultimately, the verbal report was rejected and that was the only report that got rejected. I can understand that our correspondent may be facing huge pressure. This is the reason why I chose to skip the name of the media firm where I work.

EGI says:

come mainly from the government in Manipur. Keeping the powers that be happy is a given for local media outfits that will sink without the state and ruling party's support. For example, a popular Imphal newspaper group belongs to a ruling party MLA.

TRUTH:

Local media in Imphal do not depend on state and ruling party's support. They are critical of any misrule, misgovernance, misadventure or misconduct of the government. The popular Imphal newspaper group that you mention indeed belongs to an independent MLA, who supports the government. But he only joint politics recently and got elected in the first attempt whereas the media firm has been in existence for decades.

EGI says:

welcomed by both sides. The tribals were better organised when dealing with reporters, giving details of each incident, using their mobile phone cameras to record events and providing facts and figures to support their views.

TRUTH:

OF course, the tribals were better organised when dealing with reporters, which also brings out the common allegation of "fed reports" against national media. EGI's remark also shows that they do not need any further digging but to accept whatever shown to them.

Here, let me put some perspective. A dozen of renowned journalists (regional and national media) are in the WhatsApp group of ITLF and well-laid stories are received from ITLF to these journalists through the WhatsApp feed. I will not take any name here but their names are out in the public domain. They just do WhatsApp journalism, which an alternate term I use for "parachute journalism" used by the common people.

EGI says:

Every journalist the EGI team met in the Hills said that he/she reported what they saw on the ground. "We do not rely on rumours or heresy. The minute we hear of a firing incident or homes being burnt, we rush to the location and report from Ground Zero. We file what we see with our own eyes," a reporter of a local daily claimed.

TRUTH:

What is EGI expecting from the reporters in Manipur? Isn't it obvious for reporters to go in the field and collect information and write a report? Is EGI implying that reporters in valley area do not go to the field/Ground Zero and collect information? Did the EGI team think that the reporters in Imphal valley area are like those national media WhatsApp/ parachute journalists?

EGI says:

In the Kuki areas, the general view is that the Imphal press is biased. "Media houses in Imphal, owned by Meites reported their version of events. They showed little responsibility as newsmen as the papers and television reflected the majority community's version in the initial days of the violence," a local Kuki reporter explained.

TRUTH:

Media in Imphal do not cook up stories but report from the ground. If you could not get the version of the other side, especially when your correspondents, who are working on the payroll of the media firm, fails to send report, will there be any to publish. As for those reports sent by the hill correspondents, everything is published. How can a newspaper publish a report out of the thin air without receiving from the correspondent?

EGI says:

riots in Imphal Valley where Kukis were living were torched and looted, including the homes of the well-to-do. There was nobody to report that story from our side," a volunteer of the Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum in Kangpokpi told the EGI team.

TRUTH:

This is a baseless allegation and incidents of arson and violence in Imphal valley area were reported in local media.

EGI says:

"Most of the newspapers and news channels in the Valley took 'dictation' from Chief Minister Biren Singh's office. The blame for the violence was always on us, the Kuki-Zos.

TRUTH:

This is a serious allegation against journalists and media houses in Imphal from EGI, which has no ground or proof. Every report was based on incidents happening on the ground.

EGI says:

"The narrative from Imphal was that the riots were engineered by the SoO groups(the surrendered Kuki militants, covered under Suspension of Operation, or SoO), next the blame was on poppy cultivators and drug cartels operating in Kuki areas and across the border in Myanmar.

"Then suddenly the explanation was that the violence was because of illegal migrants coming in with arms from Myanmar and settling in forest land and finally they hit on a new phrase - 'Narco-Terrorism'," a reporter explained.

TRUTH:

These are all the factors involved in the current crisis along with others, which why the root cause of the current crisis is often stated to be a complex web.

EGI says:

The author wants the Assam Rifles posted in Manipur to be replaced by battalions posted in some other north eastern states like Nagaland. The rebuttal of the Assam Rifle made it clear that its recruitment took place from different backgrounds and ethnicities from all over the country.

TRUTH:

EGI is happy to quote the article and how the author wanted replacement of Assam Rifles. However, EGI conveniently skips the part where ITLF and Kuki organisations published a list of army officers belonging to Meitei community alleging them of having biased attitude. The same was responded by Indian Army by saying that officers and all ranks in Indian Army are community/religion neutral.

EGI says:

The Manipur media inverted the role of the Meitei mobs and reported the incidents as being instigated by “Kuki

TRUTH:

The Khamenlok incident was not an isolated incident. It was a follow-up of a counter-offensive from the Meitei side. After a failed attack in the nearby Meitei village by Kuki, the village volunteers push in and burnt several houses in Khamenlok. Later, the village volunteers were having a meal in Khamenlok before retreating and it was when the Kuki militants surrounded and attack the church and killed nine persons. A man was also beheaded in the incident and injury marks resembling hacking by sword or machete were also found on the other victims. In most cases, eyes and belly of Meitei victims were gorged out.

EGI says:

there an attempt was made to suggest that a Kuki mob had set fire to the ambulance. They were forced to retract the report after protests on social media.

TRUTH:

As far as my knowledge goes, there was no such attempt and it would be better if EGI shows some proof. The incident itself was an unfortunate incident.

EGI says:

June 20: There was a claim in ‘People’s Chronicle’ that 29 Meira Paibis were injured in a major scuffle with the

Assam Rifles. What was not reported was that the local police had asked for help from AR as they were on the verge of being overwhelmed by the protestors.

TRUTH:

The report is not just a claim but a fact. By using the term ‘claim’ EGI is questioning the credibility of Manipur media. Besides, some details might be missing due to certain factors and that cannot be construed as misreporting or hiding facts.

EGI says:

August 4: The Assam Rifles pointed out that four versions of the same event were reported by the Imphal press, including ‘The Sangai Express’, where the troops allegedly fired blanks to stop a group of women belonging to the Meira Paibis group.

Assam Rifles claimed that the mob tried to breach the buffer zone to reach the (Kuki) people in Kangvai. It accused the media of spreading misinformation.

TRUTH:

The incident is about the ITLF’s attempt to convert Government Sericulture Farm in Torbung Bangla, next to burned and abandoned Meitei houses. The location lies in the buffer zone and yet Kuki people were allowed to enter and dug out graveyards using heavy machineries like excavator.



Churachandpur district police and Rapid Action Force allowing an excavator to go into the buffer zone to dig up burial grounds on August 3.

Meitei protested the attempt and the scuffle broke out as they were denied entry while Kukis were allowed not only to enter but to bring excavators in the buffer zone manned by central security forces. Video coverage by a national media team recorded firing of some shots but nobody knows for certain who fired the shots.

EGI says:

The Meitei media, for that is what Manipur media seemed to have become during the conflict, acted collectively with editors consulting each other and agreeing on a common narrative e.g., agreeing on common language to report an incident, referring to certain use of language or even not reporting an event. This the EGI team was told was because they did not want to inflame the already volatile situation further.

TRUTH:

EGI, by terming Manipur media as “Meitei Media” has already bought to the propaganda of ITLF and since its mind has already been filled with a prejudice mindset.

As for the consultation among editors, that is done in exceptional cases, where highly inflammatory languages are used and some moderations are needed. This occur once or twice a year or does not happen at all. EGI team misquoted or underquoted the explanation to suit its objective.

We know that this is not an unusual approach but there are certain factors at play in the armed conflict situation in the state. Nevertheless, this practice is not at all to allow external influence to sieve into the media reportage but to censor inflammatory statements, to fend off external influences and to face any outcome unitedly.

EGI says:

This seems to have happened to some extent during the present cycle of ethnic violence between the Meiteis and the Kukis.

TRUTH:

However, never such a situation arise in the present conflict in the state. The media team in Imphal was simply pointing out the practice in exceptional cases. By using “This seems to have happened” it is well established that EGI has not come across such situations but it still want to insert a subtle message to the readers of the report to imprint in their minds something that has not happened.

EGI says:

With the internet suspended, and communication and transport in disarray, the media had to rely almost entirely on the narrative of the state government. This narrative under the N. Biren Singh dispensation became a narrow ethnic one playing up to the biases of the majority Meitei community.

TRUTH:

EGI has levelled a serious allegation against media in Manipur by claiming “media had to rely almost entirely on the narrative of the state government”, which is not true in every sense. Unlike the national media, which is divided into LEFT and RIGHT, media in Manipur

are independent to the core. There was no such situations before and during the entire crisis period. This is a serious allegation cooked up by ITLF and borrowed by EGI. In fact, many of the texts used in the EGI's report contains direct texts copied from ITLF bulletin while projecting them as the opinion of the EGI team.

EGI says:

The Meitei media became a party to the vilification of the security forces, especially the Assam Rifles. It failed in its duty by constant propaganda against the Assam Rifles claiming that it was only purveying the views of the public.

TRUTH:

Reporters file reports from the ground, which includes statement blaming Assam Rifles. It is not the media to play jury or intermediary. It is up to the Assam Rifles to reject such allegation.

EGI says:

ethnic lines. There is a Meitei government, Meitei police and Meitei bureaucracy in Imphal and the tribal people living in the Hills have no faith in them.

TRUTH:

This is a propaganda by ITLF and Kuki and EGI is using it. I am not supporting the government but no government in Manipur has ever been the government of a single community and that is the fact. EGI should think twice before making such ridiculous remarks.

EGI says:

The State made a mistake in banning the internet. An internet ban only feeds rumours and blocks the views of the disadvantaged community as has clearly happened in Manipur.

TRUTH:

This is the opinion of every people in Manipur whether it is from Kuki or Meitei. It has done more harm than good.

Conclusion.

After going through the so-called fact finding report of Editors Guild of India, it is safe to say that the report is made without any much efforts and presents a one-sided view. Never, in any part of the report there is an opinion from the Meitei side while there are plenty of opinions from the Kuki side.

Using the photo of Wall of Remembrance, a memorial place for Kuki in the cover page shows the direction the report is heading. Photos of the Wall of Remembrance is used three times in the report, which contains seven photos including a burning forest beat office, which EGI attempted to show as a house belonging to Kuki community.

EGI team use extensively in its report, feeds from ITLF, an organisation that spearheads the violence from the Kuki side by establishing Central Data Collection Centre, Frontline volunteers under the name United Tribal Volunteers (UTVs), IT Cell, Media Cell, Legal Cell, Drone Squad, Finance Team that received foreign aid without FCRA approval, Medical team and Women's Wing among others.

Besides, opinions of the members of the fact finding team published in different platforms shows a one-sided narrative without presenting a balance view. Such persons have no moral right to judge works of a whole media community.

Lastly, there is no LEFT or RIGHT media in Manipur unlike in the national media scenario. In fact, it is the media in Imphal and its Meitei reporters, who always bring out lack of infrastructure, facilities and services in hill areas of Manipur.
