

International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies



ISSN Print: 2664-8652
ISSN Online: 2664-8660
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.31
IJAHS 2025; 7(2): 594-596
www.socialstudiesjournal.com
Received: 09-10-2025
Accepted: 13-11-2025

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

Sapam Rahul Singh
M.Ed. DMCTE, Manipur
University, Manipur, India

Digital Militarization and Youth Radicalization: Social Media, Conflict, and Campus Politics in Manipur

Joyben Okram and Sapam Rahul Singh

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26648652.2025.v7.i2h.355>

Abstract

The ethnic violence that began in Manipur in May 2023 marked a shift in how internal conflicts in India unfold, with digital spaces playing a central role alongside physical violence. This study examines how social media, long internet shutdowns, and youth politics especially on college campuses shaped the Meitei-Kuki conflict. Using secondary sources such as academic studies, reports, and verified media, the analysis shows that social media became both a tool for spreading ethnic mobilization and a platform for resistance. The prolonged 143-day internet shutdown did not reduce tensions; instead, it worsened misinformation, deepened grievances, and fuelled youth radicalization. Educational institutions and campus politics acted as key spaces where online narratives translated into real-world action, reinforcing ethnic divisions. Overall, the study highlights how security-driven digital controls in divided societies can unintentionally intensify conflict rather than contain it.

Keywords: Digital militarization, youth radicalization, social media, campus politics, internet shutdown, ethnic conflict, Manipur

Introduction

The ethnic violence that erupted in Manipur on 3 May 2023 marked one of the most severe internal conflicts in India in recent decades. What began as a protest by tribal students against a judicial recommendation to extend Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the Meitei community rapidly escalated into widespread violence between Meitei and Kuki-Zo groups, resulting in over 60,000 displacements, extensive destruction of property, and prolonged militarization of civilian spaces ^[1, 2]. While ethnic tensions and land-related grievances have long characterized Manipur's political landscape, the 2023 conflict was distinctive in its deep entanglement with digital technologies. Social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, and Telegram became central arenas where competing ethnic narratives were constructed, disseminated, and contested. Simultaneously, the state's response included the imposition of a prolonged internet shutdown lasting approximately 143 days, the longest such shutdown in any Indian state outside Jammu and Kashmir ^[3]. This unprecedented restriction transformed cyberspace into a contested domain of control and resistance, a process that can be conceptualized as digital militarization.

This article argues that youth particularly students and campus-based organizations occupied the epicentre of this transformation. Digital narratives amplified ethnic polarization, while educational disruption and institutional marginalization translated online radicalization into offline mobilization. By examining the intersection of digital militarization, youth radicalization, and campus politics, this study seeks to explain how democratic spaces were reshaped into sites of ethnic conflict during the Manipur crisis.

Conceptual Framework: Digital Militarization and Youth Radicalization

Digital militarization refers to the repurposing of civilian digital infrastructure for conflict-related objectives, including narrative warfare, recruitment, coordination, and information control ^[4]. Unlike traditional cyber warfare, which focuses on state-to-state cyber operations, digital militarization in internal conflicts blurs the distinction between combatants and civilians by mobilizing ordinary users into digital and physical confrontation.

Corresponding Author:
Joyben Okram
Department of Political
Science, Panjab University,
Chandigarh, India

Youth radicalization in the digital age is increasingly shaped by algorithmic amplification, echo chambers, and emotionally charged content. Contemporary studies highlight how social media platforms accelerate radicalization by prioritizing engagement-driven narratives that reinforce identity-based grievances ^[5]. In ethnically divided societies, these dynamics are particularly potent, as digital platforms become spaces where historical grievances are reframed into existential threats.

In Manipur, digital militarization intersected with a long-standing tradition of student activism. Student unions historically functioned as pressure groups articulating socio-political demands. However, during the 2023 conflict, campus politics increasingly converged with ethnic mobilization, eroding the boundary between civic activism and militant participation.

Review of Literature

Scholarship on Manipur’s conflicts has traditionally emphasized historical grievances, identity politics, and militarized governance ^[6]. Saha’s analysis of ethnic identity formation highlights how territorial, cultural, and demographic anxieties have sustained inter-communal mistrust ^[7]. Kojiam’s framing analysis demonstrates how divergent media narratives during the 2023 violence reinforced polarization by selectively emphasizing particular community grievances ^[8]. Recent studies extend these insights and the role of digital media. Research on internet shutdowns in India shows that such measures, while justified as security tools, often generate economic

disruption, restrict civil liberties, and fail to prevent misinformation ^[9]. Maurya’s examination of the Manipur shutdown reveals disproportionate impacts on students, healthcare services, and marginalized communities ^[10]. Global literature on youth radicalization underscores the importance of digital platforms as accelerants rather than root causes of extremism. Algorithmic curation, filter bubbles, and online validation mechanisms intensify grievance-based mobilization, particularly among politically disillusioned youth ^[11]. This article builds on these strands by integrating digital militarization, campus politics, and educational disruption into a unified analytical framework.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology based exclusively on secondary data. No primary fieldwork was conducted due to security constraints and prolonged internet restrictions. Sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional working papers, human rights reports, and verified national and international media coverage published between May 2023 and December 2024.

The analysis employs thematic content analysis to examine three interrelated domains: (1) digital narratives and social media dynamics, (2) youth and campus-based mobilization, and (3) the socio-educational impacts of internet shutdowns. Claims derived from media reports are triangulated with academic and institutional sources to ensure reliability.

Digital Narratives and Social Media as Conflict Infrastructure

Table 1: Forms of Digital Militarization Observed during the Manipur Conflict

Dimension	Description	Illustrative Evidence	Key Sources
Narrative warfare	Competing ethnic narratives framing victimhood and blame	Viral videos, hashtag campaigns	Kojiam (2025); MIYC reports
Algorithmic amplification	Platform algorithms promoting emotionally charged content	Echo chambers, filter bubbles	Soufan Centre (2025)
Organizational coordination	Use of platforms for mobilization and logistics	Encrypted groups, coordinated posting	Arquilla & Ronfeldt (1999)
Information control	Restriction and monopolization of information flows	Internet shutdown, selective access	Maurya (2024); Access Now (2024)

Source: Compiled by the author from secondary literature.

Social Media as Narrative Battlefield

During the Manipur conflict, social media platforms emerged as primary sites of narrative production. Competing ethnic groups disseminated videos, images, and testimonies portraying themselves as victims and the other as aggressors ^[8]. Hashtags and coordinated posting campaigns amplified these narratives, often reaching national and international audiences. Several documented incidents illustrate the role of misinformation as a catalyst for violence. Manipulated images and videos, later traced to unrelated events outside Manipur, circulated widely and triggered retaliatory attacks ^{[2][10]}. The speed and emotional intensity of such content overwhelmed fact-checking mechanisms, reinforcing cycles of fear and revenge.

Internet Shutdown and the Paradox of Digital Control
Conceptual Pathways Linking Internet Shutdowns and Youth Radicalization

Description: The figure conceptualizes how internet shutdowns affect youth radicalization through three interlinked pathways: (1) information vacuum and rumour proliferation, (2) educational and economic disruption, and

(3) institutional distrust. Together, these pathways intensify grievance formation and identity-based mobilization.

Source: Adapted from Maurya (2024) and Access Now (2024). The Manipur government imposed a blanket internet shutdown shortly after violence erupted, citing the need to curb misinformation and restore order. However, evidence suggests that the shutdown produced counterproductive outcomes ^[3, 9]. Rather than preventing rumour circulation, the absence of verifiable information created an information vacuum filled by speculation and offline rumour networks. The shutdown imposed severe socio-economic and educational costs. Students were unable to access online classes, register for national examinations, or apply for scholarships, while healthcare providers reverted to manual communication systems ^[10]. These disruptions disproportionately affected youth and marginalized communities, transforming digital exclusion itself into a source of grievance. From the perspective of digital militarization, the shutdown represents an attempt to assert state control over information flows. Yet its selective enforcement and uneven access reinforced information

asymmetries, enabling politically mobilized actors to dominate narrative spaces while silencing moderate voices.

Campus Politics, Education, and Youth Radicalization

Table 2: Educational Disruptions and Youth Responses during the Manipur Conflict (2023–2024)

Type of disruption	Immediate impact on students	Reported response	Reference
Internet shutdown	Inability to access online classes and exams	Campus protests, grievance articulation	Maurya (2024)
Scholarship delays	Financial stress, dropout risk	Student mobilization, demonstrations	India Today (2024)
Campus militarization	Fear and disruption of academic life	Politicization of student unions	Singh (2019)
Conflict displacement	Interrupted schooling	Educational out-migration	Imphal Times (2024)

Source: Compiled from media reports and academic studies.

Educational institutions emerged as critical nodes linking digital narratives to physical mobilization. Student unions and campus networks played a central role in organizing protests, disseminating information, and articulating ethnic grievances ^[1, 6]. As academic schedules collapsed under curfews and shutdowns, campuses increasingly became spaces of political contestation rather than learning. The prolonged disruption of education intensified youth frustration and uncertainty. For many students, the loss of academic opportunities translated into a perceived erosion of future prospects, making participation in ethnic mobilization a viable alternative form of agency. In some cases, youth transitioned from campus activism to participation in community-based armed groups, often framed as defensive “volunteer” formations ^[2]. These dynamics illustrate how educational disruption can function as an indirect driver of radicalization. When institutions fail to provide stability and opportunity, youth are more susceptible to identity-based mobilization reinforced through digital narratives.

Discussion

The Manipur conflict demonstrates how digital militarization reshapes internal conflicts by embedding violence within everyday communication infrastructures. Social media platforms enabled rapid mobilization and identity reinforcement, while state-imposed digital controls inadvertently deepened polarization. Youth radicalization emerged not simply from ethnic ideology but from the convergence of digital amplification, educational disruption, and institutional marginalization. Importantly, this case highlights the limitations of security-centric digital governance. Internet shutdowns may restrict information temporarily, but they also undermine trust, exacerbate grievances, and weaken democratic engagement. In ethnically divided societies, such measures risk transforming digital spaces into arenas of prolonged contestation rather than tools for reconciliation.

Conclusion

The 2023–24 Manipur crisis underscores the centrality of digital infrastructures in shaping contemporary ethnic conflicts. Digital militarization transformed social media platforms into sites of narrative warfare, while prolonged internet shutdowns intensified youth grievances and

radicalization. Campus politics served as a critical bridge between online mobilization and offline conflict, as educational disruption eroded traditional pathways of social mobility. Addressing such conflicts requires moving beyond blanket digital repression toward strategies that combine digital literacy, platform accountability, conflict-sensitive communication, and the protection of educational continuity. Without such interventions, digital spaces will continue to amplify division, and youth will remain vulnerable to radicalization in contexts of protracted conflict.

References

1. South Asian Voices. What’s behind the violence in Manipur? 2023.
2. The Print. How social media misinformation fuelled Manipur violence. 2023.
3. Time. India leads the world in internet shutdowns. 2023.
4. Arquilla J, Ronfeldt D. *The emergence of netwar*. Santa Monica (CA): RAND; 1999.
5. Polizzi G. Youth radicalization in digital spaces. *Vision of Humanity*. 2025.
6. Singh N. Ethnic conflict and student movements in Northeast India. *Econ Polit Wkly*. 2019.
7. Saha J. Identity politics and ethnic conflict in Manipur. *Journal of Northeast Studies*. 2023.
8. Koiyam R. Media framing and ethnic narratives in Manipur. *Int J Futur Multidiscip Res (IJFMR)*. 2025.
9. Access Now. *The global cost of internet shutdowns*. New York: Access Now; 2024.
10. Maurya A. Internet shutdowns and digital democracy in Manipur. *GMJ Manipal*. 2024.
11. The Soufan Centre. *Digital extremism and youth radicalization*. New York: The Soufan Centre; 2025.