

Research Paper

## A Study to Assess the Impact of the Ongoing Manipur Conflict on the Emotional, Academic, and Financial Well-being of Manipur Students Living Outside the State

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### ABSTRACT

The violent conflict that erupted in Manipur in May 2023 has caused widespread devastation, forcing many to flee their homes and tearing families apart. While much of the attention has focused on those directly affected within the state, this study shifts the lens toward Manipuri students living and studying outside the state, young people who, though physically distant, are emotionally and psychologically tethered to the crisis back home. Through in-depth interviews with thirty students, this research explores how the conflict has disrupted their emotional, academic, and financial well-being. The findings reveal overwhelming emotional distress, marked by anxiety, helplessness, and survivor's guilt, paired with a noticeable decline in academic focus, motivation, and performance. Financial instability was further intensified by the prolonged internet shutdown in Manipur, which disrupted online transactions and blocked access to emergency financial support from families. These students live in a constant state of emotional dissonance: trying to survive and study in peace while their families live through war. This paper highlights the urgent need for trauma-informed mental health support, institutional sensitivity, and policies that acknowledge the invisible burden carried by students who, while living away for their education, remain deeply affected by the crisis unfolding in their home state.

**Keywords:** *Manipur conflict, emotional distress, academic disruption, financial insecurity, internet shutdown, Manipuri students*

In modern Indian history, Northeast India has been recognized as a distinct region, traditionally known as the "Land of the Seven Sisters," comprising Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. With the later inclusion of Sikkim, the region's identity has further evolved (Zhimomi, 2019). Despite their distinct ethnicities and traditions, the people of this region share a strong sense of unity (Das, 2024), especially when they find themselves far from home. Whether in metropolitan cities like Delhi, Bangalore, or elsewhere for higher studies, North-eastern students tend to bond effortlessly. Studies suggest that North-eastern individuals in metropolitan cities often encounter stereotyping and social exclusion, which, in turn, fosters a stronger sense of unity and collective support among them (Kumar, 2025). Mongoloid Indians frequently face racial

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slurs and derogatory remarks, with terms like "chinky," "chini," "Nepali," "bahadur," and "Chinese" being commonly used to mock and stereotype them. Among these, "chinky" appears to be the most frequently used insult. Instead of being asked neutral questions like "Where are you from?" they are often subjected to assumptions about their nationality, with questions such as "Are you from Nepal?" or "Are you from China?" (Samson, 2017). However, this feeling of safety and support has been deeply shaken for Manipuri students ever since the conflict in their home state erupted on May 3rd. According to (Khamrang, 2023), many elements interacted in a complex way to cause the current crisis. Notably, the primary reason of the current violence is the Manipur high court judgement from March 27th, which instructed the state government to suggest adding Meitei to the ST list. The crisis has not only affected those within Manipur but has also left its students outside the state vulnerable, struggling with distress, uncertainty, and an unsettling shift in their usual sense of community. The conflict that erupted on May 3, 2023, between the Meitei and Kuki communities carries multiple narratives, each shaped by differing perspectives and lived experiences. However, an undeniable truth remains, the unrest has profoundly impacted both communities, as well as the larger population of Manipur. According to (Sadokpam, 2023) Hundreds have been injured, more than 9,000 members of the Kuki and Meitei groups, as well as others, have been displaced thus far, and more than a dozen people have been confirmed dead. Even those who are not directly involved in the conflict have felt its effects, as the state continues to grapple with widespread disruptions. In November 2024, authorities imposed an indefinite curfew and suspended internet services in response to violent protests that targeted the residences of politicians (Agarwala, 2024). The state's inadequate response has been brought to light by the crisis, but it has also brought attention to the pressing need for action to save a generation. Students, teachers, and families who have been displaced are demanding that internet connectivity be restored, that schools and institutions reopen, and that psychological care be made available (Solanki, 2024). Moreover, the conflict has disrupted the social fabric, leading to displacement and weakening the strong communal ties that once held communities together (Borah, 2024).

This paper primarily focuses on the emotional, financial, and academic well-being of Manipuri students studying outside the state, who have been deeply affected by the ongoing conflict. While wars and civil unrest are often analysed in terms of political or territorial consequences, their impact on the individual lives of those caught in the crossfire, especially students pursuing education away from home, is just as significant.

### **Emotional well-being**

Emotional well-being is the capacity to generate pleasant emotions, moods, thoughts, and sentiments as well as to adjust to stressful and challenging circumstances (Lois Melkonian, 2021). Monitoring the emotional wellbeing of an individual is crucial. Being emotionally healthy enables you to control your negative feelings and emotions in a circumstance while concentrating on the good (Lois Melkonian, 2021). Exposure to conflict, even indirectly through media coverage, can have profound psychological effects. Research indicates that exposure to distressing imagery from armed conflicts can trigger feelings of anxiety, sadness, loneliness, and overall psychological distress (Pe'er & Slone, 2022). This phenomenon, referred to as secondary traumatic stress (STS), arises when individuals indirectly experience trauma by being exposed to others' distressing experiences (Ormiston et al., 2022). For many Manipuri students living outside the state, the conflict has led to overwhelming distress, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness. Being physically distant from their families while witnessing the turmoil unfold from afar, often through fragmented and

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distressing news updates has created an emotional burden that is difficult to process. Furthermore, experiencing prolonged conflict, even indirectly from afar, can have a significant psychological impact (Global, 2025). Violence and armed conflict overturn social support networks and throw civilian populations under a lot of stress (Marquez, 2016). It is a well-known truth that people who are living in a conflict affected zone tends to have symptoms of PTSD, however, it is also important to understand that people who are not directly in contact with the conflict, supposed staying near the conflict zone, or witnessing the conflict through media, etc. are also more or less affected emotionally though not as severe as the IDPs. According to (Şar 2017), as cited in (Karaman et al., 2022) General physical health has been linked to PTSD, meaning that traumatic experiences might affect how people respond to various aspects of life. Knowing how traumatic events (bombings, conflicts, and life with refugees) impact all facets of everyday life and activities is crucial at this time so that preventative studies for those living close to conflict zones can be carried out. Ensuring that research is done on individuals who have been affected secondarily is crucial for better understanding the impact of conflicts. Emerging adults may experience hardship and difficulties in the future if they struggle with general health and life balance as a result of traumatic experiences (Karaman et al., 2022).

This paper focuses on the emotional well-being of Manipuri students who are experiencing overwhelming and difficult-to-explain emotions due to the ongoing conflict in their home state. It highlights the broader impact of conflict, emphasizing that its effects extend beyond those directly living in the conflict zone. Acknowledging and addressing these emotions is crucial to prevent further negative consequences on both the individuals affected and those around them as mentioned by (Kitzrow, 2003) Students experiencing emotional and behavioural challenges can significantly impact others on campus, including roommates, classmates, faculty, and staff, through behaviours that may be disruptive, distressing, or even pose a risk.

### **Financial well-being**

According to (Sabri & Falahati, 2012) financial well-being is a subjective assessment of one's financial status that is characterised by happiness, financial health, and lack of worry. Student's financial well-being is crucial since it significantly affects both their general life happiness and their financial well-being after graduation (Shim et al., 2009). When students face financial instability, it can create additional stress that impacts their academic performance and takes a toll on their mental well-being. The constant worry about tuition fees, daily expenses, and meeting basic needs can lead to heightened anxiety, difficulty concentrating, and even burnout. A student's financial well-being can be considered high if they exhibit healthy budgeting habits and an optimistic mind set towards money (Gutter & Copur, 2011). Students who reside outside their home state and rely on monthly financial support from their parents can face significant challenges if these funds are delayed. The uncertainty of meeting essential expenses such as rent, food, and academic supplies can create considerable stress, affecting their focus and overall well-being. Financial instability may force them to cut back on necessities, seek part-time jobs, or borrow money, further adding to their mental and emotional burden. For many Manipuri students studying outside the state, financial stability largely depends on support from their families back home. However, with the conflict disrupting businesses, livelihoods, and due to frequent internet outages, one of the biggest challenges that students encounter is their inability to obtain financial aid. With digital transactions becoming the primary mode of transferring money, internet bans have made it difficult for parents to send funds on time, leaving students in a

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state of financial uncertainty. This has forced many to delay payments, cut down on necessities, or seek emergency help from friends and acquaintances. According to (Northern et al., 2010), due to unforeseen financial emergencies, financial constraints, and their credit score, college students usually experience financial stress, which has a significant impact on their academic achievement and their physical and mental well-being in a detrimental way. This paper seeks to examine how conflict affects the financial well-being of students who are living away from home.

### **Academic well-being**

Achieving academic success, regulating academic stress, and obtaining academic fulfilment are all components of academic well-being (Shek & Chai, 2020). Students in conflict zones experience a significant loss in their well-being due to the continuous disruptions in their education. In Manipur, this challenge is further compounded by heightened stress and anxiety, as uncertainty about their future adds to their emotional and academic struggles. In Imphal, the closure of educational institutions highlights the increasing disruption to everyday life, as authorities work to prevent violence from reaching campuses and other public areas. For students and educators, this shutdown has created a sense of uncertainty and distress as they anxiously await the return of stability and normalcy (Ahuja, 2024). On one hand it is the struggle of students residing in Manipur and on the other hand, the struggle of Manipuri students who are studying outside the State, when they are constantly preoccupied with concerns about their families' safety, financial struggles, and uncertainty about the future, affecting their ability to concentrate on academics significantly. Sleepless nights, lack of motivation, and persistent stress can lead to academic burnout, poor performance, and even dropout risks. According to (Orzech et al., 2011) Sleep is typically linked to academic achievement in the classroom. Insufficient sleep has been linked to poor focus and attention in the classroom. Additionally, students studying outside the state may struggle with accessing mental health support systems, as they may not feel comfortable or understood by institutions that are unfamiliar with the socio-political context of Manipur's crisis. Therefore, this paper will try to focus on the struggle of these students while their home state is burning.

Beyond these three aspects, the conflict seem to also impact students' social well-being; their ability to form and maintain meaningful relationships. The fear of discrimination, both online and offline, has made some students withdraw from social interactions. There is also the added emotional toll of dealing with insensitive or misinformed remarks about the conflict from those outside the Northeast.

The stress of financial instability, combined with academic pressures and emotional distress, only adds to the already overwhelming burden these students are carrying. Overall, this paper aims to highlight how political unrest does not just affect those in conflict zones but also extends its reach to students living miles away, disrupting their sense of security, stability, and future prospects.

### **Research Gap**

While much research has explored the impact of conflict on internally displaced persons and those in conflict zones, less is known about the distress experienced by individuals who are geographically distant but emotionally and socially connected to affected regions. Despite not being physically present, these individuals face significant, often overlooked, psychological and financial challenges. Existing studies largely focus on trauma and anxiety,

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with limited attention to financial strain—such as disrupted family support, rising educational costs, and fewer job opportunities—which can worsen stress. This study addresses these gaps by examining both the emotional and financial burdens faced by socially connected individuals living outside conflict zones, offering a more comprehensive view of conflict’s far-reaching effects.

### ***Rationale of the study***

The ongoing conflict in Manipur since May 2023 has received widespread attention for its direct impact within the state, but little has been done to understand its effects on Manipuri students studying outside. These students, though geographically distant, face significant emotional distress, academic disruption, and financial instability due to their close personal ties to the crisis. Internet shutdowns, fear for family safety, and exposure to distressing media have left them overwhelmed and unsupported. Most existing research focuses on those directly in conflict zones, leaving a gap in understanding the secondary trauma experienced by those indirectly affected. This study aims to address that gap by exploring the lived experiences of these students and emphasizing the urgent need for institutional and policy-level support.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Research design***

This study uses a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of students affected by the Manipur conflict while studying outside the state. Qualitative interviews were chosen over surveys to capture in-depth, personal accounts from a small, hard-to-reach population more comfortable sharing through conversation. Data were analysed using narrative analysis to understand individual stories and thematic analysis to identify common patterns, offering both personal and collective insights into the conflict’s emotional, academic, and financial impacts.

### ***Participants***

The participants of this study comprise 30 Manipuri students currently pursuing higher education in the Delhi National Capital Region (NCR). The age range of the participants is between 18 to 25 years, corresponding to the typical college-going population. All participants self-identified as Manipuri (all tribes) and were residing in Delhi NCR at the time of the study. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who had direct or indirect exposure (through social media, news, etc.) to the ongoing conflict and its aftermath.

### ***Data collection method***

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to freely express their experiences, thoughts, and emotions. This method was chosen to gain nuanced insights into the psychological and academic challenges faced by the students. All responses were transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

### ***Ethical considerations***

1. Participants were informed about the study's purpose and their role before the interviews.
2. Participation was entirely voluntary.
3. Informed consent was obtained, with the understanding that participants could withdraw at any time without facing negative consequences.

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4. No real names or personal details were used in any part of the study.
5. Privacy was ensured by maintaining confidentiality throughout the process.
6. Participants' experiences were handled with respect and care.

**Data analysis**

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This approach involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This method facilitated a systematic interpretation of the qualitative data, ensuring that emerging themes accurately reflected the lived experiences of the participants.

**RESULT**

*Table 1 Data analysis result through thematic analysis*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>From Interview excerpts</b>	<b>Notes/ Example</b>
Stress and Anxiety inducing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Constant update of conflict leading to Stress and anxiety showing physical symptoms.</li> <li>· A deep sense of helplessness taking over.</li> <li>· Added guilt to the distress for being in a safer space.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Trembling hands, sleepless nights, panic attacks, etc.</li> <li>· Inability to do anything for the people.</li> <li>· Feeling guilty for being in a safe environment while their parent's life are at risk.</li> </ul>
Internet Ban-communication issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Not being able to check on family's safety.</li> <li>· Not being able to verify news.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Video call option is not available.</li> <li>· Relied only on calls and SMSs.</li> </ul>
Negative impact of social media portrayal of the conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Increased anxiety and mental exhaustion due to continuous exposure to distressing content causing emotional burnout.</li> <li>· Misinformation and confusion, biased narratives and exaggerated reports led to frustration.</li> <li>· Social withdrawal by avoiding discussions about the conflict to protect their mental health.</li> <li>· Loss of focus with the constant updates on violence, it disrupted students' ability to concentrate on academics.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Updates about the conflict is so frequent and violent which impacts almost all the students.</li> <li>· News channel showed half information, one sided news which lead to frustration. People also ask sensitive questions recklessly.</li> <li>· Uninstalling social Medias, avoiding conversations with friends regarding the conflict, etc.</li> <li>· Unable to concentrate on exam's preparation nor complete assignments.</li> </ul>
Constant threat and fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Constant fear kept them on edge, making them overly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Feels unsafe even outside the conflict zone making</li> </ul>

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perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· aware of their surroundings.</li> <li>· Avoidant behaviour by restricting movements to minimize perceived risks.</li> <li>· Identity concealment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· them think over and again before doing things.</li> <li>· Avoided going outside hostel, college campus, etc.</li> <li>· Fear of being targeted led to reluctance in revealing their background.</li> </ul>
Impact on Academics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Decline in academic performance.</li> <li>· Missed deadlines and classes</li> <li>· Disconnection from studies</li> <li>· Physical and mental strain</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Students struggled with focus, retention, and motivation.</li> <li>· Emotional exhaustion led to absenteeism.</li> <li>· Loss of long-term academic goals due to uncertainty about the future.</li> <li>· Anxiety led to physical exhaustion, impacting learning capacity.</li> </ul>
Trauma of displacement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Long-term psychological trauma</li> <li>· Uncertainty about the future</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Fear, anxiety, and PTSD-like symptoms in children and adults.</li> <li>· Families lost homes and financial stability.</li> </ul>
Financial issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Transaction issue due to internet band.</li> <li>· Basic necessities became uncertain, as students had to stretch their finances.</li> <li>· Dependency on relatives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Delayed payment for college fees, rent fees, etc.</li> <li>· Focus only on needs not wants.</li> <li>· Borrowed money to afford basic needs.</li> </ul>

Table 1 provides insight into how the ongoing Manipur conflict has affected Manipuri students studying outside the state, particularly in terms of their emotional, financial, and academic well-being. Several key themes have emerged from the data collected, including - Stress and anxiety inducing; Internet ban- communication issues; Negative impact of social media portrayal of the conflict; Constant threat and fear perception; Impact on Academics due to uncertainty; Trauma of displacement; Financial issues.

**Stress and anxiety inducing**

Students experienced significant stress and anxiety due to the constant influx of conflict updates via social media, news, and family conversations. Secondary exposure to such distressing content led to emotional exhaustion, physical symptoms (e.g., trembling, shivering), and a deep sense of helplessness. Many felt guilty for being safe while their loved ones endured hardships back home.

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### **Internet ban- communication issues**

Frequent internet bans disrupted contact with families, heightening worry and emotional distress. Limited communication and unreliable phone networks deepened feelings of isolation and panic. The inability to verify news amid widespread misinformation worsened their anxiety. Some avoided news entirely to protect their mental health.

### **Negative impact of social media portrayal of the conflict**

Overexposure to distressing social media content intensified anxiety, emotional burnout, and academic distraction. Misinformation and biased narratives fueled frustration and helplessness. To cope, some students withdrew socially and avoided conflict-related discussions, though academic focus remained deeply affected.

### **Constant threat and fear perception**

The conflict instilled persistent fear, leading students to limit their movements and, in some cases, conceal their identities to avoid discrimination. This hypervigilance and social withdrawal contributed to isolation and psychological distress.

### **Impact on Academics**

Emotional distress undermined academic performance, leading to missed deadlines, class absences, and lack of focus. Many reported difficulties concentrating, feeling disconnected from studies, and being constantly preoccupied with conflict updates.

### **Trauma of displacement**

Students worried about long-term emotional impacts as they struggled with the helplessness of not being able to support loved ones directly affected by the conflict. Uncertainty about their families' safety and their own future compounded emotional strain.

### **Financial issues**

The internet ban disrupted financial transactions, making it difficult to transfer money, pay rent, or buy essentials. Students faced late fees, financial dependency, and increased anxiety as they stretched limited resources amid uncertainty about when restrictions would ease.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study was conducted among Manipuri students studying in Delhi-NCR to assess the impact of the ongoing Manipur conflict on their emotional, financial, and academic well-being. Based on the data collected, several recurring themes were identified that reflect the challenges these students are facing while being away from their home state. The following section discusses these key themes, providing insight into how the conflict has influenced various aspects of their daily lives.

### **Stress and anxiety inducing**

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the interviews was the overwhelming emotional distress triggered by constant exposure to the conflict through social media platforms. Studies show that repeated exposure to traumatic content online can significantly impact mental health, especially among youth and those with close ties to the crisis (Thompson et al., 2019). Applications like Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube became a continuous stream of disturbing images, videos, and updates about the Manipur conflict. As highlighted by many participants "I often see or hear the news about the situation in every social media platforms, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook",

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“Social media like twitter, Facebook and Instagram was full of conflict related posts”, “Most of the time when I open Instagram or Facebook, the news feed is mostly about the conflict updates/news”, etc. Participants consistently mentioned that, despite being physically removed from the conflict zone, they felt emotionally entangled in it due to the frequency and intensity of the content they encountered online. This kind of secondary exposure has been recognised in psychological research as a contributing factor to emotional fatigue and heightened anxiety (Garfin et al., 2020). For many students, this exposure led to feelings of helplessness, mental fatigue, restlessness, and emotional exhaustion. The situation was further intensified by the lack of verified information and the spread of distressing, and often conflicting, narratives online. This created a kind of helpless witnessing, where individuals could see the suffering of their families and communities in real time, but were unable to take direct action. One participant specifically mentioned “The constant updates of violence, displacement, and suffering create a deep sense of worry and helplessness”. Studies have shown that ongoing digital exposure to crisis-related content, especially involving one's identity or community, significantly impacts emotional regulation and contributes to symptoms of trauma (Comer et al., 2008). Participants described disrupted sleep, racing thoughts, inability to focus, and emotional withdrawal as common experiences during this time. What becomes evident is that emotional distress is not limited to those within the immediate conflict zone. Several participants expressed that although they may not be facing physical harm, their mental and emotional states were severely impacted. A participant mentioned, “As most of my family and friends still reside there, any news of unrest brings about a turmoil even though I live outside the state”. This supports the idea that conflict, when consumed digitally, can transcend physical boundaries and cause psychological distress in observer, especially when those observers are deeply connected to the region or people involved (Şar, 2017). In addition to distress, some students reported experiencing guilt for being in a safer location. They struggled with the emotional weight of watching their communities suffer while they remained physically unharmed and distant. One of the participants expressed, “I also experience guilt for being in a safer place while so many people back home are suffering. Seeing innocent victims being mercilessly killed makes me feel helpless and distressed”. Another expressed, “I feel bad and sorry for my family and friends who are in Manipur. I feel bad that my family and I are having very different experiences right now”.

While social media flooded students with distressing updates, the internet ban back home brought a different challenge. Many participants expressed that not being able to check in with family or confirm news first-hand added to their anxiety and sense of helplessness.

### ***Internet ban- communication issues***

Since the outbreak of the conflict in Manipur on May 3rd, 2023, internet services have been repeatedly suspended, often beginning with short-term bans that are then extended indefinitely. Manipur records the highest internet ban in India (Rashid, 2025). This pattern has significantly disrupted student's primary mode of communication, video calls and online messaging, with their families and friends in the conflict zone. One of the participants expressed, “There has been no means of staying in touch through the everyday communication routes such as WhatsApp and messenger; all forms of social connectivity remain inaccessible, except for phone calls, which were also at times unreachable when there was no means to recharge it”. For many Manipuri students living outside the state, the internet was not merely a luxury but a psychological lifeline, offering real-time updates on their loved one's safety and emotional reassurance during a time of profound uncertainty.

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The sudden breakdown of this digital connection created a lingering sense of helplessness. Prior research highlights that students who experience crisis-related displacement or communication breakdowns often report heightened stress, decreased academic performance, and reduced motivation (Al-Rabiaah et al., 2020). Students reported increased anxiety stemming from the inability to confirm the safety of their families or cross-check distressing news. One of the participants expressed, “I experienced a lot of emotional and psychological unrest upon being unable to talk to them and being uncertain about their welfare”, another added “because of the internet ban, we don’t really know what is happening so, things are very uncertain for us”. This aligns with broader psychological literature which shows that communication disruptions during crises, particularly among displaced or diasporic populations, contribute significantly to emotional dysregulation, panic, and feelings of isolation (Garfin et al., 2020). Ultimately, the internet bans created a compounding effect, disrupting communication, support systems, access to news, and the capacity to mentally process the evolving crisis. These compounded stressors contributed to heightened emotional distress.

### ***Negative impact of social media portrayal of the conflict***

For many Manipuri students living outside the state, social media became their main window into the unfolding crisis. However, rather than offering clarity or comfort, it frequently intensified psychological distress. One of the participants mentioned, “Ever since the conflict, I have often found myself in a state of panic upon the slightest news that mentions my State”. Continuous exposure to graphic images, emotionally charged posts, and constant updates created a state of emotional exhaustion and cognitive overload. This aligns with findings that prolonged media exposure to traumatic events is associated with increased psychological symptoms such as stress, anxiety, and emotional fatigue (Garfin et al., 2020). In addition to the emotional strain of repeated exposure, students also encountered a flood of misinformation and biased narratives across platforms. One of the participants expressed, “it’s not something new that the press/medias do spread false information or rumours or just tell only one side of the story”, another participant mentioned, “While many updates come from our local networks, I also try to follow neutral sources to get a balanced understanding of the overall situation”. Research has shown that misinformation during crises can exacerbate confusion, fear, and psychological vulnerability, particularly among individuals who are directly or indirectly affected (Pennycook et al., 2020). To manage their emotional distress, some students resorted to social withdrawal or digital avoidance, limiting conversations about the conflict or muting conflict-related content online, expressed by some participants as follows, “The constant stream of disturbing news and graphic content on social media took a toll on my mental state, prompting me to uninstall all social media apps.”, “most of the time, I try to avoid conversation about the conflict among my friends and Manipuri people in general because I don’t really want to converse about the conflict”. A meta-analytic review by (Pfefferbaum et al., 2021) found a significant association between contact with mass trauma-related media and elevated symptoms of anxiety and depression. Their analysis highlights that repeated exposure to distressing content through digital platforms can have a cumulative psychological toll, particularly for individuals already emotionally connected to the trauma. The overwhelming emotional burden also interfered with academic functioning. Students reported difficulty concentrating, meeting deadlines, and staying mentally present in their coursework which will be discussed more elaborately in further themes.

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Overall, the portrayal of the conflict on social media did not simply inform, it overwhelmed. While digital platforms can offer valuable updates and foster solidarity, in this context they became a source of psychological overload, misinformation, and emotional withdrawal, further impacting the well-being and academic stability of already-vulnerable students.

### ***Constant threat and fear perception***

The conflict has affected Manipuri students studying away from home in more profound ways than just emotional longing, it has introduced a continuous feeling of unease and vulnerability in their daily lives. Research indicates that people who are physically removed from areas of conflict may still experience psychological distress, particularly when they have close emotional, familial, or cultural connections to those affected. This emotional strain is often described as vicarious trauma or secondary traumatic stress, as their sense of safety and well-being becomes intertwined with the suffering of their loved ones (Baum, 2016). This fear is often not about being directly harmed, but rather stems from the constant anxiety for the safety of their families back home. Participants expressed that even though they are physically distant, emotionally they remain chained to Manipur, where the violence continues to cast a shadow of uncertainty over their loved ones. Direct quotes from some of the participants are as follows, “I often worry about the conflict escalating and reaching my location, or worse, my locality becoming a buffer zone”, “It’s unpredictable because anything can happen at any time which means one can die at any moment.”, “It’s very emotionally torturing and psychologically, I feel not at ease knowing that something can happen any moment”. This indirect threat weighs heavily. Students described how each phone call home is filled with dread, worrying about whether their parents are safe, whether homes have been damaged, or whether they’ll have access to basic needs. News reports echo this concern; during protests at Jantar Mantar, students in Delhi explicitly shared their deep concern for the safety of their families still in the conflict zone, urging authorities to restore normalcy and act pre-emptively rather than reactively (Anand, 2023). However, the sense of fear does not stop at worrying for others. Some students noted that the line between being an observer and a potential victim has begun to blur due to news report shared in social media of animosity between the two communities even outside the state. One participant expressed, “I hear about fights and violence happening here in Delhi so I don’t feel completely safe”. Some families, concerned for their children’s safety, began advising them to limit movement, stay indoors, and even avoid revealing their ethnic identity in public if not necessary as mentioned by one of the participants, “My parents tell me to not disclose my identity and the community I belong to just for my safety”. The emotional toll of constantly feeling unsafe, whether for oneself or one’s family, creates a heightened state of vigilance that becomes mentally exhausting. This chronic stress affects not just emotional well-being, but also everyday functionality. Students may avoid social gatherings and withdraw from public or campus activities. One participant mentioned, “I missed my farewell party too as I didn’t feel like celebrating when everyone in my state was suffering”. Research on conflict-affected populations confirms that even indirect exposure to violence, especially when loved ones are in danger, can lead to symptoms of anticipatory anxiety, hypervigilance, and depressive symptoms (Hobfoll et al., 2007). In this context, the student’s fear isn’t just imagined, it’s rooted in a real, unstable backdrop of violence and uncertainty.

### ***Impact on Academics***

Beyond emotional strain, the ongoing conflict has taken a serious toll on the academic lives of many students studying outside their home state. Exams that once were just academic hurdles became almost insurmountable, as focusing on study materials felt nearly impossible

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when the mind was occupied with real-life survival scenarios. One participant expressed, “While I try to stay neutral and focus on my studies, the emotional weight often makes it difficult to give my full attention to exams, assignments, and tests”. Another expressed, “I struggled to concentrate, my thoughts were scattered everywhere. To be honest, exams felt meaningless”. This kind of academic disruption isn’t unique to this conflict alone. Research shows that emotional distress and chronic stress significantly impair student’s ability to concentrate, retain information, and perform academically. A study published in *Current Psychology* revealed that ongoing stress, especially when paired with emotional dysregulation, leads to reduced academic performance, fatigue, and avoidance behaviors like skipping classes or delaying assignments (Teixeira et al., 2022) which is also expressed by one of the participants, “There have been times when I couldn’t attend classes because I was overwhelmed with worry for my family’s safety”. In times of prolonged crisis, students often resort to coping mechanisms such as emotional suppression, withdrawal, or avoidance. One participant expressed, “I try not to see anything stressful before doing anything work related”. While these strategies may provide short-term relief from distressing thoughts or feelings, they can significantly impair both psychological and academic functioning over time. Emotional suppression, for instance, has been associated with increased internal distress and reduced cognitive flexibility, making it difficult for students to concentrate or engage meaningfully in academic activities (Gross & John, 2003). The conflict-induced uncertainty creates a psychological environment where the mind struggles to prioritize tasks like learning and academic performance, especially when loved ones back home are in danger. A participant expressed, “There were moments when I had to step back, take breaks, and remind myself of the importance of both my education”. As research shows, chronic stress and unresolved emotional conflict can impair executive functioning and memory, both of which are essential for academic success (Shields et al., 2016). This prolonged stress cycle often leads to sleep disturbances, concentration difficulties, and emotional exhaustion, all of which are strongly linked to academic underperformance in numerous psychological studies (Bücker et al., 2018).

### ***Trauma of displacement***

While not all students interviewed had families directly affected by the violence, those who did shared a unique and heavy emotional burden. One of the participants expressed, “My cousin sister used to stay in a relief camp. Her locality was bombed and attacked by the militants”, another mentioned, “My cousin was displaced from her village since her whole village was burnt down” and so on. Literature on vicarious trauma and conflict-related displacement supports this, indicating that individuals with close emotional ties to victims often experience significant distress themselves, even when physically removed from the site of crisis (Dekel & Nuttman-Shwartz, 2009). Students also express concern that the psychological wounds their families have suffered, whether from witnessing traumatic events, being forced to flee their homes, or coping with the loss of loved ones, could lead to lasting emotional and functional challenges in their daily lives. One of the participants mentioned, “Being anxious over any loud noise, being unable to sleep due to fear and panic upon seeing groups of people are some of the changed behaviour they've shown after the conflict”. These concerns remain as students continue with their routines, uncertain about when their families' lives will return to normal. Literature on vicarious trauma and conflict-related displacement supports this, indicating that individuals with close emotional ties to victims often experience significant distress themselves, even when physically removed from the site of crisis (Dekel & Nuttman-Shwartz, 2009).

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### *Financial issues*

One of the most deeply felt impacts of the ongoing Manipur conflict was the financial hardship caused by repeated internet shutdowns. For students studying outside the state, access to digital banking and online transactions became nearly impossible as expressed by one of the participants, “often I have been unable to receive money from home and although some offices have access to the internet for essential services, due to the imposition of curfew, movements were restricted and transactions were impossible to make”. Simple tasks like transferring money for rent, paying for college expenses, or even purchasing daily essentials were suddenly beyond reach. This crisis of connectivity was not a minor inconvenience. It was a major disruption that magnified their emotional and psychological distress as expressed by one of the participants, “I’ve been forced to rely on whatever savings I have left, which is not easy for anyone. This situation has taken a heavy toll on me, both emotionally and financially”. In a report by Hindu's Frontline, it was noted that the curfews and restrictions imposed during the violence, including internet bans, affected basic daily life and access to necessities across the State (Mukherjee, 2024). Even essential services were disrupted, and people had to wait for short relaxation windows to buy food and medicine, a dire situation echoed by students relying on digital remittances from their families. With no way of knowing when services would resume, many students had to put long-term planning on hold. Some were forced to delay tuition payments. One student mentioned, “The internet ban and curfew badly affected the money transaction thus leading me to pay late fine to the university”. Others relied heavily on borrowed money or emergency help from friends in host cities, creating a financial debt that weighed heavily on them. The unpredictability of the shutdowns also made budgeting nearly impossible, compounding their anxiety. In this way, the internet blackout became more than just a technological restriction, it turned into a barrier to survival and stability for many young Manipuri(s) trying to build their futures far from home.

### **CONCLUSION**

The findings highlight the profound impact of the Manipur conflict on Manipuri students studying outside the state. Interview narratives revealed deep emotional distress, anxiety, fear, helplessness, and survivor’s guilt, often intensified by feelings of identity-based alienation. Academically, students struggled with focus, deadlines, and mental exhaustion. Financial difficulties also emerged due to internet shutdowns that disrupted communication and delayed money transfers, adding practical stress. These experiences align with literature showing that prolonged conflict exposure leads to long-term psychological distress, even at a distance (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010), and that trauma can impair academic performance and increase dropout risk (Rossen & Cowan, 2013). Given these findings, universities, mental health professionals, and policymakers must recognize the lasting effects of regional conflict. Culturally sensitive mental health services, academic flexibility, and policies addressing financial and communication barriers are urgently needed to support affected students.

The Manipur conflict is not just a geopolitical crisis; it is a human crisis with profound psychological, educational, and economic repercussions. Recognizing and responding to the voices of affected youth is not only an ethical obligation, it is a crucial step towards justice, healing, and systemic change.

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### *Limitations of the Study*

This study focused on a small group of Manipuri students in Delhi NCR, limiting generalizability to students elsewhere. The sensitive topic made some participants hesitant to share deeply, potentially leaving out voices of those facing greater distress.

### *Suggestions for Future Research*

Future studies should include students from diverse locations and backgrounds, and explore broader areas like identity, relationships, health, and future aspirations. Examining variations by gender, age, and family background, as well as including other affected groups (e.g., professionals, families, teenagers), would offer deeper insights. Longitudinal research could also reveal how ongoing stress impacts lives over time.

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