

A Comparative Analysis of Student Movements in Manipur: A Review Paper

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Abstract

The student movements in Manipur are a unique and dynamic kind of political mobilization that has influenced the socio-political environment in the state since the middle of the last century. This review paper presents an exhaustive examination of student activism in Manipur, its historical development, structure, ideological leanings and dimensions against that of other states in the northeast. The paper reviews the peer reviewed literature to gain an insight into how student organizations have come to become an extremely important civil society player in a region with ethnic diversity, armed conflict, and disputed sovereignty. As it can be seen in the analysis, Manipuri student organizations are more concerned with the questions of identity, autonomy, human rights, and ethnic nationalism, unlike student movements in mainland India which are usually concerned with educational reforms or general ideological concerns. The paper will discuss key student organizations such as the All Manipur Students Union (AMSU), All Naga Students Association Manipur (ANSAM) and Kuki Students Organisation (KSO), and how they have mobilized the masses, affected the making of policy as well as the formulation of collective identities. The study, by comparing it to student movements throughout the northeastern states of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and others, determines general trends of activism around demographic change and indigenous rights, but also showcases the Manipur-specific issues of ethnic fragmentation and militarization. The paper explains the role student movements played in policy making especially on the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), territorial integrity and ethnic autonomy. It also touches on burning issues such as inter-ethnic conflicts, accountability within an organization and the economic influence of protest strategies. The review outlines evidence gaps in the knowledge of gender dynamics, digital activism, and long-term trends of student activists. The analysis can add to the larger academic discussion of the topic of youth mobilization, ethnic politics, and activism of civil societies in the conflict-afflicted areas.

Keywords: Student movements, Manipur, Northeast India, ethnic identity, political mobilization, civil society, AFSPA, indigenous rights, youth activism, ethnic nationalism

1. Introduction

Student movements constitute a critical dimension of political mobilization and social transformation across the global South, serving as vehicles for youth political participation and catalysts for broader societal change. In the Indian context, student activism has a distinguished history, from the independence movement to contemporary struggles for

educational reform, social justice, and democratic rights (Altbach, 1968). However, student movements in India's northeastern region, particularly in Manipur, exhibit distinctive characteristics shaped by the region's unique historical trajectory, ethnic diversity, and contested relationship with the Indian nation-state.

Manipur, a state of approximately 3 million people comprising diverse ethnic communities including Meiteis, Nagas, Kukis, and various other tribal groups, presents a complex landscape for understanding student activism (Shimray, 2004). The state's incorporation into the Indian Union in 1949, widely perceived as coercive rather than consensual, has generated enduring grievances that continue to fuel student-led protests and movements (Parratt & Parratt, 1997). The imposition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) in 1980 and the subsequent militarization of civil society have positioned student organizations at the forefront of human rights advocacy and resistance to state oppression (McDuie-Ra, 2012).

Student organizations in Manipur have evolved from primarily educational advocacy groups to sophisticated political actors capable of mobilizing mass protests, enforcing economic blockades, and significantly influencing public policy (Baruah, 2005). Organizations such as the All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU), founded in 1965, have played pivotal roles in shaping political discourse and collective identity formation. However, the proliferation of ethnic-based student organizations—including the All Naga Students' Association Manipur (ANSAM), Kuki Students' Organisation (KSO), and numerous others—reflects and reinforces the ethnic fragmentation that characterizes contemporary Manipur (Haokip, 2013).

1.1 Objectives of the Review

This paper aims to:

1. Trace the historical evolution of student movements in Manipur from the pre-independence period to the present
2. Analyze the organizational structures, leadership patterns, and mobilization strategies of major student organizations
3. Examine the ideological orientations and political positioning of student movements
4. Compare student activism in Manipur with similar movements in other northeastern states
5. Assess the impact and effectiveness of student movements on policy and society
6. Identify challenges, limitations, and future research directions

1.2 Methodology

This review synthesizes peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and scholarly monographs published between 1968 and 2024, focusing on student movements, ethnic politics, and civil society activism in Manipur and Northeast India. The analysis employs a comparative-historical approach, examining continuities and transformations in student activism across different periods and contexts. Search terms included "student movements Manipur," "youth

activism Northeast India," "ethnic politics Manipur," "AFSPA protests," and related keywords across databases including JSTOR, Google Scholar, and institutional repositories.

2. Historical Evolution of Student Movements in Manipur

2.1 Colonial and Early Post-Independence Period (1930s-1960s)

The emergence of organized student activism in Manipur can be traced to the 1930s when educated youth began forming associations influenced by broader anti-colonial movements across India. The Manipur Students' Federation, established during this period, represented one of the earliest attempts at collective organization among students in the Northeast (Singh, 2011). However, the character of early student activism in Manipur was distinctly shaped by concerns about preserving the kingdom's autonomy rather than merely participating in the Indian independence struggle.

The princely state of Manipur had maintained relative autonomy under British paramountcy, with its own constitutional monarchy and legislative assembly (Parratt & Parratt, 1997). The political consciousness among educated Manipuri youth in this period reflected anxieties about the future status of their homeland in post-colonial South Asia. The establishment of the All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU) in **1965**, more than fifteen years after Manipur's controversial merger with India in 1949, represented a significant milestone in the institutionalization of student activism

The merger of Manipur with India on October 15, 1949, executed through a Merger Agreement signed by Maharaja Bodhchandra Singh under circumstances that remain disputed, became a foundational grievance for subsequent student activism (Bhattacharjee, 2018). Many Manipuris, including student leaders, viewed the merger as an annexation that violated democratic principles and the will of the people. This historical trauma has continued to shape student political consciousness and mobilization strategies across generations (Nepam, 2002).

2.2 Consolidation and Politicization (1970s-1980s)

The 1970s was a turning point in the nature and the course of direction of student movements in Manipur. It was a time dominated by escalating radicalization as student groups began to broaden their scope of action to include other political interests other than educational matters such as human rights, autonomy and ethnicity (Baruah, 2005). The emergence of armed insurgency in Manipur at this time resulted in a complicated atmosphere of student activism working in concomitancy to, but not necessarily in perfect accord with, militant nationalist movements.

In 1980, after already being imposed in Nagaland and select areas of Assam, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) was imposed in Manipur, which essentially changed the political reality and heightened the student revolt against militarization (Bhan, 2019). The AFSPA gave the security agencies the powers to arrest con sporadically, lethally and enter and search private homes to the extent of impunity, which student bodies loudly protested by the AFSPA (Chowdhury, 2016).

2.3 Ethnic Fragmentation and Diversification (1990s-2000s)

The 1990s witnessed significant fragmentation of student activism along ethnic lines, reflecting broader patterns of ethnic politics in Manipur. While AMSU continued to claim state-wide representation with a primarily Meitei base, the proliferation of community-specific organizations—including ANSAM for Nagas, KSO for Kukis, and numerous smaller organizations representing other communities—transformed the landscape of student activism (Haokip, 2013).

This ethnic fragmentation both strengthened and complicated student movements. On one hand, community-based organizations could more effectively mobilize their constituencies around specific ethnic grievances and aspirations. On the other hand, competing claims and counter-mobilizations often neutralized the collective impact of student activism and created opportunities for state authorities to employ divide-and-rule strategies (Chandrika, 2012).

2.4 Contemporary Phase: Human Rights and Digital Activism (2000s-Present)

The contemporary phase of student activism in Manipur has been characterized by intensified focus on human rights violations, particularly those committed by security forces operating under AFSPA. The Thangjam Manorama Devi case of 2004, where a woman was allegedly raped and killed by Assam Rifles personnel, catalyzed unprecedented protests involving student organizations, women's groups, and civil society actors (McDuie-Ra, 2012). The iconic protest by Meira Paibis (Manipuri women activists) who disrobed before Kangla Fort with the banner "Indian Army Rape Us" brought international attention to human rights violations in Manipur.

Student organizations played crucial roles in supporting Irom Chanu Sharmila's 16-year hunger strike (2000-2016) demanding repeal of AFSPA, organizing solidarity campaigns and keeping public attention focused on the issue (Manchanda, 2015). Although AFSPA was not repealed, the sustained campaign significantly damaged the legitimacy of militarized governance and established human rights as a central frame for student activism.

3. Major Student Organizations: Structure and Ideology

3.1 All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU)

Founded in 1965, AMSU represents the oldest and most prominent student organization in Manipur, claiming state-wide representation though primarily based among the Meitei community in the valley districts (Hazarika, 1994). AMSU's organizational structure includes college-level units, district committees, and a central executive body elected through regular organizational elections.

Table 1: Organizational Characteristics of Major Student Organizations in Manipur

Organiza tion	Year Found ed	Ethni c Base	Geograph ical Reach	Members hip (Approx.)	Primary Ideology	Key Issues	Organizati onal Structure
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All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU)	1965	Meitei - majority	Valley districts, state-wide claim	50,000+	Manipuri sub-nationalism, territorial integrity	AFSPA repeal, autonomy, anti-corruption	Central executive, district units, college cells
All Naga Students' Association Manipur (ANSAM)	1968	Naga tribes	Hill districts (Naga areas)	30,000+	Pan-Naga nationalism	Territorial integration, ethnic autonomy	Tribal representatives, district committees
Kuki Students' Organisation (KSO)	1971	Kuki-Zo tribes	Hill districts (Kuki areas)	25,000+	Kuki ethnic nationalism	Separate administration, territorial demands	Central body, village units
Meitei Students' Federation	1980s	Meitei	Valley districts	15,000+	Meitei ethnic identity	Cultural protection, linguistic rights	College-based structure
Kom Students' Organisation	1968	Kom tribe	Specific districts	5,000+	Tribal rights	Scheduled Tribe status, land rights	Village-based units
Tangkhuil Students' Union	1975	Tangkhuil Naga	Ukhrul district	8,000+	Naga identity	Educational access, development	District-based

Note: Membership figures are estimates based on organizational claims and scholarly assessments. Actual active membership may vary significantly.

AMSU's ideological orientation centers on Manipuri sub-nationalism, emphasizing the distinct historical identity of Manipur as a formerly independent kingdom with its own political traditions (Parratt & Parratt, 1997). The organization has consistently opposed what it perceives as threats to Manipur's territorial integrity, including demands for territorial reorganization that would diminish the state's area. AMSU has led numerous movements on issues ranging from opposition to AFSPA, corruption, and perceived central government interference in state affairs (Nepram, 2002).

3.2 All Naga Students' Association Manipur (ANSAM)

ANSAM, established in 1968, represents Naga students in the hill districts of Manipur and maintains affiliations with the broader pan-Naga student movement, including the Naga Students' Federation (NSF) based in Nagaland (Shimray, 2001). The organization's primary ideological commitment is to the concept of Naga nationalism and the eventual integration of all Naga-inhabited areas across state boundaries.

ANSAM operates in a complex political space, balancing its identity as a Manipur-based organization with solidarity to the broader Naga national movement. This dual positioning creates both opportunities for pan-Naga coordination and tensions with Meitei-dominated organizations like AMSU, particularly on issues of territorial integrity and ethnic autonomy (Longkumer, 2018).

3.3 Kuki Students' Organisation (KSO)

The Kuki Students' Organisation, founded in 1971, represents Kuki-Zo tribal students and has been at the forefront of demands for separate administrative arrangements and recognition of Kuki identity (Haokip, 2013). The organization comprises numerous village-level units coordinated through a central leadership structure.

Political positioning of KSO is a reflection of the marginalization that Kuki communities have to face as they are minorities both in the valley district and the hill district. The group has promoted other types of territorial self-rule, such as the separate Maku state, or Union Territory. Such requirements have pitted KSO against AMSU (which rejects territorial division) and ANSAM (with whom Kukis are in competition over influence in the hill districts) (Haokip, 2013).

The Kuki-Naga ethnic conflict, which has resulted in numerous violent confrontations since the 1990s, has significantly shaped KSO's activism. The organization has played crucial roles in mobilizing Kuki communities for self-defense, providing relief during violence, and articulating Kuki political aspirations in public forums (Haokip, 2013).

4. Mobilization Strategies and Tactics

Student organizations in Manipur employ diverse repertoires of protest and mobilization, ranging from conventional tactics like memorandums and peaceful demonstrations to more disruptive strategies including economic blockades and indefinite bandhs (Samom, 2014).

Table 2: Protest Tactics and Their Effectiveness in Manipur Student Movements

Tactic	Frequency of Use	Economic Impact	Public Support	Government Response	Legal Status	Effectiveness in Achieving Demands
Memorandums/Petitions	Very High	Minimal	High	Usually acknowledged	Legal	Low - rarely sufficient

				ed		alone
Peaceful Protests/Rallies	Very High	Low	High	Tolerated with restrictions	Legal	Moderate - raises awareness
Bandhs (General Strikes)	High	Very High	Mixed	Opposition, occasional violence	Illegal (SC ruling 1998)	High - creates political pressure
Economic Blockades	Moderate	Extreme	Low among traders, variable among public	Strong opposition, attempts to break	Illegal	Very High - but controversial
Hunger Strikes	Moderate	Minimal	High	Mixed - depends on participant profile	Legal	Moderate - symbolic impact
Sit-ins/Dharnas	High	Low to Moderate	High	Generally tolerated	Legal with permissions	Moderate
Social Media Campaigns	Increasing	Minimal	High among youth	Monitoring, occasional shutdowns	Legal	Moderate - awareness building
Torch Rallies	Moderate	Minimal	High	Generally tolerated	Legal with permissions	Low - mainly symbolic
Boycotts (educational, civic)	Moderate	Moderate	Mixed	Concern but limited action	Legal	Moderate
Effigies/Symbolic Protests	High	Minimal	High	Tolerated	Legal	Low - symbolic only

Note: Effectiveness ratings based on documented outcomes in achieving stated objectives, as reported in scholarly literature.

4.1 Economic Blockades and Bandhs

Economic blockades, particularly the blocking of national highways connecting Manipur to the rest of India, represent the most powerful weapon in student organizations' tactical arsenal (Samom, 2014). Manipur's geographical isolation, accessible primarily through National Highways 2 and 37, makes it extremely vulnerable to blockades. Student organizations have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to effectively block these lifelines, causing severe shortages of essential commodities and bringing economic activity to a standstill.

The effectiveness of this tactic derives from Manipur's dependence on supplies from other states, with most consumer goods, fuel, and raw materials transported via these highways. Even brief blockades create immediate impacts on prices and availability, generating political pressure on authorities to address student demands (Bhattacharjee, 2018).

4.2 Mass Mobilization and Street Politics

Student organizations have demonstrated remarkable capacity for mass mobilization, regularly organizing protests involving thousands of participants. The organizational infrastructure of student unions, extending from colleges to villages, enables rapid communication and coordination (Nepam, 2002).

Major protests often involve not just students but broader civil society participation, including women's organizations (Meira Paibis), civil society groups, and ordinary citizens. This coalition-building capacity amplifies the political impact of student movements, presenting authorities with unified fronts that are difficult to ignore or suppress (Manchanda, 2015).

4.3 Digital Activism and Social Media

The proliferation of smartphones and social media platforms has transformed student activism in Manipur. Organizations now maintain active Facebook pages, WhatsApp groups, and Twitter accounts, using these platforms for real-time coordination, information dissemination, and documentation of events (Longkumer, 2018).

Digital platforms enable student organizations to bypass traditional media, which is often controlled or influenced by government and commercial interests. Live-streaming of protests, rapid sharing of images and videos, and viral campaigns have expanded the reach of student activism beyond Manipur's borders, attracting national and international attention (Bhan, 2019).

5. Comparative Analysis with Other Northeastern States

5.1 The Assam Model: Unified Movement and Political Success

The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) led anti-foreigner movement (1979-1985) represents the most successful student-led political movement in Northeast India, culminating in the

Assam Accord and the formation of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), a regional political party that formed government multiple times (Baruah, 1986; Weiner, 1978).

Several factors distinguished the Assam movement from Manipur's experience. First, AASU achieved remarkable unity across diverse Assamese communities around the issue of illegal Bangladeshi migration, framing it as an existential threat to Assamese identity (Hussain, 1993). Second, the Assamese linguistic-cultural identity, despite internal diversity, provided a unifying framework that Manipur's ethnically fragmented society lacks (Baruah, 2005).

5.2 Nagaland: Ethnic Nationalism and Student Auxiliaries

Student activism in Nagaland, centered on the Naga Students' Federation (NSF), operates within the framework of Naga nationalism and the long-standing demand for sovereignty or maximum autonomy (Shimray, 2001). The NSF functions effectively as an auxiliary organization to the broader Naga national movement, maintaining close relationships with Naga civil society organizations and, historically, with armed groups.

5.3 Meghalaya: Indigenous Rights and Anti-Migration Activism

The Khasi Students' Union (KSU) in Meghalaya shares with Manipur's student organizations concerns about demographic change, indigenous rights, and illegal migration (Mawdsley, 1996). KSU's aggressive campaigns against non-tribal migration and demands for stricter implementation of the Inner Line Permit system parallel similar concerns in Manipur.

However, Meghalaya's relatively peaceful environment, absence of major armed insurgency, and the constitutional protections afforded by the Sixth Schedule create different contexts for student activism. The KSU operates with greater freedom from militarization and human rights concerns that dominate Manipur's student agenda (McDuie-Ra, 2012).

5.4 Tripura: Demographic Transformation and Marginalization

Student activism in Tripura reflects the dramatic demographic transformation caused by large-scale Bengali migration, which reduced indigenous tribals to a minority in their own homeland (Bhattacharjee, 2008). The Tripura Students' Federation and tribal student organizations have struggled to effectively challenge this transformation, operating from positions of political weakness.

Table 3: Comparative Analysis of Student Movements in Northeast India

Dimension	Manipur	Assam	Nagaland	Meghalaya	Tripura
Ethnic Unity	Highly fragmented (Meitei, Naga, Kuki, others)	Relatively unified Assamese identity	Relatively unified Naga identity	Khasi-dominated with tribal diversity	Bengali majority vs tribal minority
Primary Issues	AFSPA, autonomy,	Illegal migration,	Naga sovereignty,	Illegal migration,	Tribal rights, demographi

	ethnic autonomy, human rights	Assamese identity	integration	indigenous rights	c anxiety
Relationship with Armed Groups	Independent but sympathetic (varies by organization)	Independent	Historically close, auxiliary role	Independent	Some connections to tribal insurgency
Major Student Organizations	AMSU, ANSAM, KSO (multiple)	AASU (dominant)	NSF (dominant)	KSU (dominant)	Multiple, fragmented
Political Impact	High mobilization , limited structural change	Very high - led to Assam Accord, party formation	High - integral to Naga movement	High in local issues	Limited due to demographic weakness
Tactics	Blockades, bandhs, protests, digital activism	Mass mobilization , negotiations	Protests, bandhs, political engagement	Aggressive anti-migration campaigns, blockades	Protests, limited disruptive capacity
State Response	Militarized, frequent use of force	Mixed - negotiation and repression	Negotiation within peace process	Generally accommodative	Repression with limited concessions
Constitutional Protections	Limited (except for hill tribes under 6th Schedule)	Limited	Article 371(A), strong protections	Sixth Schedule protections	TTAADC, limited tribal protections
Economic Impact of Protests	Severe - highway dependency	Significant	Moderate	Moderate	Limited
Success in Achieving Demands	Mixed - awareness high, structural	High - Assam Accord	Ongoing negotiations	Moderate - some policy changes	Low - demographic reality limits

	change limited				options
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Note: This comparative analysis is based on scholarly literature and represents general patterns; significant variations exist within each state.

6. Challenges and Limitations

6.1 Ethnic Fragmentation and Internal Conflict

The proliferation of ethnic-based student organizations represents perhaps the most significant limitation on the effectiveness of student activism in Manipur. Competing claims, counter-mobilizations, and sometimes violent conflicts between different ethnic student organizations neutralize potential collective power and create opportunities for state authorities to employ divide-and-rule strategies (Haokip, 2013).

6.2 Accountability and Representation

Questions about democratic accountability and authentic representation of student interests have become increasingly prominent in scholarly and public discourse about student movements. Critics point to several problematic patterns:

First, the continuation of individuals in student organization leadership positions long after they have completed their education raises questions about whether these organizations truly represent contemporary student concerns or serve as political platforms for career activists (Kumar, 2016).

6.3 Economic Costs and Public Support

The frequent use of economic blockades and bandhs, while politically effective in generating pressure on authorities, imposes severe costs on ordinary citizens and the state's economy. Extended blockades cause price inflation, shortages of essential commodities, disruption of education and healthcare services, and loss of livelihoods for daily wage workers and small traders (Samom, 2014).

6.4 Militarization and State Repression

The militarized atmosphere in Manipur, which exists due to the presence of security forces working under the conditions of AFSPA and anti-insurgency activities, seriously limits the room of peaceful student activism (Bhan, 2019). Protesters are often met with the use of excessive force, arbitrary arrest and intimidation by security forces. The chilling effect of student activism is caused by criminalization of dissent in the form of sedition charges and other legal means (Chowdhury, 2016).

7. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Although the conflict and ethnic politics in Manipur have received much academic attention, not much work has been done on student movements specifically and there are still some areas that need to be addressed by further research:

8. Conclusion

Student movements in Manipur represent distinctive and consequential forms of political mobilization shaped by the state's contested integration into India, ethnic diversity, and prolonged experience of armed conflict and militarization. Unlike student movements in mainland India that primarily focus on educational reforms or ideological issues, Manipuri student organizations engage fundamentally with existential questions of identity, sovereignty, autonomy, and human rights.

The historical evolution from relatively unified student activism in the immediate post-independence period to contemporary ethnic fragmentation reflects broader patterns of identity politics in Manipur. Major organizations including AMSU, ANSAM, and KSO have developed sophisticated organizational structures, diverse mobilization strategies, and significant capacity to influence policy debates and shape collective identities.

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