

## **Electoral Behaviour and Identity Politics in Manipur: An Empirical Study**

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### **Abstract**

The political landscape of Northeast India, especially in Manipur, is marked by complex layers of conflict, both vertical (state versus non-state actors) and horizontal (ethnic tensions), which significantly influence electoral behavior and governance outcomes. The region, described by the World Bank as trapped in a cycle of poverty, conflict, and mistrust in political institutions, faces a unique challenge in aligning electoral processes with democratic ideals. This paper explores the relationship between regular elections, governance quality, and conflict resolution in Manipur, emphasizing whether higher electoral participation correlates with fair governance and reduced conflict. The study examines how ethnic divisions and insurgency complicate the effectiveness of elections, highlighting the roles of political parties, civil society, and gender in shaping voter behavior. The paper utilizes archival research, ethnography, and document analysis to delve into the intersection of electoral practices and identity politics in a state plagued by systemic instability. The findings suggest that while Manipur witnesses high voter turnout, electoral practices are often undermined by violence, corruption, and unresolved conflicts. Despite these challenges, the rise of national parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century reflects a shift in the state's electoral dynamics, as economic dependency and regional aspirations drive voters toward national platforms. The BJP's increasing success contrasts with the decline of regional parties such as the Indian National Congress (INC), the Manipur People's Party (MPP), and the Federal Party of Manipur (FPM). Ultimately, the paper argues that electoral politics in conflict zones like Manipur must evolve to bridge the gap between electoral participation and tangible governance outcomes, fostering genuine democratic representation and social cohesion.

**Keywords:** Manipur, BJP, electoral participation, ethnic conflicts, governance

### **Introduction**

Regularity of elections is presumably considered to be reflective indicators of democracy. The assumption advances a higher acceptance of electoral parties and their representativeness by the voters and civil societies. The assumption is such that there is a substantial degree of perceived maturity, stability of electoral processes and diverse spectrum of political participation. The paper is keen to enquire into how the regularity of elections actually translates into effective improvement of governance, reduction of underdevelopment, and situation of conflicts. The paper aims at understanding two issues. It studies if there is a co-relation between higher electoral participation and resultant production of fair governance. And, looks at how electioneering percolates down to provide a ground for translating aspirational politics into actuality. Vertical conflicts tend to manifest in the form of state versus non-state (armed) opposition groups while the horizontal conflicts appear in the form of intra and inter-ethnic binaries. In such a scenario, the hill and valley binary also gains momentum.

### **Key Questions and Objectives**

The paper raises the following key issues explicating the intricate relationship between the representation and citizens with reference to Manipur state in India's northeast border. The paper, therefore, aims at rethinking assumptions about the nature and content of three significant variables which are crucial indicators of democracy; electoral institutions, civil society and voters. The paper studies how electors in an identity conflict ridden society align with different types of political parties like the state, regional and national parties. On the other hand, it is pertinent to understand how the non-electoral forces such as the social and cultural organisations, pressure groups, women's groups and students' groups perceive and respond to the electoral processes constituting its own sense of political worldviews. The paper relies on three methodological sources which include archival; ethnography; and documents.

### **Electoral Politics in India' Northeast: Trajectories**

Despite the prolonged situation of violence in the post-colonial era of politics in India's northeast region, the region is known for a complex pattern of electoral behaviour. For instance, insurgency, identity and social movements have

existed alongside electoral processes. Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Tripura have seen a significant phase of violence and ethnic tension. To talk about Manipur, it is known for a higher voters' turnout. It has had diverse electoral party formation. Manipur has seen the rise and fall of regional and national political parties. Before it gained statehood in 1972, Manipur witnessed a significant presence of national parties as well. With the growth of insurgency movement in the 1960s and the demand for statehood, there was an evident regional consolidation at the electoral level. The formation of Manipur People's Party (MPP) proved to be a significant force in the electoral history of Manipur. The table No. 01 shows the electoral performance of political parties immediately after the 1972 elections.

The 1972 elections resulted in the formation of a coalition government under the aegis of the United Legislature Party. Despite the granting of statehood to Manipur, the Congress Party could not perform well possibly due to the infamous *chaklam khonchat* in 1965 in which several students got injured and killed. The 1972 elections witnessed a significant voters' turnout of 75.89%. The Table 1 shows the empirical account of the performance of the political parties in 1972 elections in Manipur. The post-statehood period was marked by a phase of pluralism in leadership as the government was led by Muhammad Allimuddin. Electoral politics in Manipur had witnessed significant instability. Till date, there has been ten President's Rule, under the provision of Article 356, in the state of Manipur. Interestingly, pre-statehood phase was also witnessed to President's Rule under the Article 356 of the Indian Constitution. On October 25, 1967, the first time Article 356 was invoked in Manipur was against the backdrop of the growing demand for statehood in Manipur. Of the 10 times when President's rule, or Article 356, has been invoked in Manipur, six were in the late 1960s and the 1970s, when India was witnessed a rise of political parties opposed to the Congress party. Due to the clash between Naga and Kuki in 1992, Manipur witnessed yet another President's rule. In other words, since 2001 Manipur has not seen a stint of President's rule. From 2000 onwards, there was an evident electoral political stability with a preponderance of the Congress Party.

It was only after the 2014 electoral success of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in New Delhi, Manipur state saw its first ever BJP led government. It can be argued that in Manipur there has been consistent struggle for representation amongst political parties of different categories. One of the reasons for higher voters' turnout in Manipur is due to the active participation of women in the public sphere.

### Identity Politics: Some Trajectories

The deep-seated political aspirations and ethnic unrest have shaped the trajectories of electoral politics in Manipur. Since the early 1990s, Manipur state has faced sporadic ethnic conflicts. The Kuki-Naga clash that occurred in between 1992-1997 displaced 11,000 persons while resulting in the death of nearly 1000 persons. The Kuki-Paite conflict occurred in 1997 resulted in the death of hundreds of civilians. Meetei and Meetei-Pangal conflict occurred in 1993 leading to the death of 300. Manipur state witnessed some horrifying ethnic conflicts and the worst scenario of such conflicts emerged during the Kuki-Naga conflict and Kuki-Zomi conflict (Dena, 1991; Oinam, 2003).

Inter-ethnic tensions which are largely rooted in the overlapping claims over land and space resulted in the horizontal spread of the conflict. Heightening of identity politics and ethnic polarization had its ramifications on the electoral party system in India's northeastern region, including Manipur state. Another trajectory that affected the electoral politics in the region was the issue of illegal immigration and identity. The establishment of Asom Gana Parishad against the backdrop of anti-foreigners movement in Assam, the formation of Naga People's Front in the wake of Naga political movement in Manipur and Nagaland, and Kuki People's Alliance on the eve of 2022 elections in Manipur can be mentioned as a reflex of identity politics.

The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) or the Assam People's Association has been a recognized regional political party in India. It continues to be a formidable opposition in Assam. The AGP formed the government in Assam twice, winning the 8<sup>th</sup> State Legislative Assembly from 1985-1990 and the 10<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly from 1996-2001, respectively. Similarly, Nagaland People's Front (NPF) and Kuki People's Alliance (KPA) have harped on identity politics and community representation. The electoral dynamics in Manipur has been that of a cocktail of regional, state and national parties. It has seen appropriation of identity politics at the local level while it has also learnt to align with national political parties. In other words, electoral political diversity of Manipur has been reflective of a miniature of Indian politics.

### Issues and Electoral Trends in Manipur

At a glance, if one goes by the voting percentage it seems that Manipur has seen a trend of high voters' turnout. For instance, the Inner Manipur Parliamentary Constituency witnessed around 85% of voters' turnout while the outer Parliamentary Constituency witnessed a similar trend at 82.14% in 2014 (Election Commission of India, 2014). Despite such a high voters' turnout, election boycotts, *bandhs* and civil society apathy towards elections are often seen in the state. In the case of six valley districts of Manipur, there are a higher percentage of female electors compared to males.

The valley districts of Manipur present a diverse electorate profile providing a substantial base for the study of voting behavior across various demographic segments. The gender distribution in these districts shows a higher number of female electors compared to males, reflecting the overall trend. The importance of the relations is evident for the fact that elections presumably reflects the social representative character of the institutions of a state on the one hand, and citizens as natural voters or electors are ought to represent agency of a society. The hill-based ethnic groups have for long claimed that hilly regions of the state had remained under-developed, neglected or lacked governance. Hill politics in Manipur has revolved around a binary of lack of development and fair funding. The demands for the creation of more districts in hill areas in the 1980s were reflective such an anxiety. The Sadar Hills Demand District Committee in the 1980s had submitted a memorandum to the state government in this regard. After much tussle over the issue of district creation, in 2016 seven new districts were created in Manipur.

Till date, the contestations over district creation continue largely due to the overlapping territorial claims of ethnic communities. District re-organisation in Manipur has been subjected to continuous demand for ethnic convenience, rather than administrative convenience. Amidst these circumstances, electioneering in Manipur has certainly seen a significant quantitative success. Insurgency, highway blockades, inflation, underdevelopment and ethnic mobilizations, however, continue mar the state. As a result, the electors as a represented category of people seems to have often lost their being of agencies or as change makers where the idea of elections as vehicle of socio-political representation, good governance and democracy stands embroiled in electoral ill-practices such as rigging, vote buying, and post-poll horse trading. These make electoral equations highly unstable.

Moreover, dwindling economy and frequent strikes and *bandhs* have also equally made the things bad to worst. There were 103 days of economic blockades in 2016 and 76 days of blockades in the first quarter of 2017. The estimated economic loss for the said period stood at 168,856 crores (Singh, 2020). Thus, socio-economic conditions and electoral trajectories are inter-dependent variables. In the words of Leacock, 'political parties means more or less organized group of citizens who act together as a political unit. They share or profess to share the same opinions on public questions, and by exercising their voting power towards a common end, seek to obtain control of government' (Leacock, 2013). Whether the same political parties actually are capable of communicating and representing the civil society and voters remain a critical question. In Manipur, the existing political parties may be classified into two categories; National Political Parties and Regional Political Parties. Some of the prominent National Political Parties include the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Indian National Congress (INC), the Janata Dal (U) and the Communist Party of India (CPI). The main state Political Parties are the Manipur Peoples' Party (MPP), the Manipur state Congress Party (MSCP), and the Federal Party of Manipur (FPM).

### **Parties and Elections before Statehood of Manipur**

Historically, Hijam Irabot Singh is credited to have initiated the first political party named the *Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha* in 1934 which was re-christened as the *Nikhil Manipuri Mahasaba* in 1938. Hijam Irabot came to be known for his Communist leanings and association with the Communist Party of India in the 1940s (Manimohon, 2000). The electoral response of the people and their ability to win seats can be used as a referral to its ability to percolate down to the people. The CPI contested the elections in Manipur for the first time in 1952. The party won two seats out of six it contested. In the election of 1957, the Party fielded candidates in 17 constituencies but could win only four seats. In 1962, the CPI could not win any seat. The party could not win even a single seat out of 14 seats it contested. In the Assembly Election of 1967, the CPI fielded candidates in 6 constituencies. The CPI's performance was still very poor, only one of its nominees could win the electoral battle by securing 5.47 per cent of the votes polled. In the assembly election of 1972, the party contested in 25 seats and managed to secure 5 seats. The CPI won 6 seats and 5 seats in 1974 and 1980 elections respectively (Karam, 1989).

The next election was held on December 27, 1984. The CPI secured 1 seat out of 17 that it contested. In the 1995 elections, the party won 2 seats. However, in the election of 2000 the CPI could not secure any seat. In 2002, Assembly Elections CPI fielded 16 candidates and won 5 seats. The party did not participate in the hill districts' constituencies during the 2002 elections. Interestingly, the CPI has never fielded candidates in the hill constituencies of Manipur. The Congress party contested the election of 1952 and secured 10 seats. The Congress party did not participate in the electoral battle in the hills except in Churachandpur constituency. A Kuki National Assembly (KNA) nominee defeated the Congress candidate. In the Territorial Council election of 1957, the Congress Party contested all 30 seats but secured only 12 seats. The Congress Party's performance was the best among the political parties contesting the elections as the party captured half of the Territorial Council seats. In 1967 elections, the Party managed to get 16 of 30 seats. The Congress Party later on admitted two nominated members and 7 Independent members to its fold and formed the government, under the leadership of Koireng Singh. The hostility in the party grew over the sharing of ministerial

positions, the Koireng ministry collapsed. The Centre imposed President's rule in Manipur. The dissident section left the party and formed a new party called the Manipur Peoples Party. The Congress Party became unpopular.

### **Electioneering in the Post-Statehood Period**

The presence of Congress was felt more clearly in the Assembly Elections of 1972. The Congress had to be satisfied with only 17 seats of 60 seats. In 1974, the Congress Party fought the election in alliance with the CPI in the valley. The party contested 49 seats and secured 12 seats. In 1980, the Congress secured 13 seats. In 1984, the Congress contested all the 60 seats and secured 30 seats. The assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 brought sympathy for the Congress. Rishang Keishing became the Chief Minister. In the next Assembly Elections of 1990, the Congress emerged as the single largest party by securing 25 seats out of 60 contested. The Congress led coalition also could not survive due to ethnic violence in the state between the Kuki and the Naga. This led to the imposition of President's Rule in the state on December 31, 1993. The President's Rule continued for 346 days. It ended on December 12, 1994. On December 13, 1994, Rishang Keishing (Congress) replaced R.K. Dorendro Singh as Chief Minister. The next General Elections were held on February 16 and 19, 1995. In this election, Congress secured 22 seats and formed a coalition ministry under Rishang Keishing (Congress) as Chief Minister on February 25, 1995.

### **The fall and rise of National Parties**

With the turn of 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the national political parties were beginning to consolidate its electoral powers. The economically dependent nature of Manipur's economy was shifting the allegiance of voters from regional to national parties. In the presence of a weak economic state, the importance of national parties increased manifold. It was due to this ambience, O. Ibobi Singh, the Indian National Congress, went on to rule the state for three consecutive terms. The insurgency infested Manipur state saw heightened counter-insurgency operations. Towards the fag end of Ibobi's third term, the Inner Line Permit System (ILPS) movement in 2015 led by the Joint Committee on Inner Line Permit System (JCILPS) caused enormous instability. Moreover, the Congress' policy to create seven new districts in 2016 swaps vehemently protested by Naga fraternal pressure groups. It even led to one of the longest highway 'economic blockades' in Manipur. Due to the growing crises, the fall of the Congress Party was becoming eminent.

In other words, it paved way to the rise for another national party—the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Given the dependency syndrome, who rules in New Delhi largely influences the electoral mood in Manipur. Perhaps for the first time, BJP re-invented itself to fit into the needs of the northeast region. According to the Party Manifesto of Bharatiya Janata Party of 2019, the party reiterated its commitment to protect the linguistic, cultural and social identity of the people of Northeast region. It was in sync with the larger commitment to the Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs who were escaping persecution from India's neighbouring countries as they were promised to be given citizenship in India (BJP, Manifesto: Sankalp: 2019, 12). The manifesto also promised to bring the insurgency movement in the region under control. It further argued that the party would continue to focus on the development of infrastructure and improved connectivity in the region. The BJP Manifesto emphasizes the importance of ensuring that the Northeastern states actively contribute to the country's economic progress. We will continue to take the necessary steps to leverage the tremendous potential of hydroelectric, tourism, horticulture etc in the Northeastern states. We are committed to ensure that the unique linguistic, cultural and social identity of the Northeastern States is adequately protected and take steps to ensure the same (BJP, *Manifesto: Sankalp*, 2019).

As far as the electoral history of BJP in Manipur is concerned, for the first time, in 1984, the BJP took part in the fourth Assembly Elections in Manipur. The party contested 13 seats but failed to secure even a single seat. In 1990 Assembly Elections, the party again failed to win any seat though it fielded 16 candidates. The performance of the party in the elections of 1995 improved; the party secured a seat. Subsequently, in 2000, the party secured 6 seats. In the 2002 Assembly Elections, the Party contested 46 seats and won four, two in the valley, and two in the hills. Its share of total votes was 9.55 per cent. Out of the Party's 42 defeated nominees, 36 lost their security deposits (Election Commission of India 2002) as shown in Table 2.

### **An overview of the Regional Political Parties in Manipur**

Regional parties are better positioned to understand and address the specific problems and grievances of the local population. In this way, they succeeded in developing the region and delivered the goods. The MPP, at the outset, was an offshoot of the defectors of the Indian National Congress (INC). It was formed on December 26, 1968. The MPP for the first time entered into electoral politics in 1972. There was a strong wave of the party among the people in the valley. That was the main reason why the party was able to form the Ministry in 1972, just after the attainment of statehood. However, MPP dwindled. The MPP contested 14 seats and secured just two, making it the lowest party among the regional parties in terms of seats won in 2002. Its share of popular votes was 3.03 per cent. The party could

not win any seat in the hill constituencies. In the 2007 Assembly elections in Manipur, the MPP bagged 5 out of the 60 Assembly constituencies in Manipur. Its significance soon declined and in the 2009 general elections, the MPP lost the one seat which it contested. The MPP went into an alliance with the BJP in Manipur, to strengthen the non-Congress ally in the state. The Manipur People's Party, which ruled the state for two terms, was derecognized as a regional party in March 2013. Another trajectory of regional party in Manipur was the establishment of Federal Party of Manipur (FPM). FPM was formed under the leadership of Prof. Gangmumei Kamei on October 21, 1993. The constitution of the party clearly specifies the objectives of the party. It aimed at promoting economic development through planning, freedom from exploitation, social control over the natural resources, and encouragement of private enterprises, involvement of foreign capital and full participation of the people in the process of planning and implementations of development process as in the state.

In 1995 Assembly elections, the party fielded 22 candidates but only 2 candidates were elected namely Gangmumai Kamei and W. Thoiba Singh. In the next Assembly Elections held in 2000, the FPM secured 6 seats. The party made an alliance with the Manipur State Congress Party and formed the United Front Government. The FPM emerged as the second largest group in the Manipur Assembly Elections, 2002. It fielded 48 candidates and secured 13 seats, 10 in the valley and 3 in the hills. The party is non-functional today (APK Singh 2009). The defected Congress members under the leadership of W. Nipamacha Singh formed the Manipur State Congress Party (MSCP) on December 1997. The first MSCP led ministry was sworn in on December 16, 1997 under the Chief Ministership of W. Nipamacha Singh. Thus, the MSCP led coalition ministry is the second regional political party next to the MPP that have set up a non-Congress (I) government. In the Assembly Elections of 2000, the MSCP secured 23 seats and the second MSCP led coalition Government was installed under the leadership of W. Nipamacha Singh. In 2002 Assembly Elections, the party fielded 42 candidates and won seven seats, five in the valley and 2 in the hill areas.

On the other hand, the Kuki National Assembly (KNA) had its genesis as a regional political party in 1946 to meet the aspirations of the Kuki community. The emerging educated middle class Kukis founded the party on April 24, 1946. The Party for the first time participated in the 1952 Electoral College Elections. It put up 7 candidates and could secure 2 seats in the hill constituencies of Manipur. After 1952 elections, the party remained in a state of dormancy until the late 1960s. In the post-1972 state Assembly Elections, the party failed to capture any seat out of two seats they contested (The Sangai Express, 2015). In the next mid-term Assembly Elections of 1974, the party entered into an election alliance with the MPP and Manipur Hills Union. The results were quite positive as the party captured 2 out of 6 seats that it contested. The party continued to make its electoral presence felt till the 1990 state Assembly elections. In the meantime, three new regional political parties, yet not recognized by the Election Commission of India (EC), emerged and they participated in the 2002 elections. The three new parties included; Democratic Revolutionary People's Party (DRPP), Manipur Nationalist Conference (MNC), and Naga National Party (NNP). With the coming of BJP government in New Delhi in 2014, there was a growing electoral success of BJP in India's northeast, particularly in Assam and Manipur.

## Conclusion

The updating of National Registrar of Citizens in Assam had a positive impact on Assamese voters. Similarly, the implementation of the Inner Line Permit System (ILPS) in 2019 in Manipur gave some comfort to the disgruntled voters in the state. The threat perception felt by the people of Manipur with regard to demographic change had been a source of concern. The enactment of ILPS had a soothing effect on the citizens of Manipur. The growing demand for the implementation of Inner Line Permit System which is expected to restrict the free movement of Indian residence in the region is another pointer to the existing question illegal immigration. Tripura represents a clear case of this indigenous sensibility where its aboriginal communities had been reduced to a minority in their own homeland. The rise of Tipra Motha as an alternative political party reflects similar identity related anxiety of the people in Tripura. The rise of BJP in Assam and Manipur could be somewhat related to policies regarding documenting citizenship under the leadership of Modi. The 2022 elections results in Manipur was not a victory of *Hindutva* but largely a convention of the favouring the party rules New Delhi.

**Table 1: Electoral Performance of Political Parties in Manipur in 1972 elections**

Party Names	Vote share	Vote share (in %)	Seats won
Indian National Congress	135,678	30.02	17
Manipur People's Party	91,148	20.17	15
Communist Party India (India)	45,765	10.13	5
Socialist Party (India)	24,195	5.35	3
Indian National Congress (Organisation)	10,699	2.37	1

Communist Party of India (Marxist)	2988	0.66	0
Bharatiya Jana Sangh	1004	0.22	0
Independents	140,471	31.08	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>451,948</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>60</b>

**Source:** Statistical Report on General Election, 1974 to the Legislative Assembly of Manipur, Election Commission of India. Retrieved on 22 Oct., 2021.

**Table 2: Assembly Election Result of Manipur, 2022**

Party	Won	Leading	Total
Bharatiya Janata Party	32	0	32
Independent	03	0	03
Indian National Congress	05	0	05
Janata Dal (United)	06	0	06
Kuki People's Alliance	02	0	02
Naga Peoples Front	05	0	05
National People's Party	07	0	07
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>60</b>

Source: [https:// results.eci.gov.in](https://results.eci.gov.in)

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