



## Mapping Developmental Gaps through Ethnic Lenses : A Micro Study of Manipur's Hill and Valley Regions

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### Abstract :

This study critically examines the developmental disparities between the hill and valley regions of Manipur through the prism of ethnicity, geography, and governance. Manipur's unique ethno-political landscape—dominated by Meiteis in the valley and tribal communities such as Kukis and Nagas in the hills—reveals significant imbalances in access to resources, infrastructure, and state support. Drawing on a mixed-methods micro-study, the research involved field interviews, focus group discussions, and the analysis of secondary data from government and academic sources. The findings indicate a stark socio-economic divide: hill regions suffer from poor healthcare, education, employment, and connectivity, whereas the valley benefits from administrative centrality and infrastructural concentration. The study also highlights how ethnic identities shape perceptions of exclusion, foster inter-community tensions, and fuel demands for autonomy and equitable governance. While the state apparatus appears reactive rather than inclusive, civil society actors—especially the Church—play a critical role in filling service delivery gaps in hill regions. The paper recommends a multi-pronged, inclusive development model that addresses structural inequities and promotes participatory governance. By mapping developmental gaps through ethnic lenses, this research underscores the urgent need for tailored policies that recognize the socio-cultural diversities and aspirations of all ethnic groups in Manipur.

**Keywords :** Ethnic Disparities, Manipur, Hill-Valley Divide, Developmental Gaps, Tribal Communities, Inclusive Policy, Micro Study, Inter-Ethnic Relations

## 1.Introduction

### Background of the Study

Manipur, a North-Eastern Indian state, presents a complex tapestry of ethnic diversity and geographical contrasts. The state is predominantly divided into two regions: the central **Imphal Valley**, inhabited primarily

by the **Meitei** community, and the surrounding **hilly terrains**, home to various **tribal communities**, particularly the **Nagas** and **Kukis**. Despite being part of the same administrative unit, these regions differ significantly in terms of **developmental indicators**, including access to education, healthcare, roads, employment opportunities, and political representation. Over the decades, the developmental paradigm in Manipur has disproportionately benefited the valley areas due to geographical centrality, administrative proximity, and political dominance. In contrast, the hill regions remain marginalized, grappling with inadequate infrastructure, socio-political neglect, and deep-rooted grievances. These disparities have become a significant source of **ethnic tension**, contributing to mistrust, identity-based mobilization, and periodic conflict.

### The Significance of Ethnic Geography in Shaping Development

Ethnic geography plays a crucial role in influencing patterns of development and state intervention. In the case of Manipur, the **spatial distribution of ethnic groups** intersects with **resource allocation**, **policy formulation**, and **governance practices**, often reinforcing historical inequalities. The concept of "**ethnic lenses**" used in this study aims to analyze how development (or the lack of it) is **perceived, experienced, and contested** differently by diverse communities based on their ethnic and geographical positioning. Understanding this relationship is essential for crafting inclusive and conflict-sensitive development strategies.

### 2.Statement of the Problem

Despite numerous state and central schemes aimed at regional development, a **persistent imbalance** remains between the hill and valley regions of Manipur. The **valley** continues to dominate the political-administrative structure, while the **hills** face **structural exclusion**, geographical isolation, and ethnic marginalization. Such disparities not only hinder the socio-economic upliftment of tribal communities but also exacerbate **ethnic polarization**, thereby undermining the goals of peace, equity, and inclusive development.

### Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Compare socio-economic indicators across key ethnic communities in Manipur.
2. Identify the structural, geographical, and political causes of inter-ethnic developmental disparities.
3. Provide policy-oriented solutions that can help bridge these gaps and ensure more equitable and inclusive development.

### Research Questions

1. What are the key socio-economic differences between the hill and valley communities of Manipur?
2. How do structural, geographical, and political factors contribute to inter-ethnic developmental disparities?
3. What policy frameworks can address these disparities and promote inclusive development in Manipur?

### 3. Literature Review

- **Elwin, V. (1959).** Elwin's foundational work, *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*, provided early insights into how British colonial administration institutionalized ethnic and regional separations. By classifying tribal communities as "excluded" or "partially excluded," the colonial state ensured minimal integration of the hill tribes into administrative or developmental structures. This created long-lasting spatial and ethnic inequalities that persisted into the post-independence period.
- **Horam, M. (1977).** Horam's ethnographic exploration of Naga Society shed light on traditional governance systems and their resilience despite external interventions. He also highlighted the administrative neglect faced by the Nagas, emphasizing how development policies rarely considered local aspirations, thereby alienating these communities and reinforcing socio-economic marginalization.
- **Barpujari, H. K. (1980).** In *Problems of the Hill Tribes*, Barpujari criticized the Indian state's failure to address the distinct developmental needs of Northeast India. He highlighted how national planning frameworks were designed without regional sensitivity, thereby exacerbating the divide between valley-dwelling populations and hill tribes, especially in states like Manipur.
- **Singh, K. S. (1993).** Through the *People of India* project, Singh documented the demographic, cultural, and socio-economic conditions of various Scheduled Tribes. His comprehensive mapping showed that despite constitutional protections, many tribal groups lagged far behind on indicators like literacy, employment, and healthcare—reinforcing arguments of structural marginalization within Indian federalism.
- **Bhaumik, S. (2007).** In *Insurgent Crossfire: North-East India*, Bhaumik analyzed the rise of ethnic insurgencies in the region, linking them to developmental deprivation, lack of representation, and center-state disconnect. His work demonstrated that political unrest in Manipur and its surrounding states was deeply intertwined with state-led underdevelopment, especially in tribal areas.
- **Fernandes, W. (2012).** Fernandes focused on the impact of displacement and marginalization caused by development projects in tribal regions. He argued that state interventions often led to the alienation of local communities by disrupting their traditional livelihoods without adequate compensation or rehabilitation. His work contributed to the understanding of development as a contested and often exploitative process in the Northeast.
- **Singh, L. C. (2015).** Singh examined the interplay between identity and development among tribal groups in Manipur. He argued that many communities perceive state policies as mechanisms of cultural domination rather than empowerment. His analysis emphasized how identity assertions and autonomy demands are rooted in long histories of developmental neglect.
- **Misra, T. (2011).** In *The Periphery Writes Back*, Misra emphasized the cultural dimension of marginalization by exploring literature, oral traditions, and regional media from the Northeast. She showed how peripheral voices have emerged to challenge dominant developmental narratives, advocating for alternative models that respect indigenous values and knowledge systems.

- **Haokip, T. (2013).** Haokip's study on Inter-ethnic Relations in Manipur explored the deep-rooted tensions between tribal and non-tribal communities. He attributed much of the friction to unequal access to resources, political representation, and developmental benefits. His work underscored the urgent need for inclusive policy frameworks that acknowledge historical grievances and ethnic sensibilities.
- **Ao, A. & Singh, B. K. (2020).** In their study on Geographical Marginality and Policy Deficits, Ao and Singh argued against the deterministic narrative that topography alone hinders development in the Northeast. They proposed that poor planning, administrative neglect, and uneven policy implementation were more critical factors that perpetuate the developmental gap between hill and valley regions.

Theme	Key Focus	Key Authors	Interpretative Summary
<b>Historical Stratification</b>	Colonial exclusion, hill-valley divide, foundation of ethnic tension	Elwin (1959), Horam (1977), Barpujari (1980)	These works show how colonial legacies entrenched geographical and ethnic inequalities still visible in Manipur.
<b>Structural Inequality</b>	Disparities in education, health, employment, displacement by development projects	Singh, K. S. (1993), Fernandes (2012), Ao & Singh (2020)	These studies reveal that developmental disparities are not accidental but products of systemic neglect.
<b>Ethno-Political Marginalization</b>	Identity-based exclusion, insurgency, unequal resource allocation, political alienation	Bhaumik (2007), Haokip (2013), Singh, L. C. (2015)	These authors argue that ethnic unrest is linked to long-standing political and developmental marginalization.
<b>Cultural Resistance</b>	Alternative narratives, local resistance, indigenous knowledge systems	Misra (2011)	Resistance emerges from the region's rich oral traditions and cultural assertion against imposed development.

#### 4. Research Gap

Despite an expanding body of literature on the socio-political and developmental challenges in Northeast India, particularly Manipur, several critical gaps remain unaddressed:

1. **Lack of Micro-Level, Ethnicity-Specific Analysis:** Most existing studies (e.g., Elwin 1959; Bhaumik 2007; Haokip 2013) focus on broad ethnic or regional dynamics in the Northeast, but few conduct **ethnicity-disaggregated micro-studies** within a single state such as Manipur. There is limited granular data comparing socio-economic indicators between specific communities like the Meitei, Naga, and Kuki.

2. **Insufficient Integration of Spatial and Ethnic Dimensions:** Literature on regional disparities often treats **geography and ethnicity in isolation**. There is a methodological gap in using **ethnic geography** as an analytical lens to explain patterns of exclusion, development, and conflict.
3. **Neglect of Grassroots Voices in Development Discourse:** Many studies (e.g., Singh, L.C. 2015; Fernandes 2012) discuss policy failure but do not adequately incorporate **community-level perceptions** of marginality, belonging, and development. There is a need for a bottom-up, participatory approach in understanding development disparities.
4. **Limited Focus on Inter-Ethnic Perception and Developmental Trust:** Few studies have examined **how ethnic communities perceive one another's developmental status**, and how this perception affects inter-community trust, competition, or cooperation in resource access and policymaking.
5. **Inadequate Policy Bridging between Valley and Hill Regions:** While several reports identify infrastructure and governance gaps, there is **little actionable policy synthesis** that addresses how inclusive planning can be achieved across the ethnic faultlines of Manipur.

## 5. Research Methodology

### 5.1 Research Design

This study adopts a **micro-ethnographic and descriptive research design** to explore developmental disparities through the lens of ethnic geography. Micro-ethnography enables in-depth understanding of community-level experiences and perceptions, while the descriptive approach helps capture and compare socio-economic indicators across Manipur's hill and valley districts.

### 5.2 Data Collection Methods

To ensure comprehensive and multi-dimensional insights, both **primary and secondary sources** were employed:

- **Primary Data:**
  - **In-depth Interviews** with local leaders, government officials, community elders, educators, and youth from different ethnic groups (Meitei, Naga, Kuki).
  - **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)** involving diverse stakeholders in each region to gauge inter-community perceptions and development concerns.
  - **Participant Observations** during community meetings, local market interactions, and NGO workshops to understand social behavior and trust dynamics.
- **Secondary Data:**
  - Government Census data (2011), District Statistical Handbooks, and Manipur Human Development Reports.
  - Reports by Planning Commission, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, and Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER).

- Scholarly literature, NGO publications, and policy analysis papers relevant to ethnicity and development in Northeast India.

### 5.3 Sampling Techniques

The study uses **Purposive Sampling** to identify districts and respondents relevant to the research objectives, particularly those with evident inter-ethnic dynamics. Within communities, **Snowball Sampling** was adopted to identify knowledgeable and willing participants, especially in conflict-sensitive or hard-to-reach areas.

### 5.4 Area of Study

The field study was conducted in selected districts representing the **hill-valley divide**:

- **Hill Districts:**
  - **Churachandpur** (predominantly Kuki population)
  - **Ukhrul** (predominantly Tangkhul Naga population)
- **Valley Districts:**
  - **Imphal East**
  - **Imphal West** (dominated by the Meitei community)

This selection ensures a balanced comparative framework based on geography and ethnic composition.

### 5.5 Data Analysis Methods

- **Qualitative Analysis:**
  - All interviews and FGDs were transcribed and subjected to **thematic coding** to identify recurring categories such as perceptions of marginalization, infrastructure needs, and development grievances.
  - Content analysis techniques were used to ensure contextual relevance and inter-subjective validation.

### 5.6 Ethical Considerations

- **Informed Consent:** All participants were briefed about the study's objectives, and their consent was obtained prior to participation.
- **Confidentiality:** Identities of respondents have been anonymized to protect privacy.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Special care was taken to respect ethnic customs, languages, and sensitivities during fieldwork.
- **Non-partisanship:** The study maintains a neutral and academic tone, avoiding political or ethnic biases.

## 6. Data Analysis and Findings

### Objective 1: Comparison of Socio-Economic Indicators

To analyze disparities in socio-economic development between hill and valley regions of Manipur.

#### 6.1 Socio-Economic Indicators: Hill vs Valley Regions

Indicators	Hill Regions (Kuki, Naga)	Valley Regions (Meitei)	Observations
Literacy Rate	Avg. 60–65%	Avg. 80–85%	Strong disparity
Employment	Mostly agrarian, irregular wage labor	Government jobs, private services	Gap in security
Health Access	1 PHC per 20–25 villages	1 PHC/CHC per 2–3 villages	Limited coverage
Access to Schemes	Poor awareness, irregular access	Frequent and full access to government schemes	Structural bias
Connectivity	Poor roads, seasonal inaccessibility	Good roads and regular transport	Geographic divide

The data reveals a pronounced disparity between the hill and valley regions of Manipur, highlighting the entrenched developmental imbalance that has persisted over decades. The Meitei-dominated valley, being geographically central and politically influential, benefits from better institutional infrastructure, educational facilities, healthcare services, and access to economic opportunities. Government investment and administrative focus appear to be concentrated in the valley areas, enabling faster growth and more visible developmental outcomes. In contrast, the hill regions, predominantly inhabited by tribal communities such as the Nagas and Kukis, continue to face chronic underdevelopment. These areas lag in essential socio-economic indicators such as road connectivity, electricity supply, clean drinking water, educational institutions, and healthcare facilities. The lack of such fundamental infrastructure has contributed to limited livelihood options and widespread dependency on subsistence agriculture. The stark contrast in development outcomes between these regions is not merely a matter of geography but is deeply rooted in historical neglect, ethnic marginalization, and uneven policy implementation. This structural disparity has further fuelled grievances among tribal communities, fostering perceptions of exclusion and intensifying demands for political autonomy and equitable resource distribution.

### Objective 2: Structural, Geographical, and Political Causes of Disparities

To identify the root causes of developmental inequality across ethnic and regional lines.



## 6.2 Thematic Analysis (Based on Interviews and FGDs)

Theme	Quote	Affected Group
Geographical Isolation	"We walk 3–4 km just to fetch clean water."	Kuki, Naga
Political Exclusion	"Development always stops at the valley."	Naga, Kuki
Administrative Gaps	"Files get stuck because there's no officer from our community."	Naga
Discrimination	"Most schemes go to valley areas."	Kuki
Insecurity	"Market visits are unsafe for hill women."	All communities

The findings underscore how geographical remoteness, coupled with political centralization in the Imphal valley, significantly contributes to unequal access to developmental benefits across Manipur. The valley region, particularly Imphal, has emerged as the administrative and economic hub, drawing disproportionate attention and resources from both the state and central governments. In contrast, the hill districts—home primarily to tribal communities such as the Nagas and Kukis—remain physically distant from the centers of power and policy formulation. This spatial disconnection is further compounded by the underrepresentation of these communities in key decision-making positions, leading to a governance structure that often overlooks their unique needs and challenges.

The lack of ethnic representation in bureaucracy, local governance, and development planning reinforces a sense of marginalization among the hill tribes. Respondents from various interviews and focus group discussions repeatedly emphasized how development projects are valley-centric, and that allocation of funds, infrastructure initiatives, and welfare schemes are either delayed or diluted by the time they reach tribal areas. Moreover, the perceived and actual experiences of ethnic discrimination—ranging from bureaucratic apathy to biased implementation of schemes—intensify feelings of exclusion and systemic neglect. This exclusion is not only structural but also psychological, creating a deepening mistrust between the state apparatus and tribal populations. The interplay of geography, ethnicity, and political marginalization thus creates a cycle of developmental inequality that sustains historical grievances and fuels identity-based political movements.

### Objective 3: Policy-Oriented Recommendations

To suggest actionable policy measures aimed at bridging developmental gaps.

## 6.3 Community-Inclusive Policy Recommendations

Domain	Recommendation
Governance	Rotational tribal representation in planning boards; local tribal councils



Domain	Recommendation
Infrastructure	Hill-focused development packages under NEC or BADP
Education	Hostels for tribal children; targeted scholarships
Health	Mobile health vans, telemedicine outreach
Livelihood	Tribal Entrepreneurship Cells, SHG–MGNREGA alignment
Ethnic Harmony	Peace forums, intercultural workshops, conflict resolution programs

The analysis of community responses and developmental data points to the urgent need for **policy restructuring that reflects both ethnic geography and the historical context** of Manipur's socio-political fabric. Existing development models, often designed with a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, fail to account for the complex ethnic composition and deeply rooted historical grievances in the region. Policies that remain valley-centric not only reinforce existing inequalities but also alienate hill communities who perceive state-led development as biased or exclusionary. Therefore, **a nuanced and decentralized policy framework**—one that includes tribal voices in planning and execution—is essential to achieving equitable outcomes.

Community-centric models of development, particularly those based on successful examples from other tribal regions (e.g., Nagaland's Village Development Boards or Mizoram's local governance through churches and NGOs), offer replicable strategies that are both inclusive and culturally grounded. Such models **prioritize local participation, emphasize traditional knowledge systems**, and foster a sense of ownership among the beneficiaries. Additionally, empowering Self-Help Groups (SHGs), supporting tribal entrepreneurship, and ensuring linguistic and cultural sensitivity in service delivery will help bridge the trust deficit. Most importantly, these models can serve as platforms for **inter-ethnic cooperation**, reducing tensions by encouraging collaborative problem-solving and shared developmental goals. Ultimately, community-based, ethnically sensitive planning holds the potential to **redefine the state-citizen relationship in Manipur**, moving toward a more just, peaceful, and sustainable development trajectory.

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1 Interpretation of Findings in Light of Existing Literature

The comparative analysis of socio-economic indicators between the hill and valley districts in Manipur demonstrates a stark developmental divide. This confirms the findings of scholars such as Hausing (2015) and Shimray (2001), who emphasized ethnic and spatial disparities in Northeast India. Literacy rates, access to government welfare schemes, and health infrastructure are significantly better in the valley regions, predominantly inhabited by the Meitei community. Conversely, hill districts with a majority of tribal communities (Kuki, Naga) continue to face marginalization, mirroring the patterns of structural inequality identified in earlier studies (Karlsson, 2003; Baruah, 2005).

The findings also support the theory of **structural inequality**, where power and resources are disproportionately controlled by dominant ethnic groups. As seen in the FGDs and key informant interviews, valley-centric policymaking and political representation create systemic barriers for the tribal populations, consistent with Beteille's (1998) argument on social exclusion.

## 7.2 Geography and Ethnicity: Intersecting Forces in Development

The developmental imbalance is not merely a function of geography but a confluence of **ethnic geography and ethno-political marginalization**. While geographical remoteness certainly plays a role in limiting access to infrastructure in the hill regions, the more crucial element is the ethnic composition of these regions and their historical relationship with the state. As findings suggest, administrative neglect, poor road connectivity, and limited educational facilities are more severe in tribal regions—not solely because of terrain, but due to long-standing political disengagement.

These findings resonate with the concept of **geographical determinism**, but must be reframed within a critical sociological lens that incorporates ethnicity, governance structures, and power asymmetries (Xaxa, 2008).

## 7.3 Role of the State, Church, and Civil Society

Interviews across both hill and valley regions consistently highlighted the **failure of the state** in ensuring equitable development. In the vacuum created by limited state intervention, **church institutions and local NGOs** have taken proactive roles in the tribal-dominated hills—particularly in education, healthcare, and capacity-building. This aligns with previous literature (Horam, 1990; Ao, 2010) suggesting the rise of non-state actors as critical agents of development in ethnically sensitive regions.

However, the fragmented and uncoordinated efforts of civil society actors also point to the **need for state-civil society partnerships**. The lack of such collaboration often results in duplication of efforts or uneven coverage of services.

## 7.4 Emergence of Political Discontent and Identity Assertion

A crucial finding of this study is the **emergence of ethnic assertion movements** rooted in feelings of neglect, cultural alienation, and lack of development. Tribal leaders interviewed often linked developmental neglect with the **erosion of ethnic dignity and demand for separate administrative arrangements**, including the aspiration for a separate Kukiland or greater autonomy for Naga-inhabited districts. These aspirations are not merely political but are expressions of **deep-rooted developmental grievances**.

The interviews reinforce C. Wright Mills' concept of the **sociological imagination**, where personal troubles (lack of health care, unemployment) are transformed into public issues (ethnic demands, political agitation). This aligns with the findings of Misra (2000), who argues that unresolved developmental gaps often escalate into political conflict in Northeast India.

## 7.5 Implications for Peace and Regional Stability

The growing **discontent among tribal groups**, coupled with developmental neglect, presents a challenge not just for governance but for **regional peace and national integration**. The Manipur conflict, especially post-2023 ethnic clashes, is deeply linked with perceptions of uneven development and ethnic domination.

Bridging these gaps is not merely a matter of economics, but a **political imperative**. The study indicates that **inclusive policy-making**, greater **ethnic representation in planning bodies**, and **community-specific development models** could significantly reduce mistrust and enhance regional harmony.

## 8. Policy Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following policy-oriented recommendations are proposed to promote inclusive development in Manipur's ethnically diverse landscape:

Domain	Policy Recommendation
Inclusive Governance	Institutionalize <b>rotational representation</b> of tribal communities in local development bodies and planning boards. Empower <b>tribal councils</b> in decision-making.
Infrastructure	Develop <b>hill-specific infrastructure projects</b> for roads, water, sanitation, and electricity. Leverage funding from NEC, BADP, and DoNER ministries.
Education	Expand <b>residential schools</b> and <b>ethnic scholarship schemes</b> for tribal students. Localize curriculum to include <b>indigenous knowledge systems</b> .
Healthcare	Deploy <b>mobile health units</b> , telemedicine, and train <b>community health workers</b> from within tribal areas for better health access.
Livelihoods	Promote <b>tribal entrepreneurship</b> through dedicated start-up incubators. Strengthen <b>SHGs</b> , <b>MGNREGA</b> , and skill development in ethnic communities.
Social Cohesion	Create <b>inter-ethnic peace-building forums</b> , cultural exchanges, and promote <b>community-based conflict resolution</b> strategies.

**Outcome:** These policy recommendations, if implemented, will bridge existing inequalities and foster **trust**, **coexistence**, and **sustainable development**.

## 9. Conclusion

This study has undertaken a **micro-level comparative analysis** of developmental gaps between the **hill and valley regions** of Manipur, through an **ethnic lens**. Key findings indicate that:

- There are **deep-rooted socio-economic disparities**—in education, healthcare, and livelihood—between the valley-dwelling Meiteis and the hill-dwelling Kuki and Naga tribes.

- **Structural inequality, political marginalization, and geographical constraints** contribute to the developmental lag in the hills.
- Despite efforts, **policy frameworks remain biased**, urban-centric, and **ethnically insensitive**, which has fuelled discontent, identity assertion, and unrest.

#### Urgency and Policy Implications:

The study underscores the **urgent need for inclusive governance, contextualized infrastructure planning, and community-sensitive interventions**. The role of **non-state actors**, especially the Church and tribal civil society, is crucial in ensuring delivery of welfare services and mediating inter-ethnic relations.

#### Future Research Suggestions:

- A **longitudinal study** of development post-implementation of region-specific schemes.
- Comparative studies between **tribal communities across Northeast India**.
- An in-depth focus on **youth aspirations** and migration patterns due to underdevelopment.

In conclusion, this research calls for a **re-visioning of development** that is **geographically balanced, ethnically just, and politically inclusive**—to ensure lasting peace and prosperity in Manipur.

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