

Rethinking Underdevelopment in Manipur: Intersections of Conflict and Development

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically interrogates the dominant "statist" narrative that attributes Manipur's underdevelopment primarily to insurgency and perceived "law and order" deficits. It disagrees with the reductionist view that insurgent activity constitutes the principal impediment to economic and social progress. Drawing on historical and empirical evidence, the analysis demonstrates that underdevelopment in Manipur predates and persists independently of armed conflict, indicating that structural inequalities, political marginalization, and chronic governance deficits are the more fundamental determinants of stagnation. The study further situates these dynamics within broader patterns of state neglect and uneven development, highlighting how systemic exclusion has perpetuated socio-economic disparities over time.

The paper reconceptualizes insurgency not merely as a barrier to development but as a complex political instrument shaped by elite interests. It argues that armed resistance has, paradoxically, compelled central authorities to engage with the state and allocate resources, while simultaneously serving as a mechanism through which entrenched elites obscure systemic corruption and social stratification. Framing conflict through the lens of "Conflict Transformation," the study shows how well-managed contestation can drive positive institutional and social change. Underdevelopment in Manipur is thus presented as less an inevitable consequence of insurgency than a dysfunction of governance and administrative mismanagement, underscoring the need for systemic, informed, and transformative interventions that address the structural and political roots of instability.

Keywords: Development, Underdevelopment, Elite, Conflict, Insurgency, Structural Inequalities, Political Instrument, Conflict Transformation

Introduction

In Manipur, the development discourse has often been shaped by a statist lens, which frames the state's underdevelopment predominantly in terms of conflict (Baruah, 2005). Insurgency movements, led by various armed groups, are routinely portrayed as a law and order problem and invoked as the principal explanation for economic stagnation in Manipur and the broader Northeastern Region of India. Political leaders and policymakers frequently claim in the mass media that developmental initiatives are consistently undermined by ongoing insurgent activity. Similarly, many mainstream intellectuals and commentators have long regarded insurgency as the central cause of the region's economic underdevelopment (Kumar, 2005). Nearly every aspect of underdevelopment—ranging from infrastructural deficiencies, limited capital investment, stagnation in tourism, insufficient industrialization, trade bottlenecks, to the mismanagement of central plan funds—has been attributed to insurgent activity. Yet, it is important to critically examine the realities that underpin this understanding and question whether underdevelopment is indeed predominantly a consequence of conflict. Several questions emerge in this context: Does insurgency genuinely obstruct economic development, or is it invoked as a convenient rationale for persistent underdevelopment? Can development occur even amid conflict? Would Manipur have experienced rapid economic growth in the absence of insurgency? This paper seeks to address these questions, offering a nuanced analysis of the debate surrounding development and underdevelopment in Manipur.

Since the conclusion of the Second World War, nations around the world have witnessed diverse forms of conflict, often unprecedented in scale and frequency, the majority of which are intra-state in nature. In a global context marked by resource scarcity, unequal power relations, conflicting interests, intensifying elite competition, weak governance, the dominance of national powers, and persistent exploitative social or repressive political systems, conflict has arguably been more the norm than the exception. However, development continues in many regions despite the prevalence of conflict, reflecting the complex relationship between the two. Conflict is not inherently antagonistic to development or social change; on the contrary, it can function as a catalyst that shapes social structures and drives societal transformation (Bhattacharya, 2006). The common assumption that development is stalled solely due to conflict—such as the insurgency in Manipur—overlooks the functional role that conflict can play in promoting adaptation, innovation, and socio-political evolution. Societal change frequently arises from tensions embedded within social dynamics, and the historical evolution of human societies toward higher socio-economic and political orders underscores conflict's enduring role as an agent of transformation.

Insurgency and Its Role in Socio-Economic Change

A close analysis of insurgency movements in Manipur and their impact on the state's broader development landscape reveals a scenario that challenges the narrative advanced by the state. The repeated invocation of "law and order" by state authorities as a precondition for economic development functions, in many ways, as a strategy to absolve the state of its responsibility to ensure comprehensive and inclusive development for the population. The political evolution and historical record of Manipur since 1949, however, contradict the claim that insurgency is the sole or primary cause of the state's underdevelopment. Attributing the underdevelopment of Manipur and other Northeastern states entirely to insurgency constitutes a diversionary tactic that overlooks the complex array of structural, historical, and political factors shaping development outcomes (Singh, 2011). Historical evidence further supports this critique. Until the mid-1970s, armed insurgency in Manipur was virtually absent, despite the formation of the Meitei State Committee (MSC) and the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) in the early 1960s. The activities of the MSC were largely suppressed in their early stages, while the UNLF remained in a low profile, focusing primarily on organizational consolidation and political mobilization rather than armed confrontation. In this context, it becomes clear that the roots of underdevelopment cannot be simplistically reduced to the presence of insurgent activity, but must be understood as intertwined with the historical marginalization, structural inequalities, and policy neglect that have shaped Manipur's socio-economic and political trajectory over decades.

Following the failed communist revolution led by Hijam Irabot under the Manipur Communist Party (MCP) in 1951, the state experienced a relatively peaceful environment. Although the statehood movement remained active during this period, organized armed struggle was largely absent, creating conditions that could have been conducive to development. Despite this, the historical record demonstrates that the period prior to 1975 witnessed only limited economic progress. Industrialization was minimal, sectoral achievements were modest, and the State largely failed to provide even basic amenities—such as electrification, adequate healthcare, and safe water supply—to the population. Large portions of the interior hill regions continued to lack these fundamental facilities, which are essential markers of modern development and the standards of a contemporary, civilized society. For instance, electricity supply during this period was confined, mostly to Imphal, and the hill areas remained almost entirely without power; per-capita electricity consumption in 1975–76 stood at only about 9 kWh, far below the all-India average of 124 kWh (Misra, 2020). The absence of infrastructural development and public services during this period highlights that peace alone was insufficient to guarantee progress, pointing to structural neglect and the limited prioritization of the region in broader national development policies.

In contrast to the widespread insurgency in Nagaland and Mizoram, Manipur remained largely peaceful through the 1960s and early 1970s. Despite conditions that were, in principle, favorable for developmental initiatives, Manipur—like much of the Northeast—remained largely neglected by the Central Government over an extended period. The total central funding allocated to Manipur as part of its integration into the Union up to the Fifth Five-Year Plan did not even reach the Rs. 300-crore mark (Datta, 1995). Such a meager allocation makes clear how limited the scope for meaningful development could have been. During the same period, the Green Revolution was transforming large parts of Northern India with active and substantial support from the Central Government. If such transformative development could be achieved elsewhere, why did it fail to materialize in Manipur? Can this failure reasonably be attributed to insurgency? A comprehensive understanding of Manipur's developmental challenges requires a close examination of the pre-insurgency period, as this may reveal underlying governance and resource allocation issues that compounded later problems.

In the political landscape of Manipur, insurgency has operated not merely as a challenge to authority but as a means through which the populace has engaged with the Central Government, shaping outcomes such as statehood and resource allocation. After the unceremonious merger of Manipur into the Dominion of India in 1949, a sovereign entity with over two thousand years of historical existence was relegated to the status of a

Part-C state. In response, the people of Manipur launched a series of sustained democratic agitations demanding a responsible government and full statehood. The Indian Government's response, however, fell far short of the aspirations of the populace. Amidst this political context, the irony of history was compounded when the Indian Parliament passed the 23rd Amendment Act in 1963, granting statehood to Nagaland through the amalgamation of Naga Hills District and the Tuensang Frontier Tract, previously classified as Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas (Government of India, 1962). While the creation of Nagaland was undoubtedly accelerated by the security concerns arising from the Chinese aggression of 1962, it was also a calculated political concession to the Naga armed insurgency, which had posed a significant threat to India's internal security. This move aimed to marginalize the Naga National Council (NNC) from the masses, compel its submission, and simultaneously bolster integrationist forces represented by Naga moderates. Notably, the grant of statehood to Nagaland deviated from the principle of state reorganization based on economic viability. While national security was prioritized over economic considerations, the 1963 decision proved to be a significant political miscalculation. This oversight had enduring consequences, contributing to the spread of insurgency across the Northeast, including in Manipur (Baruah, 2005). The activities of emerging insurgent groups appear to have influenced the Government of India's decision to extend full statehood to Manipur in 1972, a move seemingly intended to forestall the escalation of armed violence. It is plausible to suggest that, in the absence of insurgent mobilization during the 1960s, the conferment of statehood might not have occurred at that juncture.

Viewed in this light, insurgency can be understood as a political instrument through which both state formation and development have been negotiated in Manipur. It was only after the emergence of armed resistance in the early 1970s that budgetary allocations for the state began to increase in a sustained manner. Without such pressures, it is unlikely that Manipur would have received significant central assistance, despite its long-standing dependence on financial transfers from New Delhi to sustain meaningful development initiatives. The Government of India historically displayed little responsiveness to democratic appeals from Manipur, and this neglect left the population with limited political recourse. In effect, insurgency became a vehicle through which counter-elites compelled the Centre to acknowledge their demands, making armed mobilization a paradoxical but significant factor in securing development resources. Moreover, the central government increasingly began to deploy targeted development schemes as a strategic instrument to mitigate insurgent activity, signaling that economic investment was not merely a matter of welfare but also a calculated political response aimed at pacifying dissent and reinforcing state authority (Sharma, 2011). In this sense, the politics of insurgency and development became intertwined: insurgent pressures generated central attention and resources, while development itself was used as a mechanism of governance to stabilize politically sensitive regions.

Faced with limited democratic space for peaceful political engagement, actors in Manipur increasingly resorted to violent methods to make their demands intelligible to the central government. There is a widespread perception that democratic channels rarely elicited a response, whereas even a single act of armed resistance or the detonation of a bomb could instantly draw nationwide attention to grievances that might otherwise have been ignored for decades (Baruah, 2005). Currently, Manipur receives substantial financial assistance from the Centre, in part, as a consequence of its history of armed movements (Sharma, 2011). However, it must be emphasized that the mere allocation of large sums of money does not constitute development in itself, although it can serve as a critical instrument to achieve it. On this basis, the assertion that conflict in Manipur—in the form of insurgency—is inherently detrimental to development becomes logically untenable.

The insurgency in Manipur has, perhaps paradoxically, emerged as a major driver of employment while also contributing to structural shifts in the state's political economy. Over the past decade, substantial numbers of youths have been recruited into the police, army, and paramilitary forces to participate in counter-insurgency operations (Sharma, 2011). The principal concern associated with this trend is the risk that society may increasingly orient itself toward a militarized economy. Nevertheless, insurgency has also functioned as an effective institutional mechanism for promoting a more equitable distribution of wealth through processes of redistribution. Previously, wealth was concentrated predominantly among bureaucrats, white-collar professionals, business elites, ministers, and their associates. In recent years, however, a new middle class has begun to emerge as a social consequence of ongoing insurgency movements—a development that is likely to play a significant role in shaping the trajectory of future historical events (Baruah, 2005).

Tourism, Security, and the Limits of Development in Manipur

The tourism sector in Manipur provides a clear example of how the notion of law and order is frequently invoked in discussions of development. While the potential of tourism in the state is widely acknowledged and requires little elaboration, the central question remains: why does this sector continue to be underdeveloped despite its considerable prospects? The official explanation offered by the government attributes the stagnation to the volatile law and order situation in Manipur, suggesting that outsiders are deterred by the risk of kidnapping or being caught in crossfire. At first glance, this claim appears plausible;

yet a closer examination tells a different story. Foreign tourists continue to visit regions like Kashmir despite the ongoing crisis there, and Mumbai's tourism industry has not collapsed in the wake of successive terrorist attacks. Such comparisons indicate that the perceived impact of insurgency on tourism in Manipur may be overstated, suggesting that other structural and policy factors also play a significant role.

Authorities often cite security concerns to justify the absence of major development initiatives in the tourism sector. The government contends that it cannot guarantee the safety of foreign visitors, necessitating the enforcement of restrictive measures such as the Protected Area Permit Act and the Restricted Area Permit Act. While these regulations are intended to address legitimate security challenges, they also have the unintended consequence of severely limiting the influx of tourists and, by extension, stifling potential economic growth in the sector. This situation raises a critical question: how can meaningful and sustainable development in tourism occur when access to the state is legally constrained for foreigners, who constitute a major component of the tourism market? Moreover, the reliance on security as the principal rationale for underdevelopment overlooks other structural and institutional factors, such as inadequate infrastructure, poor connectivity, and lack of investment incentives, which also hinder the growth of tourism. By framing security as the primary obstacle, the government may inadvertently create a self-perpetuating cycle in which the tourism potential of Manipur remains unrealized, further marginalizing the region from national and global economic networks (Sharma, 2011).

A key, though often implicit, rationale behind restricting entry to outsiders seems to relate to the Central Government's approach to managing the armed conflict in Manipur. Authorities have been cautious about the dissemination of information concerning alleged human rights incidents involving security forces to international media and human rights organizations. Such caution may stem from concerns that increased international attention could amplify the visibility of the conflict, potentially enabling armed groups to attract external support or influence narratives about the situation. This concern aligns with the Government of India's longstanding framing of the conflict primarily as an internal law and order issue (Baruah, 2005). In this context, a relevant question emerges: could the state be opened to international tourists and media while maintaining a position that insurgent groups remain subject to lawful suppression? Doing so might even provide opportunities for international engagement in support of conflict resolution. However, the government has not taken this step, possibly due to the nuanced political and legitimacy issues associated with some insurgent claims.

The extent of the Government of India's control over tourism development in Manipur becomes strikingly apparent upon visiting 'Sendra,' a well-known tourist site near Loktak Lake. For a prolonged period, Indian security forces occupied the area, dealing a serious blow to the development of tourism in the state (The Telegraph India, 2006). This not only resulted in significant revenue losses but also deprived local residents of a cherished recreational space. Many people experienced a sense of psychological confinement due to the presence of security forces at such an important site, a sentiment that was far from unfounded. One is compelled to question why security installations could not have been established elsewhere if such measures were genuinely necessary. The government's deliberate occupation of the site appeared intended to assert the presence of coercive authority at the center of public life. Fortunately, the security forces were shifted from the site a few years ago—a positive measure that has reopened the area to visitors and represents a step toward normalizing tourism activities. As a result, the tourism sector, long politically constrained, can now begin to recover from this period of enforced stagnation.

Insurgency, Governance, and Structural Inequality

In the present context, insurgency has increasingly assumed the character of a 'convenient scapegoat,' with a wide range of societal ills commonly attributed to it. Insurgents, or those adopting the guise of insurgents or revolutionaries, are frequently characterized as extortionists. Any 'demand note' issued to government departments, individuals, or institutions is often treated as non-negotiable, with non-compliance exposing the targets to coercive responses ranging from firing of shots or grenades at residences to kidnapping or abduction. This dynamic constitutes a well-documented aspect of the socio-political landscape. At the same time, the state is not entirely exempt from similar practices. Allegations of official extortion and bureaucratic complicity are pervasive, and for residents, such experiences constitute part of everyday life. For instance, the erstwhile Secular Progressive Front (SPF) Government of Manipur became closely associated with the practice of deducting a fixed 'percentage cut' from the total value of every scheme or program implemented (The Sangai Express, 8 January 2009). These parallels between insurgent coercion and state-sanctioned practices complicate conventional understandings of governance legitimacy and reveal the intertwined circulation of power in conflict-affected societies.

Allocation of central funds has seldom reached the most marginalized and vulnerable populations. The Public Distribution System (PDS) in Manipur remains largely ineffective, attributable less to insurgent interference than to entrenched political corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and systemic governance failures (India Today, 2005). Remote villages and interior regions frequently lack access to PDS provisions, leaving basic nutritional and livelihood needs unmet. A small, well-connected group, often in collusion with senior bureaucrats and ministers, systematically exploits these shortcomings to concentrate wealth and influence,

depriving the broader population of essential resources. Notable attempts at industrialization, including the Khandsari Sugar Factory, Khangabok Cotton Mill, and Hundung Cement Factory, failed not due to law and order constraints or insurgent activity but as a result of organizational mismanagement, weak oversight, and the absence of sustained political commitment (E-Pao, 2008; E-Pao, 2003). The perceived law and order problem had little bearing on these failures, underscoring the primacy of structural and institutional deficiencies in constraining economic development.

Reports and analyses of governance in Manipur have frequently highlighted the existence of a deeply entrenched, collusive network that includes public officials, police, bureaucrats, contractors, businessmen, and medical professionals. This network is alleged to have operated for an extended period, leading to the consolidation of wealth and influence among a privileged few at the expense of the wider populace. The resulting economic and social disparities are visible in the highly uneven access to resources and opportunities, with a concentration of palatial residences, luxury vehicles, and private business establishments in the hands of this elite class. Systematic exploitation is facilitated through coordinated use of state machinery, ensuring that social, political, and economic structures operate to reinforce the network's dominance. In Gramscian terms, this constitutes a form of "passive revolution" and elite capture, whereby power is consolidated not solely through coercion but through the normalization of patterns of exploitation framed as routine governance (Gramsci, 1971; Dasgupta & Beard, 2007). Control over institutional and resource flows allows this class to maintain structural advantages and expand its privileges while marginalizing the broader population.

Re-conceptualizing Ethnic Violence in Manipur

The protracted instability and recurring ethnic conflict in Manipur cannot be understood solely as a product of historical tensions; they also reflect the strategic interests of a small, influential elite. This elite—comprising political leaders, bureaucrats, business actors, and figures associated with armed groups—operates in a context where conflict can serve as a mechanism for consolidating economic, political, and social influence. Scholars have referred to this arrangement as a "conflict economy," in which a limited number of actors derive material and strategic benefits from sustained militarization and instability (Anderton & Carter, 2019).

A key aspect of this dynamic is how the conflict has been deliberately framed. Elite actors have avoided presenting the situation as a struggle between competing elite interests, instead portraying it as an ethnic conflict between communities. By emphasizing inter-community tensions rather than underlying class or power-based dynamics, this narrative obscures the structural and economic dimensions of the conflict. In Scott's terms, this reflects the use of "public transcripts" to conceal the hidden operations of power and control, shaping public perceptions, directing discourse along specific lines, and positioning certain actors as central intermediaries within the broader system of insurgency dynamics (Scott, 1990; Human Rights Watch, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2024).

Control over this narrative also enables a dual function of the conflict: it supports economic and political opportunities for the elite—through mechanisms such as contracts, extortion, and illicit trade—while simultaneously obscuring structural inequalities and uneven resource distribution (IWGIA, 2023; E-Pao, 2014). In this sense, instability in Manipur is not incidental but is actively managed in ways that reinforce the power and privileges of select actors. Government responses, including counter-insurgency operations and targeted development programs, often intersect with these elite interests, allowing the network to benefit disproportionately from both security expenditures and selective economic initiatives. Consequently, the law and order challenges in the state can be interpreted as socially and politically constructed phenomena that sustain elite advantage and perpetuate instability.

The ethnic violence observed over recent decades in Manipur can thus be understood not as an accidental outcome of historical animosities but as a phenomenon shaped by elite strategy. Rather than emerging solely from grassroots grievances, episodes of conflict have been orchestrated in ways that enable dominant political and economic actors to consolidate power, protect material interests, and maintain political influence (International Crisis Group, 2024). Within this framework, conflict functions as a deliberate tool through which the ruling elite can achieve specific objectives, often under the guise of maintaining order.

Ethnic mobilization has frequently served as a diversionary tactic. By emphasizing horizontal divisions along ethnic lines, elites redirect public attention away from underlying structural inequalities, systemic corruption, and class-based exploitation that directly benefits them (IWGIA, 2023). The resultant law and order challenges justify the deployment of state machinery to manage unrest. Under the pretext of counter-insurgency or maintaining public order, measures including psychological and physical coercion—documented as extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary detentions—have reinforced elite authority and constrained the emergence of class-based resistance (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

In this context, ethnic violence serves a dual purpose: it diverts scrutiny from structural exploitation while legitimizing mechanisms of elite dominance embedded within governance and security institutions. This dynamic creates a cyclical system in which instability is not an accidental malfunction of the political system

but a structural feature, ensuring that the wealth, power, and privileges of the elite are maintained at the expense of the broader population.

Towards Conflict Transformation

Conflict, unlike a simple dispute, involves fundamental interests or values that parties often consider non-negotiable. While disputes may be resolved through negotiation or compromise, conflicts are embedded in broader structural, social, and political dynamics shaped by historical grievances, systemic inequalities, and competing claims over resources, identity, and authority. Understanding conflict requires analyzing the social structures, power relations, and institutional frameworks that perpetuate tensions. This perspective is particularly relevant in contexts such as Manipur, where historical legacies, ethnic plurality, and elite dominance intersect to sustain chronic instability. Different theoretical frameworks interpret conflict in diverse ways, shaping the strategies adopted to address it—whether through resolution, management, or transformation.

The Conflict Resolution approach holds that conflicts arise over non-negotiable issues such as fundamental human needs, intolerable moral differences, or high-stakes disputes over essential resources like money, water, or land (Spangler, 2003). It frames conflict as inherently negative, emphasizing the need to address underlying causes rather than merely manage symptoms. Through the intervention of skilled but impartial third parties, the approach encourages parties to explore, analyze, question, and reframe their positions, fostering new thinking and relationships. Conflict Resolution aims to move parties from zero-sum, destructive patterns to positive-sum, constructive outcomes, seeking durable solutions perceived by all parties as acceptable and lasting (Burton, 1991).

Conflict Management offers a pragmatic, though limited, approach in contexts where achieving full resolution is exceedingly difficult. Many conflicts are deeply embedded in the structural, economic, or political fabric of society, making comprehensive solutions—such as socio-economic reforms, resource redistribution, or political restructuring—impractical or politically contentious. Rather than aiming to eliminate conflict, Conflict Management focuses on regulating and containing it, minimizing immediate harm and preventing escalation. Strategies under this approach—such as deploying peacekeeping forces, establishing monitoring mechanisms, or implementing temporary security arrangements—help reduce violence and maintain social stability. While these measures can make conflict less destructive, they do not address the underlying causes or structural inequities, and therefore typically provide only a temporary reprieve rather than a durable solution.

By contrast, Conflict Transformation offers a more holistic and long-term approach. Unlike Conflict Resolution, which treats conflict as inherently negative, or Conflict Management, which often reduces actors to controllable units, Conflict Transformation views conflict as a natural, rational, and socially functional phenomenon. John Paul Lederach, a principal advocate of this approach, emphasizes that conflict is an inevitable occurrence in human relationships and that, once it emerges, it has the potential to reshape the events, individuals, and relationships that gave rise to it (Lederach, 2003). Rather than being purely destructive, conflict can be constructively harnessed to produce positive changes in self-perception, interpersonal relations, and social structures. This approach requires engaging directly with the relationships, interests, and discourses that sustain conflict and, where necessary, reshaping the societal structures that enable violent or destructive patterns. Through such engagement, conflict can act as a catalyst for social reform, institutional strengthening, and equitable development (Miall, 2004, p. 4).

Among the three approaches, Conflict Transformation appears particularly suitable for contexts such as Manipur, where insurgency, ethnic tensions, and elite manipulation intersect. Unlike approaches that seek only to resolve or manage disputes, Conflict Transformation addresses the underlying structural and socio-political dynamics that perpetuate instability. Importantly, it demonstrates that conflict and development are not inherently incompatible; on the contrary, conflict can be leveraged to promote social justice, enhance governance, and facilitate inclusive economic and political progress. When conflicts are engaged with deliberately and constructively, they offer opportunities to build resilient institutions, strengthen civil society, and empower marginalized communities. As Hugh Miall (2004, p. 11) observes, “Constructive conflict handling reinforces the society’s confidence in its civic institutions, culture, and capacity to manage conflict peacefully. Further, it not only transforms relationships in conflict but also strengthens society’s system of governance and capacity for conflict handling and peaceful change.”

Conflict Transformation not only provides a framework for understanding conflict as a potential catalyst for positive change, but also emphasizes the importance of analyzing how power dynamics, historical grievances, and structural inequalities shape the trajectory of disputes. By recognizing that conflict is embedded within social, political, and economic systems, this approach highlights the need to address both the symptoms and the root causes of instability. It emphasizes that without addressing underlying structures and relationships, efforts to manage or resolve conflict may remain superficial and potentially counterproductive. It is undeniable that the situation in Manipur has deteriorated to the point where public confidence in governance and institutions is eroding. The causes of this decline are evident. Key actors, including both state and non-state stakeholders, have yet to implement measures aimed at transforming the underlying conflict.

The government's approach has largely focused on containment and reaction, rather than proactive engagement with the root causes. In the absence of a consistent and coherent policy, the government has relied heavily on military measures and *ad hoc* political interventions, often exacerbating the situation. Rather than addressing structural inequities, socio-political grievances, and historical marginalization, the state has largely reacted to events as they unfold. A strategic and informed response, grounded in a nuanced understanding of the conflict's nature, could have significantly altered the trajectory.

Conclusion

It is an oversimplification to attribute underdevelopment solely to the presence of conflict. The characterization of the situation in Manipur as a law and order problem has, in effect, functioned to legitimize systemic administrative deficiencies and entrenched patterns of misgovernance. The proliferation of armed groups has provided a convenient rationale for exercising control over local populations while deflecting attention from the structural and institutional factors that underlie persistent socio-economic stagnation. The framing of insurgency as the principal impediment obscures the more complex dynamics contributing to the state's developmental challenges.

Insurgency cannot be regarded as the singular cause of Manipur's economic underperformance. Interpretations of the conflict—whether as an inter-state or intra-state phenomenon—do not alter the enduring reality that the region has experienced a prolonged condition of instability with tangible effects on the population. The law and order framing represents only one dimension of this broader structural conflict, which persists in the absence of measures that address its fundamental incompatibilities through sustained political engagement and, where appropriate, third-party facilitation.

The presence of conflict does not preclude development. Comparative evidence from other conflict-affected regions, including Northern Ireland, demonstrates that economic and social advancement can occur despite prolonged disputes. In this context, conflict and development are not necessarily antithetical, particularly when examined through the lens of conflict transformation. Recognition of the conflict's existence, accompanied by strategies oriented toward structural transformation, is essential for fostering conditions conducive to inclusive progress and long-term stability.

Where underdevelopment continues, it appears less a function of conflict itself than of the manner in which it has been managed. Addressing the structural roots of the conflict and implementing measures oriented toward transformation—rather than mere containment—offers the potential to mitigate adverse impacts and support social and economic advancement. Even where immediate resolution remains unattainable, deliberate engagement with the conflict can create pathways that accommodate the interests of different actors while reinforcing developmental objectives. Constructive, informed, and systemic approaches to transforming conflict have become crucial to ensure that structural reforms contribute to continued well-being rather than perpetuate stagnation.

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ⁱ Manipur, a constituent unit of the Indian Union strategically located in Northeast India bordering Myanmar, Nagaland, Assam, and Mizoram, is known for its rich cultural heritage, diverse ethnic composition, and scenic landscapes. Once an independent kingdom until its merger with India in 1949, the state experienced deep political dissent that fueled armed resistance, evolving into a protracted insurgency and enduring security challenges. Today, corruption, insurgency, ethnic strife, administrative mismanagement, policy failure, and the persistent absence of good governance continue to undermine stability and obstruct meaningful development in the state.