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Infrastructural Power and Exclusion: School Construction, Road Networks, and the Politics of Development in the Hills and Valley of Manipur

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Abstract
This article explores the ongoing development gap between Manipur's hills and valley through the idea of infrastructural power. Although infrastructure is often seen as neutral, the study shows that roads and schools are unevenly built and maintained, deepening spatial, ethnic, and political divides. Using data from research papers, government reports, and media sources, it finds that the Imphal Valley has denser, better-quality infrastructure and easier access to education, while hill districts struggle with poor connectivity, higher transport costs, long travel distances, and frequent disruption due to conflict. The article also points out that financial allocations don't always lead to real improvements in the hills. By linking these patterns to broader themes of unequal state capacity and development justice, the study explains how weak implementation fuels exclusion and political dissatisfaction in Manipur.

Keywords: Infrastructural power, Hill-valley divide, Manipur, Road connectivity, Educational inequality, Ethnic conflict

Introduction
Manipur, located in the borderlands of Northeast India, is characterised by a pronounced geographical and socio-political divide between the Imphal Valley and the surrounding hill districts. The valley constitutes roughly 10 per cent of the state's land area but contains a substantial share of the population, administrative institutions, and economic activity, largely dominated by the Meitei community. In contrast, the hill districts, covering nearly 90 per cent of the territory are inhabited predominantly by Naga, Kuki-Zo, and other tribal groups. This spatial bifurcation has long structured patterns of governance, development, and political contestation. In recent years, infrastructure has emerged as a central axis of grievance and mobilisation. Roads, schools, and basic services are not merely technical assets; they represent the state's capacity to penetrate territory, deliver welfare, and generate legitimacy. Uneven infrastructural development between hills and valley has been repeatedly cited as a factor intensifying perceptions of marginalisation and demands for administrative restructuring. This article investigates how infrastructural power understood as the state's ability to implement decisions across space operates unevenly in Manipur and how this unevenness shapes educational access, mobility, and political claims. The central argument advanced here is that the hill-valley divide in Manipur is sustained not only by differences in funding levels but also by disparities in implementation quality, accessibility, and maintenance. By analysing road networks and educational infrastructure together, the study demonstrates how infrastructural outcomes, rather than formal allocations alone, produce enduring patterns of exclusion.

Conceptual Framework: Infrastructural Power
The analysis draws on Michael Mann's concept of infrastructural power, defined as the capacity of the state to penetrate society and implement decisions throughout its territory [1]. Infrastructural power contrasts with despotic power, which refers to the ability of state elites to take decisions without routine negotiation with civil society. In regions such as Northeast India, where security concerns and uneven terrain shape governance, infrastructural power is often spatially differentiated. In Manipur, the concentration of administrative institutions,

Transport corridors, and public services in the valley reflects a higher density of infrastructural power, while hill districts exhibit weaker penetration through civilian infrastructure. This asymmetry does not imply a complete absence of the state in the hills; rather, state presence is often more visible through coercive or security apparatuses than through everyday developmental infrastructure. Roads and schools therefore become critical sites for analysing how state capacity, inclusion, and legitimacy are produced or undermined across space.

Review of Literature

Existing scholarship on Northeast India highlights persistent developmental lags relative to the national average, shaped by remoteness, terrain, and security-oriented governance [2]. Within the region, however, intra-state disparities are often more pronounced than inter-regional ones. Studies of Manipur consistently document a structural imbalance between hill and valley districts in infrastructure provision, livelihood opportunities, and access to services [3].

Research on road infrastructure demonstrates that hill districts have significantly lower road density and poorer-quality connectivity than valley districts, resulting in higher transport costs and restricted access to markets and services [4]. These disparities are closely linked to educational outcomes. While Manipur's overall literacy rate compares favourably with national averages, district-level analyses reveal uneven access to schools, shortages of teachers, and higher dropout rates in hill areas [5].

The literature also underscores the political dimensions of infrastructure. Development projects are embedded in power relations, shaping inclusion and exclusion across ethnic and spatial lines [6]. In Manipur, debates over budgetary allocation, road construction, and school access intersect with broader conflicts over land, identity, and representation. This study builds on these insights by integrating empirical indicators of access and quality with a political-geographical analysis of infrastructural power.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative-quantitative mixed approach based exclusively on secondary sources. No primary fieldwork was undertaken. Data were drawn from three principal categories of sources:

1. Institutional and academic studies, including working papers from the Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC) and peer-reviewed journal articles on infrastructure and regional development [3, 4].
2. Government and policy data, reported through official statements and budget documents as summarised in reputable national media.
3. Contextual and conflict-related analyses from established media outlets and policy organisations, used to interpret recent developments in education and infrastructure.

Key analytical indicators include road density (km per square kilometre), average distance to district headquarters, transport costs, school availability, and disruption due to conflict. Media sources are used primarily for contextualisation and are triangulated with academic and institutional data wherever possible.

Results: Disparities in Infrastructure

Road Networks

Quantitative evidence indicates marked differences in road accessibility between hill and valley districts. Survey-based studies show that valley residents report higher levels of road accessibility and satisfaction compared to their hill counterparts [3]. Average road density in valley districts is approximately three times higher than in hill districts, while residents of hill areas travel significantly longer distances to reach administrative centres. Longer distances translate into higher transport costs and reduced mobility, particularly during the monsoon season when unsurfaced roads in hill districts often become impassable.

Transport costs further reflect these disparities. Higher per-kilometre costs in hill districts impose a disproportionate burden on residents, limiting access to education, healthcare, and markets. These outcomes persist despite substantial sanctioned investments for road development in hill areas, pointing to gaps between allocation and effective implementation [7].

Educational Infrastructure

Educational infrastructure mirrors the pattern observed in road connectivity. Valley districts consistently rank higher in indices of educational infrastructure, while several hill districts remain at the lower end of state rankings [4]. Physical access to schools in hill areas is constrained by terrain, distance, and inadequate transport infrastructure, increasing absenteeism and dropout rates, particularly at the secondary level. The impact of conflict has further intensified these inequalities. Episodes of violence since 2023 have led to school closures, damage to educational facilities, and the displacement of thousands of students [5][8]. Although these disruptions affect both hills and valley, their consequences are more severe in hill districts where baseline infrastructure is weaker and alternative schooling options are limited.

Education as a Site of Infrastructural Power

Educational infrastructure represents a particularly consequential dimension of infrastructural power, as schools are central to social reproduction, mobility, and the construction of citizenship. In Manipur, disparities in educational access between hill and valley districts extend beyond enrolment figures to encompass spatial accessibility, institutional quality, and curricular opportunity. Hill districts face persistent shortages of adequately staffed and equipped secondary and higher secondary schools, particularly in Science and Commerce streams. As a result, students from hill areas are frequently compelled to migrate to valley districts or outside the state to pursue higher education, incurring significant financial and social costs [5]. This phenomenon of educational out-migration reflects infrastructural constraints rather than individual preference alone. Institutional studies have documented operational challenges in hill schools, including difficulties in teacher deployment and retention [3]. While such issues are not unique to hill areas, their effects are magnified by weak transport connectivity and limited oversight. In contrast, valley schools' benefit from easier access, denser institutional networks, and greater administrative attention. Viewed through the lens of infrastructural power, education in Manipur illustrates how uneven state capacity shapes life chances across space.

Discussion

Selective Connectivity and Infrastructural Injustice

Beyond aggregate measures of road length or sanctioned expenditure, infrastructural inequality in Manipur is shaped by selective connectivity the prioritisation of certain routes and regions based on strategic, administrative, or political considerations rather than everyday accessibility needs. While national and state policies have expanded highways and major arterial roads under initiatives linked to regional integration and border connectivity, these investments have not translated into proportional improvements in last-mile access for hill communities [2]. Research on infrastructure in Northeast India suggests that large transport projects often serve the mobility requirements of the state facilitating the movement of security forces, administrators, and goods more effectively than those of local populations [2].

In Manipur's hill districts, this logic manifests in the relative neglect of feeder roads connecting villages to district centres, schools, and health facilities. As a result, physical proximity to major highways does not necessarily equate to meaningful accessibility for dispersed hill settlements.

This pattern produces infrastructural injustice, wherein basic services are least accessible in areas where needs are greatest. Hill residents frequently face long travel times, seasonal isolation during monsoons, and dependence on informal or unsafe transport arrangements. Such conditions disproportionately affect students, women, and elderly populations, reinforcing social and educational disadvantages. The contrast with valley districts where denser road networks support regular public transport and easier access to institutions highlights how infrastructural power is spatially concentrated rather than evenly diffused [4].

Allocation versus Implementation: The Limits of Budgetary Equity

Debates on infrastructural inequality in Manipur often focus on the distribution of financial allocations between hill and valley districts. Official data and public statements indicate that substantial funds have been sanctioned for hill-area development, particularly in road and transport sectors [7]. However, empirical outcomes suggest that budgetary allocation alone is an insufficient indicator of infrastructural equity. A key finding emerging from institutional studies is the gap between sanctioned expenditure and effective implementation in hill districts [3]. Challenging terrain, higher construction costs, contractor underbidding, and limited monitoring capacity collectively undermine infrastructure quality and durability. In several cases, roads constructed in hill areas deteriorate rapidly due to inadequate engineering standards and maintenance, reducing their functional lifespan and utility.

These implementation deficits point to a deeper issue of uneven state capacity. While the state may formally extend infrastructural power through budgetary commitments, its ability to enforce standards, supervise contractors, and maintain assets remains weaker in peripheral regions. This results in fragmented infrastructural penetration, where the presence of projects on paper does not translate into reliable infrastructure on the ground. From the perspective of infrastructural power, inequality thus arises not solely from intentional bias in allocation but from differential administrative reach and governance effectiveness across space.

Infrastructural Power, Conflict, and Political Perceptions

The infrastructural disparities documented above interact closely with Manipur's broader conflict dynamics. In regions where road and educational infrastructure remain fragile, everyday experiences of isolation and service deprivation reinforce perceptions of marginalisation and unequal citizenship. Infrastructure thus acquires symbolic significance, serving as a visible marker of state priority and inclusion. For hill communities, the coexistence of modern infrastructure in the valley with persistent deficits in their own regions strengthens politically articulated grievances, including demands for enhanced autonomy or alternative administrative arrangements. These claims are not driven solely by identity politics but are grounded in material conditions shaped by uneven infrastructural power. Conversely, the concentration of infrastructure in the valley consolidates administrative centralisation and deepens existing socio-spatial hierarchies. The findings demonstrate that infrastructural inequality in Manipur cannot be explained solely by differences in budgetary allocation. While official data suggest significant funds earmarked for hill areas, infrastructural outcomes remain uneven due to challenges of terrain, contractor capacity, governance deficits, and conflict-related disruptions.

This distinction between allocation and implementation is central to understanding perceptions of exclusion. From the perspective of infrastructural power, the valley represents a zone of higher state capacity, where roads and schools facilitate economic integration and social reproduction.

Hill districts, by contrast, experience fragmented infrastructural penetration, undermining both developmental outcomes and state legitimacy. These conditions contribute to politically articulated grievances, including demands for greater autonomy or separate administrative arrangements.

Contribution to the Literature

This article contributes to debates in political geography and development studies in three ways. First, it provides a sub-national analysis of infrastructural power, demonstrating how state capacity varies within a single political unit. Second, it highlights the importance of implementation quality and accessibility, rather than funding levels alone, in shaping developmental outcomes. Third, by linking infrastructure to education and conflict, it illustrates how everyday material conditions intersect with identity and political mobilisation in divided societies.

Conclusion

The hill-valley divide in Manipur is deeply embedded in the state's infrastructural landscape. Valley districts benefit from denser road networks, greater accessibility, and more resilient educational infrastructure, while hill districts continue to face structural barriers rooted in terrain, governance capacity, and conflict. Drawing together empirical indicators, political-economic analysis, and justice-oriented perspectives, this article demonstrates that infrastructural inequality is not simply a matter of uneven funding but of uneven state capacity, prioritisation, and execution. Importantly, the analysis underscores that infrastructure functions simultaneously as a material system and a political instrument. Roads and schools are not neutral assets; they shape mobility, livelihoods, educational trajectories, and perceptions of belonging.

In Manipur, the concentration of infrastructural power in the valley has reinforced patterns of administrative centralisation and social stratification, while fragmented and low-quality infrastructure in the hills has contributed to educational disruption, economic marginalisation, and politically articulated grievances. Bridging this divide requires moving beyond symbolic initiatives and aggregate budgetary claims toward justice-centred infrastructure planning. Such an approach must combine equitable allocation with implementation oversight, accessibility-based planning, community participation, and conflict-sensitive governance. Without sustained attention to these dimensions, infrastructure is likely to remain a vector of contention rather than a foundation for inclusive development and durable peace in Manipur.

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