

DECENTRALISATION WITHOUT CAPACITY: AUTONOMOUS DISTRICT COUNCILS AND THE ADMINISTRATION OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN MANIPUR'S HILLS, 1971– 2025

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Abstract : *When the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Councils Act, 1971 assigned the management of primary schools in the hills to Autonomous District Councils, it created a form of decentralised educational administration that has no counterpart in the valley. This article asks what that devolution actually transferred, why it has delivered less than its design promised, and how it has fared under stress. Using legislation, the state Education Department's own account, secondary studies of the Councils, Census and UDISE+ data, state budget estimates and recent studies of conflict-induced displacement, it argues that the arrangement is best described as decentralisation without capacity: the formal function was devolved, but supervision, inspection, curriculum and textbook selection stayed with the state, the Councils depend on state grants, and deputy commissioners retain influence over their work. The article traces this design to an earlier hill–valley division of educational authority under the Manipur Darbar and the mission societies, and uses institutional layering to explain why later reforms added authorities without replacing earlier arrangements. Budget estimates for 2024–25 show separate hill and valley allocations, but they cannot show adequacy without comparable data on need. The 2023–2025 conflict exposed the coordination demands the arrangement places on state, Councils and receiving institutions. Implications are drawn for matching function, funding and staffing, for coordination, and for the data needed to evaluate decentralised schooling.*

IndexTerms - *decentralisation; Autonomous District Councils; primary education; institutional layering; Manipur; Sixth Schedule demand*

I. INTRODUCTION

Decentralisation is usually justified by the claim that local institutions can govern more responsively than a distant administration. Manipur's hill areas offer a case in which the formal devolution of a core public service, primary schooling, has existed for half a century, and in which the question is not whether power was devolved on paper but whether the devolved bodies could use it. The Manipur (Hill Areas) District Councils Act, 1971 placed the establishment, maintenance and management of primary schools under the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) of the hill districts (Government of India, 1971). The valley has no equivalent body: its schools are administered directly by the state's education authorities. Educational administration in Manipur has therefore long run on two tracks.

This article examines that two-track structure as a problem of public administration. It asks three questions. First, what did the 1971 Act and the later administrative transfer devolve to the Councils, and what did the state retain? Second, why has devolution delivered less than its design promised, and how does the arrangement relate to earlier hill–valley divisions of educational authority? Third, what does the available evidence on literacy, infrastructure, budgets and the 2023–2025 conflict show about the capacity of the arrangement?

The central argument is that the hill system is a case of decentralisation without capacity. Responsibility for primary schools was devolved, but the state kept supervision and inspection, curriculum and syllabus framing and textbook selection; the Councils rely largely on state grants-in-aid; and studies report substantial influence of deputy commissioners over Council action. The arrangement also did not appear from nothing. Its two-track form echoes a division of hill and valley authority that predates 1971, and the article uses the concept of institutional layering to explain why later reforms added authorities beside earlier ones instead of replacing them. The article does not claim that the arrangement caused hill–valley differences in outcomes. Recent district-level evidence shows substantial spatial heterogeneity within both hill and valley areas (Meitei, Das, & Basak, 2026), and the available data do not permit causal estimates. The contribution is a documented account of how responsibility is divided, and of what evidence is still needed to evaluate it.

Section II sets out the framework and sources. Section III traces the antecedents of the two-track structure. Section IV analyses the 1971 Act, the 1974 transfer and the Councils in practice. Section V reviews the evidence on capacity: literacy, infrastructure, language and budget estimates. Section VI treats the 2023–2025 conflict as a stress test. Section VII explains persistence, and Section VIII concludes with implications and limitations.

II. FRAMEWORK, SOURCES AND APPROACH

A. Decentralisation without capacity and institutional layering

Decentralisation without capacity is used here as a descriptive term for an arrangement in which a function is formally assigned to a local body while the means to perform it, in funds, staff, supervisory authority or discretion, remain wholly or partly with a higher level of government. It is a claim about the structure of the arrangement, which can be assessed from legislation and administrative accounts, and not a claim about outcomes.

Dual governance is the label applied here to a lasting split in who runs schools. In the valley, the state's own education authorities do so. In the hills, authority has rested with bodies of a different kind: initially the Darbar's Vice-President together with mission agencies, and subsequently the Autonomous District Councils, which sit alongside the state's officials. Using the label carries no suggestion that colonial rulers planned from the outset to leave one region less schooled than the other.

Institutional layering is the process that explains how such a split survives. The scholarship on institutional change uses the term for cases where new rules or bodies are attached to existing ones instead of displacing them, so that the older arrangement goes on influencing how the newer one functions (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Thelen, 2004). Work on path dependence adds that an early institutional choice makes a later reversal more expensive (Pierson, 2004). For Manipur this implies that inherited arrangements settled into the everyday routines of administration, and later policies were carried out through those routines.

Comparative studies of colonial and missionary inheritances are also relevant. Woodberry (2012) connects missionary presence to lasting variation in schooling and politics, and work on British India asks how colonial-era institutions shaped later development and education (Banerjee & Iyer, 2005; Chaudhary, 2009). A caution comes from Chaudhary and Garg (2015): across districts of former British India, the link between early colonial outlay on rural primary schools and present literacy faded once public schooling expanded after the 1970s, which suggests that sound policy can override historical disadvantage. History's persistence is accordingly a matter to be demonstrated here and not taken for granted. Because Manipur was a princely state outside British India, evidence from the latter serves as a point of comparison and cannot test the argument directly.

B. Sources and approach

The study is a historical-institutional analysis combining legislation (Government of India, 1971); the Manipur Education Department's own account of administrative arrangements (Department of Education, Government of Manipur, n.d.); published scholarship on the Councils (Ngaihte, 2022; Haokip, 2016); colonial-period material, including Pettigrew's letters as reproduced in a compilation (Jajo, n.d.) and a secondary history (Nameirakpam, 2013); Census, UDISE+ and state budget data; and recent studies of language, infrastructure and conflict. Official statistics and budget estimates are used descriptively. Where a claim rests on a single secondary account, the text says so. The article does not estimate the causal effect of any institution on attainment.

III. ANTECEDENTS OF THE TWO-TRACK STRUCTURE, 1880S–1947

Schooling began in the valley under the Manipur Darbar, which tried state-supported education from the 1880s after British Political Agents had earlier failed to establish vernacular schools among people wary of outside instruction (Nameirakpam, 2013). Johnstone, the Political Agent, obtained the consent of Maharaj Chandra Kirti in 1885 for an English school in Imphal, and primary schools came afterwards; between 1893 and 1895 four lower primary schools opened, three in Imphal and one at Mao in the hills (Johnstone, 1896; Nameirakpam, 2013). Two forces held back the spread of mission schooling in the valley: rulers who feared that educated subjects would be harder to govern, and Hindu orthodox opinion that Western schooling led towards conversion (Nameirakpam, 2013).

The letters of the Baptist missionary William Pettigrew show how mission schooling came to be directed towards the hills. His school at Chingamakha, in the valley, opened on 7 May 1894 with fourteen boys, a figure that by his own report reached forty-eight within a few weeks (Jajo, n.d., pp. 7–8). When the Political Agent returned, he held the earlier permission to be invalid. By February 1895 Pettigrew was writing that the government would allow him to stay only if he worked in the Tangkhul hill country, and that the State was by then running the valley school 'minus Christian teaching' (Jajo, n.d., pp. 9–10). Within a year, then, the state kept valley schooling while mission schooling was sent to the hills, which is the separation this article follows. At Ukhrul, Pettigrew called the school the chief means by which the mission would grow (Jajo, n.d., pp. 12–13), and Nameirakpam (2013) reports that the Manipur State government gave small stipends to encourage attendance. The first twelve baptisms at Ukhrul took place on 29 September 1901, with the church organised in the following February (Jajo, n.d., pp. 14–15); the congregation's centenary history gives 29 September 1901 as its founding date (Phungyo Baptist Church, 2002). Further south, Watkin R. Roberts reached the Hmar village of Senvon in 1910 and began Christian schooling among the Hmar, Paite and neighbouring Kuki-Chin peoples (Ngaihte & Paulianding, 2022).

Formal division of authority came next. One secondary source states that in 1907 the Darbar's Education Member took general charge of valley schools and its Vice-President took charge of hill schools (Nameirakpam, 2013). Since that source cites no record for the arrangement, it is handled here as a reported fact awaiting confirmation in the 1907–08 administrative records. The same source places the creation of an Education Department with distinct hill and valley divisions in 1910, and the introduction of Manipuri-language primary textbooks in 1904, material tailored to the valley's Meitei population (Nameirakpam, 2013). Together these reports indicate separate administrative routes for the two areas. They do not show that colonial officials set out to produce unequal schooling, and the difference is read as institutional, not as the product of one deliberate scheme.

IV. THE 1971 ACT, THE 1974 TRANSFER AND THE COUNCILS IN PRACTICE

A. What was devolved and what was retained

The Manipur (Hill Areas) District Councils Act, 1971 was enacted while Manipur was a Union Territory; statehood followed in 1972. The Act provided for no more than six autonomous districts and authorised District Councils to exercise specified functions. Section II(9)(iii) lists the establishment, maintenance and management of primary schools, school buildings and scholarships among those functions (Government of India, 1971). The state Education Department's own historical account states that, from 1

March 1974, control and management of primary schools in the hill districts were transferred to the respective autonomous district councils, while the Department retained supervision and inspection, curriculum and syllabus framing, and textbook selection (Department of Education, Government of Manipur, n.d.). The statutory assignment and the later administrative transfer are related but distinct milestones. Table I sets out the division of functions.

TABLE I. DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR PRIMARY SCHOOLING IN THE HILL DISTRICTS

Function	Autonomous District Councils	State Education Department	Source
Establishment, maintenance and management of primary schools, buildings and scholarships	Assigned by statute (s. 29(1)(iii)); control and management transferred from 1 March 1974	—	Government of India (1971); Department of Education (n.d.)
Supervision and inspection	—	Retained	Department of Education (n.d.)
Curriculum and syllabus framing	—	Retained	Department of Education (n.d.)
Textbook selection	—	Retained	Department of Education (n.d.)
Funding	Rely substantially on state grants-in-aid	Controls the grants	Ngaihte (2022)
Oversight of Council action	Subject to deputy commissioners' influence	—	Ngaihte (2022); Haokip (2016)

Note: the table summarises the sources cited. The Department of Education account is undated and is cited as reported.

B. Devolution in practice

The statutory list of functions should not be treated as evidence that the Councils possessed equivalent fiscal or implementation capacity. Studies report that many powers remained constrained in practice and that deputy commissioners retained substantial influence over Council action (Ngaihte, 2022; Haokip, 2016). The Councils rely substantially on state grants-in-aid, and their financial relationship with the state can limit their autonomy (Ngaihte, 2022). Hill communities have also pressed for Sixth Schedule status, regarding the 1971 model as insufficient; the history of Council operation, protest and later reactivation is reported in the secondary literature (Haokip, 2016; Ngaihte, 2022). The result is best described as a layered arrangement: primary-school management in the hills was assigned to Councils, while the state retained the supervisory and curricular functions that shape what a school is and does. This division creates a plausible coordination problem, but its effects on educational outcomes must be established with evidence and not assumed.

V. EVIDENCE ON CAPACITY AND OUTCOMES

Table II summarises the evidence and the limits of what each source can support.

TABLE II. EVIDENCE USED AND ITS INTERPRETIVE SCOPE

Evidence domain	Evidence used	Interpretive scope
Literacy	2011 Census: 76.94 per cent for Manipur, 74.04 per cent for India; district rates differ across hill and valley	Descriptive; hill–valley status alone does not determine district literacy
Educational infrastructure	A recent spatial analysis identifies uneven infrastructure and accessibility constraints across hill and valley districts (Meitei et al., 2026)	Supports geographic heterogeneity, not a universal hill-versus-valley binary
Higher education	A survey by a state education officer, data gathered in 2013 (Haokip, 2019)	Illustrates late and limited hill provision; not current
Language	Varah et al. (2023) report a study of attitudes toward mother-tongue education involving 463 participants; Mataina (2025) reports a hill-district case study	Illuminates attitudes and implementation barriers; no statewide causal claim
Budget estimates	Hill and valley allocations in Demand No. 10, 2024–25 (Government of Manipur, 2024)	Estimates, not audited expenditure; adequacy untested

A. Literacy and infrastructure

The 2011 Census recorded a literacy rate of 76.94 per cent for Manipur, above the all-India rate of 74.04 per cent (Census of India, 2011). District rates differ. Ukhrul, a hill district, recorded about 81.4 per cent (District Administration Ukhrul, n.d.), above the state figure, while Imphal West recorded 86.08 per cent (North Eastern Development Finance Corporation, n.d.). These are 2011 measures on the district boundaries of that year, which have since been reorganised, and they should not be read as current. The comparison is descriptive: differences in population composition, access, household conditions and infrastructure may also matter, and it shows that the hill–valley frame cannot be reduced to a simple hill-disadvantage story at the district level. A 2026 spatial analysis found that terrain-related accessibility constraints and the uneven distribution of educational infrastructure jointly shape outcomes across hill and valley districts (Meitei et al., 2026).

Provision of higher education shows a similar imbalance, though it lies outside the Councils' remit and so only frames the administrative picture. A 2013 survey of hill colleges by a state education officer traces the oldest colleges it lists to the 1960s (Churachandpur College in 1964, Pettigrew College at Ukhrul in 1965). It counts seventeen general colleges and a single law college for hill areas that make up roughly 92 per cent of the state's land and 35.1 per cent of its people, and notes that no separate higher-education policy exists for them (Haokip, 2019).

B. Language and curriculum

Studies of mother-tongue education in the hill districts report persistent structural obstacles to delivering primary instruction in tribal languages, despite the commitment to mother-tongue instruction in the foundational stage in the National Education Policy 2020 (Varah et al., 2023; Mataina, 2025). The Education Department's retention of curriculum, syllabus and textbook selection (Department of Education, Government of Manipur, n.d.) is directly relevant, because these are the functions through which

language policy would be implemented. Research on schooling and curriculum in Manipur also identifies them as sites of ethnic and linguistic contestation, particularly around Naga identity and language (Chawang, 2023). The link between the retained functions and the language obstacles is an interpretation consistent with the evidence and not a demonstrated causal chain.

C. Budget estimates

The Government of Manipur's Demand No. 10: Education for the 2024–25 budget estimates reports separate hill and valley allocations for multiple education heads. Under Major Head 2202 (General Education), Sub-Major 01 (Elementary Education), Minor 101 (Government Primary Schools), Sub-Head 01 (Primary School), the July 2024 document gives total estimates of ₹21,277.01 lakh for the hill and ₹54,730.09 lakh for the valley, and salary estimates of ₹14,729.06 lakh and ₹39,191.49 lakh respectively (Government of Manipur, 2024, pp. 10.1–10.2). Table III reports these figures and the shares computed from them.

TABLE III. BUDGET ESTIMATES FOR GOVERNMENT PRIMARY SCHOOLS, 2024–25 (₹ LAKH)

Item	Hill	Valley	Hill share of total (%)
Total estimate	21,277.01	54,730.09	28.0
Salary estimate	14,729.06	39,191.49	27.3
Salary as share of own total (%)	69.2	71.6	—

Source: Government of Manipur (2024, pp. 10.1–10.2); shares computed by the author from the figures shown.

These are budget estimates, not audited actual expenditure, and they cannot establish relative adequacy without comparable data on enrolment, school-age population, need, remoteness, staffing and service costs. The hill share is lower than the hill share of the state's population cited above (35.1 per cent, from a 2011 figure), but the two are not like-for-like, because the budget's hill and valley heads need not coincide with hill districts, and the budget concerns only one sub-head. The figures are reported to document that separate allocations exist and can be compared, not to infer inequity. Whether allocations are equitable or explain educational outcomes remains untested. A like-for-like comparison of actual expenditure and education need across districts is required before any causal claim is made.

VI. THE 2023–2025 CONFLICT AS A STRESS TEST

Insurgency had interrupted hill schooling well before 2023. A survey of hill colleges records long closures of institutions around 2007–08, students' fear of both armed groups and the army, and a response by many parents of sending their children out of the state for higher study (Haokip, 2019). The Meitei–Kuki–Zo violence that started in May 2023 was far more severe. A press report of the Ministry of Education's August 2023 statement gave 14,763 as the number of displaced school-going children and added that most had since found places in nearby schools (Press Trust of India, 2023). That count belongs to a particular moment and cannot fix the full or lasting extent of the damage.

Research on displaced learners illustrates how much coordination such upheaval requires. Devi and Laitonjam (2026), in a mixed-methods study of adolescent girls living in relief camps and temporary shelters, report consequences for attendance, sitting examinations, time for study and access to learning materials, with more dropout and erratic attendance where conflict was more intense. Fimate (2026) surveyed 59 displaced students, drawn by purposive and snowball sampling in May 2026: 37.3 per cent had been out of education for over six months, 35.6 per cent were not enrolled when surveyed, and 47.5 per cent had received no outside help to continue studying, with stress, money problems and lost academic papers cited most often as barriers. Neither sample is large or random, so the results show types of disruption and cannot gauge its scale.

The most relevant material for an administrative reading is Fimate's (2026) set of proposals: enrolment that does not insist on full documentation, with examination boards reissuing lost certificates more quickly; scholarships or fee waivers for displaced students; trained counsellors and trauma-informed teaching; temporary or alternative learning spaces, backed by devices and connectivity; an inter-departmental task force linking education, social welfare, health and civil society; and the framing of education during displacement as part of reconciliation. Many of these call for action by the state or by examination boards and not by the Councils, and they rest on a purposive sample of 59, so they are treated as proposals, not tested remedies. What they show is that recovery in the hills depends on cooperation among authorities that the two-track structure keeps apart. Earlier research had already described restricted school and college access in the hill districts and a drift of students towards the Imphal Valley (Subba, 2022). The conflict is therefore read as one more layer of disruption that deepened pre-existing weaknesses in capacity, and not as the source of the divide.

VII. EXPLAINING PERSISTENCE

Two mechanisms, both forms of layering, help explain why a two-track structure rooted in colonial-era choices has outlasted later reform, and one question remains open.

Governance fragmentation is the first mechanism. Although the 1971 Act gave the Councils management of primary schools, they work next to state departments and customary tribal institutions, with responsibilities that overlap and are at times unclear, and with money coming from the state (Government of India, 1971; Haokip, 2016; Ngaihte, 2022). Power was added to the system without a matching transfer of supervisory authority or finance. That hill communities have long asked for Sixth Schedule status instead of the 1971 model points to their own judgement that the present structure has not given them the autonomy it was meant to provide.

Curricular and linguistic politics is the second. Since the state kept curriculum and textbook selection, argument over what hill children study, and in what language, takes place mostly beyond the Councils' reach (Department of Education, Government of Manipur, n.d.; Chawang, 2023). Nor does it reduce to a Meitei-against-tribal division: within the hills too, communities differ in language, institutional history and political claims, and curricular questions arise among them.

The open question is *fiscal allocation*. Separate hill and valley estimates exist (Government of Manipur, 2024), but expenditure data disaggregated by need were not available in verified form, so allocation is treated as a documented avenue for research and not as an established cause.

VIII. CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The Manipur case shows how decentralisation can reproduce an existing asymmetry when new authority is granted without matching capacity. Primary-school management in the hills was devolved to the Councils, while supervision, curriculum and textbook selection stayed with the state and funding depends on state grants. This structure echoes an earlier division of hill and valley authority and was added beside it without replacing it. The central proposition is that earlier arrangements are not simply replaced by later policies; they condition how new institutions operate.

Four implications follow for educational administration. First, function, funding and staffing should be matched: where a function is devolved, the supervisory and financial means to perform it should be devolved with it, or the retained responsibilities should be explicitly shared. Second, state–Council coordination needs defined channels, especially for curriculum, language and textbooks, where authority is divided. Third, remote-area provision requires reliable infrastructure and staffing. Fourth, comparison of hill and valley spending requires disaggregated expenditure and need data, so that the question of adequacy can be answered with evidence. The conflict adds a recovery dimension: temporary arrangements for displaced learners add another layer to an already crowded administrative field, and their effect will depend on whether they are designed to be absorbed into regular administration afterwards.

A. Limitations and scope

The analysis rests on published scholarship, legislation and administrative documents, and several of them are cited as reported. The account of the 1974 transfer comes from an undated departmental page, and the budget figures come from a single budget document; both should be checked against the originals. The colonial claims for 1904, 1907 and 1910 rest on a single secondary account (Nameirakpam, 2013) and need corroboration against the 1907–08 administration report. Pettigrew's letters are used as reproduced in an undated compilation (Jajo, n.d.), which reflects the compiler's selection and a missionary's perspective, and they have not been checked against the original mission periodicals. Literacy figures are from 2011 on district boundaries that have since changed. The conflict-period evidence is limited by the pace of data release, and both displacement studies are small and non-random. The argument is supported by the pattern of the evidence but is not tested against alternative explanations through formal causal methods. Comparison with other Northeast Indian states, and with other Sixth Schedule and autonomous-council areas, is suggested for future research.

DECLARATIONS

Data availability: The article uses publicly available historical and government records, Census, UDISE+ and budget data and published scholarship, all cited in the reference list. No primary data were collected from human participants.

Ethics statement: The article is based on archival, documentary and published sources and public statistical data, and reports no data collected from human participants.

Use of AI tools: Generative AI tools were used for research organisation, drafting assistance and source-checking under the author's direction and review. The author remains responsible for the accuracy, originality, interpretation and integrity of the manuscript and its sources. AI was not used to generate, manipulate or fabricate research data.

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