



Resisting Impunity: Human Rights NGOs and the Remaking of Justice in Armed Conflict Zones

Pamreiso Raiping

Research Scholar, School of Legal Studies, Dhanamanjuri University, Manipur, India
Email: asoraiping@gmail.com

Abstract: *This article presents a comprehensive socio-legal analysis of the role of Human Rights Non-Governmental Organisations (HRNGOs) in conflict-affected regions, with a particular focus on Manipur. It advances the central claim that under conditions of militarised governance and legal exceptionalism, HRNGOs operate as indispensable juridical intermediaries between civilian suffering and constitutional accountability. Through systematic documentation, evidentiary reconstruction, strategic litigation, and public advocacy, these organisations translate dispersed experiences of violence into legally intelligible claims capable of activating judicial oversight. The article demonstrates that Indian constitutional courts, most notably the Supreme Court, have relied on NGO-generated archives to interrogate the entrenched impunity sustained under security legislation, such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act.*

At the same time, the study critically interrogates the paradox of rights protection in securitised democracies. While constitutional doctrine affirms the non-derogability of the right to life, the state increasingly deploys law itself as an instrument of repression through criminalisation, financial regulation, and surveillance of rights-claiming actors. This “juridification of repression” exposes a structural disjunction between normative constitutionalism and lived legality in conflict zones. The article concludes that the rule of law in such contexts cannot be understood solely as an institutional project but must be reconceptualised as a dynamic, contested practice sustained through civic resistance, evidentiary labour, and sustained engagement with constitutional norms.

Keywords: *Human Rights NGOs, Manipur, Armed Conflict, AFSPA, Militarized Democracy, Human Rights violations, Impunity, Accountability, and Counter-Hegemonic Resistance.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The juridical landscape of armed conflict zones compels us to rethink the very grammar of legality. Manipur, governed for decades under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA), stands as a paradigmatic site where constitutional guarantees are subordinated to security imperatives and where impunity is institutionalized as a governing norm (Sathe, 2003). Within this landscape, Human Rights Non-Governmental Organizations (HRNGOs) have emerged not as ancillary actors but as central agents in contesting sovereign power. Their interventions, ranging from litigation and documentation to international advocacy and memory preservation, constitute what may be described as counter-hegemonic constitutionalism: a praxis in which law is reclaimed from its statist monopoly and reconfigured as an instrument of solidarity, resistance, and accountability.

Yet, the work of HRNGOs in Manipur also reveals a paradox. Even as they expand the ambit of constitutionalism and international human rights, they themselves become targets of criminalization, bureaucratic restriction, and civic exclusion. The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010 (FCRA) has been weaponized to curtail their financial autonomy, while charges of sedition, conspiracy, and unlawful association convert rights advocacy into prosecutable



subversion. This double bind, where defenders of legality are delegitimized through the law, underscores a deeper crisis in democratic constitutionalism.

This article situates the struggles of HRNGOs in Manipur within the broader discourse of constitutional law and international human rights. It argues that HRNGOs in conflict zones are not merely watchdogs or service providers, but subaltern juridical actors engaged in the radical remaking of justice (Claude & Weston, 2006). By transforming pain into juridical evidence, by mobilizing transnational solidarities, and by sustaining public memory against state inattention, they perform constitutional functions that formal institutions either abdicate or compromise. Their persistence illuminates an alternative vision of legality: one that flows from below, grounded in the lived experiences of communities under siege.

2. THE GENEALOGY OF HUMAN RIGHTS NGOS

The genealogy of Human Rights Non-Governmental Organizations (HRNGOs) reveals the entanglement of civil society with the legal ordering of power. These organizations did not simply emerge as benevolent auxiliaries to the state but as critical interlocutors, constantly negotiating the limits of sovereignty, justice, and accountability. To reduce their history to episodic activism is to miss their centrality in reconfiguring both international and constitutional law.

The modern institutional form of HRNGOs is traceable to the post-World War II era. The catastrophic violence of the war, culminating in the Holocaust, delegitimized the positivist assumption that sovereign discretion was insulated from external scrutiny (*The Nuremberg Trial*, 1947). The creation of the United Nations (UN) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) inaugurated a new legal framework in which individuals, not merely states, were recognized as bearers of rights. Significantly, Article 71 of the UN Charter permitted the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to establish consultative relations with NGOs, marking the first formal recognition of civil society participation in global governance (United Nations, 1945). This legal innovation granted NGOs both visibility and legitimacy, enabling them to challenge state narratives within international forums.

From this foundation, organizations such as Amnesty International (1961) and Human Rights Watch (1978) redefined advocacy through the systematic deployment of documentation and publicity. Their technique of “naming and shaming” fused empirical evidence with moral outrage, generating reputational costs for abusive states (Hopgood, 2006). The consequence was both jurisprudential and political. The boundary between domestic jurisdiction and international concern was blurred, thereby embedding the principle that sovereignty is conditional upon compliance with rights norms. HRNGOs thus functioned as non-state actors capable of generating “compliance pull” in international law (Risse & Sikkink, 1999)

The Indian trajectory illustrates both the promise and the fragility of HRNGO engagement. Constitutionally, Article 19(1)(c) secures the freedom of association, while Article 43B encourages voluntary organizations in the Directive Principles. Yet the praxis of HRNGOs in India has been forged in confrontation with authoritarian impulses. The Emergency (1975–1977), during which civil liberties were suspended and dissent criminalized, catalyzed the emergence of organizations such as the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) and People’s Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) (Sathe, 2003). These groups positioned themselves as “surrogate institutions of accountability,” stepping into the void left by compromised courts and legislatures. Their reports on bonded labour, custodial deaths, and caste discrimination functioned as alternative fact-finding commissions, effectively producing quasi-legal knowledge outside formal state apparatuses (Dhavan, 1977).

Over time, the legal order itself acknowledged the indispensability of NGOs. The Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993, established the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and explicitly empowered it to collaborate and encourage the efforts of NGOs under Section 12(i) (Government of India, 1994). Subsequent legislation, including the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012, and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, has entrenched NGO participation in victim support and monitoring. What these developments reveal is a doctrinal shift. The state increasingly recognizes that the enforcement of rights cannot be monopolized by formal institutions but requires the mediation of civil society actors.

This recognition, however, is profoundly contested in regions such as Manipur, where the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA) has entrenched a regime of exception. Groups such as the Extra-Judicial Execution Victim Families Association, Manipur (EEVFAM), Human Rights Alert, and the Naga People’s Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) have documented systematic extrajudicial killings, torture, and enforced disappearances. Their petitions



before the Supreme Court forced judicial recognition that Article 21 protections cannot be suspended under the cover of AFSPA, and that the armed forces remain bound by constitutional restraints. In this sense, HRNGOs not only aggregate grievances but convert them into juridical claims, expanding the ambit of justiciability in Indian constitutional law.

The Manipur experience demonstrates that HRNGOs are not peripheral advocates but central protagonists in the struggle over legality itself. They operate as counter-archives of violence, transforming victim testimonies and investigative reports into juridical claims that expand the ambit of justiciability. The developmental arc of HRNGOs thus underscores their role as hybrid actors: at once social movements, evidentiary repositories, and quasi-legal institutions. They have become indispensable precisely where the state is complicit in violations or structurally incapable of self-correction.

3. TYPOLOGIES OF RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN MANIPUR

In a conflict-ridden state such as Manipur, where cycles of state and non-state violence have eroded fundamental rights and liberties, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) occupy a unique position in sustaining the promise of constitutionalism and democratic accountability. Their activism is not merely supplementary to state institutions but often functions as a parallel mechanism of rights enforcement in situations where the state is itself complicit in violations. The typology of NGOs in Manipur reveals a layered and complementary ecosystem of civic resistance that reflects broader debates in socio-legal theory about the relationship between civil society, legality, and the state.

Building on existing scholarship, NGOs in Manipur can be broadly categorized into three functional types: (i) dedicated human rights NGOs; (ii) general NGOs with human rights as a secondary concern; and (iii) temporary, issue-based organizations, often in the form of Joint Action Committees (Naoroibam, 2023). Each category embodies a distinct logic of engagement with law and rights while collectively contributing to the democratization of public space.

Dedicated human rights NGOs (HRNGOs) are organizations whose principal mandate is the promotion and protection of human rights. These entities embody the professionalized and institutionalized form of human rights advocacy, mirroring global models such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch but grounded in the specificities of Manipur's militarized environment. Their interventions extend beyond immediate relief, encompassing long-term advocacy, strategic litigation, and international engagement. Examples include the Naga People's Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR), Human Rights Alert (HRA), Committee on Human Rights (COHR), and the Centre for Organisation Research and Education (CORE). These organizations have consistently foregrounded issues of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and the structural violence perpetuated under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958. Through systematic documentation, independent fact-finding, and engagement with both the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and international treaty bodies, they function as quasi-legal institutions generating counter-narratives to official state accounts.

The Supreme Court's judgment in *Extra-Judicial Execution Victim Families Association v. Union of India* (2016) affirms the juridical significance of human rights NGOs. It recognises that credible documentation and evidentiary materials produced by such organisations are sufficient to trigger judicial scrutiny of alleged excesses committed under the AFSPA framework (*Extra-Judicial Execution Victim Families Association v. Union of India*, 2016). Such organizations embody what Upendra Baxi has described as "surrogate constitutionalism," the assumption of constitutional functions by non-state actors when state institutions abdicate their duties (Baxi, 2006).

Organisations that are not primarily human rights organizations but that do step in to defend rights during a crisis fall into the second category. Student unions and women's organisations often fall within this category. Their engagements may lack the professionalized documentation and legal strategies of dedicated HRNGOs but are marked by grassroots legitimacy, spontaneity, and mass mobilization. Illustrative examples include the All Naga Students' Association, Manipur (ANSAM), the All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU), and the Democratic Students' Association, Manipur (DESAM). These groups have historically mobilized against arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, and ethnic discrimination. Similarly, women's organizations such as the Meira Paibi (Women Torch Bearers) and Tangkhul Shanao Long (TSL) have intervened in cases of sexual violence and police brutality, often through direct action and public protest.

The legal significance of these organizations lies in their ability to expand the meaning of rights beyond courtrooms and statutes. By reframing incidents of violence as rights violations in the public sphere, they transform localized grievances into normative claims against the state. Their participation illustrates the Habermasian thesis that civil society



organizations function as communicative sites where law is both contested and reconstituted through public reason (Habermas, 1996).

Perhaps, the most dynamic yet ephemeral form of NGO activism in Manipur is represented by Joint Action Committees (JACs). These groups form spontaneously in response to particular events, custodial deaths, extrajudicial killings, or ethnic conflicts, and they disband when their goals are achieved.

Although temporary, JACs are highly effective in generating immediate pressure on state institutions through rallies, petitions, and sustained media engagement. They articulate urgent community demands, reframe them in rights-based language, and compel the state to respond. In this sense, they embody what Charles Tilly describes as the “repertoire of contention,” where collective action adapts to institutional opportunity structures in moments of political crisis (Tilly, 2004).

The categorization of NGOs in Manipur reveals a pluralistic ecosystem of rights advocacy, ranging from professionalized HRNGOs to spontaneous grassroots formations. Each type contributes uniquely to the construction of rights discourse, legal accountability, and democratic participation in a militarized context.

4. COUNTER-HEGEMONIC INTERVENTIONS

The state of Manipur, located on the northeastern periphery of the Indian Union, represents a paradigmatic case of chronic militarization, protracted armed conflict, and structural fragility. For more than six decades, it has remained entrapped in cycles of insurgency and counterinsurgency, governed under exceptional legal regimes such as AFSPA, 1958 (Government of India, 1958). This juridical apparatus of militarism has normalized impunity, eroded the rule of law, and facilitated widespread human rights violations ranging from arbitrary arrests and torture to extra-judicial executions and enforced disappearances. In this context of systemic violence and institutional abdication, Human Rights Non-Governmental Organizations (HRNGOs) have emerged as indispensable actors. Far from functioning as peripheral watchdogs, HRNGOs in Manipur assume quasi-institutional responsibilities.

In a context marked by official denial and epistemic silencing, HRNGOs act as unofficial truth commissions, generating and preserving counter-archives of state violence. Entities such as the Naga People’s Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR), the Extra-Judicial Execution Victim Families Association, Manipur (EEVFAM), and Human Rights Alert (HRA) have meticulously recorded abuses, enforced disappearances, fake encounters, torture, sexual violence, and arbitrary detentions.

The significance of this work cannot be overstated. As Michel Foucault reminds us, power is exercised not only through coercion but also through regimes of truth. In Manipur, the state’s version of “counterinsurgency” sought to erase the experiences of victims, reducing extra-judicial killings to “encounters,” disappearances to “absconding,” and custodial rapes to “unverified allegations.” HRNGOs ruptured this discourse by producing a counter-archive of meticulously documented violations.

EEVFAM’s dossier documenting 1,528 alleged unlawful killings between 1979 and 2012, collated with HRA, exemplifies this process of juridical inscription (Extra Judicial Execution Victim Families Association [EEVFAM], 2012). The dossier’s precision detailing names, incidents, and implicating agencies like the Indian Army and Assam Rifles, converted narratives of loss into an evidentiary payload. This counter-archive provided the foundation for constitutional litigation culminating in Extra-Judicial Execution Victim Families Association v. Union of India (2016), where the Supreme Court declared that AFSPA could not provide blanket immunity, affirming that Article 21’s guarantee to life remains in force even in insurgency settings.

Thus, documentation serves a tripartite function: preserving marginalized memory, converting suffering into legal evidence, and destabilizing state-constructed truths. Beyond courts and case law, HRNGOs have cultivated a counter-public sphere in Manipur. They organize seminars, press briefings, workshops, and campaigns that reframe militarization not as “national security” but as a constitutional crisis of rights.

A defining moment in this trajectory was the naked protest staged by Manipuri mothers in front of Kangla Fort in 2004, following the custodial rape and killing of Thangjam Manorama. This act of radical feminist resistance, supported by HRNGOs, shattered the normalcy of militarized violence and captured global attention. Similarly, Irom Sharmila’s 16-



year hunger strike against AFSPA was not merely an individual act of dissent but a collective memory project sustained by HRNGO networks that ensured her struggle resonated beyond local confines.

NPMHR's role in shaping public discourse is particularly illustrative. Founded in 1978, it pioneered Human Rights Week in Nagaland and extended its advocacy to Manipur, embedding local struggles within global human rights discourse. The 2008 commemoration of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) brought ethnic communities together, reframing their plight as an indigenous rights question under international law (Luithui & Haksar, 1984).

Equally significant is the memory-preservation function of HRNGOs. By archiving testimonies, creating digital repositories, and organizing commemorations, they resist what Boaventura de Sousa Santos terms epistemicide, the obliteration of subaltern knowledge systems (Santos, 2014). These acts of preservation transform pain into political memory, ensuring that struggles for justice are not swallowed by state-imposed amnesia. In this sense, HRNGOs embody transitional justice functions, generating a moral archive for a future polity that may yet reckon with its violent past.

Where state institutions fail, HRNGOs intervene as mediators between victims and courts, navigating intricate legal processes to hold perpetrators accountable.

NPMHR's 1997 petition challenging AFSPA on constitutional grounds marked a seminal attempt to confront militarized legality. Though the Court refrained from striking down AFSPA, it articulated guidelines emphasizing proportionality, review mechanisms, and accountability. While doctrinally limited, the case highlighted the possibility of contesting emergency laws within the framework of constitutional adjudication (*Naga People's Movement of Human Rights v. Union of India*, 1997). Subsequent interventions deepened this trajectory. In the 1984 case concerning the disappearance of C. Daniel and C. Paul from Huining village in Ukhrul district, the Supreme Court ordered compensation and directed prosecution against Army personnel, which is a rare acknowledgment of state culpability in Manipur (Sanajaoba, 1994). Later, the EEVFAM litigation of 2016 culminated in an emphatic judicial recognition that the Constitution remains operative even amidst insurgency, mandating investigations into every alleged encounter killing.

Moreover, HRNGOs have effectively internationalized local grievances. Through shadow reports submitted during India's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) before the UN Human Rights Council, and reports to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, NGOs have expanded the normative space for accountability. The report could be well read as an articulation of the pain and suffering of the people of Manipur due to the blatant mass atrocity crimes committed by the state police and armed forces of the Union under the shadow of AFSPA (Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights in Manipur, 2012). These engagements demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of multi-level advocacy, where domestic litigation is complemented by international pressure to erode the shield of impunity.

From a constitutional law perspective, HRNGO litigation embodies a dual function: it asserts the supremacy of fundamental rights over exceptional laws, and it reinforces the principle of judicial review as a bulwark against executive militarization. In doing so, HRNGOs have shifted the locus of constitutionalism in Manipur from state institutions to civil society.

A crucial dimension of HRNGO work in Manipur is coalition-building and transnational advocacy. By situating local struggles within the grammar of international human rights and indigenous rights, they challenge the Indian state's claim that the Northeast is a purely internal matter. NPMHR has been particularly active in this regard. Its participation in the 1994 United Nations Conference on Indigenous Peoples in Geneva foregrounded militarization and suspension of civil liberties in Naga areas. Similarly, at the 2015 Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, it demanded the repeal of AFSPA, connecting Manipur's plight to global debates on indigenous self-determination (The Assam Tribune, 2015).

EEVFAM has strategically internationalized its advocacy by engaging global human rights mechanisms. Notably, in 2019, the organization addressed the 40th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, urging the dismantling of entrenched structures of impunity and calling for the harmonization of India's domestic legal framework with international human rights norms (Takhellambam, 2019). These interventions not only amplify local voices but also deploy international human rights mechanisms as counterweights to domestic institutional inertia.

Transnational networking also generates protective visibility for activists, deterring state reprisals by embedding local struggles within global solidarities. As Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink's "boomerang model" suggests, when



domestic institutions are unresponsive, NGOs bypass them by mobilizing international allies, who then pressure the state from outside. HRNGOs in Manipur exemplify this dynamic.

In conflict zones, the failure of state institutions to anticipate or prevent violence is often catastrophic. HRNGOs in Manipur, by contrast, have evolved into de facto early warning systems. Grounded in community networks, they monitor troop movements, anticipate communal clashes, and mobilize rapid responses.

During the 2023 ethnic violence in Manipur, HRNGOs played life-saving roles by coordinating humanitarian relief, safe passage, and emergency shelters for displaced civilians. Women Action for Development (WAD) set up trauma counselling units for women subjected to sexual violence, offering psychosocial support absent in state responses. These interventions illustrate that protection is not merely about physical survival but also about preserving dignity in the face of atrocity.

Independent People's Tribunals (IPTs) in Manipur reflect another innovative intervention by HRNGOs. Operating outside the formal legal system, they constitute civil society-led juridical spaces where survivors testify, document evidence, and construct collective narratives of injustice. The 2012 Independent People's Tribunal on Human Rights Violations in Manipur, organized by the Human Rights Law Network, heard testimonies of torture, disappearances, and extra-judicial executions (Human Rights Law Network, 2012). Women Action for Development (WAD), a local NGO, similarly convened tribunals addressing crimes against women in militarized contexts (Women Action for Development, 2016). These forums produced counter-archives that challenged the silences of official inquiries and commissions.

Although lacking binding authority, Independent People's Tribunals (IPTs) perform significant normative functions. They provide victims with a platform for recognition, construct a collective memory that resists erasure, and generate records that can inform later litigation and international advocacy. In the framework of transitional justice, IPTs operate as "restorative truth mechanisms," cultivating moral legitimacy where formal legal enforcement is absent or ineffective.

HRNGOs in Manipur transcend traditional NGO roles. They act as truth-keepers, litigators, public mobilizers, memory institutions, protectors, and transnational actors. In effect, they fill institutional voids and, in doing so, constitute counter-hegemonic legal architectures. Their praxis illustrates how civil society can recover legality where the state has compromised it. This is the essence of counter-hegemonic human rights reimagining constitutionalism through grassroots mobilization, legal contestation, and international solidarity.

5. THE PARADOX OF ADVOCACY

Human Rights NGOs (HRNGOs) in Manipur occupy a precarious institutional position. They serve as indispensable actors in documenting state violence, pursuing constitutional remedies, and safeguarding civilian rights in situations of protracted conflict, while simultaneously becoming targets of repression and delegitimization. This duality reflects a fundamental paradox of human rights advocacy in militarized democracies, where defenders of legality are rendered vulnerable to the very structures of law they seek to mobilize.

The most enduring challenge lies in the criminalization of dissent. When HRNGOs such as Human Rights Alert (HRA), Naga People's Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR), Human Rights Law Network (HRLN), and Women Action for Development (WAD) expose extrajudicial executions or sexual violence under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA), their activities are frequently reframed by state authorities as threats to sovereignty and national integrity.

Illustratively, in July 2023, the Manipur Police registered a barrage of draconian charges, including sedition, waging war against the state, and promoting enmity under the Indian Penal Code (now BNS), against three women peace activists following their fact-finding mission in conflict zones. Such use of draconian charges transforms legitimate rights advocacy into prosecutable subversion. The People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) condemned the incident as "a brazen attempt to silence civil society" (People's Union for Civil Liberties [PUCL], 2023). These tactics violate Articles 19(1)(a)–(c) of the Indian Constitution and are inconsistent with Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which permits restrictions on expression only if lawful, necessary, and proportionate.

The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010 (FCRA), has become an emblematic instrument of bureaucratic silencing. While couched in terms of financial transparency, its enforcement has disproportionately targeted organizations engaged in rights-based advocacy. UN Special Rapporteurs have criticized the Act's vague standards and discretionary cancellations, warning that its use effectively "strangles" civil society (United Nations Special



Rapporteurs, 2021). The 2021 revocation of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative's license underscores the state's readiness to weaponize procedural scrutiny to cripple watchdogs (Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, 2021).

In Manipur, anecdotal evidence suggests that organizations such as HRA and HRLN have experienced suspension or denial of FCRA registration, thereby eroding their capacity for long-term litigation and documentation. This selective use of regulatory discretion corrodes the rule of law by converting administrative compliance into a mechanism of political disciplining.

Beyond formal regulation, HRNGOs confront reputational attacks and surveillance in both physical and digital domains. The Centre for Organisation Research and Education (CORE), for instance, has documented systematic online vilification campaigns, while its president was arbitrarily detained in 2020 following a social media post critical of state leadership (Human Rights Defender Alert, 2020). Such practices convert digital platforms into sites of surveillance and coercion rather than deliberation.

These developments implicate the right to privacy recognized in *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India* (*Justice K. S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India*, 2017) and contravene India's obligations under the ICCPR to safeguard freedom of expression against arbitrary interference. The chilling effect is palpable. Human rights activists retreat from critical commentary under fear of criminal or reputational reprisal.

Finally, HRNGOs in Manipur are systematically excluded from policy-making, relief distribution, and consultative mechanisms during crises. By privileging apolitical NGOs over rights-based organizations, the state manufactures a curated civil society that is sanitized of dissent. This exclusion undermines participatory constitutionalism and reduces democratic accountability. Yet, the exclusion of HRNGOs from governance suggests an informal derogation from this principle, reflecting a deeper trend of securitized democracy.

The challenges facing HRNGOs in Manipur are not isolated operational hindrances but manifestations of a systemic strategy of delegitimization. Through criminal charges, financial strangulation, digital surveillance, and civic exclusion, the state has sought to transform human rights work into a liability.

From a jurisprudential standpoint, these practices undermine the rule of law, distort constitutional freedoms, and erode the participatory character of democracy. Yet, the persistence of HRNGOs in Manipur also illustrates that legality is not exhausted by the state. By documenting atrocities, litigating impunity, and sustaining public memory, HRNGOs constitute a counter-hegemonic source of normative authority, reminding us that constitutionalism lives as much in civic resistance as in formal institutions.

6. CONCLUSION

The experience of Manipur fundamentally unsettles statist and court-centric understandings of constitutionalism in armed conflict zones. It shows that Human Rights NGOs are not peripheral advocates operating at the margins of legality, but central juridical actors who sustain the normative life of the Constitution where formal institutions falter. Through documentation, litigation, counter-archives, people's tribunals, and transnational advocacy, HRNGOs convert suffering into legal claims and memory into accountability, thereby resisting the normalization of impunity entrenched under exceptional regimes such as AFSPA.

At the same time, it exposes a troubling juridical inversion. The law is increasingly redeployed to discipline those who defend rights, through criminalization, financial regulation, surveillance, and civic exclusion. This paradox reveals a deeper crisis of democratic constitutionalism, in which legality is weaponized against its own emancipatory purpose. In such contexts, constitutionalism survives not merely through courts or statutes, but through civic resistance that insists on the continuing force of dignity, accountability, and the rule of law.

The Manipur experience thus offers a broader jurisprudential lesson. Justice in conflict zones is not postponed to a post-conflict future, nor monopolized by the sovereign state. It is enacted daily through counter-hegemonic practices that reclaim law from below. HRNGOs, in this sense, emerge as indispensable custodians of constitutional morality in militarized democracies.



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