



## **THE WESEAN STUDENT FEDERATION AND THE UNITY OF NORTHEAST INDIA: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS IN FOSTERING CROSS-BORDER SOLIDARITY IN WESEA**

**JOHN HAAKIP<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the formation and role of the Wesean Student Federation (WSF) within the broader context of the Northeast Indian region, often referred to as Wesea. The region, which includes parts of Northeast India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, is characterised by its diverse indigenous populations, unique cultural heritage, and a history of political marginalisation. The study explores how the WSF has emerged as a unifying force for Wesean students, seeking to bridge ethnic divides and foster cross-border solidarity among the indigenous communities of Wesea. By analysing the WSF's efforts to address issues such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the abolition of the Free Movement Regime (FMR), this paper sheds light on the federation's role in advocating for indigenous rights, cultural preservation, and political sovereignty in a region marked by complex historical and geopolitical dynamics.

**Keywords: Northeast India, Cross Border, WESEA, Solidarity**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview of Wesea as a Geopolitical and Cultural Entity**

The region commonly referred to as Wesea encompasses the Northeastern part of India and extends into parts of Bangladesh and Myanmar. This area is marked by a unique geopolitical landscape shaped by its colonial history, ethnic diversity, and socio-political complexities. Wesea, which stands for "Western Southeast Asia," includes the Indian states of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Meghalaya, and parts of the neighbouring countries of Bangladesh and Myanmar. These states and regions are home to a multitude of indigenous communities, each with its own distinct languages, cultures, and traditions, forming a rich tapestry of cultural diversity that is often overlooked in broader national discourses (Bhattacharyya, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup>.Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Mizoram University, Aizwal



The history of Wesea is deeply intertwined with the legacies of British colonialism, which, through arbitrary border demarcations, created lasting divisions among indigenous populations. These divisions were further exacerbated by the post-colonial nation-building processes that prioritised national integration over regional autonomy. As a result, the region has frequently been the site of ethnic conflicts, political unrest, and insurgencies, all of which have contributed to its complex and often fraught relationship with the central governments of the countries that now encompass it (Baruah, 2005). Despite these challenges, the indigenous communities of Wesea have maintained a strong sense of cultural identity and resilience, which continues to be expressed through various forms of socio-political activism.

## **IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT MOVEMENTS IN THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF NORTHEAST INDIA**

Student movements have historically played a crucial role in shaping the political landscape of Northeast India. The region's student organisations have often been at the forefront of political activism, advocating for the rights and interests of their communities in the face of marginalisation and state-led development projects that threaten their land, culture, and autonomy (Misra, 2013). These movements have not only served as platforms for political expression but have also been instrumental in mobilising public opinion and influencing policy decisions at both regional and national levels.

In Northeast India, student organisations such as the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the Naga Students' Federation (NSF) have been pivotal in championing issues related to ethnic identity, autonomy, and resistance against perceived external exploitation. These organisations have successfully articulated the grievances of their communities, bringing them into the national spotlight and compelling the central government to address their demands. The impact of these movements is evident in various political outcomes, including the Assam Accord of 1985 and the ongoing peace talks with Naga insurgent groups (Weiner, 1983).

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE WESEAN STUDENT FEDERATION (WSF) AND ITS OBJECTIVES**

In this context, the formation of the Wesean Student Federation (WSF) in 2024 represents a significant development in the ongoing struggle for indigenous rights and regional unity in Wesea. The WSF was established as a direct response to the growing disillusionment among Wesean students with existing student unions, which they perceived as being either ineffective or overly influenced by ethno-



nationalist agendas that did not adequately represent the diverse interests of the Wesean communities (Morung Express, 2024). Unlike its predecessors, the WSF seeks to transcend ethnic divisions by promoting a pan-Wesean identity that encompasses all indigenous peoples across the borders of India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.

The WSF's objectives are multifaceted, focusing on the protection of indigenous rights, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the promotion of political autonomy for Wesean communities. One of the federation's primary goals is to advocate against policies such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the abolishment of the Free Movement Regime (FMR), which they argue disproportionately affect the indigenous populations of Wesea by undermining their cultural and political sovereignty (WSF, 2024). Additionally, the WSF aims to create a unified platform for Wesean students to engage in cross-border solidarity, thereby strengthening their collective voice in regional and international forums.

The formation of the WSF is not just a reaction to immediate political concerns but also a strategic effort to forge a long-term vision for the future of Wesea. By emphasising unity among the diverse ethnic groups within Wesea and building alliances across national borders, the WSF seeks to create a more cohesive and empowered Wesean identity. This approach reflects a broader trend in global indigenous movements, where local struggles are increasingly connected to transnational networks of solidarity and advocacy (Niezen, 2003). As such, the WSF represents both a continuation of the region's rich tradition of student activism and a new chapter in the ongoing quest for justice and self-determination in Wesea.

## **2. HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF WESEA**

### **2.1 BRIEF HISTORY OF WESEA: COLONIAL LEGACIES AND POST-INDEPENDENCE CHALLENGES**

The region now referred to as Wesea, encompassing the Northeastern states of India, parts of Bangladesh, and Myanmar, has a complex and contested history deeply influenced by colonialism and its aftermath. During the British colonial period, the Northeast was treated as a frontier region, often referred to as the "Eastern Borderlands" or "Northeast Frontier." The British administration's approach to this region was largely characterised by a policy of exclusion and indirect rule, where large parts of the region were designated as "Excluded" or "Partially Excluded Areas" under the Government of India Act, 1935 (Baruah, 2005). This designation meant that the region was administratively segregated from the rest of British India, with minimal intervention from the colonial state, which reinforced its marginalisation.





This resurgence has been fueled by a combination of historical grievances, economic marginalization, and the perceived failure of the state to protect the rights and identities of indigenous peoples. In India, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 has been a particularly contentious issue in the Northeast. The CAA, which provides a pathway to citizenship for non-Muslim immigrants from neighbouring countries, has been seen by many in the Northeast as a threat to the indigenous demographic balance and cultural identity of the region (Das, 2020). The act has sparked widespread protests across the Northeast, with indigenous communities fearing that it will lead to an influx of settlers who will further marginalise them in their own land.

Another significant policy challenge has been the abolishment of the Free Movement Regime (FMR) between India and Myanmar. The FMR, which allowed for the free movement of people within 16 kilometres of the India-Myanmar border, was crucial for the indigenous communities that straddle this border. Its abolishment in 2018 has disrupted the livelihoods of these communities and has been seen as another example of the state's disregard for the unique needs of the Wesean peoples (Thounaojam, 2020). The current political environment is thus one of heightened tension, as the indigenous communities of Wesea continue to resist policies that they perceive as existential threats to their identity and autonomy.

The Wesean Student Federation (WSF) has emerged in this context as a key player in advocating for the rights of these communities. By uniting students across borders, the WSF aims to build a collective identity that transcends national boundaries and resists the homogenising forces of the state. The WSF's efforts to mobilise against the CAA and other policies highlight the continuing relevance of student movements in the political struggles of Wesea, as they seek to protect the region's cultural and political sovereignty in an increasingly hostile environment.

## **THE FORMATION OF THE WESEAN STUDENT FEDERATION**

### **CIRCUMSTANCES LEADING TO THE CREATION OF THE WSF IN 2024**

The formation of the Wesean Student Federation (WSF) in 2024 was driven by a confluence of socio-political factors and the growing discontent among Wesean communities with the existing student organisations. The region of Wesea, spanning parts of Northeast India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, has long been characterised by its unique cultural identity and political marginalisation. However, the past decade saw a significant intensification of these challenges, particularly due to the rise of ethno-



nationalist policies and the increasing centralization of power by the respective governments of India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.

One of the primary catalysts for the creation of the WSF was the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in India in 2019. The CAA, which fast-tracks citizenship for non-Muslim immigrants from neighbouring countries, was widely perceived in the Northeast as a direct threat to the indigenous demographic balance of the region. The law exacerbated fears among Wesean communities that their cultural and political autonomy would be further eroded by an influx of settlers from other parts of India and neighbouring countries (Das, 2020). Despite widespread protests across the Northeast, the CAA was implemented, leading to a sense of betrayal and alienation among the indigenous youth. Simultaneously, the abolition of the Free Movement Regime (FMR) between India and Myanmar in 2018 further isolated the border communities, disrupting their traditional way of life and severing cross-border ties that had existed for centuries (Thounaojam, 2020). These developments underscored the inadequacies of existing student organisations, such as the Northeast Student Union (NESU), which many felt were either too closely aligned with specific ethnic groups or unable to effectively address the cross-border nature of Wesean issues.

In this context, a group of Wesean student leaders from various ethnic backgrounds and national affiliations came together to form the WSF. The goal was to create a more inclusive and transnational platform that could address the shared challenges faced by the Wesean peoples, regardless of their national borders. The WSF was thus conceived as a unifying force, dedicated to advocating for the rights of Wesean communities, preserving their cultural heritage, and promoting a pan-Wesean identity that transcends the boundaries imposed by nation-states (WSF, 2024).

### **KEY OBJECTIVES AND MISSION OF THE WSF**

The Wesean Student Federation was founded with several key objectives that reflect the unique challenges and aspirations of the Wesean peoples. Central to its mission is the protection and promotion of indigenous rights in the face of growing state encroachment and demographic changes. The WSF seeks to ensure that the voices of Wesean communities are heard in national and international forums, particularly concerning issues such as citizenship, land rights, and cultural preservation (WSF, 2024).

Another critical objective of the WSF is to foster cross-border solidarity among the Wesean peoples. Recognizing that the challenges faced by these communities are not confined to a single nation-state, the WSF aims to build alliances across the borders of India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. This includes organising joint protests, cultural events, and advocacy campaigns that highlight the shared heritage and





sovereignty of the Wesean peoples. By building on the foundations laid by earlier student movements while expanding its scope to address the unique challenges of the 21st century, the WSF holds the potential to be a transformative force in the region.

## **WSF'S ROLE IN PROMOTING CROSS-BORDER SOLIDARITY**

### **EFFORTS TO UNITE WESEAN STUDENTS ACROSS BORDERS**

The Wesean Student Federation (WSF) has emerged as a critical platform for fostering cross-border solidarity among Wesean students in India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. This transnational approach is a deliberate response to the historical and ongoing challenges faced by the Wesean peoples, who are divided by national borders but united by shared cultural and ethnic identities. The WSF's efforts to unite Wesean students across these borders stem from the recognition that many of the issues they face—such as displacement, loss of cultural heritage, and political marginalisation—transcend the boundaries of individual nation-states (Bhaumik, 2024).

To achieve this unity, the WSF has focused on building networks that connect students and youth leaders from different parts of Wesea. This has involved organising cross-border seminars, workshops, and cultural festivals that bring together students from India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar to discuss their common challenges and strategies for resistance. These events serve not only as forums for dialogue but also as opportunities to strengthen the bonds of solidarity among Wesean communities that have been divided by colonial and post-colonial border policies (Hazarika, 2024).

The WSF has also leveraged digital platforms to maintain these cross-border connections. Through social media, online forums, and virtual conferences, the federation has been able to overcome the physical barriers imposed by borders, allowing Wesean students to collaborate on advocacy campaigns, share resources, and provide mutual support. This digital connectivity has been particularly important in light of the restrictive border policies and travel limitations imposed by the governments of India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar (Thounaojam, 2020).

### **ADVOCACY AGAINST THE CAA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIGENOUS RIGHTS**

One of the central issues that have galvanised the WSF's cross-border solidarity efforts is the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed by the Indian government in 2019. The CAA, which offers a pathway to citizenship for non-Muslim immigrants from neighbouring countries, has been widely



criticised in Wesea as a threat to the indigenous populations. The law is seen as potentially leading to a demographic shift that could further marginalise the indigenous communities of Northeast India, who fear that they will be overwhelmed by an influx of settlers from other parts of the country (Das, 2020).

The WSF has taken a strong stance against the CAA, organising protests, raising awareness, and lobbying for its repeal. The federation argues that the CAA violates the rights of indigenous peoples by disregarding their unique cultural and historical contexts. The WSF's advocacy efforts have not been confined to India; recognizing that the implications of the CAA could have ripple effects across the region, the federation has sought to mobilise support from Wesean communities in Bangladesh and Myanmar as well (Hazarika, 2024). This cross-border approach has helped to internationalise the issue, drawing attention to the broader implications of the CAA for indigenous rights and regional stability.

The WSF's advocacy against the CAA is also part of a broader struggle to resist policies that undermine the sovereignty and cultural integrity of Wesean communities. By framing the CAA as a violation of indigenous rights, the WSF has positioned itself as a defender of these rights not only within India but across the entire Wesean region. This has helped to build a sense of shared purpose among Wesean students, strengthening the federation's efforts to promote cross-border solidarity (Roy, 2020).

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL PRESERVATION IN WSF'S AGENDA**

Cultural preservation is a cornerstone of the WSF's mission, reflecting the federation's commitment to protecting the rich and diverse heritage of the Wesean peoples. The WSF recognizes that cultural identity is central to the resilience and empowerment of indigenous communities, particularly in the face of external pressures such as globalisation, state-led assimilation policies, and demographic changes. As such, the WSF has made cultural preservation one of its primary objectives, integrating it into its broader advocacy and solidarity-building efforts (Baruah, 2005).

To promote cultural preservation, the WSF organises a variety of activities aimed at celebrating and revitalising Wesean languages, arts, and traditions. These activities include cultural festivals, language revitalization programs, and workshops on traditional crafts and practices. By bringing together Wesean students from different countries to participate in these events, the WSF not only fosters cross-border solidarity but also reinforces a shared cultural identity that transcends national boundaries (Hazarika, 2024).



The WSF also engages in advocacy to protect cultural heritage sites and practices that are under threat from state development projects and environmental degradation. For example, the federation has campaigned against large-scale infrastructure projects that threaten sacred sites and traditional lands, arguing that such projects not only disrupt the physical landscape but also erode the cultural foundations of Wesean communities (Thounaojam, 2020). Through these efforts, the WSF seeks to ensure that the cultural heritage of Wesea is preserved for future generations, even as the region faces rapid social and economic changes.

## **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE WSF**

### **INTERNAL CHALLENGES: MAINTAINING UNITY AMONG DIVERSE ETHNIC GROUPS**

One of the most significant internal challenges facing the Wesean Student Federation (WSF) is maintaining unity among the diverse ethnic groups that comprise the Wesean region. Wesea is home to a multitude of ethnicities, each with its own distinct language, culture, and historical grievances. These differences can create friction within the WSF, particularly when the interests of one group appear to be prioritized over those of others. For example, issues such as land rights, resource allocation, and political representation often have different implications for various ethnic communities, leading to potential conflicts within the organization (Baruah, 2005).

To address these challenges, the WSF has adopted an inclusive and participatory approach to decision-making, ensuring that all member groups have a voice in the federation's activities. The leadership structure of the WSF is designed to reflect the diversity of the region, with representatives from different ethnic communities taking part in key decision-making processes (Hazarika, 2024). Despite these efforts, maintaining cohesion among such a diverse membership remains a delicate and ongoing challenge, as ethnic tensions can easily be exacerbated by external events or internal disagreements.

Moreover, the WSF faces the challenge of balancing the immediate concerns of its member communities with its broader, long-term goals. While some groups may prioritize pressing issues such as land rights or cultural preservation, others may focus on broader political objectives like autonomy or resistance to state policies like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The WSF must navigate these differing priorities carefully to maintain its unity and effectiveness as a collective movement (Misra, 2011).



## **EXTERNAL CHALLENGES: OPPOSITION FROM STATE AUTHORITIES AND COMPETING NATIONALIST MOVEMENTS**

Externally, the WSF faces considerable opposition from state authorities in India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Governments in these countries view the federation's activities with suspicion, particularly its cross-border solidarity efforts and its stance against policies like the CAA. The WSF's advocacy for indigenous rights and its emphasis on a pan-Wesean identity are perceived as threats to national sovereignty and territorial integrity by these states, leading to efforts to suppress the federation's activities (Das, 2020).

In India, the government has welcomed WSF's movement especially with WSF advocating for an end to insurgency in Northeast India. The federation's cross-border activities however might be particularly scrutinized, with authorities seeking to curtail its ability to organize events and communicate with its counterparts in Bangladesh and Myanmar (Thounaojam, 2020).

In Bangladesh and Myanmar, the WSF's activities are similarly restricted, with state authorities viewing the federation as a potential source of unrest. The governments of these countries have a history of suppressing indigenous movements and are wary of any organization that seeks to unify ethnic groups across borders. This external pressure makes it difficult for the WSF to operate freely, forcing it to adopt clandestine methods of communication and organization (Roy, 2000).

Additionally, the WSF must contend with competing nationalist movements within Wesea that have their own agendas and priorities. These movements, which often emphasize ethnic exclusivity and territorial claims, can undermine the WSF's efforts to promote a more inclusive, pan-Wesean identity. For instance, some nationalist groups may oppose the WSF's advocacy for cross-border solidarity, viewing it as a threat to their own ethnic or regional interests (Baruah, 2005). The federation must therefore navigate a complex landscape of competing ideologies and interests, which can sometimes lead to fragmentation within the broader Wesean movement.

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR WSF TO INFLUENCE REGIONAL AND NATIONAL POLICY**

Despite these challenges, the WSF also has significant opportunities to influence regional and national policy. One of the federation's key strengths lies in its ability to mobilize the youth of Wesea, who are increasingly aware of and engaged with issues of social justice, indigenous rights, and environmental sustainability. By harnessing the energy and passion of Wesean students, the WSF can amplify its voice



and exert pressure on policymakers to address the concerns of the region's indigenous communities (Hazarika, 2024).

The WSF's transnational approach also provides it with unique opportunities to engage with international organizations and advocacy networks. By framing Wesean issues within the broader context of indigenous rights and environmental justice, the federation can attract the attention of global human rights organizations, environmental groups, and academic institutions. This international support can be leveraged to put pressure on the governments of India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar to adopt more inclusive and equitable policies (Bhaumik, 2024).

Furthermore, the WSF's focus on cultural preservation offers opportunities to influence policy in areas such as education, language rights, and heritage conservation. By advocating for the inclusion of Wesean languages and cultural practices in national curricula, the federation can help to ensure that the region's rich cultural heritage is recognized and preserved. This can also serve as a platform for broader discussions about the role of indigenous cultures in national identity, potentially leading to more inclusive policies that reflect the diversity of the Wesean region (Phukan, 2018).

## **CONCLUSION**

The Wesean Student Federation (WSF) has played a pivotal role in fostering unity among the diverse ethnic communities of Northeast India. By creating a platform that transcends ethnic, linguistic, and national boundaries, the WSF has successfully mobilized students from across the region to address common challenges such as cultural preservation, indigenous rights, and resistance to exclusionary state policies like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The federation's efforts to promote a pan-Wesean identity have not only strengthened intra-regional solidarity but also positioned Wesea as a distinct geopolitical and cultural entity with shared interests and aspirations (Bhaumik, 2024; Hazarika, 2024).

Through its advocacy, the WSF has brought attention to the unique challenges faced by the indigenous peoples of Northeast India, including the impacts of historical marginalization, border demarcations, and contemporary political developments. By uniting students across borders in India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, the WSF has amplified the voices of these communities, ensuring that their concerns are heard both within the region and on the national stage (Baruah, 2005; Das, 2020).



Looking ahead, the WSF is poised to continue its influence on the socio-political landscape of Wesea. As the federation matures, it is likely to expand its reach, both geographically and politically. The WSF's emphasis on cross-border solidarity and cultural preservation will remain central to its mission, potentially leading to greater collaboration with international organizations and advocacy networks. This could open new avenues for addressing the region's challenges, from human rights violations to environmental degradation, and contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable development agenda for Wesea (Hazarika, 2024; Misra, 2011).

Moreover, as the WSF continues to engage with policy debates at both the regional and national levels, it has the potential to shape the future of governance in Northeast India. By advocating for policies that recognize and protect the rights of indigenous communities, the WSF could play a key role in fostering a more equitable and representative political system in the region. This could also serve as a model for other marginalized regions in India, highlighting the importance of student-led movements in driving social and political change (Phukan, 2018).

The experience of the WSF has broader implications for student-led movements in other marginalized regions, both within India and globally. The federation's success in uniting diverse communities around common goals underscores the power of student activism in challenging entrenched systems of power and advocating for social justice. The WSF's approach—combining grassroots mobilization with strategic advocacy and international engagement—offers a blueprint for other student movements seeking to address issues of inequality, cultural erosion, and political marginalization (Bhaumik, 2024; Thounaojam, 2020).

The WSF's work also highlights the importance of cultural identity and preservation in student activism. By framing their struggle in terms of cultural rights and indigenous sovereignty, the WSF has broadened the scope of student activism beyond traditional political demands to include the defense of intangible cultural heritage. This approach not only strengthens the movement's appeal but also helps to build a more resilient and cohesive community that is better equipped to face future challenges (Baruah, 2005; Roy, 2000).

The future of student movements in Northeast India will likely be shaped by the legacy of the WSF. As the region continues to grapple with the impacts of globalization, state policies, and internal divisions, student movements will play a crucial role in articulating the aspirations of the younger generation and pushing for change. The WSF's emphasis on unity, cultural preservation, and cross-border solidarity



will likely inspire future movements to adopt similar strategies, ensuring that the voices of Northeast India's diverse communities continue to be heard (Hazarika, 2024; Misra, 2011).

In conclusion, the WSF's contributions to the unity of Northeast India and its potential to shape the region's socio-political landscape are significant. The federation's success demonstrates the power of student-led movements in driving social and political change, particularly in marginalized regions. As the WSF continues to evolve, it will likely serve as a catalyst for further activism, both within Northeast India and beyond, influencing the future trajectory of student movements in the region.

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