



Celebrity As an Agent of Political Recruitment in Mizoram

Dr.T. Lianhmingsanga

Postdoctoral Fellow

*Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR),
Under the Ministry of Education, New Delhi, India*

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In present-day, political recruitment is understood as the set of processes through which individuals are identified, inducted, and prepared for positions of authority and public responsibility. It encompasses not only formal procedures such as party selection mechanisms, electoral contests, and legislative appointments but also less visible channels, including personal networks, social prestige, cultural legitimacy, and symbolic recognition. In the context of Mizoram, a northeastern Indian state where social life, faith, and politics are closely interlinked, the emergence of celebrity figures as facilitators of political entry represents an important yet insufficiently examined development.

In contrast to expansive and socially diverse polities where celebrities command mass audiences across regions, the notion of celebrity in Mizoram is shaped by distinct cultural and communal frameworks. Public recognition here is not limited to cinema, television, or sports personalities; it also includes gospel singers, church leaders, community organisers, teachers, and activists whose influence travels across villages and towns (Zoramthanga, 2022). To grasp how celebrity functions as a channel of political recruitment in Mizoram, one must analyze how localized forms of renown operate, why they carry social weight, and how they intersect with the broader political environment.

Mizoram's Socio-Political Setting: Context and Background

Mizoram's social composition is marked by relative ethnic homogeneity and a strong communitarian ethos. The majority of the population belongs to the Mizo ethnic group, connected by shared ancestry, collective memory, and cultural practices such as *cheraw* (traditional

bamboo dance) and community feasts. Public interaction retains a degree of familiarity uncommon in many larger Indian states. Christian institutions, particularly the Presbyterian and Baptist churches, play a central role in shaping moral norms and collective identity (Zoramthanga, 2022). Church leadership commands considerable social respect, and moral authority often overlaps with public credibility. In such an environment, recognition is shaped less by mass media spectacle and more by visibility within religious, cultural, and community networks.

Politically, regional formations such as the Mizo National Front (MNF) have historically shaped the state's electoral landscape. Political engagement is embedded in vibrant election campaigns, ongoing church-state interactions, and active community discussions. Many individuals who have entered formal politics have previously occupied esteemed positions in civil society as educators, missionaries, entrepreneurs, or social reformers. Within this context, celebrity understood as social standing and community acknowledgement rather than mere glamour becomes a meaningful route into political life.

Rethinking Celebrity in the Mizo Context

In mainstream discourse, celebrity is typically associated with high media exposure and cultural prominence derived from film, television, or athletics. However, in Mizoram, the concept broadens considerably. It includes individuals whose influence emerges from overlapping spheres of religious leadership, music, cultural preservation, and grassroots development initiatives.

Religious figures often enjoy moral credibility and social trust. Although clerics seldom contest elections directly, their networks and subtle endorsements can shape public opinion and guide



collective preferences (Hluna, 2024). Musicians and performers likewise command deep emotional engagement. Mizo music often expresses shared hopes, anxieties, and generational aspirations, giving artists a distinctive platform within society. Their cultural authority extends beyond entertainment into the domain of social commentary.

Consequently, celebrity in Mizoram is not synonymous with spectacle; it is multidimensional, encompassing moral, cultural, and communal capital. This expanded understanding creates pathways for socially recognised individuals to transition into political roles with relative legitimacy and public acceptance.

Channels Through Which Celebrity Influences Political Recruitment

The impact of celebrity on political entry in Mizoram unfolds through several interconnected mechanisms. In smaller societies, familiarity and personal reputation often outweigh abstract policy debates. Recognisable figures possess built-in legitimacy derived from long-standing community engagement. Political parties recognize that such visibility can be translated into electoral advantage. When a culturally prominent individual signals political interest, parties are attentive to the mobilizing potential attached to that reputation (Chakrabarty, 2024). Moreover, celebrities frequently serve as intermediaries who translate political messages into culturally resonant language. A respected singer endorsing a campaign platform or a community leader speaking at public forums may influence followers who interpret such gestures as endorsements of trust. Beyond elections, when public figures articulate concerns about youth employment, education, or cultural continuity, they can prompt parties to incorporate these voices into advisory or representative roles.

Moreover, political recruitment often relies on established hierarchies of loyalty and seniority. The inclusion of well-known cultural or religious personalities can refresh party images and broaden appeal to younger or previously disengaged groups. By drawing from figures outside traditional party structures, political organizations attempt to project renewal and responsiveness.

Illustrative Patterns in Mizoram

Unlike larger states where film stars frequently transition into politics, Mizoram presents subtler patterns. Musicians, educators, and community organizers with strong public reputations have been invited to contest legislative seats or assume advisory responsibilities. Their prior recognition offers parties a narrative of integrity and grassroots connection.

Similarly, respected social activists whose credibility is rooted in community service have been integrated into formal politics. Their entry is often framed as a continuation of public service rather than a dramatic career shift. Even where church leaders refrain from electoral participation, their advocacy on issues such as education or social welfare can elevate emerging figures into political visibility.

Voter Perception and Party Calculations

Electoral behaviour in Mizoram is strongly influenced by relational trust. Voters frequently support candidates whose character and life histories they know (Pachua, 2025). Celebrities broadly defined benefit from the accumulated goodwill built over years of public presence. Political parties strategically factor in such social capital when selecting candidates, recognizing that an established public persona can generate momentum disproportionate to organizational seniority.

At the same time, celebrities themselves may perceive politics as a natural extension of their public engagement. Individuals who have addressed community issues through music, sermons, or activism may view electoral politics as an avenue to pursue structural change. Public forums, radio discussions, church gatherings, and youth meetings—become spaces where they articulate political ideas and gradually legitimize their transition.

Critical Reflections and Tensions

The growing reliance on celebrity figures in recruitment raises normative concerns. Democratic theorists caution against excessive personalization of politics, where charisma may overshadow administrative capability. Popular appeal does not automatically translate into policy



competence or governance expertise. There is also the risk that highly visible personalities may eclipse grassroots workers who possess organizational skill but lack public recognition. If recruitment prioritizes popularity over experience, party structures may weaken internally. Moreover, the proximity between religious authority and political ambition must be handled carefully to preserve the balance between spiritual influence and secular governance.

The involvement of celebrities in political recruitment has ambivalent consequences. On one side, it widens access to political life by enabling culturally influential individuals to enter representative institutions (Hmingthanzami, 2024). It diversifies leadership beyond entrenched elites and reflects evolving societal aspirations. Individuals with backgrounds in music, education, or activism may introduce fresh perspectives on policy debates.

Conversely, overemphasis on public image can encourage performative politics at the expense of substantive policy deliberation. Effective governance demands institutional knowledge, administrative skills, and sustained engagement with complex socio-economic issues. Thus, celebrity participation must complement—not replace—merit-based selection and policy expertise.

Advantages of Celebrity in Political Recruitment

The involvement of well-known personalities substantially raises the profile of governmental programs and public services in Mizoram, especially given the high level of social media use among young people. The political ascent of Baryl Vanneih Sangi, formerly associated with television and radio broadcasting, generated immediate public and media attention when she secured a seat in the Mizoram Legislative Assembly in 2023 as one of its youngest members. Such developments do more than create headlines; they amplify policy communication and stimulate wider civic discussion (Times of India, 4 Dec. 2023). In a socially cohesive state like Mizoram, where digital networks increasingly shape opinion, recognizable figures can convert complex administrative agendas into accessible, relatable stories. This visibility encourages citizens—particularly first-time voters—to interact more actively with democratic processes.

Vanneih Sangi's shift from influencer to elected representative demonstrates how conversations about education, sustainability, and community welfare can be extended beyond formal political spaces into everyday digital interactions (The Hindu, 2023). By doing so, recruitment of culturally resonant personalities helps bridge divides between state initiatives and segments such as rural youth, urban professionals, and women voters. The bond that audiences develop with well-known figures often translates into heightened credibility once those individuals assume public responsibility. Personal narratives rooted in faith, perseverance, and community commitment can make administrative institutions appear less distant and more responsive.

Another example is Jeje Lalpekhlua. Jeje Lalpekhlua's journey from celebrated athlete to elected representative illustrates how sporting distinction can open pathways into public life within Mizoram's evolving political sphere. His career demonstrates the capacity of popular sports figures to transition from fields of competition to forums of governance, influencing political recruitment in meaningful ways. Born in 1991 in Hnahlan in Mizoram, Jeje Lalpekhlua emerged as one of India's most recognizable strikers. Over the course of his professional career, he accumulated 95 goals at the club level with sides such as Pune FC, Chennaiyin FC, and Mohun Bagan, while also scoring 23 goals for the Indian national team. His performances in tournaments like the SAFF Championship further cemented his reputation.

In a state where football commands intense devotion and symbolizes collective identity, his popularity extended far beyond the stadium. For years, he resisted invitations from political groups, choosing to concentrate on his sporting commitments. However, in March 2023, he formally entered politics by joining the Zoram People's Movement, motivated by a desire to address socioeconomic concerns such as poverty and food insecurity in his home state. His political debut culminated in the 2023 Legislative Assembly election, where he secured victory from the South Tuipui constituency with 5,468 votes (Ralte, 2024). Drawing upon his public recognition and credibility among youth and sports supporters, he helped



energise first-time voters and align them with a reform-oriented and youth-focused political agenda.

Across Northeast India, prominent sports personalities have occasionally served as bridges between civil society and formal politics. Jeje's transition reflects this broader pattern, demonstrating how well-known public figures can attract previously disengaged citizens into participatory democracy. Now serving as a Member of the Legislative Assembly, he continues to use his public standing to advocate developmental priorities, illustrating how athletic distinction can translate into grassroots political influence in Mizoram.

In Mizoram's close-knit society, where cultural identity and community solidarity hold strong influence, such relational capital may reduce scepticism toward public authority. Policies addressing social welfare, education, or environmental sustainability can thus be framed not merely as official directives but as collective aspirations championed by familiar voices. In a society increasingly attentive to women's entrepreneurship and leadership, visible examples of female political participation may inspire broader engagement. For younger citizens, especially women, the presence of relatable role models in formal institutions can reshape perceptions about career pathways within governance and public service, potentially countering migration trends by highlighting opportunities at home. The integration of younger public figures into politics contributes new perspectives and reinforces efforts toward inclusive leadership. Vanneihsang's trajectory—from media personality to legislator and Jeje Lalpekhlua—serves as a symbolic example of expanding political opportunity in the state assembly.

By interacting directly with constituents through digital platforms and public forums, such leaders can address issues like waste management, child welfare, and neighborhood development in ways that resonate with everyday experiences. In a state where faith-based and civil society organizations play prominent roles, this culturally grounded engagement enhances policy responsiveness and implementation effectiveness. In a resource-constrained environment, leveraging

established personal networks can serve as a cost-conscious strategy for public communication. Rather than relying heavily on conventional advertising or large-scale promotional campaigns, the state can utilize the organic outreach capacity of well-known personalities.

The visibility generated through personal branding and online platforms often produces substantial engagement with comparatively limited financial expenditure. For a smaller state like Mizoram, such approaches allow development initiatives to reach wider audiences while conserving administrative resources. The recruitment of influential public personalities into governance structures in Mizoram represents more than a symbolic gesture. It reflects an adaptive strategy in which cultural familiarity, digital connectivity, and youth participation converge to reshape the interface between state institutions and society.

Conclusion

The role of celebrity in political recruitment in Mizoram illustrates the intricate entanglement of culture, community, and governance. In a setting where moral credibility and social familiarity shape public life, recognized figures, whether artists, religious leaders, or civic activists, can become pivotal conduits into formal politics. Their influence rests on visibility, accumulated trust, and symbolic legitimacy.

Celebrity involvement in Mizoram's politics illustrates how democratic systems adapt to changing social realities. It can also invigorate participation and broaden inclusion, but institutional strength and policy competence remain indispensable. By transforming popularity into political participation, celebrities have become influential actors in shaping contemporary political recruitment, expanding both the reach and character of representation in the state. Yet the health of democratic representation depends on maintaining equilibrium between popularity and proficiency. As Mizoram's political sphere continues to evolve, the relationship between public recognition and political authority will remain a crucial area for scholarly and civic reflection.



ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

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