

Editorial

Imphal, Wednesday, May 18, 2016

Demystifying electoral democracy

Electoral democracy was conceptualized by free-thinking people who were aspiring for self-governance and constitutional rights and liberties, and yet ironically, electoral democracy, like any other political system was actually put in place to govern and control people who are not willing to take the responsibility for themselves. The inherent contradictions in the system gives way to a practice where the few powerful individuals or groups at the helm of power twist, bend or even break the rules of law to conform to their conveniences. This practice is what is universally known as corruption. Some might argue that there are enough checks and balances in the constitution to deter or even bring to book anyone when proven their misdeeds. True, but then how do the common people uncover the underhand dealings or flouting of rules by those in power and privileges? The answer might be nearer than one would imagine, and as Winston Churchill once so famously said, "Democracy is the worst system of government except for all the others."

The challenge for the public, therefore is to dig up and identify the reasons or causes which is causing glitches in the functioning of the system, and then make efforts to remove or mitigate these factors. The most obvious reason, one which has been ignored and overlooked by each individual is the fact that in electoral politics, there are inherent risks of exercising undue influence during the process of electing representatives of the people, and thus misinformation or ill-informed judgments have always been a major stumbling block in the smooth and proper functioning of the system. The real drawback or deficiency is therefore not the system itself, but the inability to utilize it judiciously and in a fair manner. There is no perfect political system, and with the ever shifting political and social balances, there cannot be a universal formula for success of any system which is applicable across the nations.

The best option, therefore, lies in making efforts to sensitise the public on the importance of a continuous and collective engagement with politics and the political system instead of leaving the matter in the hands of a few people which raises the risk of manipulating the law for the benefit of the few. We should understand that more than anything, election is a political game in which various factors beyond the comprehension of the common public are put into play, and that the most popular or efficient campaigns does not necessarily reflect the ability or intents of the candidates. The ultimate fate of the system lies with the public which it professes to serve. When we all are true to ourselves and are clear of our social aspirations and future objectives, then electoral democracy will become a very powerful, useful and empowering tool for the common man.

MANIPUR LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY  
SECRETARIAT  
CORRIGENDUM  
Imphal the 13<sup>th</sup> May, 2016

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Contd. from previous issue

Reflections on the Conflicts of our Times :  
Attempt at Common Sense reading of the Manipur Experience

By: Arambam Lokendra  
History - From Obscurity to Visibility?

The relationship between Manipur and Indian state through history need some understanding, though the relationship was never a harmonious one. (The term Manipur and India are themselves subjects of relative interpretation). From very ancient times, Manipur's cultural and social orientation was towards the eastern direction, towards Myanmar and Southeast Asia. The pre-colonial Manipur state was an endogenous development, impelled by the nature of its geographic and ecological features, initiated by clan warriors who descended from the low mountains into the fertile valley below. The indigenous populations had origins from racial categories of Southern Mongoloid, with certain complicated admixtures between Proto-Australoids and incoming layers of Tibeto-Burman speech communities. All these human groups shared habitat, geography, climate, faunal and floral environments, food habits, and ancient technological traits like loom and fly shuttle technologies in the plains. While the highlander denizens continued to bear the vagaries of the forest and mountain environments, those who came down in the plains were ushered into challenging the extensive flow of the river waters whose currents had to be controlled and utilized for developing livelihood systems. Wet rice agriculture, with the system of transplantation provided early impetus to change into peasant lifestyle and invention of better tools for food production technologies. The openness of the alluvial flood-plains helped encephalization of religious beliefs, with a deep ecological consciousness of the notion of fertility of nature and veneration of ancestors. The initial tribal lifestyles of close clan formation and in-group consciousness were transformed into the need for greater integration on supra-village principality formations and the idea of a ritual theatre state, a designed architecture of governance and authority relationship through ritual was organized under a monarchical system, with war and matrimonial alliances binding the clan polities. An urge for civilization propelled the lowlanders into producing a philosophy of life, numerous literatures and texts thereby reflecting the literate status of the communities in the plains. Openness to outside influences and miscegenation with incoming migrants with various human groups resulted to a detribalized life-world of hydraulic civilization based on systematic networks of irrigation and flood control. Early possession of the plough, the horse and iron paved the path for rapid development in the ontology of the plains dwellers into a martial race. Citizen warriors swift in horsemanship, swift in physical movements in the arts of swordsmanship, rapid in aggression or retreat with tremendous spirit of sacrifice for the collective, emerging in the medieval period of expansion and conquest. A ranked society helped in smoothening of the governing bureaucracy indigenous in values and beliefs. The clan Piba (male elder of the clan) had been raised to the status of Kingship, and a system of circulation of royal princesses circulated amidst the rising international communities for peace and harmony. The territorial frontiers of the state was recognized in the international community first by the Upper Shan principalities and later by Burmans, the Ahoms, the Dimas and the Bodos of Tripura.

With the international recognition of prestige, liberality and hospitality of the monarchical regime in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the first migration of Brahmin populations, escaping from the violence of western Islamic invasions, was noticed, bringing along with them fresh notions of astrological and cosmological wisdom, along with pragmatic theories of kingship and elevation of the power and authority of the monarch to the status of divinity. The need for the integration of the clans, tribes and other communities into a well-structured poly-glot of cultures and demographics needed a higher religious system emphasizing the power and exhibitory faculties of the state represented by the monarch and his associates necessitating the conversion of the Meitei into Hinduism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

While Southeast Asian polities had easily assimilated themselves into the Indic cultural influences since the 4<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Common Era, Manipur felt these influences while its social and political systems had already been well-established with a definite identity and status of its own. The conversion into Hinduism faced shift opposition from the proponents of the Meitei indigenous

religion. But through the exercise of force and violence, subtle intimidation as well as public oppression, the king Garbinvijay (1709-1748) was able to effect a compromise with the clan elders, a sort of contract to accept the conversion into the Ramandi religion. Other indigenous religious systems of tribes and peripheral communities like the Chakpas retained their traditional systems. Christianity entered Manipur during the colonial era in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The pre-colonial orientation of the Manipur state towards Indic connections, side by side with the conversion of the ruling kraton class into Hinduism was therefore an 18<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon. It also coincided with the political orientation towards British India since 1762 C.E. because of the expansion of the imperial Burmese ambitions directly affecting the geo-political awareness of the rulers, necessitating support from the Ahom dynasties as well as the East India Company. Total economic integration was unthinkable at that period of history for more than a hundred years. Manipur's agricultural economy was based on subsistence with incipient trade relations with the proximate neighbouring countries. However the British defeat of Manipur in 1891 CE introduced forcible changes in the indigenous economic structures. The British introduced the Indian rupee as a medium of exchange replacing indigenous systems in 1892, and the Manipur resources were used to feed the imperial military establishments in Assam and the Northeastern region through the export of rice and cattle. Imports of British manufactured goods reached Imphal and the colonial economy altered the indigenous social structure by introducing a new imperial racial class of Marwaris and Bengalis for economic management and organization of the new revenue structures. The earlier migrant population of Brahmins and Muslims had earlier been assimilated into the indigenous social structure, but the new demographic inputs through the colonial economy introduced a sort of contested pluralism, as different from the organic pluralism of the past. A lot of conflictual social relationship was noticed similar to the system introduced in Burma by the colonial authorities.

The British also introduced a new system of administration totally rupturing the organic plurality of hill and plains relations. The Meitei ruler-ship was divested of administrative jurisdiction over the Hill people, and the administration of the Hill was given to the British political authority craftily institutionalized in the colonised polity. A system of dyarchy, separation of powers between the Maharajah and the British political agent was structured into the system. When the Hill citizens rebelled against the colonial authority in the first two or three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its character and form was later misinterpreted through the prism of awakened ethnicities, which became murky and unclear leading to serious conflicts in the era of ethnic identification movements. When the British left in 1947, leading to a precarious in-equilibrium from the convulsions of the Second World War all the efforts to restore traditional equilibrium of the polity was in vain. Manipur became a district of the vast territories of India through the integration in 1949. One can imagine the consequences.

**Force - The Basis of India's Relation with Manipur**  
Delving into the attitudes and worldviews of the Indian rulers in the critical era of integration of the princely states in the proposed Indian Union one can surmise that the representatives of the Dominion of India were completely unaware of the history and character of the pre-merger polity. The official version of the Dominion of India's 'Take-over' of Manipur was based on the considerations that (i) the history of Manipur is 'obscure' (ii) the economy of the state is 'unviable' and (iii) the area is a 'strategic area'. The administration of the Dominion didn't make it official that the fear of the Indian state of the infiltration of Communist ideologies through Manipur's connection with the Burmese Communist Party was never mentioned. But it was a fact that the new Indian state was forced to take a harsh decision to suppress the Communist Party of India's violent revolution under the inspiration of the Bolshevik Revolution, designed through the strategies of B.T. Ranadive in 1948-1949. The revolutionary movement of Hijam Irabot as a member of the Communist Party of India was suppressed through the use of the

Indian Army and the Police (1949-1955).

What is very significant here it that the Indian state which inherited the outgoing British Empire's territorial possessions in Northeast India also inherited the security architecture of the British Colonial Empire. Legitimate as well as covert exercise of force for suppression of rebellions, and for protection of life and properties of the imperial officials, and for maintenance of peace and order in the porous border areas and defensive parameters to be built into the system was inherited by the Indian authorities and strategic thinking in these lines was more encephalized by the Indian think tanks over a passage of time. The great Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's innate militaristic worldview 'Isn't there a Brigadier in Shillong' during the hectic days of the Manipur merger episode was a statement of immense consequences. This was strengthened by his own observations that the tribal and other communities in the Northeastern parts of India were all Mongoloid in racial origins, and thus may not be loyal to the nation state of India in future was indeed a rational perception.

The security architecture of the Indian state in Northeast India had a long history since the British colonial days. The need for security of the persons and officials of the tea industry of Assam, from fear of raids and murder by the tribal communities, necessitated the establishment of indigenous security forces, and the Cachar Levy of 1835, the Jorhat Militia of 1838, the Kuki Levy of 1850 etc, were gradually effected in various geographies of the Northeastern region, and they later were progressively merged into the famous Assam Rifles in 1917 in the wake of the first World War. From simple protective measures for colonial officials, these indigenously raised forces became a necessary instrument of the maintenance of the law and order. Military and police pickets in Assam, the Lushai Hills, the Naga Hills and in Manipur after the 1891 war was systematically merged to help effect the security architecture in the Northeast. Manipur in its painful history of colonial modernity had to experience the militaristic attitude and culture of the British colonial officials as well as their new rulers from the Indian state. After the defeat at the hands of the British Indian forces in 1891, the sacred capital of Kangla was occupied by the soldiers who remained till 2004. The native citizen army of the pre-colonial Lalup was disarmed and an occupying force of the Indian army was installed in its place. The new prince ruler was divested of any security arrangements of his own, while the British polity was systematically merged to help effect the security architecture in the region. The Assam Rifles continued to take exemplary roles for suppressing ethnic armed movements like that of the Kukis in 1917-19 as well as the Kabui movement of 1928-34. The Assam Rifles bayoneted the unarmed women in the 1939 food security agitation known as the Second Nuphal or Women's war. It also was responsible for suppressing the Mao Naga no house tax campaign in 1948 leading to the death of three hillmen. In the history of Manipur's integration into India in 1949, the Assam Rifles was used to face eventualities. The trend had to be continued for extensive counter-insurgency campaigns. The Indian security forces are even stationed in the campus of a precious educational institution, the Manipur University still today.

The security architecture at contemporary times is expanded a thousand times under new dynamics of geo-political rivalries, the persistence of insurgency as well as overall challenges by the enforced vulnerability of the borderland syndrome. What is more sinister is the fear that sheer militarism and capacities for ruthless use of excessive force was not reserved for security reasons alone. What was more diabolic was blatant exercise of intervention in the dynamics of ethnic conflict, taking advantage of the primordial passions and prejudices of the ethnic rivalries, thereby helping expand ethnic jealousies. The classical Kautilyan principles of Sham, Dam, Dand, Bhed (of reconciliation, inducement of riches, use of force and principles of split or divide) are all in evidence. Whisper campaigns are afoot silently in the public sphere, in the

atmosphere of suspicion and hatred, that the Meitei in the plains were persuaded, not to fear the Nagas, but the Kukis and the Muslims as enemies. Again the Kukis were learnt to have been persuaded, not to hate the Nagas, but the Meiteis and the Muslims.

**Concluding Observations**  
What was the more immediate was the virtual reality to state violence over the general population for the last three or four decades coupled with unbridled corruption and opportunity affliction. The vitals of the polity are eaten up into, which had corroded all institutions of the state. Globalization and liberalization since the nineties had accentuated the vitiated atmosphere, with more violence and ruthlessness of human behaviour in tow. Ethnicity and ethnic conflict shall increase more, affected by the wrenching processes of modernization of the struggle for power over resources, above the surface of the earth, as well as below. Pure sentimental outcries of Hills and Plains unity of the past will no longer be valid. The challenge today seems to indicate a heightened response of consciousness, of understanding conflict in a positive way, like by those classical sociologists, who reflected that conflict (or violence) would prevent ossification of the social system by exerting pressure for innovation and creativity (George Sorel 1908). In the words of Lewis A Coser "Conflict within and between groups a society can prevent accommodations and relations from progressively impoverishing creativity. The clash of values, and interests, the tension between what is and what some groups ought to be, the conflict between vested interests and new strata and demanding their share of power, wealth and status, have been productive of vitality". (George A. Kelly & Clifford W. Brown Jr. 1970)

We must accept conflict as reality, though the Government of India nor its henchmen the local state, do not recognize it. We must respond with more in depth knowledge of what constitutes the violence of what is spread as "Development". Developmental violence is another category of oppression under which ethnic rivalries are played out. One has to acknowledge the configurations of ethnic demands, and the global universal values of rights, entitlements and freedoms have to be addressed anew with all honest intensity of commitment and fair play. Civil society have to understand afresh that we are entering into a much more sinister era of intrigue, deceit and lies, and the whole artificiality of discourse of development.

The crisis of the times had thrown challenges to both the people of the hills and the plains, the dynamics of which had not been addressed dispassionately by the indigenous peoples themselves having posed over each other as adversaries for long. The Meiteis in the plains could only blame themselves for their incapability to play the facilitating leadership role for multi-ethnic and multi-religious unity. The Meiteis had failed to learn from their nation-memories of how they carried the burdens of the collective of the past, and it seems they are as community sinking fast in the debris of self-destruction through intra-group attrition and false individualist pride!

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