

Editorial

Thursday, July, 12, 2018

Addressing core issues

After what can be considered an unusually long period of relative calm and semblance of positive development in the state by any yardstick, we are now reverting back to the old days of chaos and confusion if the present social developments is anything to go by. After the initial euphoria and the heightened expectations of the public for a radical change in the system of governance in the state with the change of guard, the emerging picture is proving to be one of increasing disappointment with each passing day, not for lack of effort or expressed intent on the part of the incumbent state government, but more due to the fact that the very system which the public wants changed and were expecting to be altered, has eventually claimed yet another well-meaning bunch of 'social activists' who have evidently missed the woods for the trees.

Instances of 'hands-on' publicity gimmicks where ministers and political leaders got their hands soiled with physical activities in what is often described as acts of encouragement have become a rage of late, and while such acts may very well motivate the general public to contribute or cooperate with the government, it still does not address the basic issue of remedying the system of governance.

The deepening crisis on the educational front with the present imbroglio between the Vice Chancellor on the one hand and the students and the teaching as well as non teaching staff on the other has already put the future of thousands of students, if not more, at jeopardy, and there is still no sign of any initiative from the state government to settle the issue in the larger interest of the state even if the matter may not justify official intervention.

The ongoing agitation by the government employees demanding implementation of 7th pay commission is another huge hindrance which is proving to be a nightmare for the general public as the already lethargic and unfriendly public services has ceased functioning for all practical purposes. It goes without saying that the debacle which is unlikely to be resolved in the foreseeable future has already done its damage to the efforts on development and progress of the state.

What about the frighteningly regular reports of seizure of narcotic drugs in the state? The suspicious silence on the part of the government and the failure to admit as yet, the growing menace of drugs in the state and the presence of a powerful and influential drug cartel which is using the state as an international highway for drug trafficking is a cause for serious concern for everybody. A more proactive and stringent approach towards the issue is required to allay the fears and suspicions on the minds of the public.

And why is the state government, in this time and age, still unable to present a definite stand on the much discussed and disgruntled border issue for once? Every state ought to have its definite boundary, and the state government should present the official area and physical boundary of Manipur to the public which will be of immense help in framing policies, programs and conclusions regarding the public perception.

While the present government has repeatedly expressed its intent to usher in positive change in the state, there is still a load to be done, and the manner of implementation of various programs, policies and activities remain far from satisfactory. Slapdash efforts will only worsen the situation. What is sorely needed is for the system to be rectified so that more transparency, efficiency and effectiveness are achieved. The voice of the public should be a guiding force towards such efforts.

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Contd. from previous issue

Ecological and social impacts of the Ithai Barrage

By - Ramananda Wangkheirakpam



It is also known both from experiences of fishers and also from previous research, that fish population on the wetland has decreased tremendously, and also that traditional aquatic vegetation which was once main source of food and income has largely vanished from the wetland. The result is that fishers have to market all the fish they catch in order to buy essential household items, leaving little or nothing for household consumption. The gravity of the problem is such that children in these communities are found to be suffering from protein malnutrition. According to a research done by Yaima (1989) it was found that children below the age of 12 years were suffering from moderate to severe malnutrition. The wetland is not 'free access' for everyone but are 'commons' and is governed by community laws and ethics. However, there are signs of degeneration of the commons, which are partly a result of government laws on common property and partly as a result of the project.

There are various symptoms visible in the present practices of the local people that can be interpreted as erosion of traditional water use system. One prominent shift is the individual effort to catch and market fish as much as possible. Traditionally, it was an accepted norm that fishers do not catch fingerlings, but now nobody cares about other people or about the pat. Anything and everything that can be consumed or taken to the market is extracted using any means. In any commons, when community laws break down, resource use can become unsustainable and destructive. It is not intended here to paint a picture of total breakdown of community life among the fisherpeople. There are still unwritten and commonly accepted laws in managing the wetland. Helping each other, which is a must in such a terrain, for laying large nets or for repair of the Khangpok is still seen everywhere on the wetland. The formation of a fishermen association at Karang can be interpreted as a response to this degeneration, and also an effort to defend themselves from further onslaught by the government or other vested interests.

Floating vegetation on the wetland is of immense importance to Loktak people. Not only that many build their huts on the phumdi, but also some of the vegetation are main food items. The vegetation is also breeding ground for fish. The eutrophication of the pat has increased to the extent of covering half of the surface area of the wetland. And this increase of aquatic vegetation has created tremendous problem for both the wetland and the people. It is not that there was no problem of phumdi before the barrage, but the accumulation of phumdi during the monsoon season used to get carried down when the water from

Loktak drained out through the Khordak Channel. Residents of floating huts report blocking of the navigation path by the vegetation, sometimes getting stranded for hours at one area unable to reach their destinations. More areas covered by phumdi means less breathing water area for fish, depletion of dissolved oxygen, suppression of phytoplankton and the release of methane consequent to the anaerobic decay of weeds resulting into slower growth and decreased fish directly affect the fisher people.

It is difficult to establish an income differential by taking into account the inflation over time i.e., of pre 1979 and the present, as these are reports of perceived income in the past by individuals/families. Nevertheless, the average of all the incomes of pre 1979 compared to the average of the present income reveals that the earning capacity of the Loktak people has reduced to a considerable extent. The average earning per day of a family before the construction of the dam is estimated to be Rs. 903 while the present average income of the families comes out to Rs. 355 a day. These incomes do not represent the earning of these families for all the days of the year but of the lean season only, which is during the month of December to March/April. The rest of the months, and particularly during the monsoon, the catch is relatively reduced compared to the lean season. The income during these seasons is difficult to estimate, as the respondents did not specify the catch. Another aspect of this pre 1979 income is that it comprises not only the income from selling fish but also from edible aquatic vegetation. In the post-dam scenario, income from the second is absent as the vegetation has been taken over by alien vegetation.

The knowledge of the Loktak-Khangpok people about the wetland is vast. They have an intricate knowledge of the life cycle of fish, how different species

from the river migrate to the wetland, what kind of food they consume, and in what season they grow up to the right sizes for catch. The dwellers can predict the wind direction, which helps in their navigation. They have also identified each of the vegetation Loktak supports, and the names of birds that feed on the water. Any changes or any new external introduction, whether vegetation or waterfowl is easily identified. After the barrage was constructed the face of the wetland has transformed so much that many of the fishers reckon it as an alien and not the one they once knew. There are no available pre-barrage data on the quality of water making it difficult to arrive at a definite conclusion on the deterioration of water quality and the diseases associated with it. However, frequent complaints of getting sick after drinking water or skin rashes by lake dwellers confirm pollution². Residents fear that their only source of water is getting too contaminated. Available data on the incidence rate of the major diseases (Enteric fever, Gastroenteritis etc.) in the district of Bishnupur points to this too. For a community where life is centred on water, the degeneration of quality and quantity of water could mean an end point.

With the reduction of fish population in Loktak, it is known from the residents that they have to spend more time and resources to eke out their living. As a consequence of this, they have less and less time to attend to health needs. The major health complaints of women are muscle pull on their thighs and back pain. Women use a kind of fishing net in which the thigh muscle acts as fulcrum. As result of reduction of fish, the frequency of using the net has increased to a considerable amount. So they have recurrent muscle pulls and lower back pain. For men, the problem is restricted to back pain due to more time spent on fishing. Parents also have little time to attend to their children and to other aspects of community life.

The thinning nature of the phum results in people drowning when

they step on it. This happens particularly to children. Residents complain that as a result of destruction of natural cycle of the lake, the thickness of the phum vegetation recedes at a fast pace, making it difficult for residents to repair it. Malnutrition, overexertion, deterioration of water quality, water-borne diseases, unavailability of medicine, bad government health services and most importantly the acute reduction of earning capacity are the immediate cause of health problems among the residents. Other than these there are other indicators of psychological stress associated with increased insecurity of future and present impoverishment. Increased alcoholism among residents and at the islands and high dropout rates from schools point to some of the psychosocial impact of the conditions created by the dam.

Women have suffered more because of changes in the pat. The woman's role of taking care of the household, fishing and marketing of fish has heightened as a result of the decreasing resource base. Another implication for women relates to their productive capacity. The traditional fishing equipment used by women has not seen much change despite the fact that the gears used by men has changed in order to adjust to the new environment. With their 'unsuited' and nonadaptive technology they invest more time and energy, while taking care of the household at the same time.

(Concluded)

(This article was first published in the book called "Loktak Lake And Manipuri Lifeworld: Putting The Ramsar Sites To Inconsequential Abyss" edited by Shukhdeba Sharma Hanjabam, Aheibam Koireng Singh and Rajkumar Ranjan Singh and published by Conflict and Human Rights Studies Network- Manipur and Centre for Manipur Studies, Manipur University)

KUKIS AND MERGER OF MANIPUR

Holkhomang Haopik

I take this opportunity to write a few lines in connection with Manipur Merger Issue. It is an attempt to focus on the last minute events just before Maharajah Budhachandra Singh had to leave for Shillong to sign the Agreement against his will.

It is a fact that it was a group of Kuki Chiefs particularly Haopik Chiefs, who determined to help Maharajah and resist the Merger. Here, to be specific, a group of

Kuki Chiefs was led by then Chief of Chassad and who was supported by Chief of Aihang, Chief of Nabil, Chief of Longpi and many other Haopik villages. These Chiefs went to the extent that about 200-300 volunteers with muzzle loading guns were kept at the gate of Palace to protect the Maharajah and his kingdom.

The leaders of Akhil Manipur Hindu Maha Sabha (AMHMS) organised strikes and procession to force the Maharajah to relinquish his throne and to merge

with India. There was almost a clash between the volunteers of Haopik Chiefs on one side and AMHMS on the other. Meanwhile, two or three telegrams reached/came to Maharajah from the then Home Minister of India, Shri Sardar Vallabhai Patel but the Maharajah refused to go to Shillong.

Unfortunately, on that eventful day, against his will supported by the fact that Maharajah turned back two-three times then to God, into his car made ready for his journey to Shillong, but had to go to

Shillong to sign the said Agreement.

People of Manipur or any historian have not recorded such important events of that decisive moment which took place at the palace gate. The Maharajah, out of his love for his supporters - the Haopik Chiefs and volunteers who stood by him for his protection and independent Manipur during those eventful time/moments till the last minute, have granted the Haopiks to settle at Haopik Veng which itself is an axiom.