Reorganisation of District Boundaries in Manipur: Issues and Perspectives

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A month after intense Sadar Hills agitation spearheaded by the Sadar Hills Districthood Demand Committee (SHDDC) since August 1, 2011 demanding upgradation of the Sadar Hills area of Senapati district into a full-fledged district, the indecisive cabinet of the Secular Progressive Front (SPF) government of Manipur under Okram Ibobi Singh institute a committee, named as Committee on Reorganisation of Administrative and Police Boundary (CRA&PB), to reorganise district boundaries and police jurisdictions in the state. The committee headed by the Chief Secretary of Manipur, DS Poonia, is to submit its report in three months time. What would be the nature and extent of the recommendation of the CRA&PB is too early to speculate. However, an intriguing question that arises is whether the report be able to fill the lacuna of ethnic aspirations of the various communities in the state. There are scores of issues that needs to be taken into consideration for long term stability and relevance of policy to all the parochialised ethnic groups in the state.

Some issues on reorganisation of boundaries

It is not the first time that the government of Manipur constituted district reorganisation committee to solve the Sadar Hills stalemate. Decades back the Rishang Keishing Congress ministry once instituted a committee headed by L Chandramani as chairman but failed to finalise the report. Even during the tenure of the present SPF government the Sadar Hills District Demand Committee (SHDDC) held agitations in 2008 albeit in lesser intensity. However, a month after indefinite bandh in Sadar Hills area the self explanatory CRA&PB was formed. Is the state government in action and formulate policies only after intense agitation? The past three years experiences in the state prove so.

In due course of Sadar Hills agitation various civil society organisations of the valley demanded the merger of some hillocks near the Imphal valley, such as the Langol hills, which is barely 10 kilometres from the Imphal West district headquarters, before the creation of Sadar Hills. Likewise, there are also oblivious cases that need to be considered. There are areas like Ekou of the Imphal East district which is barely 7 kilometres from Saikul sub-divisional headquarters and also Pukhao and Leitanpokpi that can come under Saikul sub-division of the Sadar Hills. Ekou is more than 30 kilometres from Imphal East district headquarters.

Here comes the issue of reconciliation between administrative convenience and ethnic attachment to a particular administrative unit. Even though administrative expediency is being emphasised for reorganisation of administrative and police boundary, at the bottom ethnic attachment seems to counterweight administrative convenience.

It is a known fact that Jiribam subdivision can be placed under the contiguous Churachandpur district or Tamenglong district, if the call is for administrative convenience, as the subdivision is very much in close proximity to the district.
headquarters of Tamenglong. However, this small valley largely inhabited by Meitei community is placed under Imphal East district, which is more than 200 kms from the district headquarters. In this case, the hard fact is that, it is not about administrative convenience but the people in this valley prefer to be under a district dominated by their own community.

A camouflaged step?

There is more doubt about the sincerity of the state government in forming this committee than prudence in solving the decades old Sadar Hills issue. It is questionable whether the committee is a scapegoat to the devolved ruling ministry to buy time until the code of conduct for the upcoming state assembly election is enforced. Manipur is going to the polls early next year. The code of conduct for the forthcoming election is expected to come into force by November. By the time CRA&PB give its report no major decision could be made and enforced by the state government.

Apart from this, even at the peak of the agitation in Sadar Hills the Chief Minister Okram Ibobi left Imphal for Tokyo to attend an international conference from September 5 to 7. This shows that the state government is totally incapable of handling situations of this gravity as the Sadar Hills demand which eventually spiraled on communal lines.

The sharp division of political community into a group preserving the integrity of the state and the other vying separation has degenerated the state into a zone of political battle. As the present crisis demonstrates, decisively, that one of the key factors in the current political impasse, perhaps the key factor, is the crisis of political leadership. Political elites are now so disengaged, so parochialised, that it lacks the imagination or the will to deal with new experiences in the changed Manipur.

Ethnic Churning

Of late there is no love lost between the ethnic communities of the state. The daily incidents speak for it. In such intricate situation the ethnic groups of the state often romanticise their history. The hard fact is that the history of communities in Manipur is largely an oral tradition. Romanticising oral history replaces facts and every new generation often sees its history in more glorious ways than the former one. The tribes in the hills see their community as being under threat from the larger valley population which they perceive as being intellectually and economically more advanced. Hence they become so possessive that often leads to them being subjective about their histories.

In a state where ethnic enmity is so tied-up with land and identity the greatest task is to find a solution in these churnings. Various civil society organisations and insurgent groups have put up their demands ranging from integration with neighbouring states, statehood, autonomous state, union territory, territorial council, alternative arrangement, etc. Likewise, various suggestions have been put forward by scholars which mainly focus on autonomy for political solution.
Beyond boundary commission

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that “We must learn to live together as brothers, or we will die together as fools.” This is true not only in a spiritual sense but also collective life on humanitarian ground. But how this can be done in an equitable way? Chauvinism and negativism has to be done away and replaced by mutual trust and goodwill. Issues like relative deprivation and cultural nationalism, which exacerbates a sense of antagonism and mistrust among the various communities, needs to be addressed with ingenuity.

What emerges to be the only alternative left with Manipur is to resort to some forms of structural and constitutional adjustments. This would entail granting of Sixth Schedule to the hill areas and holding Autonomous District Council elections under this, as strongly demanded by various Naga civil society organisations. As against the principle of reorganisation of districts based on administrative convenience, reorganisation based on ethnic lines after ethnic adjustments and safeguarding the rights and interests of each groups would help in establishing a long term stable Manipur.