The Politics of Indigeneity in Manipur

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The emerging notion of space and territoriality and the demand for new political space in Manipur by marginalised groups have, of late, raised the question on indigeneity. The discourse emerges out of the ‘perceived threat’ within a section of the dominant group in the wake of the ensuing ‘peace talks’ between the central government and the minority ‘others’ in the state. This brings a more intricate situation in Manipur demanding an ever stronger role to the state government.

The discourse on indigeneity is generally associated with communities with the lived experiences of marginality; and the degree of such marginality and vulnerability in relation to their historical dependence on land and its resources are the yardsticks for measuring indigenousness in the Westphalian state system. These are also clearly reflected in Jawaharlal Nehru’s tribal policy or the ‘Panch Sheel’ of India’s tribal policy as enunciated by the first Prime Minister. They are the five cardinal principles that ensured tribal autonomy within the larger objective of national integration. This policy not only provided for the protection of tribal’s land and its resources but also to preserve their social and cultural institutions through which everything should be channeled so that they develop along the lines of ‘their own genius’. It urged ‘to train and build up a team of their own people to do the work of administration and development’ and the results of such development should not be judged by instrument of statistics or the amount of money spent but by ‘the quality of human character that is evolved’. It specifically denounced ‘imposing of anything on them’.

Due to the emerging notion of territoriality in contested spaces, discourse on indigeneity is often politicised and besieged, and indigenousness is defined in terms of ‘first settler’ while keeping the other key determining factors, such as dispossession and marginality, at bay. The often conflicting narratives on indigeneity and the contestation thereupon led anthropologists in India to suggest that the idea of indigeneity in the sense of ‘indigenous people’ or ‘original settler’ is irrelevant in the ‘strange alchemy’ of India’s historical melting pot. In this sense, they suggest that nobody is ‘indigenous’ (Singh, 1995, p. 30). In this context, all the people of Northeast India also invariably fall within this category. As in other parts of India, all the communities of Northeast India also traced, or at least several studies since the colonial period have shown, that they came from ‘somewhere else’ to their present habitats. While some claimed to have come from the north, from Tibet through the Himalayas, larger number of them claimed to have come from the east, northeast Tibet and southwestern China via Burma. As migration went on the earlier settlers have been further pushed forward so that a particular land which certain community inhabit today have been a site of settlements by a series of moving communities in the past. This undisputable historical fact has never constituted the site of discourse on the question of indigeneity in Northeast India while the idea of the ‘first/original settler’ discourse have been mindlessly employed to stigmatise certain marginal or minority communities within certain states purely to exacerbate the hate campaign looming at large at the altar of new ‘nationalism’.

The discourse on indigeneity in Manipur has generated an intense debate among different ethnic groups of the state recently. The people in the state are mainly divided into three groups –
Meitei, Naga and Kuki. The Meitei occupy the small valley having only about ten percent of the total geographical area of the state and is surrounded by the hills occupied by the Kukis (southern hills) and Nagas (northern hills). Historically, these three communities lived independently and cordially to each other. It was during the British colonialism that the hills are tagged to Manipur state and since then continue to remain with it. With the emerging notion of nationalism in the region, the divisive politics among the three communities also become profound. The new assertion even led smaller communities within these three broader communities claim for a separate identity such as Zomi, Komrem, Zeliangrong and so on. With this new assertion the politics of indigeneity has also become prominent. Indigeneity has become a convenient tool not only to create a self-image of the community but also to create the image of the ‘others’. This leads them to claim that they are the ‘original settlers’ and the others are ‘foreigners’ who occupy their ‘ancestral lands’.

The issue of indigeneity has become quite fashionable in pan-Naga movement and later imbibed by the Manipur integrity movement. In this both the parties fashioned themselves to be the ‘indigenous people’ of Manipur and the minority Kukis have been thoughtlessly projected to be the ‘late settlers’, ‘migrants’ and ‘foreigners’ despite the fact that they have been migrating to Manipur with the Nagas and Meiteis roughly during the same time. To the two parties some recorded Kuki migration who sought the protection of Manipur Maharajah during early colonial period when there was conflict among the Kuki chiefs in the hills was enough case to stigmatise the whole Kuki community as ‘migrants’. Indeed these small refugees were not allowed to settle within Manipur state; they were provided with guns and asked them to remain in the foothills to protect Manipur territory from the attack of Kuki Rajahs. It was by circumstances of the British colonial paramount frontier politics that these people have become the ‘subjects’ of Maharajah when the whole hills was included within the expanded territory of Manipur. This unwarranted politics of indigeneity has become quite profound in public especially during different ethnic conflicts in the state.

The quit notice served to the Kukis by United Naga Council (UNC), Manipur in their meeting on 22 October 1992 brought up the dormant debate on territoriality and ‘politicised indigeneity’ since the early 1960s, which was subsequently responsible for Kuki-Naga conflict of the 1990s. The meeting adopted a resolution setting 1 July 1972 as the basis year for the purpose of determining land ownership for the Kukis in the hill districts of Manipur, and for those settling after 1972 were directed to vacate the land and their settlement by December 1992. It also put another condition that the Kukis may reside in a particular village by giving an undertaking to the supposed original Naga village authorities that ‘they will peacefully and loyally live with the next immediate Naga village by recognising the sole ownership and sovereignty to the Nagas over the land and that they will not invite or allow any new settler in their village’. The Kuki Inpi, Manipur (KIM) in its memorandum to the then Indian Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao blamed the UNC’s quit notice served to the Kukis as the ‘root cause’ of Kuki-Naga conflict and ‘an undisclosed objectives of the Nagas of Manipur… to dispossess Kukis of their land by force and fraud’. The relentless public debate on territoriality and indigeneity continues to be found during the Sadar Hills district demand blockade in the latter part of 2011 and the Kuki State Demand Committee (KSDC) movement in 2012-13.

The extension of ceasefire between Government of India and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland - Isak Chisi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah (NSCN-IM) to Naga-dominated areas outside Nagaland invited stiff opposition from various civil society groups in Imphal valley leading to review of the agreement after 43 days. During the protest movement various public
debates reflect the extent of seriousness of territoriality in the state. In the debates both the Meitei and Naga civil society organisations and insurgent groups claimed themselves to have cognizance of the past. It is manifested in the words of NSCN-IM communiqué where they stated that the ‘Manipur Territorial Integrity’ campaign of the valley based clubs, human rights activists and politicians ‘reflects their ignorance of their own history and political reality of contemporary period’ (The Imphal Free Press, 2001).

Among scholars too, selecting literatures that suits one’s intention and disregarding the others that would have led to different observation is also common. The Cheitharon Kumpapa, the court chronicle of the kings of Manipur, and Puyas, the traditional records of the Meitei people, have accounts of the Kukis since 33 AD. However, even such records can again be contested as it is claimed that the Puya Meithaba (burning of ancient Manipuri scriptures) in 1729, during the reign of Meidingu Pamheiba (1709–1748), totally devastated the ancient Manipuri scriptures and cultural history and the present literatures are merely reconstructions.

A recently formed International Meeteis Forum (IMF) under the leadership of R.K. Rajender intended to, in the words of the forum, ‘launch a signature campaign against the Kuki tribe claiming to be one of the indigenous communities settled in Manipur’ (The Sangai Express, 2013a). Seen together with another effort by the Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur Valley, demanding Scheduled Tribe status for the Meiteis (The Sangai Express, 2013b), there seems to be a clear sense of insecurity and ‘perceived threat’ on the part of the dominant Meitei community because this exercise, in the nutshell, typify the earnestness for restructuring the self-image of Meitei ‘indigeneity’, as the ‘original settler’ of Manipur (hills). At the same time, if they succeed in their assertion for ‘indigeneity’ over the hills it means a lot for them because it follows that the hills of Manipur also belongs to them in the past. In this sense, the Meiteis assertion for ‘indigeneity’ is but an exercise of domination over the hills of Manipur (and its inhabitants?). The ‘perceived threat’ to Meitei community came in the wake of the ongoing ‘peace talks’ between Government of India and the Nagas and the Kukis but instead of lobbying for inclusive politics the Meiteis have chosen for exclusion. This is not only disturbing in the eyes of the hill people who now found that their ancestral lands in the hills were threatened much stronger then ever before but it also now give them more tooth, a much stronger case, to clamour for the disintegration of Manipur then they usually have.

On the question of migration which has become central in the public debate noted above one can only say that the question is charged by the new zeal of nationalism having no real ground at the base for migration is as dynamic as it was before. Just as we have a continuous internal migration within the state there was also migration of people into the state from outside. This also applies to the migration of people of Manipur to other states in India and overseas. Take the case of Meiteis who have migrated to Cachar valley in Assam during the ‘seven years devastation’ (1819-26) who later immigrated back into Manipur, the process of which is still going on. The case of immigration of Bishnupriya Meiteis and Meitei Tripuris into Manipur in recent time is a clear case in point. They were compelled to do so by the circumstances of their position there and the great hope they expected in Manipur (Bimol, 2013). Likewise, there were many Nagas who migrated to Nagaland from Manipur in recent time but by circumstances of their new found land they immigrated into Manipur again. The case of Tangkhul immigration from Dimapur in recent time is a clear case. Likewise, internal migration from one district to another and from rural to urban areas and vice-versa are as vibrant as before. The statistical data from different government organisations, including the decadal census, have clearly shown this dynamic situation. Therefore, the pertinent question is where are we going to put the standard
time line to measure who is ‘migrant’ or ‘immigrant’ in Manipur state? If the question of indigeneity is so serious a matter to be reckoned with there should be a proper standard to measure who are ‘migrants’ in Manipur and who are not? Without setting any proper standard measurement it is pointless to tag someone who lived in their present habitat for centuries as ‘foreigners’ and someone who came few decades before as ‘indigenous’. But the more serious point is any such instrument of standard measurement would seriously question the status of more than half of the population of the state especially to the valley people who have deserted the valley en masse during the Seven Years Devastation. People migrated from one place to another by virtue of their circumstances and expectation for a better livelihood; one must have great sympathy to these circumstances and hope. Any effort to create a standard will simply shut down the system to the ground because there cannot be any standard in strict sense of the term. One thing that is crystal clear to astute observer is that there is no ‘indigenous people’ in Manipur and there is ‘no migrants’ in Manipur because the question does not simply arise as everyone is ‘indigenous’ to the land they inhabit now. This is the natural truth and any effort to overwhelm this natural truth, especially through the emotive instrument of nationalism, is going to bring down everything including peace and governance.

The ball is now in the court of the government to tackle the tangled question that is rolling on a slippery slope. What remains to be done is to pay more attention into the archaeology of perceived threat and misunderstanding among the state’s people. The best politics is to manage carefully and seriously this looming misunderstanding among the people who lived together peacefully for centuries and bring them back to normalcy. The government can harp on inclusive politics. The management of diversity or what has come to be known as multicultural politics is pertinent here (Haokip, 2003, p. 85). In this complex relationship between different ethnic groups, issues like relative deprivation and perceived threats, which exacerbate a sense of antagonism and mistrust among the various communities, need to be addressed with seriousness. Given the deep split within the state population, Manipur government should particularly shoulder the responsibility of managing and balancing the intricate ethnic relationship. It must control the hurling of excessive communal expression which can hurt sentiments and provide ‘dialogic space’ for civil societies to highlight and discuss their concerns and interests and thereby formulate strategies to tackle the differences. The state should also attempt to redress its past wrongs as a part of the effort of various forums on indigenous peoples of the United Nations seeking to address the problems of indigenous peoples.8

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Notes

1 In foreword to the second edition of Verrier Elwin’s book, A Philosophy for NEFA in 1959, Nehru spelt out his “Panch Sheel”. For details of India’s policy towards its northeastern region, see Haokip (2010).
2 For example, Alex Akhup discusses an emergent “Komrem” identity in Manipur; see Akhup (2012).
3 By “politicised indigeneity” I refer to the notion of indigeneity defined in terms of “first settler”.
4 Resolutions passed in the emergency meeting of the Executive Committee of UNC, Manipur on 22 October 1992 with RK Thekho as President and Francis as Secretary.
5 Memorandum submitted to Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao by Kuki Inpi, Manipur on 10 February 1996.
6 A certain Hindu preacher from Sylhet Shantidas Adhikari, popularly known as Shantidas Gosai, converted King Pamheiba of Manipur to Hinduism in 1717 AD. Under the behest of the Hindu preacher,
Pamheiba ordered his men to burn all the Meitei scriptures. A “Puya Meithaba Commemoration Day” was observed on 4 February 2013, jointly organised by International Observation Committee on Puya Mei Thaba (ICOP) and other Meitei civil society organisations at Palace Compound, Imphal. “Puya burning observed solemnly”, The Sangai Express, 5 February 2013, http://www.thesangaiexpress.com/tseitm-23409-puya-burning-observed-solemnly/ viewed on 16 March 2013.

International Meetei Forum also threatened to file Public Interest Litigation (PIL) against Dr. Priyadarshni M. Gangte for allegedly categorising the Kukis as one of the indigenous communities of Manipur in her works. Dr. P.M. Gangte is a Meitei lady who is married to a noted Kuki historian and former Director of Education (U), Manipur (L) Dr. Thangkhotinmang Sielpho Gangte.

There are several international agencies which work for the recognition and problems faced by indigenous peoples, such as the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and International Decade(s) of the World’s Indigenous Peoples.

References


