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Archives of Conflict: Identity, Memory and State Power in Manipur

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Abstract

This paper examines the cultural, political, and economic dimensions of conflict in Manipur through the lenses of Cultural Studies, identity politics, and capitalism. It explores how ethnic rivalry, religious polarization, and xenophobia are historically rooted in colonial legacies, cultural hegemony, and state policies. The study analyses the impact of militarization, AFSPA, and insurgency on everyday life, particularly among the working classes. It further interprets bandhs, blockades, and protest cultures as forms of subaltern resistance. Ultimately, the paper argues that globalization and political engineering threaten indigenous identity, cultural harmony, and socio-economic stability in Manipur.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Ethnic Conflict, Militarization, Xenophobia, Indigenous Rights.

Introduction

Culture, Identity and Capitalism

Cultural identity elaborates on and associates the categories of 'personal' and 'social' identity, as well as the concepts of politics and culture. Capitalism explores the emergence and evolution of the concept of social identity within the political, social, and cultural context of society. Capitalism may generally imply a mechanistic view of the economy, but it also comes in various forms and can mean different things.

Ethnic Rivalry and Religious Polarization

The paper interrogates "ethnic rivalry" as a structural outcome of caste hierarchy and explores its role in producing xenophobic attitudes and practices among the indigenous communities of Manipur. The cultural hegemony created by the rise of Hinduism and Christianity among the people of Manipur, which created a conflict between the two plural (Meitei and Tribal) communities, was mainly due to religious hatred. The study focuses on the impact of capitalism on the socio-economic system, highlighting how ethnic and political divisions between the Meitei and the tribal communities influence these dynamics. This impact led to the suffering of both the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat classes, affecting the people of the hills and the people of the valley.

Historical Roots of Xenophobia and the 'Outsider' Fear

The fear that microscopic minority, like the indigenous population of Manipur, would be over-swarmed by the "outsiders" who come invading Manipur for business purposes, replacing all the work of daily bread earners of the working-class people with their commodified skills and cheap

labour. Due to a loss of respect, in the name of caste, many workers had been replaced by outsiders. There is no outsider control mechanism in Manipur so far, whereas an inner line permit system has been introduced in neighbouring states, such as Nagaland, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh. This fear comes from a long history. Manipur was an independent kingdom before the British arrived in the mid-nineteenth century. There was a regulation on the outsider population as early as 1901. In 1947, when the British left, Manipur had its own constitution, framed in 1948, and its assembly had the same control over the influx of outsider populations. On November 18, 1950, this outsider population control mechanism was summarily lifted by an executive order from the state government. After that, there is a sudden spike in "decadent growth" in the decades that followed.

Religion, Caste and Identity Politics

The concern of people here is that, with the ethnic, cultural and religious divisions between the people of the hills and the valley, there is no proper unity of ideas between the people of the hills and the valley to safeguard the indigenous people. There appears to be a sudden growth in the trust deficit between the people in the hills and the valley. This division originated in the 18th century, driven by religious influences. Bengalis came and brainwashed the king of Manipur and converted the people of the valley into Hindus and in the hills to Christianity. With Hinduism came the concepts of "mangba" (unchaste) and "sengba" (chaste), according to which eating "beef" or "pork" renders one unclean. All this structure came with "Hinduism". Various people in the valley look down upon various ethnic communities that are not

Hindu. This is one of the significant factors that divides the Christian tribes from the Hindu Meiteis. Both are external imports which led to contorts and separate the two. Ethnicity has been the marker of identity politics. From an emotional angle, a political party can attract many people, as every small individual group has its own distinct ideology.

With this conflict between the people of the hills and the valley, political decision-making was paralyzed. If there is any law or any setup introduced for the welfare of the people of the valley, the people of the hills would oppose and vice versa. The form of opposition by these two groups leads to indefinite general strikes, bandhs, economic blockades, and curfews, resulting in the complete rupture of the state's economy. The complete failure of the system in governing the people led to the rise of insurgent groups demanding a separate nation and separate homelands, which is also a hallmark threat to the integrity of the state. In 2010, there were a total of 165 days of bandhs and blockades in the state. The number fluctuates, but bandhs and blockades occur year after year, resulting in substantial economic losses for the state. There is a Bengali proverb that says, "Fish starts rotting from the head". Our political bureaucrats and administrative heads have been highly corrupt.

Militarization, Everyday Life, and the Culture of Fear

The bourgeois, proletariat or working-class people have suffered so much at the hands of the draconian lawmakers. The rich become richer, while the poor become poorer. For instance, with the implementation of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in 1958, it took away our rights to live as democratic citizens in Manipur. According to N Ferrelly, "the image of a battle between modernity and tradition enunciated is part of the standard Indian approach which helps to clarify the government's role. However, the modernity of the Indian Army, the AFSPA and all the rest, stands in stark contrast to local poverty and anarchy." Every day in our lives, guns are pointed at us. With this law, anyone could be shot dead on sight on the mere charge of suspicion without producing a warrant. At any point in time, the police or the army could come and pick up anyone, whether it is 2 A.M or 11 P.M. In the World's largest democracy, this is the "black patch" on our democracy. This is happening even after 69 years of independence. It violates the Indian Constitution Article 21, which says that "No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law." This has a particularly profound impact on the poorer section (proletariat) of society, as the law rarely concerns itself with the upper echelons of society.

Sushil Kumar Sharma, in his book "Ethnic Conflict and Harmonization: A Study of Manipur", marks the identity politics of political engineering ironically in this way: "Manipur is not only suffering from armed movements of innumerable underground organizations but also from a complex ethnic crisis. Being inhabited by different groups of people which can be classified broadly into Meitei, Naga and Kuki, a harmonious existence of the state is being threatened as the interests of one group clash with the other. This has given rise to assertion of group identity; inter group competition for resources, political instability, insecurity and underdevelopment." Including both state and non-state actors, we have more than 60 Indian army battalions and more than 32 insurgent groups. It is a war which is leaving thousands of women without their husbands and sons, caught in the cycle of violence which is not of the making of the working-class people.

Economic Blockades, Protest Culture and Subaltern Resistance:

When any unwanted law is passed that affects the communities of others to some extent, the form of agitation and means of protest often take the form of bandhs and blockades, initiated by civil society and working-class groups. When economic blockades and bandhs begin on either side, there is a complete loss of economic activity in the state. In a single day, the state treasury department loses an estimated Rs 20-30 crore. There is a complete shutdown of all markets, schools, and official buildings due to the strikes, and the public transport system is at a standstill. Out of 365 days a year, we have 100 to 165 days of maximum bandhs, general strikes, curfews and economic blockades. Imagine the condition of a daily bread earner in Manipur. Everything we need in our day-to-day lives is imported from outside the state, primarily by road transport. The protesters will not even let in the vehicles that brought in all the domestic needs. Imagine a litre of petrol costing Rs 250, which you might obtain even after a long queue. A gas cylinder costs Rs 2,500, a packet of salt costs Rs 50, and the hospital is running low on its oxygen supply.

On the other hand, the bourgeoisie are more exploited by the insurgent groups' demands for money to purchase their arms and weaponry. The lethality of armed groups, whether they are state forces or insurgents, falls on the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. Insurgents suck up most of the state funds sanctioned by the union government, political leaders and administrators. No development can be seen in the public sphere as being up to standard in any part of the state, which is again a threat to the middle class, as there is a lack of good infrastructure in the education sector, institutional systems, and hospital facilities. The working class had to suffer much bigger hardships by sending off their hard-earned money after much labour and toil for their kids to study or even to treat their family in a good hospital outside the state.

Conflicts which exist between the insurgent groups and armed forces benefit the arms and drug dealers from across the World. Binalakshmi Nepram, a social activist from the state, prefaced her book "South Asia's fractured frontier: Armed Conflict, Narcotics and Small Arms Proliferation in India's Northeast" states that "A staggering 500,000 people are killed in the World each year by small arms, 90 percent of them women and children. 300,000 dies because of armed conflict in places that include the Northeast India each year. The illegal arms industry with a \$3-6 billion profit, together with illegal narcotics industry with \$200-300 billion profit forms the World's largest illegal trade". In Manipur, we discovered guns infiltrating from 13 countries. The United States of America might never have heard of Manipur, but its M16 and rocket launchers are popular with our insurgents. The question is whose money? To deal with gun dealers across the country and to train their army abroad would cost a considerable amount of money collected from the people of the state. Manipur, being a state of war and a conflict zone, had more than 32 bomb blasts in 2013 and 60 bomb blasts in 2014. Undoubtedly, Manipur is the worst militarised zone in the whole country. There are more than 20,000 widows who have lost their husbands in the hands of the armed forces. Since they lost their husbands, they must work to feed their kids and meet their household needs. Half the answer to the question of why Manipur is an economically backward state becomes clear from these statistics. However, the news never reaches the national media. National media is not national media; it is only where their "OB van" can reach.

Interestingly, the two-month-long economic lockdown in Manipur is not covered by the national media. It sounds more like “the national politics versus gun politics”.

These complete ruptures in the system are a product of deliberate political engineering. Since there is an undercurrent of division between the plural communities in the state, policymakers employ a divide-and-rule policy. For instance, the different tribes in the hills are demanding separate nations, such as Nagalim for the Naga communities, Kukiland for the Kukis, and in the valley, the Meiteis are demanding protection for the indigenous population of Manipur, all of which contradict each other in their ideologies. With these different ideologies, Meiteis and tribals make politically distinct divisions, ignoring the fact that they are on the same boat, whether they sink or sail together. This conflict is a clear apprehension for the extinction of the indigenous population. The geographical structure of Manipur comprises 80% hills and 20% valley. In that 20%, 5% is occupied by Loktak Lake. Pradip Phanjoubam, in his paper published in the Economic and Political Weekly, “The Homeland and the State: The Meiteis and the Nagas in Manipur”, wrote:

“Today, in this insurgency-torn state, the liberation that a section of the population seeks is not the liberation another wants. The politics behind the 68-day economic blockade over the issue of revival of the Autonomous District Councils in the hill districts, which further hardened after the state government refused to allow the Naga nationalist leader, Thuingaleng Muivah, to visit his ‘home’ village located in Manipur revealed the complex and antagonistic nature of ethnic aspirations that seems to make the state destined for conflict.”

The so-called Autonomous District Council has autonomous powers within the state, which means that outsiders, including those from the valley of the same state, cannot buy land in the hill districts. However, the remaining 20% is open to the World. In much the same way, Tripura has only 28% of its indigenous population, with much grief in their hearts, they do not have a say in politics, civil society and cultural dynamics. The same is the case with Sikkim, where the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie have reduced to 17%. The Act East Policy, introduced by policymakers, poses a greater threat to a border state like Manipur, where there is not a single industrial setup or well-extractable resources. Cheap labourers would wipe out the proletariat class or the bourgeoisie, and this again means the loss of 39 different indigenous communities residing in the state, where there is no Inner Line Permit System introduced. When the Trans-Asian Highway comes, one cannot predict the fate of the valley land, which is open to the World. Even one big billionaire could buy off the whole with a hefty amount. The chances of extinction of the indigenous people of Manipur are high, which means a loss of identity and their contribution to the World, for instance, ‘polo’, ‘Manipuri classical dance’, and ‘thang-ta’ (martial art). Policymakers attempted population engineering by weakening the state’s integrity and failing to introduce a ‘reform’ outsider control mechanism.

The people of Manipur are never satisfied with a smaller identity or community in this global World. They are not saying “no” to the outsiders, but feel there should be a regulation to safeguard the indigenous people. Moreover, it opens the door to significantly strengthening the economy.

Conclusion

At no point will it be a rare phenomenon that a writer, critic, or artist would be out of their narrow psychosis and explore

more about romance or about the natural beauties. Why is there no nature poet like William Wordsworth born in this natural heaven? There is no agenda to write, but the cries of starving children go unheard. The ‘Vanishing forever’ of one’s identity is what people fear. Do people in other states of India wonder the same thing? People only vote to choose their leaders, but not to be led astray from the solution by policymakers. People’s protests are intended to make policymakers aware of their concerns. One cannot bring back the cultural harmony that is already extinct. Intellectuals in the state who are true believers in the policymakers have a voice to stop breaking if they do not know how to fix it. Here, policymakers are the delegates of the people holding the faith and future of the nationwide youth.

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