

Manipur Crises – towards a just and peaceful solution

1. Labouring people all over the country need to be aware of the developments in Manipur state and its long term implications for the movements of the working people. As was to be expected the ruling classes led by the BJP are fomenting fratricidal warfare in which they actively support or constitute the leadership of both sides. The result is a process of fascist inspired ethnic cleansing accompanied by arson, rape, killing of ordinary working men and women, by infuriated mobs led by armed ‘militants’. This is a part of the pattern of neo liberal economic and political policies which incite anarchic identity based politics in place of organised national or class interest based struggles.

2. The genuine problems faced by the people of Manipur, both the majority Meiteis and the minority tribal people like the Kukis or Nagas need to be understood historically. The majority community faces severe problems arising from being confined to a geographically very limited space; the lopsided concentration of ‘development’ i.e. of services (not employment opportunities) in the valley resulting in the in-migration of tribal people from the hills and beyond the national borders; legal restrictions on acquisition of tribal land in the hills by the non-tribal communities; sustained spread of drug addiction, based on opium produced in the hills but peddled by drug mafia of all communities and so on. The result is severe restriction of opportunities for mobility, employment, and a perceived threat to the language, culture and traditions of the majority community, and concern over the degeneration of unemployed and drug addicted youth. The already stressed land situation has been aggravated by the acquisition of land by the state for the so called ‘development projects’ leading to eviction of people engaged in traditional land use.

3. The Kukis and other tribal people inhabiting the hilly regions face an apparently different set of problems but which are in actual fact generated by the same processes of lopsided ‘development’ which seeks to impose a regime of ‘zero employment development’ while simultaneously depriving the people of their traditional livelihoods and reducing them to the status of ‘informal’ workers in the so called ‘unorganised sectors’. Indian Kukis are a part of a larger tribal ethnic group inhabiting the border regions between India, Myanmar and other neighbouring countries and historically there has been a movement of population

across the porous borders. Declaring some of them as ‘foreigners’ or ‘infiltrators’ and subjecting them to harassment and criminalisation has been a long standing problem not just of the Kukis but also of a large number of such people who live astride international borders. Living in hilly areas with difficult access, they have been deprived of modern services like tertiary education, advanced medical facilities, roads, electricity and other civic amenities. As noted above most of these have been concentrated in the plains, which effectively means that those who want to avail of them have to move to there. Since there has been no planned development of sustainable productive potential of the hills, the hills people have been left to their own resources to augment their incomes. In a large number of cases this has taken the form of deforestation, poppy cultivation for drug lords, trans-border arms smuggling to feed militant outfits, with the connivance of armed forces on both sides. The Kukis are mostly Christian and they have accessed English education and also the public employment made possible by reservation for tribal people. This may have had symbolic value but given the very limited public employment, this does not mean much in real terms. In recent years the Indian state and the state government have constantly been encroaching upon tribal lands on one pretext or the other. The latest set of provocation has been in the form of declaring large tracts of hill lands as reserve forests and national parks and bringing them under the control of the state. Similarly the action of the state to ‘identify’ foreign settlers and oust them. Another provocation has been in the form of declaring parts of the tribal lands as being sacred to the Meiteis and claiming control over them.

4. The Meiteis look upon the hill regions as potential areas for their expansion and residence and seek removal of legal constraints to their acquisition of land there and also access to privileged employment and education which the legal ‘tribal’ status will give them. Understandably this has alarmed the Kukis and other tribal people who stand to lose both their land and also public employment. Further the assumption of control of forest lands by the state which is seen to be controlled by the Meiteis is also a source of anxiety. On the other hand the Meiteis feel a sense of alienation and frustration within their own state, and look at the Kukis as potential threat to their culture and religion and also a conduit for illegal immigration of ‘foreigners’ and drug and arms peddlers. These perceptions have

been fanned on both sides to create fear psychosis and mutual distrust and animosity.

5. The BJP came to power in the state by independent negotiations with the Meitei and Kuki leadership playing upon their anxieties and demands and promising both of them support in their fight with the other. The armed forces like the Assam Rifles and the Manipur Police have also been playing partisan role overtly supporting one against the other.

6. Ours is not to enter the blame game of who started it all or which party has suffered more or which side has been more brutal or violent. Suffice it to say that the state institutions including courts of law have played an active role in fomenting the crises and pushing people into this fratricidal confrontation.

7. Labouring people need to approach such situations keeping in mind three basic principles:

i. Right to Self-determination of peoples : We need to recognise that the state of Manipur which inherited the history of the kingdom of Manipur is a composite state which brought together diverse people with some guarantees to the hill-tribal people. Violation of those guarantees will only help to break the political compact and lead to fragmentation. When one community forces others to forgo their guarantees, the other community can seek to go on its own. Such guarantees which become historically obsolete may be eased out through mutually respectful dialogue.

ii. Planned development of productive forces and employment which enable people to improve their economic and cultural life in an equitable and sustainable manner.

iii. Spirit of internationalism and fraternity of labouring people and abjuring violence in settling mutual differences.

8. Labouring people also need to keep in mind a historical truth that regions and societies which take the path of rapid development and economic transformation, especially the path of capitalist development need to be prepared for in-migration of people with capital, skills, knowhow and distressed people who come to sell cheap labour for basic livelihood needs. Historically societies and

regions that have undergone such transformation have sites of intermingling of diverse peoples and cultures and they cannot have both 'development' and ethnic purity. This historically inevitable process would certainly give rise to tensions but need to be resolved with insight and compassion.

9. Whenever labouring people are made to target each other, it is imperative that class conscious leadership should identify the class interests that it serves and persuade the mass of the people from desisting from violence against fellow working people and instead turn their wrath against those who seek to divide and exploit them.

10. It is important for all democratic organisations, trade unions and democratic cultural organisations to send peace keepers to such trouble torn areas and conduct democratic political propaganda and also actively prevent violence against common people.

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Revolutionary Democracy.