

Manipur violence: Why the protest and what are the demands

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By Binalakshmi Nepram



A mob sets ablaze the residences of a Manipur minister and two other legislators in Imphal on August 31, to protest against the passage of allegedly “anti-tribal” bills in the 60-member assembly. (Source: PTI)

“The nation is an imagined political community” – Benedict Anderson

Manipur, literally translated, “Land of Jewels” is a former Asiatic kingdom with a 3,000-year-old recorded history, which became a part of India in 1949. Nestled in northeast region of country at the border with Myanmar, the state is home to 2.8 million people belonging to myriad ethnic groups and communities. The state is also, unfortunately, one of the worst conflict-affected states in the entire country and South Asian region. Currently, over 100,000 troops of the Indian armed forces armed with martial law called Armed Forces Special Powers Act operate here. The reason, authorities say, is to combat 60 armed ethnic groups in the state. Twenty thousand people have been reportedly killed in the 60-year-old conflict out of which almost 1,500 have been found to be of extra-judicial killings as per the Supreme Court.

Summer of Revolt – July 2015

Of late, the state of Manipur has been facing one of the longest lock-downs a state in India has ever seen. Starting 8 July, 2015 after the death of a 16-year-old student Sapam Robinhood at a protest rally, the whole

state has been under government curfew and lock-down, resulting in complete paralysis of the state. The state, as I write today, faces its 55th day of lock-down since 8 July. I shudder at the happenings, as children cannot go to school, roads and transportation, offices, market places are shut down. Thousands of people in the state are marching in the streets in protest, asking the government to adhere to their demands.

Demands of the Manipur people

The mass movement for protection of indigenous people's rights in Manipur commenced around 2011 after census of Manipur showed the population of Non-Manipuris in the state had grown at an alarming rate. In fact, in a memorandum submitted to Chief Minister of Manipur by a group of civil society leaders on 8 August 2015, it was stated that migrant population in Manipur shot up to 400 per cent from 1948 till 2011. And overall, the population of Manipur increased 4.6 times in sixty years. Manipur's population was 5 lakh in 1950 and according to 2011 census its 28 lakh now.

Worried over the tremendous increase in the population of non-Manipuris, many civil society organisations came out and resorted to non-violent agitations.

The people of Manipur have seen over the years how the indigenous population in states of Tripura where indigenous population is only 30% now, Sikkim and Assam and many others became inundated by non-indigenous population and hence the movement rose in an attempt to ensure this does not happen. In the words of Tseten T.Bhuta, Sikkim,

"We are becoming refugees in our own land, but we can't raise our voice. If we do, we are termed anti-national and communal. But we shall certainly overcome against all the odds."

Many in country did raise the issue that India is a free country and citizens can live, work and settle in any part of country. People of Manipur do also agree to this. However, what they are asking is that like in Himachal Pradesh, [Kashmir](#), Nagaland, Meghalaya, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh only local people should be allowed to own land.

Why The Call To Protect Ancestral Lands: The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms (Seventh Amendment) Bill 2015

The reason behind this may be accrued from how the recently passed bill titled "The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms (Seventh Amendment) Bill 2015" states:

"Whereas 10 per cent of the geographical area of the state of Manipur is Valley area and the remaining 90 per cent is hill; Whereas 60 per cent of the population of the State reside in the Valley areas and the population density in Valley areas is 730 while in hill areas it is 61 as per 2011 census, and whereas there is tremendous pressure in the limited valley areas, with the increase in population in the immediate future...it is therefore considered necessary to regulate the sale of land to Non-Manipur

persons of the state so that the limited available land in the valley area are available to all the permanent residents of the states in the interest of general public”.

Minister Th. Debendra while giving the statement of objects and reasons at the time of passing the bill on 31 August 2015 had stated :

“The population of Manipur has reached 28.58 lakh as per 2011 Census. The population density of the 4 (four) Valley Districts has reached 730 while in the 5 (five) Hill Districts where is restriction of purchase of land by non-Scheduled tribe is 61. Hence, there is tremendous pressure on land especially in the 4 (four) Valley Districts of Manipur. There has been apprehension among the general public of Manipur that without regulation on sale of land in the very near future many families in the state may not have a roof over their heads. Hence, there is an urgent need to regulate the sale of land to non-Manipur persons. Hence the Bill”

Rumour spread soon after the passing of the bill saying the bill is to “snatch away tribal lands” and violence broke out in Churachandpur District of Manipur where houses of the members of legislative assembly and parliamentarians were burnt and eight people died in the violence that ensued. Manipur government had categorically clarified that this was not the case. In a statement issued on 1 September 2015 at after an emergency Cabinet Meeting had stated:

“3(Three) Bills do not infringe on the existing rights of tribal communities in Manipur. The present amendment of Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act which was passed in the Assembly does not extend to Hill Areas and in no way it will affect or alter the present status of tribal land...”

The Protection of Manipur People’s Bill, 2015

The Protection of Manipur People’s Bill was passed on 31 August 2015. Introducing the bill, Manipur’s Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh had stated,

“Manipur is one of the small hill states in the Northeastern region of India. Manipur has a geographical area of 22,327 sq km which constitute 0.7 % of the total land surface of India. 90% of the total geographical area of the state 20,089 sq km is covered by the hills and the remaining area is a small valley covering only 2,238 sq km. According to 2011 Census, the population of Manipur as per 2011 Census was 128 per sq km as against 103 per sq km in 2001 census. The population growth rate of Manipur is found to be higher than that of India.

Before the merger of Manipur to India on 15 October 1949, the entry into Manipur was regulated by imposition of a permit system. The permit system was abolished with effect from 18 November 1950 by a notification issued by the then Chief Commissioner of Manipur. Since then there is no restriction on the entry by the citizens of India. The increase in the population has caused panic in the minds of people of Manipur...It has become therefore expedient to enact a law to maintain tranquility and public order in the interest of general public...”

The passing of the above bills were questioned by some section of the population in Manipur with regard to the 1951 cut off date of defining who is a “Manipur People”. Questions were also raised regarding the bills not been debated and consulted widely with all cross section of people of Manipur and communities living there and many felt that it was a move against “outsiders” by Manipur people.

Indian Constitution and the Protection of People of Manipur

Many term the protests in Manipur as being against outsiders. However, in a memorandum submitted by the Joint Committee on Inner Line Permit that spear-headed the protests, it was argued that the Constitution of India in Article 19 protects certain fundamental freedoms. In the same article in clause (1)(d) it specifically protects the rights of citizens to move freely throughout the territory of India. Also Article 19(1)(e) protects the right to reside and settle freely in any territory of India. However article 19(5) states :

Nothing in sub clauses (d) and (e) of the said clause shall affect the operation of any existing law in so far as it imposes, or prevent the State from making any law imposing, reasonable restrictions on the exercise of the rights conferred by the said sub-clauses either in the interest of general public or the protection of the interests of any Scheduled Tribe

Manipur was once called by an author as “Flower on Lofty Heights”, described beautifully in one of legendary theatre personality Ratan Thiyam as “Nine Hills One Valley”. The place is beautiful, lush green valley surrounded by a low lying mountains and is truly a unique place that deserves to be protected, cherished and nurtured. The mass movements that happened in past two months had its origin in 1980s where the movement for protection of Manipur people had first started. I was very little then and I remember vividly my maternal grandfather participating in meetings that were aimed to help protect our lives, our lands, our culture and our history.

At the time of completing this article protests continue unabated. It’s time the government calls for an immediate dialogue of all concerned communities in the state, look into their concerns, and a solution be arrived at so that all fears are allayed and protection of all communities in Manipur is ensured. Peace is a collective process, a journey that must be taken together.

The author is founder of Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network/Control Arms Foundation of India and is convenor of Northeast India Women Initiative for Peace. She tweets at @BinaNepam.