

The Real, Fundamental and Principal Cause behind the Ethnic-Conflict of Violence and Conflagration in Manipur

In Manipur one of the north-eastern states of India, a state consisting of multi-ethnic population, since May 3, communal riots have been raging unabated unleashing, unprecedented human displacement, loss of lives and destruction of property. Houses, churches, temples etc. are vandalized besides arson across five districts. Central and state governments are unable to bring out any peace in the state with their actions. This ethnic conflict spurted in to violence is perceived to be the consequence of a long-standing hill-valley identity divide in the state, which is avoidable if the governments have provided a proper governance by focusing in the accommodation of the identity of various tribes and their culture and adopted the policies that could bring out unity and amity among the population of different tribes and ethnicity.

In 1949 Manipur had merged in the Indian union. From that time onwards even the independent rulers of India have been ruling the population of Manipur with the very same policies of colonial rulers and the mindset of the colonial rulers. Instead of providing a governance of fulfilling the aspirations and well-being of the people of various tribes inhabiting in the state by promoting their cultural identities in bringing about unity among them, any difference arisen between the tribes has been treated as an issue and problem of maintenance of law and order and suppressed with ferocious state oppression. Added to this, the tactics adopted by the rulers of political parties for catching the votes based on tribal identities and religious and caste identities of the people too had caused a divide among the people of Manipur.

The topography of Manipur too had played a great deal for the divide of people based on the identity of hill or valley inhabitation. While there is 10% landmass in Manipur, 90% are hills. Out of the 20,85,000 population of Manipur, 60% live in the land mass area of Imphal at the centre of the state and the remaining 40% of the population inhabit in the surrounding hills.

About 60% Manipur's population that live in Imphal valley and other valley belong to non-tribal Meiteis and the 40% population living in hills are tribals of around 33 tribes comprising of Naga and Kuki-Zomi clans.

While more than 83% of the Meitei people are associated with Hinduism, more than 90% of Kuki-Zomi people are Christians. Hinduism penetrated in to Manipur in the late 15th century, but large scale adaption of Hindu religion is attributed to the influence of Vaishnav monks. Caste entered Manipur VIA Hinduism broadly dividing Meitei community into 3 castes- the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the scheduled castes. This division of population into Hindus

and Christians too played a considerable part in the community and ethnic divide on the basis of religions in recent times particularly after BJP entered into central and state rule with its policies of religious hatred against others of Hinduism.

Successive governments have not focused on even development in the state and caused uneven development between land-mass (urban) and hill areas. As a result of this the better educated urban dwellers of Imphal valley comprising mainly Hindus – the Meiteis – have better access to good quality drinking water, clean cooking fuel, education and hospitals. They dominate public sector jobs, a higher share of jobs in the industries which provide better employment opportunities. Whereas the relatively less educated tribal people that live in hilly regions which are covered mostly by forests have relatively poor access to basic facilities. The tribal hill population is poorly represented in public sector jobs. Very few of the tribals work in industries and do not earn a sufficient income. They are mainly dependent on hills and forests for their livelihoods. Even in the Manipur state assembly while the Meiteis who live in the landmass area of Imphal valley and Jiribam valley of 5 districts who enjoy a demographic and political advantage send 40 MLAs to the 60 member assembly; the tribal people living in hill areas of 10 districts send only 20 MLAs. The Meiteis are more advanced in all spheres. Meiteis are the vocal section, as is the case even in the other states of India, where the people from plains encroach upon the land and lives of the less educated and of different culture and customs from those of majority Hindu community, which maintains and imposes its so-called cultural and intellectual superiority over the tribal clans and community. These circumstances have exacerbated the differences in conflict between these communities, which have been brewing for the past 3 decades, often leading to clashes between the Meitei and Kuki communities leading to violence and vandalism.

Successive governments have not attempted to diffuse the tensions and smooth-out the differences and antagonism between the communities but instead treated them as law and order problems and dealt accordingly.

The BJP government of Manipur state under the Chief Minister, N.Biren Singh instead of genuinely recognizing and accommodating substantively the territorial rights and identities of tribals, has adopted aggressive and majoritarian project undermining the tribal rights and identities under Article 371C of Constitution where 'scheduled matters' on the hill areas are made invisible by brute legislative majority. The Meiteis with the support of BJP government have succeeded partially in their attempt to dissolve land rights of tribals in the valley areas which is a major reason to set for the present day conflagrations.

On the other hand the judiciary system and judiciary have considered and adjudged the conflicts and the claims of the communities, based on the legalistic merits according to the colonial laws entrenched in our judicial system but not basing on reality of the day, circumstances and prevailing conditions.

There is one more thing to be said here. After evicting tribals from the forests in the name of protected forests, reserve forests and wildlife sanctuaries, they are handed over to

private institutions/trusts in the name of community reserves/forests in the name of conservation. More than 200 of the 220 community reserves/forests in the country are in the north-eastern states. Nearly 75 per cent of Manipur's forests are managed by these communities. Most of the community reserves are held by the Wildlife Trust of India, a partner in the UK's World Land Trust. The World Land Trust is the reason for the eviction of tribals and indigenous peoples from the forests by encroaching of forests in many countries of the world in the name of conservation of forests and wildlife. The Wildlife Trust of India and the intellectuals who fall in with the trust have filed a case that led to the Supreme Court's 2019 verdict to evict tribals from the forests.

The BJP government in Manipur has violently evicted tribals in the name of protecting protected forests, reserve forests and wildlife sanctuaries. A total of 35,000 tribals were forcibly evacuated. Demonstrations have been held across the state in a phased manner for some time now to protest against this forcible move. The discontent intensified when the chief minister himself declared that those who took part in the protests were encroachers, drug smugglers, poppy cultivators and illegal immigrants.

In the name of "war against drugs" the state government, attacked tribals instead of arresting and punishing the real culprits – the international drug cartels and the big investors from the valley who are the king-pins of drug trade. Churches that have been in existence for more than five decades were demolished in the name of illegal constructions, just days before Eastern Day, when Christians offer holy prayers in April in the area where clashes are taking place. As a result of this series of actions, the discontent and anger among the tribals, which was like an ember, was ignited into conflagration by the court's verdict.

The order of the High Court to concede a demand of ST status of the Meiteis the majority, has been the last straw that flared up the conflict into violence and conflagration of the present day i.e., on May 4 the rag-tag mobs in Imphal and valley areas have completely targeted and erased the land titles that the tribals held for centuries in the valley and accomplished it, clearly denotes the fundamental and principal cause of these conflagrations: (i.e.) the inviolable rights of tribals and the question of land ownership.

The very question of M.Manihar Singh Kongpal a Meitei leader in Imphal that "we are not allowed to buy land in the hills and settle there. How is it fair" speaks volumes about the actual and real reason behind this conflagration. By hook or crook the people of majority community – the Meiteis – intend to nullify the constitutional land rights of tribals, people living in the hills and deny them the right to purchase land in landmass valley areas of Manipur with the willing support of BJP rulers. Vested interests in collusion with the BJP state government intend to grab and buy the wealthy and resource rich hills and lands of tribals displacing the tribals from their natural habitats and lands under their ownership as has been happening throughout the world in the name of neo-liberal economic policies – the imperialism of the day.

Thus the question of land ownership of tribals is the actual cause behind the present day ethnic conflict and conflagration. Unless this problem is solved, in favour of protecting the constitutional rights and land ownership rights of tribals, such conflicts will raise and continue even leading to the armed struggles of the tribals, as has been happening elsewhere in India as well as in some of the African Countries!

The BJP and its state and central governments are fully responsible in flaring up this conflagration in Manipur, who adopted an anti-tribal and majoritarian project and agenda against the rights of the hill tribal people of Manipur.