

Developing Manipur as the Gateway to East Asia

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Last August, we had an opportunity to visit our dream city of Imphal, which eluded us so long, thanks to the Manipur Public Service Commission (MPSC), though Imphal is just half an hour's flight from Lokapriya Gopinath Bardoloi International (LGB) Airport, Guwahati. Incidentally, the MPSC requested for my participation in a Selection Committee, as an Adviser, which I consented to. Accompanied by my wife Rita, we travelled in Kingfisher Airlines Flt. IT 0357, which took off from Guwahati two hours late about 15.30 hr., as against the scheduled departure time of 13.30 hr. By 4p.m., just after 30 minutes, we landed at Tulihal Airport, Imphal. From the sky, the city looked magnificent, with lush greenery, water bodies, blue hills surrounding the valley, with numerous CGI sheet roofed, traditional Assam -type houses. The drive to Imphal Hotel of the State Tourism Department, in the heart of the city, took us about 20 minutes only, which was really very short, compared to the usual one of one and half hours' drive from LGB airport to Guwahati city, mainly due to traffic congestion. The beautiful avenue plantation from the Tulihal airport to the city immediately captured our attention, giving a soothing feel to the eyes. While the hotel didn't look impressive, except for the many coloured flags fluttering in the front, which could be due to the refurbishment work going on, accommodation was modest, representing the usual standard of State-run guest houses elsewhere.

We were really thrilled to reach Imphal, as the Nature's bounties were simply captivating and we had high expectations to visit some very well known places and sites of tourists' attraction of Manipur, in near-about places. While Manipur is known during recent times, as the most insurgency- affected state in the northeastern region of India, it is also one of the most fascinating regions of the country, known for its rich history, cultural heritage, spiritualism, handicrafts and handlooms, patriotism, multi- ethnic harmonious living, rich and varied flora and fauna, with pristine beauty of nature in plenty.

Manipur is a small State, comprised of nine administrative Districts, spread over an area of 22,327 sq. km, with a population of 27.22 lakh (2011 Census). Manipur valley is oval- shaped, surrounded by hills on all sides, which occupy nearly 90 percent of the total area. Unlike several other states of the region and the country, the forest

coverage of Manipur is one of the highest, with 77.12 percent of the state's geographical area, and that itself is an indicator of how the people of the state are fondly nourishing the forests, not allowing rampant felling of trees, as in Assam and some other bordering States. While Manipur does not have any major or medium industry worth the name, it is very famous for traditionally rich handloom and handicrafts in the cottage and small sector, with more than 33 communities having their different exquisite designs of handloom fabrics. Every woman of Manipur has the reputation of a born weaver, as in the case of not too distant Assam, when, as Gandhiji said, every Assamese woman could weave golden dreams in her loom.

The Manipur valley is well-known for the Vaisnavite culture among the Meities and other Hindu communities, and a district by the name of Bishnupur is the seat of Vaisnavism. Incidentally, the colourful Manipuri inhabitants of Barak valley in Assam, known as Bishnupuria Manipurias, had their origins from Bishnupur. Apart from Ras Lila depicting the Lilas (sports) of Lord Krishna as a child with Gopies (milkmaids) of Brindaban, other important festivals of the state are- Lai –Haraoba, a spring festival, Lui-Ngai- Ni (seed sowing festival of Manipuri Nagas) and KUT (the largest festival of Kukichin Mizo communities).

We had a view of the conical temple of Lord Visnu, at Bishnupur, Netaji Memorial at Moirang, Netaji Museum (from outside only, as it was closed when we visited), the famous Loktak Lake- the largest lake in the northeastern region and also a fishermen's paradise providing livelihood for thousands, also one-time centre of militants' hideouts on the thick and dense willows grown there. One of the best vantage points to have a panoramic view of the huge lake is a guest house of the state tourism department, but under occupation of the Assam Rifles, and as such out of bounds for outsiders / tourists. Manipur Government would do well to take it over and develop it, with ancillary facilities like public toilets, refreshment centre, photography etc. An extension of the lake on its south-western part, which has formed part of the Kibul Lamjao National Park- the only floating park in the world, known to be the natural habitat of the near- extinct 'marsh- friendly Sangai deer (only dancing deer), we could visit, though we weren't fortunate enough to spot a Sangai. We also visited the Loktak Hydro-electric Power Station of NHPC which is one of the oldest hydro- power stations in the country, with a long, chequered history of construction, with a total capacity of 105 MW (35 MW x 3). One operator who hailed from Silchar had shown us around and explained the operation process very confidently. The road to the power station (about 11 miles), was a zigzag, narrow one and needed improvement for a comfortable ride. One could get fantastic views of the Lake while climbing up the hills to reach the station, as also returning there from. The entire area has the potential to be a tourists' hot- spot.

At Imphal itself, a number of places of general importance that we could visit, are- the famous Ima (Mothers') Market in two huge structures, built up on two sides of a

road, Kangla (Fort)- the centre of Manipur's power till 1891, Shree shree Govindaji Temple; Bir Tikendrajit Park, the Swahid Minar, War Cemetery, Khonghampat Orchidarium, Zoological Garden, State Museum etc. Ima Market is hundred percent womens' market, with 3000 of them running stalls selling groceries, vegetables, fish, fruits and other household items under one shed, and exquisite handloom fabrics, other textile items, household tools etc. in the other. In other parts of Manipur also one could find the women- folk doing brisk business by running different stalls. Perhaps, the women of Manipur are the most dynamic, courageous and well organized in India, empowering themselves in a male- dominated world. Well, it's their dynamism, will power, determination and commitment against all odds, that, they could produce our Nation's pride- Mary Com, who is now the only international celebrity from the Northeast.

While main roads in Imphal city are very wide, perhaps widest in the entire region, the internal link roads, lanes and by-lanes are in poor health and need quick look from the establishment. Similarly, for becoming the gateway to the East and also to India, Imphal city and towns, suburban areas, road- side villages along the three National Highways, need to develop Star category as well as Budget hotels, rest houses, standard restaurants, dhabas, eateries, public toilets / wash rooms etc. Incidentally, on the way to Moirang, Loktak, even Moreh- the famous border town- real gateway to the East via Tamu in Myanmar (a distance of 110 k.m from Imphal along NH-39, renamed as NH-2), no such resting place or facility was available. The NH was very poorly maintained; mind it this small distance took more than 3 hours of drive to reach Moreh. Moreh is in Chandel district, and one has to pass from Imphal through Thoubal district and then enter Chandel. Thoubal town has nicely designed market complexes by the road side, reportedly done by present Chief Minister Ibobi Singh, who represents Thoubal assembly constituency. Extortions from groups like NSCN (IM), NSCN (K), UKNLF and many splinter & small sub- groups of these militant outfits, are reported to be normal daily features in these areas along the Highway.

Moreh is a small border town, very congested without good internal roads, even the highway not maintained, with very poor infrastructure like Customs post, immigration post, security check post, police / transport post etc. On the other hand, beyond the Indo- Myanmar Friendship Bridge, when we entered Tamu town, we found that side very well organized, absolutely neat and clean, and a long straight road for 3-4 k.m planted with trees on both sides- really eye- catching to any visitor. Manipur Government and the Government of India, much talking about the Look East Policy must Act Now, Act Fast to remove all these bottlenecks.

Finally, it would be absolutely necessary to normalize the law and order and security scenario in Manipur, as no tourists or visitors in good number, would like to see the capital town sleeping at 8 p.m., with all markets and road- side shops drawing the shutters, and hardly any vehicles moving on the road. Then, even at hotels or

otherwise, no tourist or visitor could even have a small drink to relax, as Manipur is supposed to be a dry area, though people say, for the influential ones, liquor is not a problem. It is believed, that, one reason for drugs- addiction of Manipur youth, has been this short- sighted Prohibition Policy, which has also cost the exchequer dearly, through smuggling and increased corruption among 'concerned' public servants. Once the aberrations are removed, this 'jeweled land' of India could certainly become little 'Shangrila' to attract visitors from the East and the West.
