

Manipur A Ticking Time Bomb

Manipur's tragic and sustained downward spiral continues, reinforced by the collapse of the State Government, and the Centre's lethargy in evolving an effective strategy for recovery. A kleptocracy reigns across Manipur, both through the State Government and through the exaction of the militants. Despite the continuous "successes" of continuing military operations, the State has not been able to provide the minimal safety and security to life and property of its people in the State. A significant proportion of all Government funds finds its way into militant coffers. General perception is that Manipur is in a state of near-anarchy as the cumulative impact of the activities by the various militant groups coupled with the ineffectual administration of the State Government has been a total breakdown in the law and order and the administrative machinery of the State. For the common people there is no relief in sight.

Who is Safe?

The militants have carried out attacks on the residences of prominent politicians, administrative personnel as well as on common civilians. Glaring incidents of such attacks during the current year 2008 are: -

- Jan 1: Grenade lobbed at the residence of the Independent MLA S.Kunjakeshore at Tera Imphal West. The grenade fails to explode.
- Feb 24: Grenade explodes at the residence of congress legislator Hemochandra Singh at Singjamei in Imphal West.
- Mar 8: People Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) triggers a blast at State Assembly Complex.
- Mar 9: A grenade explodes at the residence of legislator Bijoy Koijam at Thongju Feija Leitong Imphal West.
- Apr 24: A powerful bomb strapped to a scooter goes off in Imphal's VIP (MLA) Colony, its shrapnel flung 100 meters away into the Chief Minister's official bungalow complex.
- Aug 12: Four grenades, thrown one after the other, at the ancestral home of State agriculture minister Loken Singh in Bishnupur District, the second attack in three months.
- Aug 28: Lethal bomb fired at the private residence of Food & Civil Supplies minister Y.Irabot Singh. The Bomb fails to explode. A month earlier, militants explode a hand grenade at his house in Khurai, Imphal East.
- Sept 1: Bomb attack at the official residence of the Chief Minister. Bomb explodes in an open area in the north western corner of the office-bungalow complex in close proximity of the conference hall.
- Oct 5: Grenade lobbed at the residence of the legislator Thangjam Nandakishore at Kshetrigao, Imphal East.
- Oct 19: Grenade explodes 50 yards from the Chief Minister's office cum residence gate on the main road.

What is most disturbing is that the Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh who is also the Home Minister and who is responsible for the safety and security of his cabinet colleagues, government officials as also the people at large is under attack in his own

fortified bungalow cum office complex. With this apparent inability to ensure his own personal security, how is he to be expected to protect the lives of the common masses. If the Chief Minister is so vulnerable, what would then be the plight of common people who have to fend for themselves?

Militancy

All the nine districts (four in the valley & five in the hills) have been affected by the unending militant violence, severely impacting on the very limited local capacities for governance, justice administration, and the provision of minimal security to its people. On November 22, 2007, the Manipur Cabinet approved the extension of the “disturbed area” status of the state (less greater Imphal area) for another year (from December 1, 2007 to November 30, 2008), thus retaining the Armed Forces Special Power Act. About 15 major militant groups operate in the State, some claiming to represent the State’s majority Meitei Community, principally dominating the Imphal Valley while others professing to speak for the Naga, Kuki and other tribal communities, dominate the Hill areas.

The erstwhile insurgency movement with the lofty ideal of an independent and sovereign Manipur has apparently degenerated to a new kind of militancy with no-holds-barred and without consideration of the suffering of the people whose support is a must for a successful revolution. Witness the recent bomb blast at Ragailong gate, Imphal on October 21, 2008 in which 18 innocent people were killed and more than 30 people were maimed or injured for having joined pre-Diwali frolicking crowd enjoying a dice game. There is no rationale for such a heinous act except to terrorise people and show that the perpetrators of such terrorism can strike at will at any place at any time.

The irony is that the insurgents have switched their modus operandi to tactics of terrorism by targeting those innocent people of the State whose cause they profess to champion. The level of sympathy, if not support, they commanded from their ethnic component of Manipur’s civil population is denuding by the day. People who suffered in silence accepting their plight as fait accompli have become vociferous. Inspector General Assam Rifles (South), Major General AK Choudhury, during a press conference at Imphal on October 24, 2008, said “People in general have come out in open against their (militant’s) subversive activities.” None of the militant groups in the State appears to be fighting to win in terms of any of their political objectives, the management of the networks of extortion has become an end in itself.

State remains mired in poverty and backwardness with avenues of employment chronically stagnant in virtually every sector, with the exception of militancy itself, which has emerged as the only money minting industry, the “largest employer” in the State, after the Government.

Extortion, the biggest business in Manipur

“No taxes, underground or overground, are paid voluntarily by any tax payer (or an overwhelming number of tax payers to be fair), and these are extracted by the taxing authorities through overt or covert coercion..... Insurgency predicates extortion”, commented the Imphal Free Press, a local daily, editorial (February 14, 2008) on the Government’s moves against the people paying extortion to the militants. Extortion, referred to as taxes, percentage cuts and donation, is different from bribery and a sting

operation is unthinkable. Nevertheless it is common knowledge in Manipur that large proportions of the State's resources are both directly and indirectly siphoned out by the militant's extortion campaigns. Over the years Government Departments in Manipur have regularly paid out a fixed percentage of their revenues to various militant groups. Further, the militants also directly interfere in the award of Government contracts and execution of developmental projects, which essentially are reduced to largesse that they come to control, rather than projects to be executed on the ground.

"Even during war, hospitals are not targeted. But here in Manipur, several militant groups are trying to loot the hospital and people in the name of sovereignty. It is very unfortunate", the Chief Minister of Manipur lamented in the State Assembly on June 24, 2005. This came as a reaction to the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences, Imphal, the only medical institute in the State, was yet again served an extortion demand of INR 1.5 million to its management by a militant outfit on June 14, 2005. This was preceded by the abduction of Dr. Yumnam Nandabir Singh, a senior doctor, by the militants on a ransom demand for INR 3 million on May 9, 2005.

On September 27, 2008, despite public outcries, protest demonstration as well as appeal from different sections of the society to respect sanctity of educational institutions, the Kangleipak Medical, Para-Medical and Nursing Institute, Imphal came under bomb attack for the third time. Bomb attacks were previously carried out on September 19 & 26 on the institute by the proscribed KCP (Kangleipak Communist Party) following monetary demand of Rs. 10 Lakhs served against the institute. Police reportedly registered a case on the attacks and as it normally happens it would die a natural death.

The militants have a system of revenue intelligence that would shame the most diligent of tax officials, and have detailed information on exactly how much money is coming in and from where, and calculate precisely how big a bite they can put without actually forcing the establishment/institute to shut shop. Bargaining is pointless and risky. The gruesome enforcement methods guarantee a 100% recovery. On July 14, 2005, 12 village Pradhans (Head men) of Langmeidong block submitted mass resignation to the Deputy Commissioner of Thoubal District in protest against the militants' extortion demands. The militants had demanded a share out of money allocated to the Pradhans for village development.

No doubt the business establishments are the prime targets, no citizen and no institution is free from this menace. Public Works Department's office is another place that is always on target. Funds that come for roads and infrastructure development have always been targeted and the Director of the PWD feels insecure even to talk on this issue. Road Transport Sector in the State - Manipur's lifeline, since virtually all goods and commodities have to be brought from outside the State - is a regular target, large segments are controlled by various militant groups, each of which levies a variety of "taxes" on every vehicle. Two national highways, NH-39 & NH-53, constitute the link between Manipur and main land India through Assam. While NH-39 connects Guwahati via Dimapur in Nagaland with Imphal, NH-53 links Silchar in Assam to Manipur's capital. On October 24, 2008 two passengers were burnt alive along with the bus they were traveling in, while other passengers managed to escape the inferno, on the Assam side of the Nagaland-Assam border along NH-39 by a militant group allegedly for failing to pay their annual "tax". The bus was on

a routine trip plying from Imphal to Guwahati when it was stopped and set ablaze after dousing it with petrol by two unidentified gunmen from Dimapur after the 32 passengers, including women and children, were locked inside the bus. No terrorist organization in the world is reported to have ever burnt their innocent victims alive by dousing them with petrol. Militants of Manipur are apparently of a different caliber.

The extortion racket indulged in by militant outfits has caused deep suffering and trauma to the people of Manipur. It has created a complex situation where people cannot lead a normal family life or live in peace. The masses fear for their lives and want the government to act tough against militant groups. But the government's apathy and incapability to handle the situation has made the people's cry fall on deaf ears. Wearing battle fatigues and joining the militant groups to allegedly fight for Manipur's secession from India offers an exciting if risky career for the young people of Manipur. And then there is the lucre of easy pickings from extortion.

Politician-Militant Nexus : Anarchy in Manipur

In a major search operation carried out in MLA quarter complex in the VIP colony in Babupara, Imphal, on August 18, 2007, police nabbed 12 militants belonging to various outfits from the official residence of three MLAs and from a former legislator's house. Police also recovered one M16 rifle, two 9mm pistols and a number of live rounds. Extortion letters addressed to several businessmen were also recovered. The MLAs in whose quarters the militants were found were K.Meghachandra, W.Brajabidhu, Bijoy Koijam of ruling congress and former legislator N.Sovakiran. The C.M. loudly declared that an enquiry would be instituted and if anybody found guilty, would be dealt with as per the law of the land. As usual the case died its natural death.

"Outlook" magazine (12 December, 2005) published an expose of Manipur Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh allegedly donating Rs. 1.5 crores to two militant outfits. Two receipts, accessed by "Outlook" were said to have been presented by the then Chief of the Army Staff, General JJ Singh to Home Minister Shivraj Patil. The receipt issued by Kanglei Yawol Kanba Lup (KYKL) No. D219 dated March 2005 "Thanks" Ibobi Singh for a donation of Rs. 50 Lakhs. The receipt dated June 2005 issued by Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) "acknowledges" a donation of Rs. 1 crore and "expresses gratitude" for Ibobi Singh's "contribution to the genuine cause of the national movement of Manipur".

Former Manipur Governor Ved Marwah was not at all surprised by the receipts. He said, "There are hardly any politicians in Manipur of any stature who do not have links with insurgent groups. At times we have had good evidence to indicate politicians in Manipur paying off insurgent groups and also enlisting their help to win elections". Marwah also pointed out that unlike insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, there is very little foreign funding for these separatists. "Extortion is the only way these groups can fund their activities. Therefore most politicians have to pay for these private armies." The publication of this report speaks volumes about the prevailing unholy nexus between politicians and militants in Manipur.

Perception of nexus between politicians and militants is not a new story in the region. The situation in Manipur is worse than one can imagine. The State Government and the militants have devised a cozy relationship of "live and let live" with each looking after the vested interest of the other. This unholy nexus has become more or less a

tradition for those who are at the helm of affairs. It is the common man irrespective of his ethnic background who suffers. With this as the back drop, why then would the State Government be keen to end militancy in the state?

Corruption: A way of life

Corruption at high places has been the hallmark of Manipur's political history. Manipur today has become the most corrupted State and at the lowest ebb in all respects in the North East. Disproportionate wealth of public and government servants overnight are simply witness to the fact that corruption is rampant among an overwhelmingly majority sections of society. Despite efforts of some revolutionary organizations to fight corruption the menace seems to have grown insurmountable today may be because the revolutionaries themselves got sucked into the juggernaut of corruption and became equally corrupt if not more corrupt than the ones they are trying to rectify. If one is to point out a single most dreadful challenge of the people of Manipur of today, it would be corruption in public life. Wealth is the undisputed trump card, it makes little difference what the background of that wealth is. It is hardly ever an issue in any of the periodic elections to the State Assembly. By and large, those who can spend big will have the upper hand, it is as if leadership quality is measured in terms of the depth of the pockets of the candidates. In any case, the most vehement complaints against corruption have seldom turned out to be driven by moral stance, but induced by disguised envy. The most ardent crusades against corruption always ended up co-opted, becoming as corrupt if not more once they have joined the officialdom's ranks. The history of Manipur's political leadership has been largely defined by this phenomenon.

A report published in the Sangai Express, a local daily, on February 6, 2007 stated that it is common knowledge that for any development fund that is released, the Chief Minister of Manipur Shri Okram Ibobi Singh takes 10% to 15% of the total amount. This has been openly alleged in a statement released by the proscribed UNLF (United National Liberation Front). It has been alleged that the CM and his cohort (PWD Minister) had withdrawn a huge amount of money by way of "Akash Bill" (money withdrawn without doing any work/in the name of non-existent work) from the PWD from October last year (2006). Once this came to the knowledge of the Central Special Force of the UNLF, a total amount of Rs. 4,81,69,500/- (Rupees four crores eighty-one lakhs sixty-nine thousand and five hundred only) was "surrendered" to the outfit by the officials and Ministers concerned, said the statement. The reason why UNLF undertook the investigation and unmask the truth is to expose the true face of the Chief Minister and his men and not to weed out corruption. Explaining, UNLF said that as long as Manipur is under India, corruption will thrive because it is in the Indian system. To root out corruption, therefore, the system has to be uprooted first, it maintained. UNLF is also of the opinion that the engineers and officials are not guilty as they are used as pawns by the Chief Minister and Minister as collectors, said the statement. The amount of Rs. 4,81,69,500/- with the UNLF will not be used as the party's fund said UNLF and added that it aims to use it for the development of interior areas. The outfit has also sought the suggestions of the people in its utilization.

Report of the Controller and Auditor General of India for the year ended March 31, 2007 of the government of Manipur on audit of transactions (civil) is a pointer towards rampant corruption in the functioning of the State Government.

Fraud/misappropriation/embezzlement/losses

Pensionary benefits amounting to Rs.92.31 lakh were fraudulently paid during 2004-07 on fictitious PPOs/GPOs in the Thoubal Treasury.

(Paragraph 4.1)

Rupees 10.45 lakh was withdrawn fraudulently from the accounts of four subscribers from their General Provident Funds Accounts.

(Paragraph 4.2)

Rupees 32.90 lakh had been paid to a contractor on the basis of fictitious measurements.

(Paragraph 4.3)

Allowing a lead of 17 kms for earth quarry, while the earth was actually transported from a distance of 1-2 kms, led to undue benefit to the contractor by Rs. 1.93 crore.

(Paragraph 4.4)

Inflating the quantum of work done over the capacity of the machinery used, the Department had billed Rs.23.07 lakh in excess of the quantity of work possible.

(Paragraph 4.5)

Rupees 27.06 lakh was paid to two contractors before execution of work by the Executive Engineer, Ukhrul Division.

(Paragraph 4.6)

Payment for Rs.19.94 lakh had been made to a supplier without receiving the goods.

(Paragraph 4.7)

Rupees 1.51 crore were spent on procuring 503 cows meant for distribution to selected beneficiaries of Minorities and Other Backward Classes. In the absence of any record pertaining to the receipt and distribution of these cows, the expenditure could not be vouchsafed in Audit.

(Paragraph 4.8)

Imphal Free Press, a local daily of Manipur, in its editorial on September 10, 2008 under the caption "Point Counterpoint" states: "... The State Government is raising a new battalion of India Reserve Battalion, IRB, an armed state police constabulary. Even as the hint of a fresh recruitment campaign begins floating in the air, the bribe amount is already going through inflationary pressures. At the moment the rate is Rs. 3 Lakhs per recruit, and impoverished rural families are selling their marginal farmland holdings to raise the money to get at least a son into a steady government job. Many other young men, although fit for the job as anybody else, are not even thinking of trying because they do not have means to raise the money that would open doors for them"

If that be the amount for a recruit constable, what would then be the bribe amount for a Hawaldar, an ASI or SI? Once such a person dons his uniform, can he be expected to perform his duty with sincerity, honesty, sacrifice, integrity, etc.? They would undoubtedly follow in the footsteps of their leader. And those unemployed youth, who could not make the grade for want of bribe money, would by and large out of frustration and dearth of other employment avenues make a beeline for the militant

outfits. The State government is therefore indirectly providing impetus for increased militancy in the State. But who cares? As the Imphal Free Press editorial *ibid* says that the stakes are high in raising even a single battalion as it would involve a bribe booty of anything between Rs. 20 crores and Rs. 30 crores, enough to buy silence and compliance of anybody who can obstruct this daylight looting, in the State as well as the Union Government establishments.

Law & Order

Talking about law and order the less said the better. Where in the world one hears such outrageous joke as “Law” is in the hands of the Government but “Order” comes from the underground elements. But tragically this is what is happening in the State today. The legitimacy commanded by the militants is ever increasing, extortion or demand is almost their right and for the victims to pay or a duty to perform. Such is the unwritten law and order that is prevalent in the State. Further, where there is the highest number of militant groups operating and often confusion compounded by the factional fights among themselves, the problem is bound to multiply. Not a day passes without someone's house being bombed or fired at and the latest form of warning given by the militants is a gift of a bomb or a bullet. The two National Highways leading to the State have now become the haven to all the militant groups. Looting, extortion takes place at will. Lifeline of the people of the State has become an extended umbilical chord of the militants. All goods passing through this route is “taxed” by all the groups. Even the groups bound by the guidelines of the Suspension Of Operation signed between the Government and (some of) the insurgents, without qualms jump into this lucrative business, despite the agreement barring them from such unlawful activities. The accumulated cost of all the “taxes” on the goods is ultimately borne by the end users who are the common people and who are always on the receiving end.

Killings take place unabated. Not a day passes without two to three killings reported in the daily newspapers. Both the State actors and non-State actors resort to killings with impunity. Those killed by the security forces in dubious encounters and those killed by the militants - all killings are justified. Killing for killing sake takes place. And in spite of it, the Government has failed to reign in the militants nor been able to end their activities. Government's effort to curtail activities of the militants by increasing the number of the security forces has only added to the miseries of the common people. Instead of feeling safe, people are wearier of being harassed by these forces. They are paranoid of seeing the uniformed people in the street. Instead of successfully tackling the lawlessness it has given birth to a Frankenstein, a new breed of criminals in the guise of security force. Anecdotes of open daylight robbery, by the state police on the civilians and many such unheard of stories are doing the rounds in the State. The image and credibility of the State Police is an all time low. This pathetic scenario is the outcome of the corrupt State Government which has allegedly taken huge sum of money as bribe while appointing police personnel who are now adopting dubious means to recover the amount from the hapless common people.

People view State Police more or less as a thug than as a protector of the society. They do not have confidence in the ability of the police to solve their cases. The number of crimes committed and number of cases registered during 2002-07 is given below: -

| Year | Number of crimes committed | Number of cases registered | Percentage of cases registered |
|---------|----------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 2002-03 | 2458 | 699 | 28 |
| 2003-04 | 2484 | 614 | 25 |
| 2004-05 | 2531 | 450 | 18 |
| 2005-06 | 2911 | 539 | 19 |
| 2006-07 | 2886 | 483 | 17 |

(Source: Report of the Controller and Auditor General of India for the year ended March 31 2007)

Seeking justice from the militant outfits rather than approaching the police has become a trend. The State's law and order machinery has failed.

Manipur: A failing State

The problems in the State are endless. There is total failure in the business front. Non-Manipuri business community has left the State in large numbers; even some Manipurians have left the State for a safer place. When the rest of the nation is reeling under the impact of 12% above inflation rate the State's economy is even more compounded by the innumerable "taxes" imposed on the goods by the various militant groups.

Amidst all these problems the Government's claim for development is to hoodwink the people who are like living dead. Hardcore optimists have become die-hard pessimists. And to talk of development at this juncture though may be a political gimmick, is insane, inhuman and criminal. And everybody in the State knows how a contract work goes underway as not a single project proceeds without collusion with the non-state actors. It is all about sharing the booty with everyone concerned; the officers, the contractors, the Ministers and the non-State actors.

Mr. Amar Yumnam, a visiting scholar, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, has written an article titled "Manipur" Time to reinvent the State in the Sangai Express, a local daily of Manipur, of January 21, 2007. In this article, the author writes that despite the expenditure of Rs. 3,000 crores per annum by the Government of Manipur, the State Government has miserably failed to establish and foster an atmosphere of the rule of law. To quote "Now we need to ask what has been the value of the money we are spending every year on the continuation of Government in terms of its performance. Well it is zero; there is no order and no trust in any sector relating to Government functioning. We have the school not functioning, colleges not performing, department only in name and what not. However, what worries me most is not this failure, but the absolute compromise on the core character of the State. As I said, among all organizations evolved by human beings, State is the only one legitimately empowered to use force and violence in the maintenance of order. But as I have been continuously emphasizing in quite a few of my interventions, the State has now been unfortunately reduced to a silent spectator (and hence tacit collaborator) to organized crime and use of force. In other words, the aggressive rent seeking of the functionaries

of the State has now been decentralized to cover organized groups. But in the process, we incur a double cost of maintaining the State and much more damaging atmosphere of absence of rule of law..... To put in short, detecting and stopping crime is the responsibility of all, including the State, but administering justice is and should be the sole responsibility of the State.”

The politician of Manipur is today a scared human being. He patronizes one militant outfit only to be targeted by another. His life is literally on the firing line not for any courageous stand that he takes but because his acts of corruption are known to all the militant groups. Any one of them is capable of kidnapping or killing him if security slackens. It is amply clear therefore, that those who are elected to govern Manipur are no longer in a position to do so and for too long Manipur has been moving from crisis to crisis. A perverse system exists today that makes governance totally impossible. The Government of India, through its highly sensitive intelligence officials, is aware of the ground realities but is unwilling to disturb the status quo.

Manipur today is passing through a critical stage. The Government has failed to protect and safeguard the lives of the common people. It has failed on all fronts. Manipur is a failing State. The blame must squarely lie on the present Government because for all its commission or non-commission, act or inaction the situation has today reached this critical stage. The need of the hour now is a strong leadership and tough measures.

There is therefore a crying need for a change of Government. Anti-incumbency factor is at its highest limit. But to bring in another elected Government to replace the present one will be futile; it will not even be an old wine in a new bottle but the same wine in a different bottle. Thus if a change for the better is a must, then the anti-incumbency factor must be seen in the light of elected Government vis-à-vis President's Rule. Let there be no doubt that President's Rule does not mean Army Rule. It only means that due to constitutional breakdown of State machinery the State is being administered directly by the Centre for the betterment of the State. Special situation requires special consideration. Therefore, notwithstanding what is laid down in Article 365 of the Constitution, as also taking precedent from Punjab, President's Rule should be proclaimed in Manipur for a period of five years – the normal term of a State Assembly. Then and only then Manipur can get back on its feet or else wait for an apocalypse to happen. And this time it will be a much worse scenario than what took place on June 18, 2001 when the people rose as one and directed their angst and ire in a massive uprising against the political class, which resulted in the burning down of the State Assembly and the political class taking refuge outside Manipur. 18 people killed during the people's uprising is still a reminder of that unfortunate chapter in the recent history of Manipur when the State failed to address people's issues. The bomb is ticking.
