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Abstract

This article critically examines the demand made by a progressively forward moving Meitei community of Manipur for Scheduled Tribe status after having been listed in the general category for the past 60 years. The calling attention motion raised by Ibohalbi in the State Assembly in February 2014 regarding this attempt to move backward raises concerns and apprehensions on the part of the 'others'.

Keywords

Scheduled Tribe, India's tribal policy, Manipur, Meitei

Since independence the Indian government has categorised certain historically disadvantaged communities and social groups into Scheduled Tribe (ST), Scheduled Caste (SC) and Other Backward Class (OBC). These categorisations were intended to bring advancement of such socially and economically backward people through special provisions of affirmative discrimination and thereby reduce the gap of socio-economic disparity with the more affluent communities. It is through the constitutional protective arrangement, affirmative action and provision of resources and benefits that the government intends to lift up such groups of people.

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India's Tribal Policy

The term 'Scheduled Tribe' is used in administrative sense to denote tribals in India. The categorisation of certain communities as 'tribal' or 'indigenous peoples' by the Indian government is primarily based on their lived experiences of marginality and vulnerability in relation to their historical dependence on land and forest resources. The writings of renowned anthropologists,[2] along with the report of Commissioner of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in 1952, provide the criteria for recognising a community as 'ST' in India although they are not spelt out in the Constitution.[3] India has a clear tribal policy which was formulated by the first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1959.[4] This is known as *Panch Sheel* or five cardinal principles concerning the government's attitude towards the tribals. This policy sought the protection of tribal rights in land and forests, non-interference of outsiders into tribal territory, their social and cultural institutions and administration. It specifically denounced imposing of anything on them.[5]

The Constitution specified 7.5 per cent of vacancies in public sector and government-aided educational institutions as quota reserved for ST candidates. It was decided that this reservation system would be reviewed after a period of 10 years, and the system has been extended every 10 years for the past 60 years. This percentage of reservation is still below their population percentage of 8.2 in 2011 census. As a result of this policy of positive discrimination through reservations, STs in services have gained strength from 2.8 per cent in 1974 to 5.5 per cent in 1994 (Planning Commission 2001). Since the categorisation of certain groups as ST in 1950, the number of communities listed in this category increased over the years. In the last three decades dozens of communities were newly given ST status. Certain communities previously categorised as SC were also later put into the ST category leading to a drastic increase in the population of STs. However, the percentage of ST reservation has not been increased appropriately in proportion to the increase in ST population in the last two decades.

[2] Naik (1972) and Ghurye (1963) largely devoted their studies on the STs of India.

[3] Some of the important criteria are: geographical isolation, general backwardness, shyness of contact with community at large, politically a unit under a common tribal authority, members averse to change and having its own traditional laws which differ from those of majority communities.

[4] In foreword to the second edition of Verrier Elwin's book *A Philosophy for NEFA* in 1959, Nehru spelt out his 'Panch Sheel'.

[5] For details of India's policy towards its Northeastern region see Haokip (2010).

In recent times the Meiteis in India's northeastern state of Manipur started demanding ST status after having been mainly in the general category for the past six decades. The sharp reaction from some of the prominent civil society organisations and other student groups of the hills opposing this demand necessitates a close examination of this debate.

Manipur: Geodemography and Socio-political Matrix

Manipur is geographically divided into a centrally located valley and the surrounding hills. The hills, which are administratively divided into five districts and six autonomous district councils,[6] are inhabited by 34 recognised tribes who are broadly classified into 'Any Kuki Tribes' and 'Any Naga Tribes' by the Constitution (STs) Order, 1950.[7] It constitutes about 90 per cent of the total geographical area of the state and 35.4 per cent of the state's population. The Imphal valley constitutes about 10 per cent of the total landmass of the state and inhabited mainly by the Meiteis and Meitei Pangals, who together constitute 64.6 per cent of the total population of the state. In the state legislative assembly with 60 members, 40 members are elected from various Assembly Constituencies (A/Cs) located in the valley and 19 A/Cs in the hill areas are reserved for ST candidates, while Kangpokpi A/C is the lone non-reserved seat located in the hill areas.

Looking back into the political history of Manipur, the Imphal valley was an independent kingdom with rich cultural heritage and a written history dating back to 33 AD. During the British rule the princely kingdom was not included among the Scheduled Districts by the Scheduled District Act of 1874, or categorised as Backward Tracts by the Government of India Act of 1919, and Excluded and Partially Excluded Area by the Government of India Act of 1935. The advanced civilisation and being one of the oldest kingdoms in the northeast frontier may be the deliberate reasons. On the other hand, the hill areas of the present-day

[6] There are five hills districts in Manipur—Churachandpur, Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong and Ukhrul, with six autonomous district councils which are associated with each of these districts along with Sadar Hills Autonomous District Council. Sadar Hills, which is within the administrative jurisdiction of Senapati district, has been long due to be upgraded as a full-fledged district. For this issue, see Haokip (2012).

[7] There are 34 recognised STs in Manipur. They are Aimol, Anal, Angami, Chiru, Chothe, Gangte, Hmar, Kabui, Kacha Naga, Koirao, Koireng, Kom, Lamgang, Mao, Maram, Maring, Any Mizo (Lushai), Monsang, Moyon, Paite, Purum, Ralte, Sema, Simte, Suhte, Tangkhul, Thadou, Vaiphei, Zou, Poumei, Tarao, Kharam, Any Kuki Tribes and Mate.

Manipur had been a free hill country and largely unadministered even during the British rule till the Kuki uprising (1917–19). It is treated as 'illegible space' (Scott 2000) and a separate sub-cultural zone within the larger region known as 'Zomia'[8] and the people regarded as 'non-state peoples' (Scott 2009: 23).

Despite having large swelling population the Meiteis of the Imphal valley are not allowed to acquire land and settle in the hill areas as per India's tribal policy. The Meitei-dominated state assembly had legislated certain acts to remove such restrictions and bring about uniformity in the application of laws. This move has been opposed tooth and nail by the hills people leading to the intractable hills-valley divide. Thus, the hills-valley divide becomes one of the major themes in understanding inter-ethnic relations in Manipur.

ST Status for Meiteis

In the last two decades many demands for ST status were made by different socio-cultural groups in various parts of India. In the northeastern region the contentious ones were the demands made by Adivasis of Assam and Meiteis of Manipur. The Scheduled Tribe Demand Committee of Manipur (STDCM) has been demanding ST status for the Meiteis since the latter part of 2012. Within a year the STDCM claimed to have been assured by the Indian prime minister in July 2013 for examining the demand provided the Manipur state cabinet takes a decision in favour of the committee's demand. In response to the demand made by the STDCM, Manipur legislator Irengbam Ibohalbi moved a Calling Attention Motion in the State Assembly in this regard on 25 February 2014, and was assured by the Deputy Chief Minister Gaikhangam Gangmei, who also holds the Tribal Affairs and Hills portfolio, that the issue will be discussed with the Central Government after a thorough study. There has never been such a hasty positive gesture, whether it is propagandistic or real, made by the central government on any contentious demand made in the northeastern region. This led to a series of protests by the hill tribes of Manipur in the form of press releases and threatening more intensive protests.

The STDCM argued that the Meiteis' mongoloid physical features, the practice of animism (Sanamahi faith) by most of the population (*Sangai Express* 2013), and being partial Hinduised and the first settler of the

[8] Zomia is an upland region of Southeast Asia, Southwest China and India's northeastern region. For details, see Scott (2009: Chapter 1).

Imphal valley fulfil the criteria of being categorised as ST. It blamed the Government of India for the present rift and misunderstanding between the hills and valley people, resulting from the recognition of hills people as tribes and the Meiteis as mainly general category, and stressed on the non-existence of adversarial discord before India's independence. To them the demand is to recover the cohesive, harmonious and peaceful society before the merger of Manipur into India on 21 September 1949 (*Imphal Free Press* 2013). They also emphasised the need to protect their endangered culture and identity by way of being listed as ST under the power vested to the president by Article 342(1) of the Indian Constitution. However, the movement is largely restricted to periodic press releases without street protest and mass movement or violence in any form.

The Hills Perspective

To the tribes in the hills of Manipur the main reason for the Meiteis seeking ST status is to avail the opportunity of job reservation (*Hueiyen Lanpao* 2013). However, when this apprehension is being examined carefully the Meiteis in places such as Sekmai, Phayeng, Khurkhul, Koutruk, Laimaram, Kwatha, Laimaram Khunou and Andro, and other weaker sections have already been given SC and Other Backward Class (OBC) statuses.[9] If the remaining Meitei community further needs reservation, they can either be listed into the SC or OBC category which has more reservations for jobs in public sectors and in educational institutions than ST. But it bewilders and agitates many in the hills as to why an ST status is sought. When delved into this demand there are tacit objectives behind this. The hills-valley divide is so deep that peaceful coexistence and stability in Manipur is now a far cry and on the process of disintegrating the state. To the STDCM, if ST status is given to the Meiteis the wedge between the hills and valley people could be reduced to a certain extent and the integrity of the state can be preserved.

The assertion that animism is being practiced by most of the Meitei population is misleading. According to the Census of India, Hindu Meiteis constitute about 80 per cent of the total Meitei population, and the rest are mainly Meitei Pangal/Muslim (about 19 per cent) and negligible

[9] There are seven SC communities in Manipur, namely, Loi, Yaithabi, Dhobi, Muchi or Rabidas, Namsudra, Patni and Sutradhar. OBCs of the state include Nepali, Meitei/Meetei (including Meitei Brahmin, Meitei/Meetei Sanamahi, Meitei Pangal and Rajkumar) and Teli. http://ncbc.nic.in/Pdf/manipur.pdf (accessed on 24 August 2013).

Sanamahi faith.[10] The Meitei Pangal and Meiteis with Sanamahi faith are already categorised in the OBC category. Again, the claim that Meiteis need ST status to protect their culture and identity is self-defeating. The Meiteis are a dominant group controlling the state and its apparatuses. The state has been protecting their cultural, political and economic rights. As such, their culture and identity are in no way endangered.

For many decades the Meiteis, through the instrument of their dominated state legislative assembly, have been attempting to remove the restriction imposed on the Meiteis in acquiring lands in the hills through certain legislative acts but without much success.[11] In a public meeting organised on 22 October 2011 at Imphal by Manipur Land Revenue & Land Reforms Act (MLR&LR Act, 1960) Demand Committee which discussed the possible means and ways of extending the MLR&LR Act to the hill areas of Manipur, a remark by one participant conveys the extent of seriousness of the issue. The participant said '…that a civil war may break out in Manipur if MLR&LR Act is not enforced uniformly all over Manipur' (*Sangai Express* 2011). On the other hand, ST status to Meiteis will automatically remove this restriction and, therefore, be able to acquire lands in the hills with their sheer purchasing power. Through this they can expand their occupied territory beyond the Imphal valley. This attempt can be observed in the systematic administrative expansions of the Imphal districts into the foothills of Sadar Hills.[12]

To the hill tribal people of Manipur, the demand for ST status by STDCM is a ploy to attenuate the fervent political demands of the Kukis

[10] In Census of India 2001, out of the total 2,166,788 persons in Manipur, Hindus were 996,894, Muslims 190,939, Christians 737,578, Sikhs 1,653, Buddhists 1,926, Jains 1,461 and other religious communities 235,280. Among other religious communities, the Rongmeis (Kabuis) have sizeable population still practicising their primordial religion called *Tingkao Ragwang,* and among the Kukis too considerable percentage of their population is Jewish. As such, the Sanamahi faith among Meiteis will be very less in contradiction to the claim made by STDCM.

[11] There are various acts passed by the Manipur government such as 'The Manipur Village Authority Act, 1956', 'The Manipur Hill Area (Acquisition of Chiefs Rights) Act, 1967' and 'The Manipur Land Revenue & Land Reforms Act, 1960', which intend to reduce the rights of village chiefs and eventually abolish the institution of tribal chieftainship, and incursion into their territory as against India's tribal policy.

[12] For the last two decades branch post offices of some areas in Sadar Hills, particularly the foothills, which are adjacent to the Imphal valley have been placed under Imphal valley post offices. Recently, there has been a move to place such areas into the jurisdiction of Imphal East Police. Reacting to this, President of Kuki Inpi, Saikul Gamkai Mr Thangkam Lupheng 'alleged that initiatives to bring areas of Saikul under Imphal East District Police are driven by a hidden agenda masked under the name of law and order and security to encroach upon hill areas' (*Sangai Express* 2013).

and Nagas, as well as a tacit strategy of the dominant valley dwellers to make inroads into the hill areas of the state.

The Way Out

Contemporary Manipur is filled with demands and counter-demands, protests and anti-protests, and bandhs and counter-bandhs. The three communities are intractably interwoven over different issues. In recent years the fervent demands by the hills people for separate administrative arrangements posed an enduring challenge to the Meitei-dominated state politics. It has led to the sporadic formation of Meitei pressure groups which some of them even specialised in hurling communal expressions and the others formulating strategies to dilute and counter the hills demands.

The demand for ST status by STDCM not only generated a debate between the hills and valley people but also within the Meitei community, with equally strong objection and opposition from different sections. This contradiction within the Meiteis points to the demand as evolving from a small section of the Meiteis without any prior consultation or consensus. The demand, seemingly, has become very much 'political' rather than 'sociological' or 'anthropological'. As such, the way out lies not on the ST status for Meiteis but on managing and paying attention into the apprehensions and misunderstandings among the state's people. Here arises the management of diversity. This key-issue has to be handled carefully by the state government. The best policy is to carefully and seriously manage this apprehensions and looming misunderstandings among the people.

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