Research in Progress: Resistance or Change? Manipur in the Neo-liberal Era

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Abstract

Manipur has been considered as a conflict-ridden state of the Northeastern region of India. These issues and tensions are very complex and sometimes overlapping in nature. These conflicts in Manipur are rooted in territory, autonomy, separation and identity politics. Much of this assertion has been to protect ‘cultural identity’ as symbolised in dress, language and cultural tastes. Against this backdrop, the paper attempts to analyse the interplay between people and the conflict in the face of the neo-liberal period in Manipur. This paper examines the changes in cultural attitudes and cultural tastes owing to the forces of neo-liberalism, especially the changes taking place in the context of material and symbolic culture. In this context, the present study focuses on non-state actors and their activities towards restriction of outsider culture, especially the mainland India.

Key words: Conflict, Manipur, Middle class, Neo-liberal, Northeast

Introduction

This paper attempts to examine the changing socio-cultural aspects of Manipur in the neo-liberal period. Manipur has been considered a conflict-ridden state. The conflicts and tensions in Manipur are based on ‘assertion of ethnic identity and protection of territoriality, demands for a separate sovereign state, and autonomy within the state’ (Raile, 2012, p. 56). Much of this assertion has been to protect ‘cultural identity’ as symbolised in dress, language and cultural tastes. Thus, owing to this socio-political situation, the state has high presence and dominance of security and state military apparatus (McDuie-Ra, 2016).

However, the nature and forms of conflicts in Manipur have been changing. In comparison to 1960s and 1970s, the present scenario of insurgency’s attitude towards the demand for independent sovereign state of Manipur has been blurred. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, tribals who were supporting the struggle for the sovereignty of Manipur, have started to mobilise themselves in demand for their
territorial rights (as separate area) and ‘integration’ movement of Nagas (with Nagas of Nagaland and Kuki for Kukiland) (Hanjabam, 2013, p. 110; Goswami, 2011). On the other hand, such sentiments seem to have gone away from ‘people’s mind’ (mostly Meiteis) as Manipur is more ‘integrated’ into the mainland India ‘culturally’ than before.

Against this backdrop, the paper attempts to analyse the interplay between people and the conflict in the wake of the neo-liberal economy in Manipur and examine the changes in cultural attitudes and tastes owing to the forces of neo-liberalism. The focus of the present study is on the activities of non-state actors towards restriction of outside culture, especially from the mainland India.

The main focus of the study is the Imphal area. Methodologically, it is based on both primary and secondary data, collected for a study on education in Manipur. The data was collected from different stakeholders using interviews. This includes academicians, student union leaders, journalists, government retired officials, active service personnel and social activists. Snowball sampling has been employed in the data collection. In addition, observation method was also employed in the study. The data was collected within the period of 2016 to 2018 at periodic intervals.

Neo-liberalism and Manipur

With the opening of the national market to the global market economy in the early 1990s, the ‘neo-liberal era’ brought many changes in India. Privatisation in different sectors of society has increased rapidly. Defining neo-liberalism, Harvey says, ‘Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes human wellbeing can be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurship, freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade’ (Harvey, 2007, p. 2). The role of the state is to guarantee the proper functioning of the markets with minimal intervention (Kotz, 2000). According to Steven Ward, ‘under neo-liberalism, people are situated as less socially connected citizens of the state, and they are more situated as more as self-interested, competitors, self-actualised entrepreneurs and rational consumers in a dynamic and ever-changing global marketplace’ (Ward, 2012, p. 2). The neo-liberal era emphasises the role of the market in all sectors of the society including education (ibid.). Consequently, private enterprises in the sector of education and health are on the rise (Nayak,
This new economic configuration was subsumed under the term globalisation (Harvey, 2007) and now there is no region where globalisation has not penetrated, and Manipur too has not escaped its clutches.

It is interesting to discuss the case of Manipur because ‘attention to post-liberalism in the borderland has been limited owing to the dominance of security and state-led development in its governance’ (McDuie-Ra, 2016, p. 144). This could also be a reason for the late influx of neo-liberal market forces in the state. In the past, even at the turn of the century, some underground outfits have propagated resistance to anything ‘Indian’ and restrictions to acculturation of Indian values (Singh, 2010). For instance, banning of Hindi movies in theatres, telecast of Hindi language programmes on TV and Hindi songs in public places since 2000 (ibid.), even shutting down of showing Hindi movies in cable television (though this is now relaxed at present for home viewing, but not in public spaces like cinema theatres), discouraging wearing of mainland dresses, especially North Indian dress code such as saree, salwar, and western outfits such as jeans, skirt (by women), and so on and so forth, which they considered a threat to traditional Manipuri culture (Hussain, 2001) as it ‘undermines Manipuri cultural values’ (Bhaumik, 2009). However, the restriction on dress code was ephemeral.

In the initial period of such restriction, it was very common to collect and burn down the CDs containing Hindi films, breaking of music system if someone was listening to Hindi songs in public vehicles or personal car. Hindi films and music was totally shut from being displayed in public space (Singh, 2010). For people, it was also one of the fears of violence, and threat if someone dares to play Hindi music or films in public. Due to such ban on Hindi films in the state, a few cinema hall owners have converted their cinema halls to shopping plazas (Naorem, 2006).

As a result of such restriction on Hindi entertainment programmes, three effects have been seen – first, South Indian entertainment programmes such as Telugu, Malayalam or Kannada movies have started selling in CD parlours for viewing on home TV with English sub-titles; second, interestingly, Korean movies, soap operas and their pop culture have become popular in Manipur; and third, Manipur digital film industry rapidly developed and expanded its production (Naorem, 2006). However, the former has not gained popularity among the people as much as the second, especially among the youth. McDuie-Ra (2012) stated that youth in
Imphal are heavily influenced by the cosmopolitan lifestyle of East Asian countries such as Korea and Japan and also the Western culture as introduced by Korean/Japanese movies and soap operas. This shows the ‘divergence from Indian popular culture (Bollywood, cricket, etc.)’ (ibid., p. 61). Korean movies and their drama series have become a favourite form of entertainment, especially among the youth (Das, 2014). Even other states of Northeast India where Hindi was not banned, such as Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, have witnessed the spread of the Korean wave (Kuotsu, 2013). It could be considered as an after-effect of banning Hindi movies and this has been successful because of the technological changes in telecasting through satellites in the early neo-liberal period.

Restriction on Hindi entertainment programmes shows the role of non-state actors, their share in power (McDuie-Ra, 2016) and their influence in the state. Although there has been restriction and resistance to so-called mainland attire and entertainment, especially Hindi programmes, there is no such strong case in terms of learning of the Hindi language in schools as part of their education. It could be argued that the resistance conducted by the interest groups or underground outfits was specifically to express cultural non-integration; but resistance to learning Hindi is not seen as a threat so that Manipuris who migrate are not at a disadvantage for not knowing Hindi. The resistance is not to get ‘exploited’ (financially and symbolically) but at the same time not to handicap the people of Manipur in terms of cultural capital (by allowing them to learn Hindi). All these are portrayed as an attempt to protect the interest of the Manipuris.

Nevertheless, such resistance and restrictions has not spread uniformly in the state. Being a multi-ethnic diverse state, different resistance imposed by non-state or any interest group, has different effects on different sections of the society. The above instances of banning Hindi entertainment programmes have more effect in the valley areas especially with Meitei ethnic groups. Such practices have been strongly imposed in the valley areas, because bulk of the population of the state live in the valley areas; thus it is the centre of political power as well (as most of the State Legislative Assembly seats are from the valley). Hence non-state Meitei actors were in the forefront of asserting their power and influence through such means. Indeed, this could be seen as fear of assimilation with the dominant culture, especially of Hindi heartland. In the hill areas, resistance did not take such form, partly because the tribals wanted to assert their culture vis-à-vis the Meiteis.
Neo-liberal penetration in Manipur has come about only in the second decade of this century, perhaps owing to the negative image of the state being conflict-ridden. Now perhaps the image is changing owing to the political view that movements of ‘resistance’ and ‘secession’ are because of lack of job opportunities and ‘development’ (Bhaumik, 2009; Dutt, 2003). The central government has given a push in this regard with its Act East Policy (Dubey, 2015).

**Manipur at Present: Resistance or Change?**

Regardless of issues and tensions in the state, gradually Manipur has started participating and entering into the mainstream scenario, especially in material and symbolic culture, with the existing resistance unconsciously taking a backseat. Gradually, commercial activities have been slowly penetrating into the state in the last few years, especially since the early 2000s. Commercial activities have emerged in the valley. Recently, a number of mini shopping malls have also come up (Mamcy Mall, Bazar India, Vishal Shopping Mart, etc.). It was in 2013 that a multi-national brand ADIDAS landed in Imphal in Mamcy Mall and then later followed by other brands (Khangenbam, 2015). There were no food chains like KFC, McDonalds in the state but in the beginning of 2019, a KFC restaurant has opened up in Imphal city. This is the emerging new cultural taste for the Manipuri people, especially among the urban elite and growing middle class people. As a result, it has changed the culture of consumption in the state. Thus, it has become a cultural symbol of the upper middle class and for the aspirant middle class. A respondent stated that till recently, the well-off families were conscious that if they indulged in such consumption, non-state members would come and place a demand (in form of a letter) for money (usually in terms of lakhs). However, such things are not happening anymore and people appear to have come out of that fear.

In this sense, Manipur is no more marginal in material and symbolic culture as compared to other mainland states. The emerging consumerist urban middle class culture is visible rapidly. Big multi-nationals are making their presence felt. For many of the elite and middle class who have had such taste from outside Manipur, now Imphal is part of the global elite consumer culture. Imphal has become well known as an important centre for medical tourism, especially for those in Myanmar; and with the opening of international air services to Myanmar, this integration is only growing to get deeper (*Straits Times*, 2019). A few educated people have started establishing private schools. Many of them have established
private coaching institutions and other commercial activities in the state. Such penetration has been helped by young people who have been educated or have worked in mainland cities and brought such mainland traits and culture. As a result, the forces of neo-liberalism have been expanding in the state.

Indeed, technology and media have contributed towards bringing this transition in Manipur as well, with the introduction of smart phones, private cable network, and more so with the Indian government’s Look East Policy (re-launched in 2014 as ‘Act East Policy’). Recently many billboards, a number of banners, advertisements on mainstream Indian television channels, including in Hindi, have become popular, which was not possible till recently. McDuie-Ra observes about Imphal that ‘the frontier city has been connecting slowly through symbolic gestures such as the Indian-ASEAN car rally and with the opening of the land border with Myanmar and the arrival of national and international capital and its trappings such as billboards, advertisement, and the consumer goods’ (McDuie-Ra, 2016, p. 144). Further, he states that the local people and their practices have been reshaped, along with their connectivity to other regions, despite the politics of ‘belonging’ and political situation in the state.

In addition, we cannot ignore the role of media, including both visual and print media. Recently, the Northeastern states of India have been the focus of national media, and even that of Bollywood (Hindi film industry). There can now be seen a representation of Northeast Indian, including Manipur in Bollywood films. Films such as *Mary Kom, Jagga Jasoos, Uri,* and *Penalty* are few such examples of Bollywood films which have aspects of Northeast and also Manipur in their narration. The underground outfits have not yet accepted the release of such films in theatres in Manipur, even though the films are more or less based on Manipur and Northeast India. However, these reflect the newly growing connectivity with mainland India.

Interestingly, modern technology, especially private DTH (direct to home) TV, has increased the accessibility to watch films without having to go to theatres. Big private players like Tata Sky, Dish TV bring Bollywood films to the TV sets at home, while streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc. bring it directly to the individual smart phones. These technologies have changed the way films and visual entertainment is watched and consumed. These technologies have circumvented the ban on Hindi films and programmes in public space in such a way that it has become infructuous. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that
traditional attempts of resistance to Bollywood and Hindi entertainment programmes are not much successful now; technology has broken down the fence of such resistance. Thus, now, it is not surprising that many young people from Manipur are also participating in mainland (Hindi heartland) TV entertainment programmes and talent shows, such as dance and singing competition, and other entertainment activities, which was unimaginable until the recent past. However, these Manipuri singers or young emerging singers have to face threats from the underground groups for singing Hindi songs.

On the other hand, many sports players are coming out and playing for India and earning national recognition, especially in sports such as boxing, weightlifting and football. Mention can be made especially of women sportsperson MC Mary Kom (six times world women’s boxing champion), and Bala Devi Ngangom in football (team captain of Indian women football). Mary Kom was nominated to Rajya Sabha because of her achievements in boxing. Because of the rich sports culture in the Northeast, especially Manipur, the National Sport University has also been established in Manipur in 2018.

The education sector is also one such domain which has been affected by neo-liberalism. Private educational institutions, especially professional colleges are increasing; private higher secondary schools are flooded in the state, especially in the urban areas in the valley. In this contemporary era, people are consciously or unconsciously being oriented towards the economy rather than the community. This can be seen with many new associations and organisations which are emerging. For instance, the parents’ association for exemption of fees for those months when teaching does not take place due to long duration of closure of schools. On the other hand, teachers’ have made the counter-demand against the school authority that the demands of parents should not affect their salary and so on. Such a scenario indicates the logic of individual economic interest taking precedence ahead of societal or community concerns.

People who have resources are the ones enjoying such educational opportunities and in turn expand their social capital, developing a new taste of urban culture and becoming a symbol of middle class culture. The emerging middle class consumerist culture has considerably reshaped Imphal and Manipur.
Conclusion

The present social and cultural landscape in Manipur has experienced rapid change in comparison to around ten years back. Different national as well as international brands for clothes, jewellery, furniture, automobile stores have flooded in and around Imphal city, such as in the areas like Thangmeiband and Sangaiprou-Airport road. This leads to a change in the symbolic capital and socio-culture of Manipur. Manipur is no longer at the margin as far as consumerism is concerned, as it is no different to other cities in India. For instance, in the near past, going out in the evening was not considered safe, owing to frequent security checking by the state forces or due to unfavourable incidents, especially among the youth. But now-a-days, one can easily find people coming out in the evening for leisure time. Shops also stay open till late in the evening. In fact in the last three to five years, going out in the night has become fashionable in the areas in and around Imphal city.

In terms of development, Northeastern states including Manipur, are considered to be lagging behind compared to mainland India (Sharma, 2012). It is also believed that it is the lack of development that has given rise to the conflicts in the region. So, the major role of the Indian government is now to focus on the development of the Northeast region; hence, one witnesses significant government activism in the planning for connecting the state with the railway network, upgrading the status of the Imphal airport to international airport, establishing international market at Moreh, Indo-Myanmar border, construction of Asian Highway (Dubey, 2014), taking Asian car rally through Imphal to other parts of Asia and so on (McDuie-Ra, 2016).

However, an important question to be posed is that will this kind of development finally bring peace to Manipur and will it lead to the resolution of all the conflicts? Though people want development in the state, the local people have a fear of the influx of outsiders. Thus, development is always double-edged. People have shown fear of assimilation with so-called Hindi-land culture and there is also a deep concern about the influx of outsiders, as there is a fear that they may become a minority in their own homeland in near future. As a result, the demand for re-implementation of the Inner Line Permit System (ILP) and demand for recognition of the Meiteis as a Scheduled Tribe has been raised.
It is yet to be seen whether neo-liberalism will result in greater acceptance of the mainland culture of Hindi speaking regions, or whether it will manifold the existing tensions involving the Inner Line Permit System and the demand for Scheduled Tribe status to the Meiteis, or will it result in the emergence of new conflicts? Manipur is in a period of transition, despite laden with conflicts and various social tensions. Gradually, the neo-liberal economy has made significant penetration into the socio-cultural landscape of the state, generating new values of individualism and consumerism, and thereby undermining the resistance movement of the non-state actors against contemporary Indian middle class consumerist cultural values.

Notes:

i This paper is based on my ongoing PhD work.

ii Look East Policy was launched by former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao in 1991. The main aim of the policy is for economic integration by strengthening the ties between India and ASEAN countries. In 2014, the NDA government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi re-launched the policy as ‘Act East Policy’ at East Asia and India Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). See, Sajjanhar, A. (2016). Taking stock of India’s ‘Act East Policy’. ORF Issue Brief, (142).


iv On 23rd July, 2009, a 27 year old man was killed in an alleged fake encounter; and a bystander, a pregnant woman was also shot dead in Imphal city. Owing to this, schools were forcefully shut down by the All Manipur Students’ Union (AMSU) for more than three months. Owing to prolonged shut down of schools, some parents’ association put forward the demand that school should exempt the fees of those months for which teaching has not taken place. On the other hand, the private school teachers’ association owing to the fear of cutting down of their salary, in turn, demanded to the school authorities that the issue of exemption of fees should not affect their salary. (Private School Teachers not given Salary. E-pao (January, 2009). Retrieved from http://e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=17..271009.oct09)

v The Inner Line Permit System is the permit system under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873 Act which has been implemented in some Northeast states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland (Government of India, 1873). According to official Gazette, there are prohibitions to all citizens from other regions of India to reside or pass through boundary of such regions without a valid pass issued by the relevant authority under the regulation. Manipur in the past had a well-regulated policy that was functional under permit systems and Foreigners Department to maintain check and balance towards entry and exit of outsiders. In 1949, when Manipur merged into India, the transit and exit system of Manipur was removed from Manipur on 18th November, 1950.
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