

## What ails Manipur?

Manipur or the 'land of jewels' is going through a turbulent phase in its history. During the Assembly elections held in February, 2007, people came out in large numbers and voted for stability, peace and prosperity. The longing for peace, good governance, probity in public life is amply demonstrated in the collage of articles, news clippings that one came across in the State during January – February, 2007.

2. In an editorial titled '**Corruption No Issue**' published on January 24, 2007 in the **Imphal Free Press**, the daily wrote:

*"Corruption has become an obsessive concern of the public in Manipur today. Every opinion poll conducted formally and informally, including one by All India Radio, Imphal, has indicated this. But surprisingly, corruption has never been an issue of significance in any crucial exercise of public decision making, the most vital of these being the periodic elections to the State Assembly. The matter again is unlikely to have any significance in the forthcoming February elections. 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 candidates. Wealth is the undisputed trump card, it makes little difference what the background of that wealth is. Everybody is in awe of wealth, but nobody ever enquires with any seriousness how the wealth has been acquired. So much for all the frets and fusses about corruption – a lack of discretion that has legitimized and institutionalized corruption deep in the social psyche. One of the reasons for this inscrutable and incredible public behaviour is perhaps a sense of being overawed by the issue. You censure one politician, or for that matter one government official, for corruption and you probably will realize you have hit just the tip of the iceberg, so much so that it becomes somewhat unfair to just single out one when almost the entire system is corrupt. Some days ago there was an allegation that the local area development funds of a particular legislator had been misused. But the fact is, which legislator can volunteer to reveal where their own Rs. 1 crore under this fund have been spent? Unlikely, which is why no politician, even in the heat of these no-holds-barred election campaigns have chosen to pursue the matter. People living in glass houses never throw stones at others, for a return stone can shatter their own houses.*

*But the other depressing fact is, the electorate seems condemned to select their leaders from only amongst people who live in glass houses, or to be more precise, people who can afford glass houses. 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. The incentive structuring of the system has been such that it has induced corruption in every heart – in active manifestation when in position of official power, and as a latent desire when the levers of power are remote from immediate access. A dilution of social conscience has resulted. Corruption today has come to be generally treated more as a service perk than moral erosion. Bribe givers and bribe takers, and so too vote buyers and vote sellers, share the same moral platform, and no longer with any remorse.*

*How can this dreadful cycle be broken should be the concern of all discerning citizens today. Appealing to public conscience alone will not be enough as this conscience itself has been transformed by overwhelming circumstances. If it is agreed that executive power itself is the corrupting factor, we see no other core to be tackled than executive power itself, and what better way to this than to structure checks and balances to harness misuse of power within the system itself. For whatever its drawbacks, there is no way the system can be done away with altogether. At best, another can replace it, and the new system too would be exposed to the same corrupting influences of executive power. We have seen this in so many different forms, haven't we? Two very effective legislations are today available. One is the Public Interest Legislation, PIL, mechanism, and the other the Right to Information Act, RTI. A citizens' activism is called for to make these become truly the nemesis of official corruption. If such an activism can rekindle public conscience against corruption, and wealth comes to be qualified by the manner it is earned before it is given respectability, half the battle would have been won."*

3. Another news report titled "**Warning to PWD officials**" published in the **Imphal Free Press** on the same day (Wednesday, January 24, 2007) mentioned that three officials of the

PWD office Tamenglong, including Executive Engineer Zindai and an Assistant Engineer had not turned up in the office since the last more than six months....”

4. A report titled **“Evidences debunk FCS official’s rebuttal”** published in **‘The Sangai Express’** published from Imphal on January 30, 2007 mentioned about one Md. Ahmed Ali, LDC under DSO / Churachandpur who had misappropriated three months’ PDS quota of the district valued at Rs.72 lakh. Ahmed Ali had lifted the district’s quota of AAY and BPL rice for February, May and July 2006 on June 13 and 14, August 22 and again on September 4, 2006. Consequently, acting upon a complaint lodged by the DSO, criminal cases on four counts including breach of trust, cheating and dishonesty, conspiracy, misconduct of public servant, were registered under FIR No. 13 (1) 07CCP u/s 409/420/120-B IPC & 13 PC Act against Ali.

5. In Manipur NSCN (IM) in the Hill Districts deducts 2 percent from the salary of all Government servants every month. This amount is calculated and collected by the Cashiere of the Office and handed over to the representative of the underground outfit. NSCN (IM) collects the tax in advance for the entire year from the salary bill for the month of February. The UG outfits only spare top civil officers like DC/SP if they are perceived to be honest. It was learnt that even Central Government employees like Revenue Department Officials pay this tax to the UG outfits. In some cases the top commanders of the UG outfits do not even know as to who collects this fund as they auction off the actual collection process! Likewise 3 percent of all contracts is paid to the UG outfits. This applies to all contracts. Major NHA contracts are undertaken by contractors who have direct links with the dominant UG outfit.

6. As per common perception, not even 25 percent of allocated money is spent on the project. Share in the loot starts from the Secretariat itself. For instance, for the last ten years, only some bandage, tincture-iodine and some doses of anti-biotics have been supplied in Veterinary hospitals although several crores are provided in the budget and also released. Manipur PWD has the reputation of constructing roads where green grass grows even on black topped roads! Roads constructed even under the PMGSY were found to be of poor quality.

7. Shri S.L.Paoksosei, ex-MLA and ex-Minister of Manipur mentioned in Leimakhong that he is not contesting the present elections because under ground outfits demanded Rs.30 lakh for permitting him to contest the elections and he felt that it would be better to try for a Rajya Sabha seat rather than pay such a huge amount to the UG outfit. At Khunkhu Kuki village, an ex-serviceman mentioned that he cannot contest the elections as he does not have 50 AK 47s and cache of hand grenades!

8. Some of the problems facing the State could be listed as under:

- Load shedding – not even two hours of electricity in areas outside Imphal
- Dusty roads – poor condition of NH 39 – Lifeline to Imphal
- Dying and dysfunctional Government schools and colleges
- Large population of unemployed youth
- Drug addiction and prevalence of HIV/AIDS.

9. Mr. Khelsoril Wanbe wrote in an article published in **“The Sangai Express”** of 23.1.2007 that ‘the brand of corruption that we are endowed with doesn’t seem to tolerate any sort of development or progress required for us, citizens, to at least keep pace with others. Life in this poor backward State is becoming increasingly difficult. Sincerity, honesty, sacrifice, integrity, mutual love and respect seem to have completely vanished or have been banished from our land. Quackery, flattery, pretensions, vainglory, chauvinism, segregation, pomposity etc. seem to have taken the place of the former.’

10. 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** of 21.1.2007. In this article, the author writes that despite the expenditure of Rs.3000 crore 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 schools not functioning, colleges not performing, departments 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 the 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."*

11. The situation in Manipur is worse than we imagine. The State and the UG outfits have devised a cozy relationship of 'live and let live' – it is the common man who suffers – whether Kuki, Naga or a Meiti, all have to pander to the dictates of the UG outfits as well as the State administration. One boy from every family must join the UG outfit; they must provide shelter, food to the UG activists when they visit the village; in some cases, they have to provide the girls too! All vehicles passing on NH 39 have to pay to the UG outfits – between Rs.2000 to 2500 each apart from the policemen and transport officials.

12. Mr. Thangboi Haokip, in his article captioned '**Analytical Study on the Ills of Manipur**' published in '**The Sangai Express**' of 26.1.2007, has identified three threats as insurgency, corruption and disintegration. He writes:

*"the number of corrupt practitioners have grown good in the insurgent ranks so much that the reputations of true revolutionary workers are being tarnished. Hence, a serious turn about has to be resorted to in order to reverse this trend. Disproportionate wealth of public and government servants overnight are simply witness to the fact that corruption is so rampant among an overwhelmingly majority sections of society. In spite of sincere efforts of some revolutionary organizations to fight corruption the menace seems to have grown insurmountable today. If one is to find out one single greatest challenge for the people of Manipur, it is nothing but corruption in public life.'*

13. The anguish of the common man is clearly reflected in this letter to the editor written by Mr. R. Rungsung of Ukhrul and published in '**The Sangai Express**' of 25.1.2007:

*"The main game players ; rulers, social workers, bureaucrats and sycophants (the swindlers) who have no moral qualms but moral turpitude have created cesspool for public depriving all facilities and intended purposes. Thereby their greed and self centred nature caused strikes, bandhs, blockades. As such, Manipur today has become the most corrupted state and at the lowest ebb in all respects in the Northeast. The rulers striding high in sleek cars and impressive entourage do not lift a single straw by their fingers but always seek a seat of honour in front of the people to show his/their public stolen clamorous power.*

*There is complete moral bankruptcy in Manipur. Would any honest man have walked away after vindication? Can or will any person place faith by keeping his chicken in the custody of jackal? For many decades the issue of corruption in high places have haunted the State of Manipur. Whoever was found corrupted in many respects was never impeached or punished. He walked away like a clean man with moral victory as if he has done no wrongs. In Manipur corrupt cannot be brought to book because the party and its government or so and so shielded him and provided the shelter to flourish. As such, moral bankruptcy is a normal way of Manipur politics and a form of democracy..... What is needed today is a new morality of politics. Why are the corrupt and wicked mighty in*

*power? Is it to get wealth or terrorize people? Are the false promises meant for robbing public treasure? The very root cause and the beginning of all illnesses started from the inner rooms / chamber of powers that be. The moral cleansing must begin from the mother.”*

14. A report published in **The Sangai Express** on 6<sup>th</sup> February, 2007 stated that it is common knowledge that for any development fund that is released, the Chief Minister of Manipur, Shri O.Ibobi Singh takes 10 to 15 percent of the total amount. This has been openly alleged in a statement released by the proscribed UNLF.

15. It has been alleged that the CM and his cohort, Govindas (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. Once this came to the knowledge of the Central Special Force of the UNLF, a total amount of Rs.4,81,69,500 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 were 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 for the development of the interior areas. The outfit has also sought the suggestions of the people on its utilization.

16. The publication of this report speaks volumes about the prevailing state of affairs in Manipur. After a long time, people of Manipur have given a decisive verdict and have returned a single party with absolute majority. People of Manipur have done their job. They have decisively put to an end ‘blackmailing’ of Government by single MLA outfits. The yearning for good governance, end to corruption and extortion, establishment of rule of law, end to the misery effected on ordinary citizens through power cuts, bad roads etc. and avenues for employment are not ‘unreasonable’ demands. All State Governments ought to address these issues if their credibility and legitimacy are not to be seriously compromised. Let us hope that these aspirations of the people of Manipur are met in the near future.