**Manipur’s Urgencies for Alternative Energy**

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Hardly many in Manipur would be aware that Manipur hastily formulated the Manipur Hydroelectric Power Policy in 2012[[1]](#footnote-1). The Act was quietly introduced with limited consultation and discussion even within the Manipur Assembly where it was passed. The policy fits perfectly in India’s larger definition of Manipur and other parts of India’s North East as power house of India and to generate more than 60,000 Mega Watt of electricity. The policy also forms part of the larger plan to build over Two Hundred (200) mega dams all over the Brahmaputra-Barak River Basin. As the name suggest, the hydroelectric power centric policy envisages generating nearly 3000 Mega Watt of electricity from almost all major Rivers and tributaries of Manipur, the Thoubal River, the Imphal River, the Makru River, the Leimatak River, the Irang River, Iril River and endless of other Rivers. Already several Memorandum of Understandings are being signed with various corporate bodies to undertake mega dam projects all over Manipur, which includes the 66 MW Loktak Downstream Project, the 1500 MW Tipaimukh HEP project, to be implemented by North Eastern Electric Power Corporation (NEEPCO), National Hydroelectric Power Project (NHPC), Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam Limited etc[[2]](#footnote-2). The Manipur Government is preparing to sign agreements with NEEPCO to undertake Irang Hydro Electric Project (60 MW) at Irang River in Tamenglong district, Khongnem-Chakha Hydro Electric Project (67 MW) at Barak River in Senapati District and Pabram Hydro Electric (190 MW) at Barak River in Tamenglong district[[3]](#footnote-3). The government had even issued Expression of Interest, and several companies already submitted tender bids in response. It is worth noticing that many of the corporate bodies conferred contracts and MoUs for dam building in Manipur are corporate bodies such as National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC), which continues to remain unaccountable for the multifaceted violations and devastations wrought on the affected peoples and also the environment. And these are projects that contribute in complicating the ongoing conflict in Manipur and in subduing the rights of communities over their land and their physical integrity itself.

This Manipur Hydroelectric Power Policy has been pushed through amidst an adverse reality of Manipur reeling in acute power shortage, despite commissioning of the 105 Loktak HEP project, the 35 MW Leimakhong Heavy Fuel Power Project, the Khuga Dam, Singda dam etc, which are supposedly to generate nearly 150 MW of power altogether, not even to mention several micro hydel power projects and other renewable energy projects initiated by Manipur Renewable Energy Department. Manipur is an interesting state having unlimited resources to sustain widespread militarization and related infrastructure all over Manipur and probably to sustain the conflict itself, but lacking adequate resources to respond to power infrastructure needs and other social services.

The power policy has been pushed through amidst prolonged call of different communities for a full scale review of the impacts of 105 MW Loktak Multipurpose Hydroelectric Power Project, commissioned way back in 1984 and further to conduct a holistic review of the Mapithel Dam of the Thoubal Multipurpose Hydroelectric Project built over the Thoubal River. The arbitration, the violations of all applicable legislations, the devastation of ecosystems, the divisions and confusions created among affected communities, the lack of accountability of corporate bodies involved in these two projects, militarization and related human rights violations are just few of the impacts.

The Manipur Hydroelectric Power Policy has also been pushed through at a time when the World Bank is funding development of High Voltage Transmission and Distribution line in Manipur and other parts of India’s North East[[4]](#footnote-4), whose power networks envisages to connect almost areas demarcated for power generations, such as Tipaimukh region. It is very much clear the World Bank’s support for such mega project will directly facilitate the construction of mega dams in Manipur. In a stark coincidence, the Asian Development Bank is promoting power sector reforms all over Manipur and across the region as well and today Manipur Electricity Department is already a ‘Corporation’ and the power supply and distribution is already privatized. So, there is a tacit correlation and coincidence of timing as to how such initiatives are being pursued aggressively with involvement of International Financial Institutions and corporate bodies in the energy sector promotion in Manipur.

One wonders what is the premise setting of this policy and for whose benefit? One also wonders if the people of Manipur have any idea how much this particular policy will benefit them. A primary question is how responsive this power policy will be to the actual needs of Manipur in the long term and for its requisite growth? One may ask then as to why there is an exclusive decision making in defining the power needs and generation of Manipur. Especially for a ‘development’ process, which supposedly should for peoples’ benefits? The participatory planning need to assume centrality as Manipur already had experiences, born out of acute power shortage and compulsions, to meet basic power needs. And these are alternatives of extremely low energy consumption and of increased reliance on alternative energies, such as extensive reliance on affordable solar energies by the people.

The introduction of Manipur Hydroelectric Power Policy in 2012 without any consultation and consent with indigenous communities of Manipur simply constitutes a disregard of their intrinsic relationship and survival dependence on their land, water and forest. Especially, the lack of consultation with communities to be affected and to lose their land from implementation of such policies is unacceptable, given the reality that countries like India are obligating itself to participatory development in international processes in defining sustainable development goals under the Post 2015 development agenda definition processes underway.

The policy lacks vision of promoting an energy policy of Manipur, based on the real and alternative energy needs of our people. One wonders if there’s been any effort to learn from the adverse experience of previous mega dam projects like the 105 MW Loktak HEP project, the Khuga dam project. Has the Government learnt from the lessons of failures and challenges of several dams such as the Khoupum dam, the Singda dam[[5]](#footnote-5) etc as to why such mega dams are unable to serve the intended and defined benefits. It is high time for the government to also learn from the ongoing controversy with Mapithel dam construction.

The need for defining alternative energy needs and also for development process is becoming crucial. Due to acute power shortage in Manipur, different communities of Manipur already resorted to solar energy, more of the affordable, efficient smaller solar units. Almost every home in Manipur has a solar unit or more, which at least can meet to basic lighting need for use during frequent blackouts[[6]](#footnote-6). Such reliance on solar renewable energy is actually reducing the consumption of fossil fuels which pollutes our earth and which contributes in warming up of our earth through emission of green house gases. It is highly unfortunate that the practical initiatives of the communities are ignored and undermined by the concerned authorities and instead opt for energy solutions that will lead to more corporatisation of our peoples’ land and also direct damming of almost of the rivers of Manipur. Is there a thought even to support the initiatives that have already come from communities in the form of extensive reliance on solar energy, through subsidies, or promotion of efficient and more affordable technologies etc, instead of resorting to destructive and unsustainable forms of energy generations which will destroy Manipur’s natural heritage? It seems, there is a clear and strong dichotomy between how people respond to energy needs and crisis and how State responds to meet energy needs. There is a clear mismatch. Are the planners of the Manipur Hydroelectric Power Policy ever considerate of the communities’ shifting energy dependency paradigm? Is there any thought of complementing or to advance communities initiatives for widespread solar use? When the entire world is struggling with concepts of alternative energy, Manipur already have a situation where its peoples have already resorted to alternative energy, consciously or unconsciously. Such community initiative is laudable as it also minimizes consumption of fossil fuel and further a model of low energy and low carbon consumption oriented way of life.

There is no definition of Manipur’s power needs for the coming decades, based on which a viable energy assessment and policy is formulated. Manipur also has huge potential for micro hydel power projects, many of which are already installed in several remote villages of Manipur. One wonders if the Government through its agencies has ever conducted any assessment of potential micro hydel sites of Manipur. Has the Government ever bothered to think about how much of Manipur power’s need could be sourced from alternative energies and accordingly plan for it? Is the state sensitive to what other regions, especially nearby states like Nagaland had initiated and advanced in terms of promoting both solar and micro hydel projects, through widespread collaboration with civil society organizations? NEPeD, an organization with Nagaland Government support, has successfully developed assembling units of 3 KW hydroger, a micro Hydel power generation unit, and has shown the way by lighting more than twenty (20) villages in Nagaland. Is the Government also keeping its eyes open as to how other countries are promoting alternative energies? Countries like Germany, top user and generator of Solar Energy globally, plan to receive its entire energy from Solar and other renewable energy by 2050. Around ten (10) percent of Spain’s energy comes from solar power, which is five times more than the average of 2 percent in the rest of the world[[7]](#footnote-7). So, what hinders Manipur to explore beyond frontiers to see progressive and sustainable development models?

Is the Government of Manipur listening to the ongoing debates to promote sustainable development, to promote development which places communities at the centre stage of decision making, that emphasize on seeking alternatives and which also promotes accountability of the corporate bodies?

It seems the Government of Manipur has failed to comprehend the message for options assessment and promotion of alternative energies coming from diverse civil societies and community organization in their call for stop of the long controversial 1500 MW Tipaimukh Multipurpose Hydro electric Project to be built over the Barak River. There are also additional calls to stop the proposed Chakpi Dam plan to be again built over the Chakpi River in Southern part of Manipur.

The consideration of alternative energy is extremely crucial to minimize social, environmental, cultural, biodiversity impacts as efforts are being made to generate Manipur’s power requirements, both for domestic needs and to grow its industries and allied activities. One also asks what protective clauses are ensured to minimize impacts on the rich biodiversity of Manipur, which has been listed among the Twenty Five (25) biodiversity hotspots of the world. The communities need be at the centre of such development planning process. Unfortunately, the process is focussing on corporate led development in Manipur, even to the extent of causing destruction of whatever heritage we have. The communities of Manipur are already leading a very low energy oriented way of life as compared with per capita consumption of energy in countries like the United States of America.

The world is also shifting towards intensive efforts to promote alternative energies. The global climate crisis has also confirmed that the present development model adopted has already intensified climate crisis and impacts of climate changes are fast unfolding everywhere. And Manipur is not an exception. Mega dams are also proven to contribute a fair quantum of green house gases and big dams like Tipaimukh dam project, by the potential submergence of 27,000 hectares or 311 sq. Km, will substantially contribute in massive emission of such potent gases. The cumulative submergence of forest and potential emission of green house gases of nearly twenty big dams planned under the Manipur Hydroelectric Power Policy, 2012 will simply be colossal. And here, it’s important to gauge as to where the process to pursue large scale dams is associated with holistic impact assessments.

Given the exclusionary nature of decision making and defining both the energy and development agenda, it’s high time that the Government of Manipur opens up the debates to the people of Manipur to assess the quantum, the quality and source of energy required for Manipur. It is high time to adopt and frame an energy policy which is holistic and considerate of the power needs of Manipur and which integrate the needs for respecting the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous communities. One may recall that several human rights bodies have actually suggested tangible steps towards promoting democratic decision making for development. Specific to the persisting violations to the ongoing construction of Mapithel Dam, the UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples urged upon the Government of Manipur n 2009 to ensure that affected peoples' right to free, prior and informed consent is fully considered and that all forms of development related militarization should end. The special Rapporteur even went to the extent of recommending repealing even emergency laws such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958, which increasingly has been used to promote unsustainable and destructive development, all the interest of corporate bodies.

Specific on the building of dam, one may also ask if the government has ever considered taking into consideration the recommendations of the World Commission on Dams in 2000 and also the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Elimination on Racial Discrimination in 2007, which is more to ensure community participation in decision making, to ensure full holistic impact assessment, to undertake an option assessment more to identify if alternative energy generation potential and sources are available[[8]](#footnote-8). The indigenous communities of Manipur will be hard to accept a development push from beyond and for benefits intended for somebody else.

The definition of alternative power needs of Manipur is very much related to the issue of defining Manipur’s own alternative development, a development process rooted in the wishes and aspirations of the people. For indigenous peoples' development, recognition of their inherent rights over their land and territories and resources is crucial and also as already emphasized by several international processes. Indigenous peoples right to self determination over their land and their self determined development process is crucial even in the definition of energy needs of Manipur as such recognition and subsequent participatory decision making can led to meaningful development, one that provides energy needs, that substantially minimize environmental devastation and reduce multiple impacts. The promotion of alternative energy should ensure that the full provisions outlined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007 and the recommendations of the World Commission on Dams in 2000 are fully complied too.

It is high time to repeal the Manipur Hydroelectric Power Policy, 2012 and to consider a comprehensive Manipur Energy policy that encompasses the different alternatives to energy solutions and most feasible alternatives in Manipur. The policy must accord due primacy to promoting the renewable energy development visible from the community and intensify initiative including research on renewable energy prospects in Manipur, exploration of most feasible efficient renewable energy technologies and also provision of subsidies for communities to undertake alternate energy options. Such approach should accord due sensitivity to the already low energy oriented way of life in Manipur. It is high time to explore what best models of alternative energy options are available in other countries and by communities worldwide. Adopting an archaic parochial development notion of exploration, expropriation of communities land and resources in an exclusive and militaristic pattern will only complicate the multiple layers of crisis and conflict plaguing Manipur and its denizens.

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