**An Introspection: Manipur Paddy Conservation Bill 2014**

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In a significant development on 25 July 2014, the Manipur Assembly passed the Manipur Conservation of Paddy Land Bill 2014 amidst the longstanding and ongoing struggle for protection of agriculture land on an urgent basis. The passing of the Bill indicates at least a tardy realization of the Government, at least, of basic significance of agriculture in Manipur’s economy. However, one wonders what Manipur actually needs at this point of time in agriculture or for that matter in larger Manipur’s economy. Is it mere protection of paddy land or protection of agriculture land? One is also concerned on the approach, piecemeal or holistic? The question is more obvious given Manipur’s land terrain, its geography and diverse pattern of agriculture practices. Manipur’s agriculture both in the valley and the hills is not restricted merely to paddy cultivation. Especially in the hill areas, diversified cultivation assumes much prominence with pursuance of traditional forms of agriculture.

Manipur has different categories of agriculture land, depending on the terrain, in the plains, wetlands, hills, forest etc with diverse agricultural practice. One wonders if the policy will cover all agriculture land. The protection of agricultural land in Manipur should also entail protection of wetlands, forest land and those areas with possibility for permanent cultivation. And here it is highly crucial to ensure involvement of all different communities of Manipur practising different types and forms of agriculture practices and to acknowledge their pattern of land ownership and agriculture practices, to identify best practices and ways to protect agricultural land in all terrains across Manipur.

Interestingly, the bill is introduced at a time where agriculture land both in the hills and valley fast shrinks and vigorously conscripted for multiple large scale development projects and uncontrolled urbanization. Land grabbing is an alarming phenomenon fast unfolding in Manipur amidst India’s aggressive pursuance of neoliberal economic policies and its economic and political expansionist policies. Peoples’ stern resistance against agriculture land acquisition without their free prior and informed consent, such as for creation of Capitol Project, Industrial Growth Centre, international Airport in Imphal etc are still fresh in peoples’ memories[[1]](#footnote-1). Today, residents of Yurembam are dead against the land acquisition move for Trans Asian Highway. The village already lost substantial trace of their land to the Power Station of NEEPCO, Ltd and due to the expansion of 400 KV power plant of the Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd very recently[[2]](#footnote-2). Further much concern abound that the inconsiderate implementation of the subsidy oriented National Food Security Act, 2012 of India in Manipur has enormous potential to destroy indigenous agriculture with dumping of cheap and chemical laden food grain from beyond Manipur. Much of Manipur’s prime agriculture land is also lost due to extensive militarization of Indian armed forces under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 to subdue insurgent groups seeking self determination of Manipur.

The new policy will simply be irrational and meaningless without addressing the implications of development onslaught in Manipur. Manipur, with its geographical advantage of locating right in middle of South Asia and South East Asia is already at the centre of an international economic process of converting entire Asian region into a huge market. The Trans Asian Railway, the Trans Asian Highway and the 400 KV High Voltage Transmission lines are part of the larger strategy to economically connect Asian sub regions and to foster trade between countries in South Asian and South East Asia, the process being facilitated by economically powerful countries through Multilateral banks, viz, World Bank, Asian Development Bank etc and bilateral banks like Japan Bank for International Cooperation. The enormous challenge is indigenous peoples of Manipur are excluded in the process of defining such development priorities and processes. Further, the people are not even informed of the potential multifaceted impacts of large development initiative under such processes. Rather its land, its forest and rich resources are already subjected to economic exploitation, as evident in the ongoing process to construct more than 200 mega dams all over India’s North East region and to drill oil and natural gas by multinational companies, such as in Manipur by Jubilant Energy. Indeed, power trading is one of the priorities set in Asian Development Bank’ and World Bank’s development visions for the region. The infrastructures created for such economic process will conscript huge trace of prime agriculture land and will directly facilitate unhindered dumping of cheap agricultural produces from across borders from South and South East Asia, thus destroying indigenous agriculture and undermining food sovereignty of Manipur.

The need for clarity on reasons for loss of agricultural land need be considered. Will there be a rethinking of the development process and rescinding of unsustainable policies with the move to defend agriculture land? Or will it be just an expression of intent devoid of practicalities. Will it also rethink certain development process, such as 105 MW Loktak HEP Project, to return the 83,000 acres of prime agriculture land, submerged by the project? Will it also consider abandoning the Tipaimukh dam project which will submerge nearly 30,000 hectares of forest and fertile agriculture land along the Barak River and its tributaries in Tamenglong and Churachandpur Districts[[3]](#footnote-3)? Will the decision led to saving more than 1000 hectares of agriculture land in Mapithel Valley to be submerged by Mapithel dam[[4]](#footnote-4)? The proposed Chakpi dam will submerge more than 3000 hectares, most of which will be prime agriculture land along the Chakpi River in Chandel District[[5]](#footnote-5).

One also needs be clear of the objectives of pursuing such bill or policies? One needs a comprehensive assessment of reasons for loss of agriculture land or threats to sustainable agriculture in Manipur, based on which the policy need be based. Manipur’s agriculture in all terrains is increasingly rendered uneconomical for the farmers and indigenous communities due to multiple reasons, high cost of fertilizer and pesticides, high labor cost, lack of state support, influx of cheap agricultural items, impacts of climate change and lack of marketing support, bad infrastructure etc.

One may also ask if the passing of the bill or the enactment of related policies able to defend agriculture land of Manipur. Manipur’s agriculture is under intense pressure due to the liberalization of Indian agriculture, where Agri corporate bodies are fast converting the state into their market for fertilizers, pesticides, high yielding seeds, agriculture equipments etc, which increases cost of farming. Defense of agricultural land need rethinking the capitalist led development, dominant development model based on profits for private parties, which undermines sustainable agriculture. One wonders if the Government of Manipur will embark on this at a time when it is deeply encouraging commercial agriculture as outlined in the New Land Use Policy of Manipur 2014[[6]](#footnote-6). The reality today is the unregulated corporate expansionism under imperialist countries led globalization is the biggest threat to sustainable agriculture in Manipur? The Government need be sensitive to such challenges and threats to agriculture in Manipur, both in the hills and plains. Further, also to understand the grievances of small scale farmers, which have limited state support for their agriculture activities, such as purchase of farm equipments, irrigation facilities and crop insurance etc. Without challenging the larger unsustainable development models and all threats to sustainable agriculture, a mere defense of paddy land will simply be irrational? There are fundamental contradictions to be addressed, in policy application and in defining development vision and processes. One also wonder if there will there be reconsideration of the Policies like Manipur Tourism Policy 2011 and Manipur Hydroelectric Power Policy etc, that will destroy agriculture land, forest, water sources and restrict community’s access to their land and survival sources.

Is formulation of paddy conservation bill rational? One may rather wish to press a policy to protect all agriculture land in its entirely in Manipur and will certainly lead to a more substantial understanding of Manipur in itself, which can lead to answers to many challenges of Manipur. The Government of Manipur should consider a comprehensive agriculture policy which recognize communities’ rights over their land and recognize their right to free, prior and informed consent before introducing any initiative or development projects that will undermine their rights or relationship with their land. It is highly crucial to perceive the importance and intrinsic relationship of communities with their land. A holistic policy to protect agriculture land, wetlands, forest of Manipur should be framed in due consultation with communities. The policy need be based on sustainable agriculture, promotion of small scale farming, recognition of indigenous agriculture, addressing the key threats to agriculture etc with the protection of agriculture land as one of the key and essential components of the policy. Protection of agricultural land should be an essential and key component of promoting just and sustainable development in Manipur. A mere intent to protect agriculture land will mean nothing till a holistic approach is adopted for agriculture.

Addressing and reversing the potential threats to a viable and sustainable agriculture in Manipur, such as extensive promotion of industries, large scale development projects, infrastructure projects, extensive militarization etc is highly crucial. A thorough understanding of the potential risks and challenges of agriculture in Manipur in the larger neoliberal economic framework of considering agriculture purely in economic terms need be pursued. One need to ponder where is Manipur’s agriculture and how our farmers can cope with the onslaught of multiple free trade agreements signed by India with South East Asian and South Asian countries. In this context, merely conserving paddy land will highly be insufficient. It is highly critical to really identify and insist on what needs to conserved and for what purpose and if it simply will be enough. Reviewing and changing development processes detrimental in sustainable agriculture is urgent. Protection of agriculture land is not feasible less there’s a concerted effort both to understand and to respond to the larger global forces, which already threatened the socio- economic, political and cultural values of Manipur.

1. Developmental challenges : Airport & University expansion, The Sangai Express, 11 May 2008,  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Manipur's debut in railway map may wipe out Yurembam, fear inhabitants
Source: The Sangai Express / Newmai News Network, The 9 July 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Damned Hearings of Tipaimukh High Dam”, by Jiten Yumnam, the Imphal Free Press [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Mapithel Dam and Militaristic Development”, by Jiten Yumnam, the Sangai Express [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Nuances of Chakpi Dam Plan in Manipur”, Centre for Research and Advocacy, Manipur, March 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. New Nuisance: Manipur’s New Land Use Policy 2014, by Jiten Yumnam The Sangai Express, 22 July 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)