**New Nuisance: Manipur’s New Land Use Policy 2014**

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Manipur witness enactment of arrays of controversial development policies n the last decade, more so in recent years. The Manipur Hydroelectric Power Policy, 2012, the Manipur Tourism Policy 2011, the Manipur Industrial Policy, 2013, the Manipur Loktak Lake Protection Act, 2006 are all introduced sans peoples’ involvement and to serve India’s economic and political expansionist priorities. For instance, the Manipur Hydroelectric Power Policy perfectly fits India’s larger plan to build more than two hundred (200) mega dams over all the Rivers in India’s North East. The New Land Use policy, 2014 (NLUP, Manipur) registers as the latest policy that provoke wide objections from communities and their organizations, as affirmed in outcomes of several community meet and deliberations in Tamenglong, Churachandpur and even in Imphal Town[[1]](#footnote-1). Some interpreted the policy more as a political ploy of dominant communities to subdue the rights of minority communities[[2]](#footnote-2), despite the same policy enacted in places like Mizoram to fit India’s larger economic ambitions.

Objections apart, one requires a deeper introspection into the content of the new policy as to the real intent of the NLUP policy. Interestingly the premise setting of the new policy is to foster strategic market competitiveness and land productivity in Manipur in the context of India’s Look East Policy and Free Trade Agreements with Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)[[3]](#footnote-3).

The implementation of New Land Use Policy in Mizoram has been cited as successful evidence, despite intensive process of cash crops cultivation, palm oil primarily by Multinational Corporations. Defining Jhum cultivation as unproductive and destructive of forest cover, policy makers promoted permanent or ‘settled ‘cultivation and plantations, such as pineapple and oil palm, claiming they are better land use than Jhum cultivation. However, oil palm, rubber and horticultural plantations are monocultures that cause permanent deforestation, a fact that the India State of Forest Report 2011 notes to explain declines in Mizoram’s forest cover.  In Mizoram, more than one Lakh hectares have been identified for oil palm cultivation and following the entry of three corporate oil palm companies, over 17,500 hectares have already been permanently deforested within a decade by 2014 March[[4]](#footnote-4). Even before NLUP was implemented, over 90 per cent of Mizoram’s land area was under forest cover. This is despite decades of extensive shifting cultivation. Recent declines in forest cover in Mizoram have occurred at a period when area under Jhum cultivation is actually declining, while area under settled cultivation is increasing, suggesting that the New Land Use Policy in Mizoram has been counterproductive to forests[[5]](#footnote-5). Moreover, the political, socio economic context of ethnicity in Mizoram are far different from Manipur and hence a policy formulation based on such premature conclusion and reference will find minimal results in Manipur.

The new NLUP policy also emphasizes heavily on inclusive development in Manipur? The deafening voice of rejection of the new policy already testifies the absence of a process to take free, prior and informed consent of communities of Manipur. Development track records in Manipur are marred with high exclusivity and state repression on rural communities for promoting development inclusiveness and effectiveness. Another emphasis of the policy to delegitimize the age old traditional agriculture practice is born out of exclusive processes and due to reinforcement of alien perception of land use system in Manipur. This premise setting of completely debunking the viability and sustainability of such agriculture practices is simply unacceptable. Surprisingly, the policy failed to acknowledge the high significance of such traditional cultivation towards promoting indigenous crop diversification, towards protection of cultures, in sustenance of families, in mitigating climate crisis etc. The policy also promoted commercial cash crops and high yielding variety crops, which are extremely volatile to market conditions, has already devastated lives of communities worldwide in Asia, Africa[[6]](#footnote-6) and Latin America. Such industrial agriculture, which requires extensive use of fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides etc often contaminates environmental and poses health hazards for farming communities, cannot, under any circumstances promote food security in Manipur.

Several studies confirm the multiple benefits of Jhum and Shifting cultivation[[7]](#footnote-7). The issue is more about finding ways and means of promoting sustainability and for this will require efforts to comprehend both internal and external factors that increasingly render such practices unsustainable in the long run. Manipur is no exception to climate crisis unfolding all over the world and impacts on agriculture is very sensitive for its high vulnerability. Increase in Pest, emergence of new pest extensively damaging indigenous crops, wiping out of economically viable food crops, all impacts of climate change, etc is already confirmed in Manipur. Commercial crops are not immune to climate change and there is no guarantee that the introduction of commercial crops in Manipur will be viable and sustainable. Here lay the extreme importance to have extensive consultation with communities depending on their land for immediate survival with an open mind and bereft of preconceived notions that traditional agriculture practices is unscientific, non production and unsustainable etc. Is contamination of our land with pesticides and herbicides scientific? A mere conclusion that Jhum cultivation led to destruction of forest in Manipur is simply premature. There are myriad reasons of forest loss, including State’s Forest Department corrupt practices and insincerity as well.

Indigenous communities in Manipur all have traditional practices, through their way of life, through customary practices, through ritual and ceremonies to protect their forest and conserve rich biodiversity with due community participation. It is highly unfortunate that the New Land Use policy, 2014 failed to appreciate or even have a slightest mention of such unique role of communities in sustainable management of their land, water, forest and other natural heritages. The new policy with a clear corporate agenda with introduction of a commercial perception of land is a clear push for privatization of communities land and forest and to alienate them from their survival sources.

The policy failed to comprehend and mention primary reasons of land loss in Manipur, development onslaught, extensive militarization, unregulated urbanization, industries and infrastructure projects etc in Manipur as key reasons of increasing unsustainability of indigenous agriculture. The 105 MW Loktak Multipurpose Hydroelectric Power Project already submerged more than 83,000 acres of agriculture land. The Tipaimukh Dam will also submerge more than 30,000 hectares of forest land[[8]](#footnote-8). The Chakpi and Mapithel dams will submerge 4000 acres of agriculture land respectively. The full scale implementation of the Manipur Hydroelectric Power Policy will inundate extensive agriculture land of Manipur. Manipur’s food sovereignty has long been threatened with extensive land grabbing for endless ‘development’ projects. The new NLUP policy while advocating for a radical shift in land management for enhancing productivity and market competitiveness, failed to advocate for a radical shift to review and end pursuance of large scale unsustainable development processes and associated land grabbing in Manipur, and thus, will defeat the basic objectives of the policy itself. There’s also serious policy incoherence with the framers of New Land Use Policy, 2014 with those framing the Manipur Hydroelectric Power Policy, 2012. The only common feature is both envisage privatization and corporatization of development at the expense of peoples’ land and resource.

The Manipur NLUP envisages protection of 63 percent of total land in Manipur as forest, another 15 of land under Joint Forest Management, 15 percent for agriculture and the rest 7 percent for habitation etc. Curtailing community access to forest is also pursued under the Green India Mission under the National Action Plan on Climate Change 2010, to promote forest as carbon stocks and to receive financial incentives from developed countries under REDD. There is clearly insensitivity as to how communities depend on forest for their survival. One is not sure if the forest will really remain forest, especially at a time when mono cultivations are included in the new controversial definition of ‘forest’? Mizoram is a perfect example as to how corporate bodies destroyed forest areas with oil palm plantations. The predefined notion of rigid forest protections violates indigenous peoples’ rights under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007.

The policy also envisages promoting competiveness among agriculture workers of Manipur to compete with agriculturists, food processing industries of South East Asia. This is already expected as India signed Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN Countries and agriculture is one of the areas which will be liberalized extensively. With extensive infrastructure projects underway, the Trans Asian Highway, the Trans Asian Railway and the Trans Asian High Voltage Transmission and Distribution lines, supported by the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and Japanese Bank for International Cooperation, it is already highly likely that Manipur will just be dumping grounds for agriculture products from ASEAN. One wonders if Manipur’s agriculturalists, the small scale farmers and its indigenous peoples can withstand the pressure from the highly sophisticated markets of ASEAN, both in production and processing of food items. Thailand and Vietnam, number one and two in rice production are just next door to Manipur. Already reduced to rice importing state long time back, thanks to the prolonged neglect of agriculture, failure of irrigation projects and extensive land grabbing for series of destructive, unsustainable projects, Manipur will further be pushed to brink of complete collapse of its agriculture sector. This will only aggravate poverty and inequality, which the policy intends to eliminate. The Food Security Act, 2012 of India will also led to more dumping of heavily subsidized and chemical laden agriculture food items in Manipur. One also wonders if the Government of Manipur is fully aware as to how the Indo-Burma free trade agreement already undermined indigenous agriculture in Manipur, or whether it simply choose to remain blind to studies and voices from marginal and small scale farmers of Manipur.

Consideration of land merely as productive resources rather than as life giver is very simplistic. A strong consideration of land as just economic and productive asset, as pursued in the NLUP will only led to monetization and disrespect of land. With the GPS and land records planned, the New Manipur Land Use Policy will undermine community based land ownership and foster individualism.

For a place like Manipur, where its agriculturalists are increasingly constrained by lack of state support, unpredictability of weather patterns, of heavy rainfall and droughts, where small scale farmers are increasingly abandoning their farmland for other economic activity or to enter any available Government jobs, stated objectives to increase competitiveness with ASEAN countries is simply incompatible. One wonders if competition is actually the wishes and aspiration of the small scale farmers and indigenous peoples of Manipur. A due consultation and assessment of the actual need of agriculturalists in Manipur would be otherwise. The sorry state of agriculture in Manipur is also partly due to lack of commitment, corruption, and favouritism in the Agriculture Department.

Attributing to increase in Ganja and Opium cultivation to unsustainability of traditional agriculture in Manipur is misleading conclusion devoid of improper assessment with invovlement of communities and a clear lack of understanding on causes of shifting agriculture pattern in Manipur. Such cultivation are usually in areas with extremely inadequate infrastructure facilities, such as road or market infrastructure, such as storage facilities. Such situation warrants adequate response and not simply introduction of commercial crops. Without infrastructure development and market fluctuations, over production of commercial crops will aggravating suffering of indigenous peoples' lives and future, and as diversified crop cultivation is being discouraged through the NLUP Policy.

Citing population increase as also key reasons of unsustainability of land use and agriculture is also an overstatement. There is unchecked entry of illegal immigrants in Manipur and given the trend of unchecked entry, introduction of range of schemes and missions will simply be irrational and only be counterproductive. Are the framers of the NLUP aware of the role of illegal immigrants in undermining food sovereignty of Manipur? A mere generalization of increase of illegal immigrants as part of population increase or deliberate omission can also be a very dangerous proposition.

One wonders if the NLUP policy is another master plan of economists and technocrats from afar, insensitive to the reality, needs and wishes of communities in Manipur. It’s surprising that Manipur with records of dismal neglect and performance in primary economic base of Manipur, agriculture, is now embarking on a dangerous game of competitiveness with big market forces. It evident, there is no option for Manipur as it’s simply facilitating India’s larger game with ASEAN. It cannot change the rules of the game. India already signed Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN already and now everything is either profit or loss. That’s where the concern is for Manipur as unfortunately, the state cannot think for itself to weather challenges of market. And politically, it simply does not have the right to take independent decisions compatible to the actual needs of its people and land. Yet again, Manipur will just be facilitating the unregulated entry of Agri-multinational corporations and land mafia from beyond to confiscate peoples land and promote industrial agriculture in Manipur.

The strong push for private sector participation in the NLUP Manipur policy through PPPs in enhancing the productive capacity of land and increasing market strategy further raises the question if communities of Manipur will ever be able to participate in this competitive process. Such process will require not only investment, but also experiences of orientation and ability to respond to risk of market volatility. One may also wonder who controls economy in Manipur and who can invest in the market and involve in the tough competition across International border trading. At least, not the indigenous peoples of Manipur? What then, can we expect from a Government which is unable to keep any of the public corporations functioning, even forgetting competition in an open market? What can we expect from a government long geared only to serve India’s national security?

The New land Use Policy also confirms there’s clear dichotomy between the decision makers and the people, in terms of understanding what is development and means of pursuing it and definition of its end objectives. The new policy connotes Manipur simply in pure economic terms and not leaving anything uneconomical or to realign everything economical. Even the range of complex and contested political issues are misinterpreted to fit into India’s economic and political ambitions. A direct visible impact is the potential to further confuse and complicate the existing misunderstanding among communities of Manipur as visible in the tone of objection of the new policy.

A serious misunderstanding and insensitivity to diverse land ownership pattern and survival relationship of communities with their land will only lead to irrational, incomplete and problematic policies. The policy is a clear representation of the capitalist expansionism in Manipur and across the region, where corporate bodies rules the roost to the detriment of indigenous peoples rights, cultures and sustainable practices. It is pertinent to perceive the policy as to how it fits into the larger spectrum of State’s role complementing the expansionist policies of the Government of India and other corporate ambitions, backed by international financial institutions and developed countries.

A comprehensive assessment of challenges of agriculture, of the aspirations of different indigenous communities of Manipur, on the range of support required would lead to an entirely different response other than the NLUP. A realistic and participatory assessment as to why majority of people of Manipur remains in acute poverty, as highlighted in the New Land Use Policy of Manipur is need of the hour. A realistic policy formulation rooted in the reality, actually needs and seeking alternative with rightful invovlement of indigenous communities is crucial. Manipur needs a fundamental shift in its approach to development, agriculture and land management. Undoing development injustice in Manipur is crucial in contributing towards promoting food sovereignty. Promoting a false notion of development will only complicate the crisis of insurgency in Manipur. As land is what that gives identity and life of any people and nations, a cautious move on dealing with land is highly warranted in a place like Manipur, where unresolved political tussle defines the polity and legitimacy of the state. Recognition of self determined development with due recognition communities self determination over their land and resources is key to sustainable, people oriented development. Revoking the New Land Use Policy 2014 is urgent to deter further nuisances in Manipur.

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   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Approach paper of the NEW LAND USE POLICY/PROJECT OF MANIPUR (2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Multinational companies involved in oil palm cultivation in Mizoram includes Godrej, Reliance and Ecofirst of Malaysia (EcoFirst's subsidiary, PalmTech India Ltd) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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