**Ambiguous Farmland Defense Plan in Manipur**

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Two contrasting media reports in subsequent days in early July, 2014 provoke enough confusion in Manipur. In a strange and seemingly stirring from deep slumber to its senses, the media reports the ruling Congress party of the Manipur Government resolves to protect agriculture land[[1]](#footnote-1), citing setting up of brick farms, residential areas, schools as key reasons for agriculture loss. Few organizations hastily applauded the decision. The decision already provokes wide interest for an agrarian state like Manipur, where nearly 70 percent of its people rely on agriculture for sustenance. Manipur’s agriculture has long been in a state of crisis for long, its land has been shrinking alarmingly in recent decades and an industrial form of agriculture fast descends.

No further details were elucidated except for the intent expressed to save agriculture land. All’s fine till the next day when denizens of Yurembam village in suburb of Imphal Town expressed strong objection to fresh move to acquire their village land for construction of rail tracks and a Station for the Trans Asian Railway passing through Manipur. The village already lost substantial tract of their prime agricultural land for setting up the high voltage power transmission and distribution lines of Power Grid Corporation of India with funding from the World Bank and for expansion of the Yurembam Power Sub Station. The village literally is on the verge of extinction[[2]](#footnote-2).

One wonders whether the recent decision of ruling party is reasons rife for rejoice? And whether there’s comprehensive introspection of reasons for loss of agriculture land or threats to sustainable agriculture in Manipur? Will such decision led to food sovereignty or sustainable agriculture in Manipur, as also outlined in the draft Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the Post 2015 development agenda. One also wonder if the decision will undo development injustice in Manipur. One obviously needs to dwell into hard realities to find lucid answers.

For long, Manipur manages agriculture without a comprehensive policy to protect agriculture land. Adhocism rules the roost as agriculture land continues to be conscripted one after another amidst growing public resentment. Peoples’ resistance against farmland acquisition without their consent, in the setting up of National Institute of Technology at Lamphelpat and at Kyamgei and the expansion of Imphal Airport and proposed expansion of Manipur University, setting of Manipur industrial centre at Chingarel etc are still fresh in peoples’ memories[[3]](#footnote-3). Much of Manipur’s prime agriculture land is also lost due to accommodate extensive deployment of Indian armed forces under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 to subdue insurgent groups seeking self determination of Manipur.

Will there be a rethinking of the development process and rescinding of destructive and unsustainable policies with the move to defend agriculture land? Or will it be just an expression of intent devoid of practicalities. The development record of government of Manipur is heavily laden with injustice, disrespect of peoples’ rights over their land, their right to participate in development decision making and also brute use of force. 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 mega dam 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? Will the decision led to saving more than 1000 hectares of agriculture land in Mapithel Valley to be submerged by Mapithel dam? 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 of Manipur.

The decision of the Government of Manipur comes at an interesting phase of Manipur’s history, already in the centre of large scale Trans Asian development initiatives and larger international policies. The Trans Asian Railway, the Trans Asian Highway and the 400 KW High Voltage Transmission lines are both 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 several economically powerful countries like Japan through its Japanese Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) and several Multilateral banks, primarily the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. With countries like India and Thailand supporting such master plans through their Look East Policies and Look West Policies, Manipur and other parts of India’s North East confronts development onslaught of multinational corporations and intrusion of international financial institutions, conscripting agriculture land in the subsequent industrialization and infrastructure development processes. Neither its people nor its land and resources are involved in definition of such development priorities but rather subjected them for exploitation in all forms to advance their interest and priorities. These infrastructures will only facilitate dumping of cheap agricultural produces from across borders and destroying indigenous agriculture.

Manipur also saw aggressive corporate expansionism with several policies formed to facilitate such processes. The Manipur Loktak Lake Protection Act, 2006, the Manipur Tourism Policy, 2011 and also the Manipur Hydroelectric Power Policy, 2012 etc all favour privatisation and corporatization of peoples land and resources, all of which will require substantial acquisition of agricultural land forcibly and evicting communities. There’s ongoing process to introduce the New Land Use Policy (NLUP), 2014 to facilitate privatisation and commodification of communities’ land and resources. Several farmers’ bodies already opposed the 6th amendment Bill of Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms recently passed in the 7th session of the 10th Legislative Assembly in March 2014, for favouring the rich and wealthy[[4]](#footnote-4).

Development injustice has strongly been pursued in forced confiscation of peoples land and eviction of small scale farmers. Conscription of agriculture land with state militarism and justice denial can never be sustainable and just development. Further, the police personnel involved in unleashing brutalities on communities asserting defense of their agriculture land as in the case of Mapithel Dam, Khuga Dam, Loktak Eviction etc faces no trial and hence justice remains denied to them.

One also needs to reflect as to the objective and purpose of protecting agriculture land. This question finds much relevance given the high inputs to agriculture and as farmers increasingly finds it difficult to sustain their agricultural activities. One need to introspect what additional factors threatens Manipur’s agriculture, such as the promulgation of subsidy oriented policies such as National Food Security Act, 2012 and its inconsiderate application in Manipur with enormous potential to destroy indigenous agriculture with dumping of cheap and chemical laden food grain from outside Manipur. Moreover, multinational corporations aggressively promoted their agricultural products ranging from high yielding seeds, chemicals, pesticides, herbicides etc, which will eventually destroy indigenous agriculture, subjecting small scale farmers fully dependent on chemical laden and high capital intensive forms of agriculture. This will render farming impossible for impoverished and marginal farmers. There’s also wide impact of free trade agreement signed by the Government of India with South East Asian countries on agriculture in Manipur. Cheap agriculture products from Myanmar, Thailand and China already destroyed production of seasonal indigenous crops of Manipur[[5]](#footnote-5).

For the Manipur Government, which has long ceased to think for itself, can it really oppose or obstruct the larger dominant paradigm or liberalization of agriculture and subsequent impacts on small scale and marginal farmers? Agriculture in India has landed in further crisis after wide reforms in the after math of the neo-liberal policies of 1991. Decline in the public investment, shrinking public extension services and contraction of institutional credit availability in rural areas after 1991 policy reforms has led to widespread agrarian crisis. The Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee Act, 2003 has been amended to facilitate setting up private markets, allowing contract farming and legalizing direct purchase from farmers. Multinational companies gained spaces in procurement, wholesale trade and retailing, much to the detriment of small scale farmers. 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 corporate agriculture.

The reality today is the unregulated corporate expansionism under imperialist globalization is the biggest threat to sustainable agriculture in Manipur? The Government need be sensitive to such external challenges and threats to agriculture in Manipur, both in the hills and plains, including due to climate change. 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 agriculture land will simply be irrational?

One also wonder if there will there be reconsideration of the Policies like Manipur Tourism Policy 2011 and Manipur Hydroelectric Power Policy and other legislations that will destroy farmland and restrict community’s access to community land. Especially, the Manipur Tourism policy stipulated creating land banks and to simplify all necessary environmental, social, forest clearances for those that can accord maximum investments. The other policy will submerge vast prime agriculture land.

Again, will there be real defense of agriculture land in Manipur? And for whom will they be defended? Will it be for the people or for the State functionaries or for the Multinational Corporations? What should be the process to defend? Can such process be defined exclusively by the State without involving communities who very much depends on their land for survival? The call for protection of agriculture land comes also at a time when wetlands are destroyed, with massive urbanization and for pursuance of unregulated industrial activities.

One also wonders what will be considered as agricultural land and whether it will be confined to only permanent cultivable land. Manipur has different categories of agriculture land, depending on the terrain and geography, in the plains, wetlands, hills and in the forest with different agricultural practice. 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 acknowledge and accept best practices and ways to protect agricultural land in different terrains.

What kind of exception clause will be outlined, if ever there’s a policy for agriculture land protection? With “Eminent Domain” concept ruling supreme and with legislations like the Manipur Land Registration and Reform Act, 1960, whose provisions are in line with the British colonial land act, Land Acquisition Act, 1894, still allowing State to forcibly acquire peoples’ land for ‘public’ purpose, one wonders how the Manipur Government will ensure protection of communities rights.

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. Reviewing and changing development processes or policies detrimental in sustainable agriculture of Manipur is urgently required. Protection of agriculture land cannot and simply work in isolation less there’s a concerted effort both to understand and to respond to the larger forces, which already threatened the socio- economic, political and cultural values of Manipur. A serious endeavour to ensure agriculture sector remains a viable survival option is very much crucial. 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.

1. “CLP bats for saving Agriculture Land”, 10 July 2014, the Sangai Express [↑](#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. Developmental challenges : Airport & University expansion, The Sangai Express, 11 May 2008, <http://e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=news_section.opinions.Politics_and_Governance.Developmental_challenges_Airport_Univ_expansion> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. #  Farmers` body opposes Manipur Land revenue and Land reforms 6th amendment Bill 2014

The [Imphal Free Press](http://kanglaonline.com/author/ifp/), March 3, 2014, <http://kanglaonline.com/2014/03/farmers-body-opposes-manipur-land-revenue-and-land-reforms-6th-amendment-bill-2014/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ##  “Banned food items from Myanmar still sold”,  [The Peoples Chronicle](http://www.manipurtimes.com/news-article/the-peoples-chronicle-news/itemlist/user/45-thepeopleschronicle), 3 August 2013

 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)