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Political Environment and Conditions of Protest: Manipur Experience

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to initiate an exploration of various environmental factors associated with the incidence of collective social protest activities, which is directed mostly towards the state authority and its agencies in Manipur. Good governance is considered to be a requisite for the smooth functioning of the state machineries, which induces an ideal environment for the socio-economic development of the state as well as its citizens. The legitimacy of the state authority is dependent on the trust the people has on the authority. This legitimacy of authority and trust could be sustained by the conventional functioning of the state agencies such as the courts and the police. The courts and the police are the two main agencies of the state which is directly responsible for the rights, justice, equality and safety of its citizens. When these two agencies are unresponsive in a political setup, it gives rises to conditions of social protest activities.

Key Words: Protest, Political Environment, Governance, Bandhs, Blockades

Introduction

Various studies have been undertaken which shows a correlation between political structure and incidents of protests. There is a relationship between trust, legitimacy of authority and protests (Worchel *et al.*1974). When there is an imposition of a threat to the physical and economic security, integrity and central values of individual members in the system, created by certain feelings and ideas such as inequality, injustice, frustration of one kind or another, blocking of potential ability to satisfy needs, threat to self-esteem, relative deprivation etc. by the political structure, there tends to be an upsurge of collective protest activities (*ibid.*). Then, one can assume, protests occur more frequently in unresponsive and unrepresentative political system (Eisinger 2008). Protest is directed at those in authority to correct the inequity. The absence of channels to effect some correction and the persistence of inequities in the system lead to distrust and erosion of the legitimacy of the existing authority structure (Worchel *et. al.*1974). Legitimacy of the authority is a function of trust and this trust depends on the objectivity of the authorities in resolving conflicts, the degree to which the legal system, including the courts and the police, implement the principle of equality, and the trustworthiness of the statements made by legitimate figures (Flacks 1969). Erosion of legitimacy of authority is not so much a matter of grievances not being met but that the idea of going to authorities with grievances is questioned. The basic elements which promote hostile outbursts are (a) the availability of communication channels which lead to crowd mobilization, (b) the failure of legitimate authorities to deal justly with all the conflicting elements, and (c) the belief that going to the authorities is practically useless (Smelser 1965: 227-241).

Environmental factors, such as the climate of governmental responsiveness and the level of community resources, help to establish the chances of citizen protest activity. In short, elements in the environment impose certain constraints on protest activities or open avenues for it. The manners in which individuals or groups in the political system behave are not simply a function of the resources they command but of the openings, weak spots, barriers and resources of the political system itself. There is interaction or linkage between the environment understood in terms of the notion of a structure of political opportunities and protest behaviour (Eisinger 2008).

Contemporary Political Environment Scenario in Manipur

Political environment is a generic term used variously in the literature of political science to refer to, among other things, aspects of formal political structure, the climate of governmental responsiveness, social structure and social stability (*ibid.*). Manipur is one of the eight states in the northeast region of India. These north eastern states are tiny in terms of its geographical size, with limited revenue and considerable expenditure. These states are economically unviable and therefore the government of India treats them as special category states (Sinha 2005, Marwah 2009). According to Sinha (2005) the north-eastern states lacks committed, foresighted and effective leadership and the decision making process is highly unsatisfactory. Such a situation makes the common man lost, insecure and always apprehensive. Manipur today is regarded as the worst affected state in the region (Marwah 2009). It is no more a question of law and order problem but more of a socio-politico, economic and governance problem. Level of corruption reaches new heights and this has vitiated the process of socio-economic development (*ibid.*). The level of corruption in the state is so awful that it has affected the psyche of the younger generations. The youngsters feel that securing a job is an impossible task without a bribe. From primary teachers to Manipur Public Service Commission (MPSC) recruitment examinations, there are allegations of high corruption. It is observed that the job of a sub-inspector in the state police requires a bribe of 15 to 25 lakh Rupees, for additional sub-inspector 10 to 15 lakhs Rupees, for constable 5-7 lakh Rupees (Lisam 2013). This has led to a deteriorating quality police force as the personnel are more interested in earning quick money, than doing their duty, by indulging in crimes like drug trafficking, kidnapping or collusion with underground elements (*ibid.*). 'There will be two thousand candidates for a single post of a peon and the minister himself will personally see to it that each of them pays a fee to him through his intermediaries just for pleasure of being the candidate. If he is to get the job, then of course he will have to pay much more. Thus the whole state administration has been turned to an auction market for jobs; the highest bidder gets the job' (Borgohain 1982).

The functioning of the state police has also become highly unsatisfactory. According to the reports of the National Crime Records Bureau, Manipur has the highest number of pendency of cases. The pendency rate for IPC (Indian Penal Code) and SLL (Special and Local Laws) Crimes in Manipur was reported as 88.3% and 92.8% respectively for the year 2011 and 86.7% and 91.0% for the year 2012. This highest rate of pendency in cases is a clear example of police unresponsiveness and incompetence in ensuring the safety and providing justice to the people. Moreover the Supreme Court found six cases of alleged extra-judicial killings that the committee investigated as fake¹. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) also declared 20 cases heard by the commission as fake. The commission went on to say that almost all encounters in the state appear to be staged². As for such reasons, the people in Manipur have developed a different perception of the law enforcing

agencies. Mistrust of the public towards the security forces is large, where they are seen as tormentors rather than helpers.

Manipur today is a picture of violence, corruption, poor governance, and ethnically fragmented society (Singh 2008). The government has lost its authority, especially the moral authority over the people, by and large and it would not be wrong to say that nobody anymore trusts the government. Not any particular government, but the institution of government as such, is capable of doing anything honestly or with the larger interest of the people. This is the general psychology that generation after generation of the state's leaders have left to the psyche of the people. Manipur's salvation can dawn only when this trust and faith in the authority and intent of the democratically elected government is re-inculcated in the people (Phanjoubam 2005).

Protest and Manipur

Protest in this modern age seems to have transcended the traditional Marxian struggle over class structure and private property, and includes much broader spectrum of shifting interests relating to diverse pursuits and civil rights (Boschken 1975). The issue of protests pose a serious challenge in Manipur today. The recurrence of such forms of agitation is so frequent that it has come to be seen more as a rule rather than an exception. Protest in Manipur, comes in various forms such as sit-ins, rallies, bandhs, general strikes, economic blockades etc. The most prominent ways of protesting are bandhs and general strikes in the valley region of Manipur and economic blockades in the hill districts. Inability of the state to resolve disputes and the fact that people are not able to realise the legitimate aspirations within the existing socio-economic and legal framework are a major cause for appraisal of such protests.

Protests are a function of the diverse interests and aspirations in segmented society at large (*ibid.*), and the failure of legitimate authorities to deal justly in resolving conflicts (Smelser 1962; Worchel *et al.*1974). Social protest is an expression of grievance that intends to provoke ameliorative action (Altheide and Gilmore 1972). A protest is an expression or declaration of objection, disapproval or dissent, often in opposition to something a person is powerless to prevent or avoid. The act of protest includes five elements: the action expresses a grievance, a conviction of wrong or injustice, the protestors are unable to correct the condition directly by their own efforts, the action is intended to draw attention to the grievances, the action is further meant to provoke ameliorative steps by some target group and the protesters depend upon some combination of sympathy and fear to move the target group in their behalf (Turner 1969). The term protest may be used either generically to refer to any form of verbal or active objection or remonstrance or it may be used technically to refer to a conceptually set of behaviours. Protest refers to a host of types of collective manifestations, disruptive in nature, designed to provide "relatively powerless" people with bargaining leverage in the political process (Eisinger 2008).

Table 1 shows the number of incidents of blockades, bandhs and strikes for ten years from 2004 to 2013. The data is compiled from two or more newspaper reports, crosschecked against each other, to ascertain the authenticity of the incidents reported. The total number of such protest incidents in the last ten years is 535, that is 53.5 incidents of protest a year and 4.45 incidents every month. These protests amounted to a loss of 1268 days, at an average of 126 days per year and 10.56 days a month. That is a day of protest almost every three days. The data signifies frequent public agitation, indicating an unresponsive political environment, poor governance and insensitive police force towards the issues faced by the public in the state of Manipur.

Table 2 shows the number of incidents of protest, in the form of bandhs and strikes which had drastic impact state-wide, against the conduct of the security forces. The graph shows a decrease in the number of incidents after 2009. This could be attributed to the aftermath of the July 23, 2009 Khwairamband Bazar encounter case, where the incident was reported in Tehelka magazine³, which clearly reveals a contrary version to the official Manipur police version. This incident led to a state-wide remonstrations which led to a strict scrutiny to address the grievances of the people. After the said incident, which revealed the conduct of security forces, the government and various other state agencies were forced to adhere to the rule of law. Plausibly, there is a correlation between good governance and reduction in rates of collective protests.

Conclusion

Though the government of Manipur faces huge criticism every now and then, little has been done to improve the functioning of its government agencies. It is noticed that public remonstrations in Manipur is generally high, given the fact that the political environment is at an unconventional state of affairs. The chronic protest activity that keeps on recurring is due to unresponsive and insensitive governance. Corrupt, unjust, and hypocritical use of power by state authorities provides the rational basis for the upsurge of different forms of public protest, particularly when legitimate channels of achieving the goals are closed or ineffective. Fine governance, proper law and order maintenance, justice and a strong political will only will ensure the safety of the people, which will reinstate the faith and trust on the state authority. The government had to seriously think on the issue of collective public protest, which pose a serious challenge in the socio-economic development of the state and its people. Such protest, which is both violent and nonviolent, has seriously crippled the state economy to a very large extent.

The incidents of protests occurring in Manipur could be inferred from the existing political scenario of the state. This exploration seems to validate the existing theoretical formulation regarding the relationship between the political environment of a society and the occurrence of protests. It is also observed from table 2 that a conventional and appropriate mode of functioning of the state agencies tends to reduce the protest activity.

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In 2013, a committee appointed by the Supreme Court, comprising retired judge Santosh Hegde, former chief election commissioner J M Lyngdoh and former Karnataka police chief A K Singh, examined a case in PIL hearing filed by a Manipur group, Extra Judicial Execution Victims Families Association to probe 1,528 alleged fake or staged encounters in Manipur carried out by the Indian security forces. The committee selected six cases and found that none of them were genuine.

NHRC, as a full commission investigated 44 cases of fake encounters that took place in Manipur between 2005 and 2010, against complaints filed by families of victims of the alleged fake encounters. 20 cases have already been declared fake and the remaining 22 cases, the Commission is yet to come to a conclusion. The news has been reported in all leading newspapers and news channels in November 2013.

Tehelka Magazine, vol. 6, issue 31, dated August 08, 2009, carried a detailed report with a series of pictures of sequences of events leading to the shooting to death, by the Manipur police commandos (MPC), of Chongkham Sanjit at Bir Tikendrajt Road, a crowded street in Imphal. The report belies the initial claim made by the MPC that he was fired at because he resisted arrest and fired at the forces.

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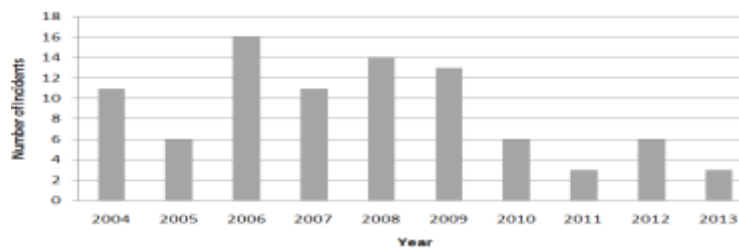
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Table 1
Year wise data of Bandhs/Strikes/Blockades and number of days lost over the last ten years (2004 - 2013)

YEAR	Blockades		Bandhs/Strikes			
			State-wide		Partial	
	Incidents	Days	Incidents	Days	Incidents	Days
2004	7	34	19	15 Days 13 Hours	27	27 Days 7 Hours
2005	4	87	9	9 Days 15 Hours	22	35 Days 15 Hours
2006	11	72	20	20 days 3 hours	41	51 Days 5 Hours
2007	8	74	11	12 Days 3 Hours	33	45 Days 20 Hours
2008	5	46	14	13 Days 9 Hours	28	36 Days 14 hours
2009	4	40	17	24 Days 21 Hours	46	53 Days 18 Hours
2010	3	128	13	9 Days	39	95 Days 21 Hours
2011	4	131	11	12 Days 21 Hours	40	56 Days 9 Hours
2012	2	6	13	12 Days 2 Hours	27	41 Days 22 Hours
2013	4	13	23	20 Days 20 Hours	30	52 Days 8 Hours
Total	52	621	150	150 Days 11 Hours	333	496 Days 19 Hours

Source: Newspaper reports over the last ten years (*The Sangai Express, Huiyen News Service, Newmai News Network* etc).

Table: 2
Year wise remonstrated incidents relating to alleged fake encounters, forced abductions, unwarranted arrests, custodial deaths etc. by security forces



Source: Newspaper reports over the last ten years (*The Sangai Express, Huiyen News Service, Newmai News Network* etc).