

Fellow's Presentation

Topic: **"Democracy in Jeopardy: Problems & Prospects in India's north east with special reference to Manipur"**

Presenter: **Ch. Rupachandra**, Fellow, (MAKAIAS)

External Expert: **Dr. Dulali Nag**, IISWBM

Date : **24.08.2012**

Time : **3.30 pm**

Venue: **Azad Bhawan, Salt Lake**

Rapporteur: **Anwasha Ghosh**, Researcher, MAKAIAS

Ch. Rupachandra's presentation titled "Democracy in Jeopardy: Problems and prospects in India's northeast with special reference to Manipur" highlighted the problems of India's North East Policy. He argued that the process of assimilation of North-Eastern region into India started relatively late and over the years the Indian state has failed to provide the citizens with rights enjoyed by other parts of India. Though the presentation was meant to deal with the entire northeast region, the focus was on the state of Manipur. The role played by the Indian government and the adoption of various policies towards the region has been unsatisfactory, according to the presenter whose paper makes the pertinent point that, inspite of apparent commonalities between the states of Northeast, they have divergent historical, political, socio-economic roots and concerns, and therefore clubbing them together had its own share of problems. The saga of suffering for the people of this region is not a recent one and has its origin in colonial times. The region has been witness to many socio-political movements, including the First Women's War launched in 1904, all of which has been seen as steps towards democracy. The paper highlights the ongoing political violence and indicates the absence of democratic politics and good governance as factors behind such this. The presenter spoke of the government attempts at suppressing the reactions of the masses against the government and how that in itself goes against the principles of democracy. After briefly discussing the historical backdrop, Rupachandra emphasized political violence. He identified that separatist feelings emerged on the basis of ethnicity, identity and history but feelings of exploitation, discrimination and neglect were largely as a result of bad governance, corruption and economic underdevelopment. Therefore through the democratic institutions were firmly established, citizens often felt powerless to influence national or state policies. The presenter argued that democratic politics demand attention for the empowerment of the people so that they are capable of taking active roles in every facet of existence- which was largely missing from India's agenda. Through his presentation, Rupachandra attempted to highlight the contradictions of India's policy towards Northeast. He argued that all issues of democracy could be accomplished through the democratic process and the revival of the idea of integration by understanding the serious impact of the imposition of a new nation state on an old society.

Discussion Session:

Dr. Dulali Nag, the external expert, appreciated the comprehensive presentation and pointed at the central argument - Is Democracy practicable in a situation where its pre-conditions are absent? She started by quoting Winston Churchill, who said "*Democracy* is the worst form of government except that all the others have been tried". In her excellent deliberation she raised several pertinent

questions including, to what extent Democracy has lived up to its promises to the people of India at large. Dr. Nag pointed out that the issue was not exclusive to Manipur or the Northeast, that there are several regions in India which feel alienated from mainstream politics. She gave examples of the Maoist movements in the country and pointed out that the arguments of the insurgents are not too different from those of Northeast except for the context. She agreed to a certain extent with the presenter's argument that the ongoing violence is due to lack of good governance in the country. She discussed another pertinent point raised in the paper - why the conflict was not resolved by peaceful democratic means - and highlighted the answer given by Rupachandra. She pointed out that at the beginning of his presentation the presenter had argued that Democracy was a theoretical concept/construct with no practical relevance while in the later half he contradicted himself by saying that the conflicts in the region were a result of functioning democracy. She urged the presenter to look at the problem from a historical perspective, especially in respect to formation of new ethnic groups. Dr. Nag also pointed that one major problem of the presentation was the State-centred view of the problem. Globalization has had an immense impact on the issue, along with other neighbouring countries like Burma. Therefore to limit the perspective only to the State might not be correct.

She also shared her experiences of working in the region and especially highlighted the socio-economic changes that took place once the border to Burma was opened for trade. She gave the example of Namphalang Market to explain the demographic shift. She argued that the Manipuris historically were involved in agriculture as opposed to trade and commerce, which was the forte of the 'Indian' business class (as the locals would term them). However after the opening of the border and the increase in the proportion of illegal trade, the locals also wanted to have a share in the economic gains and some of them accumulated enormous wealth, which then became a reason for conflict. Today the power and clout of the Indian trading community has diminished to a large extent and more power rests with Manipuris, which in a way she cites as 'Democratic'. At the same time she argued that the violence in the region is largely indigenous in nature as opposed to being directed against the Indian state. The globalised economy and its impact needs to be given more importance while dealing with this topic she argued. To conclude Dr. Nag pointed out that the presenter has highlighted just one side of the picture, and that distorts the analysis. Justice is not an abstract concept and it works through law and order, therefore one has to go through the system of law and order to claim or complain about the lack of it.

Following Dr. Dulali Nag's observations and comments, questions and observations came from the floor as follows:

- ✓ One of the fellows who had worked in Nagaland shared his experience and the common people's view of 'Democracy' and pointed out that the people generally view "politics as a good business".
- ✓ Observations indicated that in spite of everything Nagaland and Manipur have 87% and 82% turnout respectively in the elections while the national average was less than 56%.
- ✓ Questions were raised over the limited presence of Indian traders in the market of Morey, when representation from other Southeast Asian countries was adequate
- ✓ Along with economic factors what sort of role did religion and culture play in the India-Manipuri divide?