

Book Review

Jiten Yumnam, *Development Aggression Rethinking India's Neoliberal Development in Manipur*, Yaol Publishing Limited, London, 2021.

Reviewed by Khullakpham Ruqaiya

The book is a must read book for anyone who is interested in development politics in Manipur, one of the states in the north-eastern region of India. Manipur is known for conflict-prone situation due to multiple inter and intra-ethnic conflicts coupled with problems of insurgency and low economic growth. The Indian state after adopting the Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization policy in 1991 intensified the course for a neoliberal model of development. The trajectory of development that the post-colonial Indian state pursues is to bring security to its conflict-prone situation. However since three decades, the neoliberal agenda of development was best reflected in the formulation of the Look East Policy (LEP) rechristened as the Act East Policy (AEP) to realise the region's strategic location and utilize its untapped resources by initiating development projects aimed for increasing connectivity with the neighbouring South East Asian nations. Therefore, a critical examination of the neoliberal developmental intervention and a study of its implications in the region are highly necessary and this enlightening book strikes at this juncture to explore and analyse the practices of development in the region.

This book critically examines and peels off the dark layers that neoliberal model of development that the Indian state pursued in Manipur and other states of the region. The author: Jiten Yumnam, an eminent activist of Manipur has posed serious questions by critiquing the model of neoliberal development. He provides a fantastical compilation of data and sources from international agencies backed by his own experiences as an activist and an advocate of indigenous rights in Manipur. He overtly argues that the model of development that the Indian state pursues towards developing Manipur is simply just 'development aggression'. He shows that the policies like the AEP is a political tool designed by global monopoly IFIs (International Financial Institutions) allowed by the Indian state to loot, plunder and exploit the resources in the name of increasing trade; attracting investments and improving economic growth of the state. Another striking point he notes in the book is that, the development projects undermine the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the Indian state clamps down any resistance and dissent voices that sprung up in the state

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level with tactics of militarisation and strategies of repression (p.105). Development for him is not a 'problem' rather he presents it as a 'challenge' (p.xliv). He challenges the policy of the Indian state in pursuing the neoliberal model of development aggression not only from ideological perspective but also highlights an extensive critical evaluation and examination of not only immediate but also long term negative consequences of development processes in the state of Manipur.

The book is divided into twelve chapters with a brief comprehensive *foreword* and a lucid explanatory *introduction* part. The *foreword* and the *introduction* parts perfectly present and spell out the analytical structure of the book. The book builds a structure for its critical take on the model of development with that of experiences rather than theories. The scholar who gave the *introduction* clearly spells out, 'Jiten's chapters in this book are instances of an activist's writing against the development project' (p.xxvii). The chapters evolve around three central themes. First, he identifies the key policies of the Indian state for economically developing the region along with its partnership with the big development IFIs, Regional banks, Regional organisations and the like. The second aspect that he deals in every chapter is to look at the issues and concerns of the capitalist driven development policies forming a nexus and a chain with the profit maximising companies by suppressing, repressing resistance of the local people further alienating and violating the indigenous rights to land, labour and livelihood. The right to protest, dissent has been restricted; 'consent' in formulating a policy meant for development of the state and the society has never been prioritized by the state. The third aspect that he presents out is by looking at the resistance movements; analysing the community responses and concluding that the protests and resistance movements are being left unheard by the state as it clamps down any movement or protests that crops up. Thus, he argues that repression and resistance are trapped in a vicious cycle leading to violence and conflict in the region. He argues that the AEP is an agenda of promoting the IFIs and the Multinational Companies (MNCs) to gain only profits by extracting and exploiting the natural resources of the region in the name of development. The first chapter presents sections that deal with the contexts, processes, contents and impact of the LPG regime in the region with special focus in Manipur. He presents in the chapter how the AEP heavily depended on financial loans signed through several bilateral and multilateral agreements with IFIs based in France, Germany, Japan related to fund connectivity projects, energy projects, improve infrastructure, water sanitization and privatization, agribusiness, power sector reforms and to enhance security cooperation.

The second chapter explains the role and challenges in implementing the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) of India particularly in Manipur. He argues that the state took almost four years to complete a plan and implement the SDGs. The Manipur's vision 2030 was released in 2019 envisioning efforts for inclusive development eliminating factors that hinders sustainable development as well. After the adoption of SDGs in 2015, the author highlights the cases of aggressive mining operations, projects for building dams, oil and gas exploration, starting agribusiness along with efforts to undertake large infrastructure projects initiated under the Act East policy. The aggressive push for development has led to the increasing intervention

from the private corporate bodies and the state's lack of regulating these bodies has led to marginalization of indigenous people and their rights to life and livelihood by plundering resources of the indigenous people in the state. Therefore, he argues this has led to unsustainable push for development leading to development injustice to the indigenous population in the state.

The Government of India has the liberty to privatise and liberalise oil exploration, drilling and extraction projects after 1991. In Manipur, he traces the impact of these efforts by the Government of the state allowing the MNCs to explore, drill oil and gas as early as 1996. Since 1997 as the GOI adopted the New Exploration Licensing Policy (NELP) inviting big MNCs in the oil sector, there has been series of Production Sharing Contracts (PSC) and Petroleum Exploration Licensing (PEL) that followed. In 2016, the Hydrocarbon Vision 2030 for North east India, the Government aims to enhance the oil and gas production in the region to 16 metric tonnes per annum (mtpa) from 7 mtpa 2030. Here, this chapter presents how the GOI signed oil exploration projects with the Jubilant Oil and Gas Private Limited (JOGPL) in 2003 and 2009 unknown to the people of the state leading to greater resistance and protests which he listed and explained in detail of these instances in the chapter. The company withdrew oil exploration activities from the state due to narrow, bad road conditions of the state. In 2017, after the withdrawal of JOGPL, other companies like Oil India Limited (OIL) and Assam Oilfield Services Limited (AOSL). Meanwhile in 2018, the Manipur government tried to win back the Dutch farm, the JOGPL but in vain. He expressed deep concern of the increasing push by the GOI and the state government for oil exploration in Manipur. He outlined the issues and concerns of these initiatives in the states of the North East region of India: the limitation of the Indian laws, fear of oil spill, fear of gas flaring, absence of adequate Environment Impact Assessment (EIA), fear of loss and livelihood and are not serving the interests of the indigenous people of the states in the region. He calls for an end to all forms of threats and intimidations directed towards the human rights activists and against those who speak against the Government's efforts of corporatizing the land and resources of the region.

The fourth chapter deals with the intensifying survey works aiming for extracting minerals in Manipur. The state Government adopted the Industrial and Investment Policy of Manipur in 2013 re-notified in 2017. The Manipur Mineral policy was adopted in 2018 followed by series of Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) signed by the state government with several mining companies. This has been further enhanced by the increasing efforts of investment by International Financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the Asian Development Bank and corporate bodies from the developed countries like Japan, South Korea. In the chapter, he listed out all the mining processes done in villages of the different districts. He further discusses the issues and impacts of the Mining Operations of how these operations have been violating the free prior and informed consent (FPIC) of the affected people and also undermines indigenous people's rights and can lead to environmental destruction. The author's take on these projects are incredibly unfolded in this chapter explaining how it can cause health hazards by focusing on the negative impact of mining operations done in context like Papua New Guinea. The cases of corporate extraction, tax avoidance and community

impoverishment in Mineral rich states like Jharkhand, Odissa, Bihar and Chattisgarh are highlighted. He highlights the case of Africa: one of the most impoverished continents with the highest malnutrition rate, poverty worsened by the increasing conflict and abuse of human rights due to militarization of the potential mining areas. Therefore, by bringing the cases of adverse impacts on the environment in different contexts, he emphasizes to rethink and reject the mining operations and plans in Manipur to work towards Sustainable development rooted in protecting the indigenous rights to land and livelihood.

Many talk about the adverse impact of building dams even if they are considered as symbols of 'national' pride, progress and built in the name of development. But according to the author, he argues the controversy over dam building has far better involvement with the moral, political and philosophical concerns that needs a critical assessment of the idea of 'Development' used in the economic policy that the Indian State pursued. He traced the history of initiating large scale hydel projects since the 1970s till the present. This chapter focuses more on the resistance movements and explains in detail the specific cases of community resistance against the mega dam projects. He briefly mentions the failed dam projects in the state and how the affected villagers in those areas resisted and protested urging the Government to revoke land acquisition order. However, he brings into the attention of the newly proposed dam projects to be given immediate attention as he warns that it will further lead to destruction of the people's land and livelihood. He further points out the devastating impacts of proposed dam projects that it is wastage of public resources, leading to further corporatization of land, can increase human rights violations already devastated by long history of failed dams in the state which cannot simply be ignored. He overtly highlights the reasons that hydropower projects are irrelevant in the state as the initial projects were unsuccessful. He simply stated that dams are a stark reminder of development injustice meted out by the government by allowing the unaccountable MNCs like the NHPC (National Hydroelectric Power Corporation).

His book critically analyses the efforts of Indian Government to improve connectivity in the region and calls for rethinking the efforts and policies of the Trans Asian Railway works in the sixth chapter. Since the 1990s, the call for enhancing connectivity with the mainland cities was emphasized. In 2003-04, the Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) project for the Manipur section was sanctioned and the construction started in 2008. This project constitutes an important infrastructure project of the Act East policy. He presents the detailed cases of railway works and its impacts due to violations of TAR in villages of some districts. The cases involve violation of FPIC leading to forced acquisition and neglect of EIA, Social Impact Assessment (SIA) and Environment Management Plan (EMP) thereby leading to destruction of the forests and neglect of forest's protection rights, the construction affects the water sources and frequent landslides happened due to blasting. He highlights the deceitful measures and manipulation to manufacture consent which is done by the administrators and certain influential persons to pursue the construction works thereby heightening conflicts among the communities in the affected villages.

Another layer that adds to his definition of development as aggression is due to

the militarization and repression policies by the Indian Government. The militarization tactics and policies enforced in some states of the region by the Government of India for security and strategic reasons are well known for its widespread human rights violations. He mentions in the seventh chapter of certain cases in which the armed troops are deployed to suppress people who are social activists and who protests against the anti-indigenous projects and opposed their construction processes. Instances of the projects sites being militarised were mentioned and these instances clearly show that the armed troops serve the corporate bodies and their interests by suppressing democratic voices and resistance movements in the affected areas.

This book indeed brings in multiple cases of failed projects; assessing their failures and the controversies surrounding these development projects. The eighth chapter extensively analyses the instance of the failed Public Private Partnership project: the Teesta III project which involved a complex financing processes of the Private Equity Funds and faulty financing of the Major IFIs. The author points out that the project lacks regulatory mechanisms and no scope of accountability measures. He added the studies in which they have shown that the project is unsustainable and has devastated agricultural land and people's lives which have been worsened by the Government of Sikkim being pulled in the circle of debt burden as the state government was already having limited resources. He clearly states that he brings this instance to serve as an eye opener of how development projects in fragile areas and poor governance in handling failed projects can lead to disastrous consequences to the people and the environment.

It seems that based on his personal observation in the IMF/World Bank Annual Meeting at Bali and the subsequent meetings, he argues that these meetings highlight the importance of reflecting and scrutinizing the World Bank's financing processes in the North East region of India and beyond. In the ninth chapter, he highlights the contradictions, issues and concerns being raised by the civil society organizations in the meeting held in Bali. He argues that it is high time for more scrutiny on the notion and development and its push initiated strongly by the World Bank and other IFIs in financing development's projects not only in Manipur but in other states like Mizoram, Meghalaya and Assam under the Act east Policy as mentioned in the chapter. Therefore, as he discusses extensively on the issues around WB funded projects and development processes, he further calls for a serious introspection on these funded projects to rather opt for a sustainable and should not violate and oppress indigenous people's rights and resources.

Asian Development Bank (ADB) and its financed road projects in Manipur which has caused enormous social and environmental impacts is the main theme for the tenth chapter. He highlights extensively issues of concern and increased risk of the state government to fall in a vicious cycle of debt, conflict and unending exploitation and destruction of indigenous rights. Another personal observation that he made after attending the East Asian Summit 2019 held in Bangkok was that it strengthens the neoliberal policy. He questions the base of the EAS whether it can achieve regional cooperation as emphasized. Instead of developing the region, the Act East policy pursues passing of Free Trade Agreements with the ASEAN (Association of South

East Asian Nations) and the relaxation of Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) by the major economies. However, he argues that this policy of free and liberalised trading system has rather intensified the vicious cycle of conflict, supressing human rights in the affected areas of the region.

The author clearly states that Manipur must not be a victim of ‘development aggression’. The author in the conclusion criticizing the neoliberal development aggression model, rather calls for a sustainable, holistic approach of development which is sensitive to the cultural, social, economic, political, environmental needs of the states in the region and addressed that the Indian state must be defenders and protectors of indigenou and human rights.

However, it will not be far-fetched to mention here that the book needs a theoretical structure to serve as pillars in which the existing experiences, observations of the author can fit in or compared to; to situate and theorise the practices of development based on the particular context: the North east region of India. Nevertheless, the book is based on practical considerations, individual research derived from personal experiences, observations in the author’s journey of advocacy and activism. It is packed with detailed information about on going, new proposed, complete (failed) and incomplete (stalled/delayed) development projects funded by the major corporate giants to improve road, water, sanitation, building smart cities, infrastructure development in the state of Manipur and the other states of the region.

This book provides a fresh, critical, unconventional and raw account shaped by the author’s first hand experiences backed by the data collected in his field visits and interactions with the indigenou communities in the state fighting and helping them find a voice for their rights. Therefore, this book serves as a perfect eye opener and an excellent book for students, researchers, observers, policy makers, activists, developmental activists and scholars who are interested in exploring angles to understand, analyze and study practices of development in the state of Manipur and the other states in the North-east region of India.