

Examining Some Aspects of the Political Economy of Manipur from the Perspective of Amartya Sen's Theory of Development

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The paper examines the political economy of Manipur and explores whether Amartya Sen's theory of development as freedom could be applied to elevate the economic backwardness and other socio-political problems in the state. Sen's theory of development states that development is to be measured in terms of the freedom people have to choose the kind of life they want to lead. Development requires that an enabling environment whereby people are empowered economically, socially and politically in order to have the capability to make rational choices. Traditional yardsticks of development like high GDP, increase in per capita income, growth in GNP, technological advancement, etc. do not capture the true essence of development. Besides economic growth, there are also equally important factors of development such as civil and political liberties, justice, equality, health, education etc. So, development would mean removing all sorts of what Sen would call "unfreedoms" which could be economic, social and political in nature. Manipur is one of the most disturbed states, economically backward and politically unstable due to various insurgent groups operating in the state. AFSPA is used to maintain law and order thereby curtailing various rights and civil liberties granted by the Constitution of India to its citizens. All sorts of 'unfreedoms' – the obstacles that stand in the way of development – have their nagging presence in this state. So, Sen's theory of development has special relevance to the problems of Manipur and may serve as an effective remedy.

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Introduction

Amartya Sen's theory of development as freedom brings into perspective certain factors which are not taken into account or ignored by traditional theories of development. Traditional yardsticks of development would take into account the

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increase in personal income, per capita income, growth in GDP, GNP, growth in industrialisation, advancement in technology and so on without taking into consideration whether they are effective in enhancing the quality of life of the people. Sen feels that economic growth by itself does not depict the true essence of development. Economic growth should facilitate in empowering people, contribute to their wellbeing and equip them with the capability to choose the kind of life they want to lead. Two people having the same income are not equally empowered in terms of having capabilities. Their capabilities depend on the social structure they are in and even within the same social structure, the social strata to which they belong. So, development would include within its ambit, the social and political dynamics as well. This point was aptly highlighted by Alesso Maria Musella and Lucrezia Alberti Corseri in their article “The Application of Sen’s Capability Approach to the Study of Social and Economic Phenomena”. They bring into focus the plurality of personal factors and the diversity of social, environment, economic, institutional and cultural contexts and the importance of Sen’s capability approach in understanding the different rates of conversion of resources into well-being.

Manipur is bogged down by a plethora of problems starting from economic backwardness and poverty to political problems like lack of civil liberties and shrinking of democratic space to social problems like ethnic conflicts, identity and discrimination, growing intolerance and mutual distrust and enmity among different communities.

In order to correlate Amartya Sen’s theory of development as freedom to the political economy of Manipur, it is necessary to first give a brief exposition of the basic features of Sen’s theory as well as the predicament of Manipur in the introductory part of the article. Then, the more distinctive problems will be examined under the sub-heading viz. Political instability and social unrest in Manipur, Economic backwardness, Democracy in Manipur, Democracy and AFSPA. After exploring the different and varied problems, the conclusion will seek for a way forward by applying Sen’s theory of development as freedom and his theory of identity and violence in the context of Manipur and see if there is a possibility of removing the obstacles that hinder development process.

Exposition of Sen’s Theory

Amartya Sen, in his book *Development as Freedom* (2006) puts forward his view that the traditional yardsticks for measuring development like high GDP, GNP, increase in per capita income, industrialization, advancement in technology etc. do not depict the true essence of development. It is true that growth in the overall economy of the country has resulted in an increase in personal income, wealth and an opulent lifestyle of a handful of people. It is also true that India has become one of the super powers of the world. But all these have not translated into better living conditions for the majority poor nor in their well-being. Sen is of the opinion that development should rather be seen in terms of the freedom and capability people have in choosing the kind of life they want to lead. This provides a wider perspective as it includes: political and civil liberty, addressing the problem of inequalities and the issue of justice, freedom

from poverty (here he means capability poverty and not just income poverty), and so on. Mzingaye Brilliant Xaba in his article “A qualitative application of Amartya Sen’s ‘development as freedom’ theory to an understanding of social grants in South Africa” made an in-depth study of how poverty should not be seen as just low income but deprivations of the capabilities to lead a good life. He argued that social grants do play a positive role in the livelihoods of recipients but while they enable some choices to recipients, these choices are limited.¹

There is no doubt that economic growth is an important denominator and factor in the process of development. However, there are also equally important factors like political and civil liberties, distributive justice in income distribution and opportunities, the capability of people to have access to healthcare, education etc. Reversely, it may be said that development would mean the absence of ‘unfreedoms’. These unfreedoms would include “persistence of poverty and unfulfilled elementary needs, occurrence of famines and widespread hunger, violation of elementary political freedoms as well as of basic, extensive neglect of the interests and agency of women, and worsening threats to our environment and to the sustainability of our economic and social lives” (Sen 2006: xi). Therefore, development requires the removal of all sorts of unfreedoms. The process of development is therefore intimately intertwined with the process of overcoming these unfreedoms.

Sen is of the view that only a democratic system can facilitate the process of development. By democratic system, he is referring to not only the procedural aspect of democracy where elections are held every five years but substantive democracy where space is created for healthy debate, discussion and dialogue. A despotic government or an intolerant government or an elected government that functions in a despotic manner can never provide a platform to address the issues and problems of the people. A well-functioning democracy must allow public discourse, where people can participate freely for discussion and debate to thresh out issues that are important to the people and the State.

The Predicament of Manipur

The predicament of Manipur, at present a State of the North Eastern part of India, may be summarily captured in the words of S. Lokendrajit in his book *Identity and Crisis of Identity* as follows:

Our fundamental problem is the problem of underdevelopment. By underdevelopment, I mean arresting the forces of material production. We have not been able to produce material goods commensurate with our needs. We do not have any industrial infrastructure for growth. All the money coming from the Central Government goes into security and salary heads. The plan money pumping into the State is taken out again through supply of commodities in a basically captive market. The State has not been able to create indigenous capital and built up infrastructure for further growth.³

Coupled with this, the shrinking of democratic space and gross violations of human rights, growing intolerance, ethnic clashes, mutual distrust and enmity among the

various communities, Manipur has witnessed them all. The turmoil that Manipur faces is related not only just to its economic, social and political problems but also an amalgam of all these and many more. The unresolved AFSPA and the consequent human rights violations, the deep-rooted existence of corruption in public life and all kinds of unfreedoms that Sen talks about are galore here. All the unfreedoms that Sen identified as impediments to development have their nagging presence in Manipur. So, it may be worthwhile to refer to Amartya Sen's theory of development as freedom in trying to find a solution to the myriad problems besieging the State of Manipur because the solution to the problems of Manipur requires a deeper analysis and a serious and sensitive approach. The problem related to ethnicity and community is especially a bit more complicated and sensitive as we have to deal with the sentiments of the people of various communities.

Political Instability and social unrest in Manipur

Manipur is following the procedural part of democracy by holding elections every five years and thereby putting an elected Government at the helm. So technically, it would be wrong to say that we do not have a democratic system in place. But the question is: do we have substantive democracy where people participate in a democratic process through informed and rational choices? Do people have the right to voice their opinions and have a say in the governance of the State without any fear of repercussion? These are important parameters to look out for because a healthy democracy must allow rational choices and must have space for debate and discussion and even be accommodating of dissents and differences. In recent times, the State of Manipur seems to have witnessed the shrinking of democratic space and gross violations of human rights. When we talk about human rights violations, it is usually in the form of how a State treats its citizens. Manipur has witnessed a long history of the struggle for independence and the right to self-determination, ethnic conflicts, mutual distrust and enmity among the various communities living in Manipur.

It has always been convenient to blame the economic backwardness and lack of opportunities for the thriving insurgency movements in Manipur. There is no denying the fact that economic backwardness is indeed one of the factors. But to focus more on this particular aspect and ignore the more burning issues of identity and the aspirations of the people based on ethnic lines will be missing the whole point. The roots of insurgency may be traced to the time when Manipur was merged with the Indian Union against the will of majority of the people. "History took a different turn when India annexed Manipur on 15th October 1949. On annexation, the first thing the newly decolonized India did was to abolish the democratically elected popular government of Manipur and transform her into a Part C state of the Indian Union."⁴

It must be borne in mind that Independent Manipur already had a democratically elected Government in place even before the merger. The people of Manipur saw this annexation as a colonization disregarding the wishes of the people and an infringement of the right to self-determination. The sense of alienation was there from the time of merger to the present day because there has been no emotional integration. The people of Manipur, and the entire region of the North-eastern States for that matter, have had to go through humiliating experiences of racial discriminations because of the

differences in appearance, culture, tradition, outlook and food habits in mainland India. They are made to feel like foreigners in their own land and never made to feel as being part of India. It is only natural that they would not have a sense of belongingness and the feeling of being colonized add to their dissension.

There is also the issue of demographic invasion adding to the problems of Manipur threatening the survival of the indigenous people. S. Lokendrajit speaks of how illegal immigrants infiltrate and sneak into other's territories as follows:

They encroach on the reserve forests, khas lands, grazing grounds, riverine areas, hill areas duping simple tribals, lakes, ponds etc. They deluge the labour market with cheap labour, depriving the indigenous workers of their jobs in the unprotected unorganised sector. Thus they exert heavy pressure on the material life support system of people – impact adversely on the fertility and sustainability of people. They procure, God only knows with what means, certificates and documents for legal legitimation.⁵

Once the wheels of the railways are set in motion and trains bring in goods and people in hordes, then the demographic transformation will render the indigenous population into oblivion. Railways, generally considered to be a parameter of development, will become a powerful means of demographic invasion. So, railways do not necessarily mean development. It depends on the context in which they are seen and used. Far from being a boon, railways would rather turn into a bane for the people of Manipur. They will be reduced to minority in their own land. Fearing this, the people of Manipur in an attempt to protect themselves and land against the impending onslaught felt the need to prepare some sort of mechanism or system which took the form of Inner Line Permit (ILP). The drafting of the ILP bills (namely the Protection of Manipur People Bill, 2015 and also two other amendments) started and was passed in the Manipur Legislative Assembly. But unfortunately, a misunderstanding erupted between the Hill people and the Valley people on certain points of the provisions of the bills. Eventually, the President of India sent back the bills without giving his assent.

This brings us to another important feature of the State, viz. the multi ethnic character of Manipur which is home to more than thirty different tribes and communities. The majority Meitei community and Meitei Pangals inhabit the valley while the tribals mostly inhabit the hills. Home to such a big conglomerate of different tribes, interests and perspectives are bound to have contradictions and Manipur has witnessed its share of ethnic cleansing, conflicts and animosity. The Kuki-Naga clash (the Kukis would refer to it as genocide by the NSCN-IM) in the early 1990s saw the loss of thousands of precious and innocent lives, leaving thousands homeless and orphaned, houses torched and reducing entire villages to ashes. It all began when cadres of NSCN-IM (National Socialist Council of Nagaland-IM) demanded of villages belonging to the Kuki community to pay taxes to the outfit and served quit notice to those who refused.⁶ Even before the date line of the quit notice ended, the outfit unleashed a reign of terror where innocent villagers were forced to flee, men and women on the run were butchered and even children slaughtered in the most

gruesome way. “To this day, the Kukis observe September 13th as Kuki Black Day every year”.⁷ People who fled their homes and were lucky enough to survive have not been resettled in their villages nor given any facility for rehabilitation. They have been living like refugees taking shelter in nearby villages or with relatives. There was retaliation from the Kuki community and many people from the Naga tribes too lost their lives. There was mayhem all over. The repercussion of the conflict in the early part of the 90s were still reverberating when another pandemonium shook the State of Manipur once again in the year 2001 when Government of India extended its ceasefire agreement with the NSCN-IM to the State of Manipur. There was an uproar of protest, with the State Assembly ending up in flames and in the course of agitation against the extension of the ceasefire to Manipur eighteen precious lives were lost. This is perfect example of where procedural democracy ends and people’s uprising takes over. The ceasefire was eventually withdrawn from the State.

The sense of identity can sometimes have devastating effects. The idea of a shared identity can have a cohesive effect among a group of people while, at the same time, it can cause estrangement with other groups. Sen’s theory is relevant to the wellbeing and freedom of people as well as its role in influencing social and political change. So, the denial of basic needs and freedom of choice may lead to capability deprivation of the people. There can be capability deprivation of individuals but inter-group dynamics can also play a role in capability deprivation resulting in group deprivation of certain communities or even an entire ethnic group. In a State or country having multiple ethnic groups and communities, the aspirations of one group may lead to the deprivation of another group. When Sen talks of development, he is actually talking of an inclusive development touching the lives of all sections of the society. Therefore, the hopes and aspirations of one section or group should not be an impediment to the rights and entitlements of another group.

All round development requires finding an amicable solution to the problems at hand which would be acceptable to all. In his book *Identity and Violence*, Amartya Sen hit the point when he says, “violence is promoted by the cultivation of a sense of inevitability about some allegedly unique—often belligerent—identity that we are supposed to have and which apparently makes extensive demands on us (sometimes of a most disagreeable kind). The imposition of an allegedly unique identity is often a crucial component of the “martial art” of fomenting sectarian confrontation.”⁸

On the issue of identity, Sen talks about two different types of reductionism in the formal literature of social and economic analysis. One may be called “identity disregard”, and it takes the form of ignoring, or neglecting altogether, the influence of any sense of identity with others, on what we value and how we behave.⁹ The second type of reductionism is what he calls “singular affiliation” which takes the form of assuming that any person pre-eminently belongs, for all practical purposes, to one collectivity only. “We are all individually involved in identities of various kinds in disparate contexts, in our own respective lives, arising from our background, or associations, or social activities.”¹⁰ So, Sen debunks the singular-affiliation view as a person does not belong to one group and one group only. According to Sen, there are a great variety of categories to which we simultaneously belong and belonging to each one of the membership groups can be quite important. He wishes to make the

following point:

First, the recognition that identities are robustly, and that the importance of one identity need not obliterate the importance of others. Second, a person has to make choices – explicitly or by implication – about what relative importance to attach, in a particular context, to the divergent loyalties and priorities that may compete for precedence.¹¹

To this particular point, S. Lokendrajit in his book ‘Who is a Terrorist’ makes the following observation:

While one can wholeheartedly endorse Sen’s thesis that individual identity is a matter of choice the thesis needs to be qualified by the further proposition that one’s choice is always in relation to and as conditioned by the sum total of choices that one’s fellow beings have made already. No matter how individual identity is conceived, there is always a collective or communitarian dimension to it. Moreover, a person is related to a collectivity and/or tradition not as the flippant butterfly who moves from one flower to another at leisure, but as one who lives through the collective experience, transforming it into an inalienable part of his being.¹²

If we look closely at the nature of ethnic conflicts in the region, the second type of reductionism that Sen refers to, namely, singular affiliation seems to be the case. Despite having many common interests and similarities on many issues like common food habits, similar physical features etc. the overriding sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group obliterates any other shared interests with members of other ethnic groups. The people belonging to different ethnic groups fail to see that the threat of demographic invasion from outside is a common problem and if not checked, they would all perish together. The need of the hour is to learn to live together on the basis of a shared interest and a shared destiny. As Sen has aptly put, the responsibilities of choice and reasoning are central to leading a human life. “Our shared humanity gets savagely challenged when the manifold divisions in the world are unified into one allegedly dominant system of classification – in terms of religion, or community, or culture, or nation, or civilization.”¹³ Rather than use identity and the strong sense of belonging to one group to diverge from other groups, it can be used as a source not merely of pride and joy, but also of strength and confidence. “The sense of identity can make an important contribution to the strength and warmth of our relations with others, such as neighbours, or members of the same community, or fellow citizens, or followers of the same religion.”¹⁴

The political aspirations of the people of the Northeast region can be realized only if they work together and nothing good will come out of fighting among themselves. The common goal of having a voice in the decisions concerning the region, of having the right to self-determination, of political and civil liberties (heavily curtailed by AFSPA), the threat to their very existence with demographic invasions from outside and the common characteristics of being economically backward are issues important enough to fight a common war for their very survival. We have a

plurality of identities, so says Amartya Sen. It is up to the people to decide with reasoning which ones out of their many identities have overriding importance.

In recent years, Manipur has witnessed another form of conflict of interests among the various communities living there with regard to the demand of the majority Meitei Community and Meitei Pangals for inclusion in the ST category. The Schedule Tribe Demand Committee, Manipur (STDCM) has been spearheading a demand for ST status for the Meitei community as a way of constitutional protection of the interests of the Meitei community. Yambem Laba, advisor to STDCM, was quoted by 'The new Indian Express' published on 23 February 2022 as saying "My concept is political for us. We are controlling Indian sports. So, if we become ST, we can produce over 100 bureaucrats and police officers in India in 10 years' time. We can get a lot of jobs across categories"¹⁵ On the other side of the spectrum, the demand of the STDCM has been opposed by the tribal populace of Manipur as they are apprehensive that this will result in gross imbalance in distributive justice. The dominant Meitei community is an advanced community with a hold of 40 out of 60 seats in the Manipur Assembly. Besides, some sections of the Meitei community are enlisted under SC category and majority of the Meiteis already enjoy the OBC quota. The All Tribal Students' Union, Manipur (ATSUM) spearheading the movement opposing the inclusion of Meiteis in the ST category apprised the chairperson of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribe about the seriousness of the demand pointing out that ST status for the Meitei would result in adverse social upheaval not only in the state of Manipur but also in the whole tribal society in the country, once the Meitei community is granted ST status. ATSUM leaders also explained that the demand for ST status is nothing but a policy of the community to circumvent the existing laws in Manipur to enable them to buy and own lands in the hill areas.¹⁶ Ngaranmi Shimray, a social activist in an article voiced a strong opposition to the inclusion of Meiteis in the ST category. He stated "There is an imminent risk that any attempt to give the Meiteis ST status will upset the prevailing social, economic, political and peaceful communal situation for the worst. It could lead to a situation where the ST of Manipur will feel helpless, forcing them to fight for their survival as they sense that they will soon be losing their share of jobs, seats and land to the dominant community if they get the ST status."¹⁷ It certainly is a tightrope for the Government as it has to take into account the interests of all the stakeholders. The Centre must study the situation carefully to make sure that injustice is not done to the deprived and the marginalised.

Economic Backwardness

The situation of Manipur is perturbing on the economic front too. Manipur is the third poorest state in the country as per a list hosted by NITI Aayog's Sustainable Development Goals dashboard and Reserve Bank of India's 'Handbook of Statistics on Indian Economy'. According to this report 36.89% of the population of Manipur live below the national poverty percentage.¹⁸ Due to lack of basic infrastructure for factories and industries, agriculture continues to be the main occupation of the people of Manipur. Rice cultivation, the main source of livelihood, is practiced at a subsistence level in the valley and through shifting cultivation in the hills. So, although agriculture sector is the main contributor to the total state domestic product, it depends on the

vagaries of the monsoon and climate due to the lack of modern scientific techniques. Poverty and acute deprivation especially in remote and far-flung areas continue to haunt the marginalised section of the society. Amartya Sen of course does not equate development with economic growth but heavily emphasized its importance as an inseparable part of the process of development. Economic growth is useful in the things it allows us to do, so says Amartya Sen. It is to help us in having greater access to education, healthcare and other social needs. It helps us in enhancing our capabilities, expanding our freedoms and invariably improving our lifestyle. Economic deprivation, on the other hand, restrains us from exercising our choices as it puts a lot of constraints on our potentials. Dire economic needs force us to work under hostile circumstances and sometimes in inhuman conditions. For instance, the tribal people in the hills of Manipur are forced to undertake shifting cultivation which apart from being economically not viable also causes extensive damage and destruction to the ecology and environment. But for want of a better option of earning their livelihoods, they take up shifting cultivation – felling trees to clear forests for the purpose of cultivation of crops as well as for fuel thereby causing forest fires and vast deforestation – for mere survival thereby creating disastrous consequences to nature in the process.

With no industries and infrastructure for economic activities, the people of Manipur are totally dependent economically on the Centre. What the Government doles out in the form of welfare schemes and benefits for the poor does not help much. Firstly, these schemes hardly reach those who are in desperate need of it. Secondly, in the long run what the people need is sustainable development and building of infrastructure towards that purpose. Poverty in Manipur therefore is not just income poverty but capability poverty. As per the Report On Youth Unemployment, 2015-2016, Ministry of Labour and Employment, youth unemployment per 1000 youth in Manipur is 188 and 59 in urban and rural areas respectively which is way higher than the national average. Because of lack of economic and unemployment opportunities, some people have resorted to drug smuggling, poppy cultivation and other anti-social activities. In order to prevent Manipur from becoming a conduit for drug trafficking, the people should be empowered by providing them employment opportunities and alternative means of livelihood. Drug trafficking is an unfreedom that deprives the young generation of a healthy life. What the present wage of war against drugs should focus on is how to wean away youth from a destructive occupation that is harmful to the society. What is needed is to create employment opportunities and implement Government schemes effectively. Unless the people are empowered first, the war on drug related activities will be like putting the cart before the horse.

While economic backwardness has been blamed for many of the problems ailing the State like political unrest, insurgency movements, ethnic conflicts etc. the reverse also holds true. Political instability, insurgency, ethnic conflicts etc. in turn stand in the way of development and plunge the State into a perpetual state of economic backwardness. Moreover, Manipur does not have the infrastructure to generate its own revenues and thus depend on the doles given by the Centre in the form of grants and loans. Despite the region's richness in natural resources, there has been little or no growth in industries because of lack of infrastructure. And infrastructure cannot be developed because of extreme economic backwardness and other socio-political

reasons. It is indeed a vicious circle. The Government, on its part, will claim that it has taken up a number of projects and plans for development of the region. Whatever development projects have been implemented by the Government are non-functional. They are mere mechanisms to draw and misuse public money by cohorts of unscrupulous politicians, contractors and bureaucrats. The result is there for all to see. Crores of rupees were spent on construction of dams with the promise of ensuring water supply, water for irrigation purpose, power supply etc. Acres and acres of land have been submerged, paddy fields eroded, thousands of poor hapless villagers have been displaced robbing them of their land and livelihood and in most cases, no adequate compensations have been given. Furthermore, these development projects have caused immense ecological and environmental damage, destroying flora and fauna. S. Lokendrajit succinctly describes the outcome of The Loktak Hydropower Multipurpose Project, (LHMP), the mother of all development projects, which was commissioned to the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) of India in 1977 as follows:

In the beginning were the promises. And promises were God. Of free electricity, irrigation water, schools, roads and opportunity to work. In the end when the Loktak Hydropower Station of 105 Megawatts was completed, promises were forgotten or ignored. For the communities living along Loktak Lake and the Manipur River, it was 'development' par excellence. Their paddy fields and homes were submerged. They were forced to move away God knows where. Compensations were never made. *Loktak Project Affected Areas Actions Committee* representing affected victims launched popular resistance movements including legal actions. In the end once again the mighty Corporate and the Handmaid State have had their ways. They are the ones to tell us what development is and how it is to be sustained.¹⁹

Another disastrous outcome of development project in Manipur is the Mapithel Dam/Thoubal Multi-Purpose Project which has submerged Chadong Village along with its agricultural land, grazing fields and destroying the flora and fauna of the land. On this, S. Lokendrajit again has this insightful thing to say:

The majority of the population who have depended on agriculture as the only source of livelihood now face a bigger challenge of an alternative livelihood. The future of these unskilled, untrained tribals is at stake. They are hurt, resentful, and fear the possible outcomes of their future. They are totally unprepared to face the challenges brought by the flood of the dam and its consequences. They need not only physical rehabilitation but also need counselling to prepare them mentally and emotionally to face a completely different socio-economic and cultural environment.²⁰

One can only imagine what the people of the erstwhile village must be going through whenever they see the tower of their church, a place where the whole village once congregated together to worship God and sing hymns of praises, jutting out of an

endless sea of water. This must be a peculiar sentiment that all displaced persons must be going through after all there's nothing more difficult than leaving one's home and hearth. And to make this sacrifice over something that that is not worthwhile is even more painful. Rather than make the lives of those who have given up their homes for the sake of overall development, they are left in the lurch unable to keep up with the changing world. In his book *Identity and Crisis of Identity*, S. Lokendrajit has exhorted us to learn from the development narrative of Chadong, the lost Village.

A self-sufficient village living on agriculture is caught in a development trap. Development is thrust upon the villagers. But they are not aware of the technology of neither development nor the changes that will follow. They do not have the skill, the technical know-how to change their means of livelihood. They never knew that one day development will overwhelm them. That at the end of the day, the development narrative will leave them with the option to lead a life they don't know how to! That it is beyond their empowerment to sustain the development thrust upon them. No matter what the experts or the politicians say.²¹

One of the more successful schemes for the public implemented by the Government is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) which seeks to provide 100 days of employment in a financial year to the rural poor. Even in this seemingly successful project, although the benefits of this scheme has trickled down to the public to some extent, the lion's share of the benefits goes into the hands of those who oversee the implementation of the Act. Empirical data will show the number of beneficiaries or job card holders and the extent to which it has been successfully implemented. But overall improvement in the lives of the people is not that visible. What has been prominently visible is the number of new cars, sudden rise from the rags to riches stories, enhanced lifestyles of people involved in the execution of the project. Large villages were fragmented into smaller villages and so, many new villages spring up as everyone wanted to have a share of the pie which was like manna from heaven for them. Official data will not have a record of these as it is only concerned with the extent of implementation and not on how it has been implemented.

The process of development must take into account the interests of the people and their preparedness in embracing the changes that come along with development. It should not be an imposition but rather it should take along the people with every stride. The Government should take the people along with its plans and policies, take them into confidence through discussion and dialogue. The process of development should be an inclusive one. But more often than not the so called democratically elected Government of a Country or a State resort to policies and plans that exploit the weaker sections of the society rather than protecting them or empowering them. Very often development projects are just ploys for multinational corporations, with the Government acting as the conduit, to extract mineral and other natural resources. The proposals for development are not intended for the benefit of the poor but a ploy to grab their land which would uproot them from their very existence. If development was intended for the people, they should themselves have been empowered to use the

natural resources instead of grabbing their land. They are rather treated as sacrificial lambs in the name of overall development. And these sacrifices of the poor go in vain as the projects remain either incomplete or non-functional or does not bear any fruits, e.g., the Khuga Dam, the Mapithel Dam and the Loktak Project just to name a few.

Another example of a half-baked policy of the Manipur Government regarding development program is the failed attempt to acquire around 3000 acres of land near Moreh town a few years back. This was in connection with the Government of India's project of building hundred (100) smart cities in the country in 2014. The then Chief Minister of the State tried to hard sell Haolenphai, a Village near the border town of Moreh as one of the venues for building a smart city. As part of the Look East Policy and consequently the Act East Policy of the Government of India, Manipur and in particular the border town of Moreh and its surrounding areas, has become increasingly important because of its strategic location. The Chief and the villagers of Haolenphai with the help of young student leaders and civil society organization struggled to protect their land by organizing consultative meetings, peaceful protests and agitations, calling bandh on the highways and submitting memorandums to the Government of Manipur and Government of India. Eventually, when the Central Government announced the list of smart cities to be built, Haolenphai was safely excluded perhaps the result of the struggle of the people or perhaps it did not meet the benchmarks of a proposed smart city. Whatever the reason may have been, the people of Haolenphai heaved a collective sigh of relief.²²

The smart city episode may be over but the Haolenphai case remains relevant because the plights of helpless villagers who are victims of any development projects are all similar. So, it is pertinent to look into the heart of such matters and see the cause of worry, doubts and concerns on the part of the villagers by taking Haolenphai issue as a case study. The apprehension of the people can be properly gauged when we take into account the socio-economic life of the people of Haolenphai. They mostly depend on land and natural resources for their livelihood surviving on farming, fishing and other traditional way of life. They have no access to basic infrastructure like schools, healthcare facilities, proper roads etc. with even the only bridge which connects the village with the nearest town Moreh, washed away by intermittent floods in 2015.²³ They had to make do with a suspension bridge which they precariously had to cross to connect with the outside world. Juxtapose this harsh reality with the vision of a smart city which has the promise of a well-planned city with all infrastructure in place – schools and other educational institutions, hospitals, good roads, bridges and drainage, electricity, water supply – topped up with the latest gadgets and technologies. It sure is an attractive package and who wouldn't be tempted by such an offer. The only hitch was that a smart city package comes with a price, naturally, since building a smart city involves investors, builders, architects, engineers, materials, man power and so on. Will the poor villagers be able to afford once the Government completed the dream project? The answer obviously is an emphatic 'no'. It should be borne in mind that the benefit of such a project was not meant for them in the first place. These sort of development projects are exclusively meant for the moneyed class, the middle and upper classes, multinational companies and people

in influential positions. Even if by some stretch of imagination, we assume that such a project is inclusive of the poor indigenous people, it would seem highly improbable that they are ready for such a humongous transition from indigenous traditional world to a high-tech world. It would be hypocritical to say that development projects are inclusive given the unpreparedness of the weaker section of the society to take part in that process. The Government may insist that the benefits of all development projects is meant for all sections of the society and may actually intend it that way. But here the practical aspect should not be lost sight of. It would be too much to expect people who have had no opportunity of attending school, and thereby not having even basic education, to be capable of taking part in the inclusive development projects.

This is where Sen's theory of the capability approach to development comes in. According to him, an enabling environment has to be created first in order for people to have the capability to participate in the process of development and reap the fruits thereof. By enabling environment, Sen means the basic necessities of living a fulfilling life like providing facilities for education and healthcare, as well as political and civil rights, removal of poverty and all sorts of unfreedom. Here, Amartya Sen's view on the role of instrumental freedoms in the process of development is pertinent. In order to live the kind of life one values, one should have the capability to choose that lifestyle. Sadly, the path development projects have taken is in the opposite direction of enhancing the capabilities of people – swindling of public money, corruption, violations of nature and people becoming slaves to neoliberal consumerism and so on. To have the capability of making a choice, one needs to be equipped with instrumental freedoms which Amartya Sen identified as political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security.

But the moot question is who is responsible for ensuring these freedoms to the people. Being a democratic country and having elected members to represent us in the Government, the onus naturally lies with the Government. But the responsibility of making the Government perform falls on the people. It is also the responsibility of the public to be alert and aware of the Government's plans and activities. This is why it is so important to be adequately informed and vigilant so that the elected Government does not play truant. This brings us to how democracy is practiced in Manipur.

Democracy in Manipur

Independent Manipur had embraced democracy with the departure of the British when it adopted her own constitution, Manipur Constitution Act, 1947. In between 11 June 1947 and 27 July 1947 Manipur National Assembly Election by way of Universal Adult Franchise to form a popular government was held under the newly adopted Constitution. The first democratically elected Manipur Legislative Assembly opened on 18th October 1948.²⁴ So Manipur already had a tryst with democracy even before it became a part of India. After the merger with independent India, the democratically elected Government of Manipur was abolished and Manipur became a Part C state of the Indian Union. From then on Manipur has been functioning like an automaton with the procedural democracy which had been imposed on it replacing the true democratic spirit which the people had adopted.

Manipur follows procedural democracy with elections every five years where

politicians go to the people with folded hands asking for their votes promising them the moon and then promptly forgetting them once they get elected. But in recent years, there has not even been the need to make promises. Earlier, even though nothing substantial was offered to the people, at least an effort was made to reach out to the people. But the process of vote collecting has become so much simpler. It just requires an exchange of currency notes between the voter and the vote seeker. The minds of the people have been so corrupted by the consumeristic world that nothing matters to them except money for which they are willing to sell their souls for crumbs. Little do they realize the worth of their vote which is meant to be used to exercise their choice on substantive issues. Elections based on formal democracy will not improve the situation as the politicians find it easier to buy off voters than involve in facing critical, uncomfortable issues of the land. An alert and receptive public should point out when the Government goes against the interest of the public but the public is toothless since they have sold off their votes which they could have used as their weapon to make rational choices. In the process, ample opportunity is created for the party in power to use state machinery and tax payer's money to permanently perpetuate their hold on state power and abuse state apparatus. This is why Sen's version of democracy i.e., substantive democracy is so important in his theory of development as freedom.

By substantive democracy, Amartya Sen means governance through debate, dialogue and discussion and not just procedural democracy. Substantive democracy, where the Government should have the magnanimity to allow voice of dissent, is sadly missing in Manipur. This point is very important judging the recent trends when democratic space is shrinking and intolerance is growing. A case in point is the arrest of Manipur TV journalist Kishorechandra Wangkhem under National Security Act (NSA) in 2018 for posting his criticisms of the BJP led Government both at the Centre and in the State on social media.²⁵ He was subsequently released after the CJM Imphal West revoked the charges against him after spending a few months in prison. In recent times, the use of social media has thoroughly been scrutinized and many have been arrested because of certain comments or posts in social media. Criticisms and dissensions are part and parcel of a democratic system. It is against the spirit of democracy to gag and stifle the voice of dissent by arresting anybody who does not sing to the tune of the Government on sedition charges. This does not augur well for a healthy democracy.

Democracy and AFSPA

Another form of breach of democratic practice is in the form AFSPA (The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958). The provisions contained in the said Act will reveal why it is anti-thesis to democracy and thereby the most prominent and notorious form of unfreedom.

Presently, AFSPA, 1958 is operational fully in 31 districts and partially in 12 districts of four states in the Northeast – Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh – according to a notification issued by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs.²⁶

The central Act is designed to give special power to the Army in disturbed areas. A disturbed area is defined in section 2(b) of the Act as an area declared to be a disturbed area by Notification under Section 3 of the Act.

Section 3 tells us who can declare an area a disturbed area. Any one of the following authorities can declare:

- i) The Union Government of India
- ii) The State Government
- iii) Chief Commissioner of Union Territories.

Section 3 also gives the ground. It says that if the Union Government of India or the State Government is of the opinion that the whole or any part of the state or Union Territory is in such a disturbed or dangerous condition that the use of armed forces in aid of civil power is necessary, any of these authorities may by Notification in the official Gazette, declare the whole or any part of the State or Union Territory to be a disturbed area.²⁷

It is not clearly spelt out as to what constitutes the criteria for forming such an opinion. But once a State or Union Territory is declared a disturbed area, any Commissioned Officer, Warrant Officer, Non-Commissioned Officer or any person of equivalent rank in the armed forces may perform the following acts:

- 1) May form opinion *ex parte*, as to whether it is necessary to shoot, use force or kill any person in a disturbed area
- 2) May form opinion as to whether it is necessary to destroy any structure likely to be used as a training camp for armed volunteers or used as a hideout by armed gangs or absconders wanted for any offence.
- 3) May arrest without warrant, that is, without or in violation of the due process of law, any person who has committed a cognizable offence.
- 4) May enter and search without warrant any house in a disturbed area.

AFSPA confers on them the power to execute any of the above actions and for any of the Acts so performed AFSPA provides them blanket immunity against any prosecution, suit or other legal proceedings. So, the Armed Forces personnel are equipped to perform any of these Acts merely on the basis of suspicion on any person (men, women, and even children).²⁸ The discretion of the security forces to shoot at sight and arrest without warrant has resulted in the loss of lives in countless fake encounters and custodial deaths and inhuman treatment to the citizens violating their basic human rights. It is, without any exaggeration, a reign of terror unleashed on the people of Manipur by the security forces.

In most incidents of encounter, the victims were mostly innocent civilians who had nothing to do with insurgency or underground movements. If people going about their daily business do so under the perpetual fear of being caught in the quagmire of the gun, it is bound to lead to paranoia. Even when the victims are people who are actually involved in some ways with any insurgent movement, their right to be tried in the law Court has to be respected and should not be killed in cold blood. As human beings, they have every right to be tried in a Court of law. The infamous case of Chungkham Sanjit where he was killed in broad daylight and more importantly the aftermath of the incident comes to mind. As is supported by evidence, he was already

in the custody of the security personnel and was not resisting arrest nor was he trying to flee. But the security forces thought it better to kill him, violating basic human rights. In their haste to add a feather to their cap, the Manipur police while hunting down Sanjit Singh, acted in a brazen manner and a young pregnant woman (with her infant son beside her) was killed in the police firing. What crime did a young mother of one with another in her womb commit that she had to be gunned down when it was totally unnecessary to rain those bullets as they already had the suspect in their custody? (the evidence being the Tehelka expose). Her only problem was preparing for motherhood and buying basic necessities of her household in the market. The heart-rending pictures of the young infant near his mother's corpse will haunt the conscience of every human being and the baby in the womb robbed off the right to be born, his right to live already determined by AFSPA. It makes sure that you are not safe in the work place, in the streets, in the neighbourhood, in the market place and not even in your own home. At one point of time, it was a normal sight to see people in uniforms driving at breakneck speed suddenly screeching to a halt, getting down from the vehicle and slapping and thrashing young men on the road. Young boys who have had the misfortune of being picked up and detained (often boys loitering around on the streets or going on errands) by security personnel often narrate their ordeal of how they were being slapped, pushed around, of being hit with the butt of rifles, of being taunted and even being exhorted to flee. If anyone was naive enough to heed to their exhortation to flee, he would be gunned down and they would claim that he died in an encounter after carefully placing a weapon near his body. In almost all cases of the death in claimed encounters, it usually turns out to be a case of fake encounters orchestrated by the security forces.²⁹ AFSPA does not recognize the basic dignity of a human being because it is inhuman.

AFSPA is, in any form, inimical to the idea of freedom and a misfit in a democratic system. "One fundamental principle of democracy is; the army is subservient to the civil authority. The Army in occupation of the disturbed areas under AFSPA, is supposed to operate in aid of civil authority. But in practice the civil authority is reduced to playing second fiddle legitimizing whatever the Army does."³⁰

Democracy again means rule of law, which protects life and liberty. Rule of law also protects the person against arbitrary arrest and detention. That no person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law (Article 21) and also that no person who is arrested shall be detained in custody without being informed, as soon as may be, of the grounds for such arrest (Article 22) are articles of faith in the rule of law. AFSPA gives the Army the power to kill a person or arrest a person or destroy his property and home, without due process of law. This is violation of the rule of law no matter what arguments from technicalities may say in defense of AFSPA. AFSPA therefore, violates the spirit of democracy and hence the spirit of the Constitution of India.³¹

AFSPA is, therefore, against the very essence of democracy. It is not difficult to see why India takes pride in the fact that it is the largest democracy in the world but it is

a mystery as to why it does not have any qualms in allowing this inhuman law to be a part of its glorious democratic life. It is only a handful of staunch advocates of freedom and democracy who openly voice their reservations about this draconian law and the terror it unleashes among the people. Amartya Sen, a staunch supporter of the democratic way of life, considers it a breach of democratic practice. He commented in his book *An Uncertain Glory* that these powers have frequently been used in a remarkably violent way, and have tended to aggravate rather than remove conflicts.³² Thus we can clearly see how AFSPA encroaches upon the basic freedom and dignity of the people.

The reason and purpose for the imposition of such a draconian Act on its own people by the Government is to counter terrorist activities and insurgency movements in the Northeast. But it is very clear that it has not served the purpose judging by the number of new underground outfits that springs up every now and then. Moreover, AFSPA and its enforcers are nowhere in sight when the people are tormented, tortured and harassed by unscrupulous elements in the guise of insurgent groups. So, ultimately it is the people who get the short end of the stick. They are sandwiched between the security forces and terrorists bearing the brunt of atrocities from both sides. Recently, in March 2022, AFSPA had been withdrawn from many areas of the Northeast. But this is not enough as it has a way of coming back unless the Act is completely repealed.

The freedom of the people, which Amartya Sen so emphasized as a prerequisite for development, is curtailed. The people of Manipur did not choose to live their lives in fear of terrorist groups nor did they ask for atrocities to be committed on them by security forces in the name of protection. What the people want is the freedom to choose the kind of life they want to lead without any hindrance, without suppression and to have the freedom to speak their mind without fear of being persecuted.

Conclusion

Manipur, being bogged down by a multitude of problems, is a far cry from the vision that Amartya Sen has of a well-developed society where people have the freedom and the rationality to choose the kind of life they value and the capability to chart their own course of destiny. Applying Sen's theory of empowering the people and making them 'capable' of making a choice should be the first step. Equipping the people with the instrumental freedoms, viz. political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective securities will aid the process of development. Since the major problems have already been identified, a better future can be affected from the current experiences. It is up to the people of Manipur to get out of the doldrums and work towards removing the major sources of unfreedoms that stand in the way of the State's development. We can begin by empowering people through sustainable development programs by way of building better infrastructure and production of material goods and increase agriculture production by using scientific and modern techniques instead of just relying on the funds pumped into the state from the centre. It is also pertinent to make sure that the infusion of funds from the Centre to the state through grants and loans and various welfare schemes should benefit and empower the people through effective implementation. For this, a vigilant and informed public is required.

Sen's theory of development is not confined to economic development alone but also on the overall freedom of the people. So, basic civil and political freedoms are equally important in his framework of development. A despotic government or a communal government will certainly not help the cause of the State, it would instead foster confrontation, further fragmentation and enmity among the people of the State. Moreover, the eternal presence of a controversial law, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 has taken away many young precious lives and the little dignity left of those alive have to go. Such a draconian law has no place in a democracy. The application of Sen's substantive democracy can be an effective tool for overcoming this unfreedom.

The problem related to ethnicity and community is a bit more complicated and sensitive as we have to deal with the sentiments of the people of various communities. But if we apply Sen's concept of plural identities in his book 'Identity and Violence' perhaps there can be long lasting solution. After all everyone has a plurality of identities and some of these identities can have a common interest cutting through ethnic lines and moreover it is the distribution of justice and shares in development that most problems started in the first place. The denial of basic needs and freedom of choice may lead to capability deprivation of the people. There can be capability deprivation of individuals but inter-group dynamics can also play a role in capability deprivation resulting in group deprivation of certain communities or even an entire ethnic group. In a State or country having multiple ethnic groups and communities, the aspirations of one group may lead to the deprivation of another group. When Sen talks of development, he is actually talking of an inclusive development touching the lives of all sections of the society. Therefore, the hopes and aspirations of one section or group should not be an impediment to the rights and entitlements of another group.

Amartya Sen staunchly believes that the removal of all sorts of unfreedoms was essentially not different from the process of development. So, the removal of all these obstacles that engulfs the state of Manipur can also pave the way towards development.

Endnotes

¹ Musella, Alessio Maria and Corseri, Lucrezia Alberti (2021), 'The Application of Sen's Capability Approach to the Study of Social and Economic Phenomena', *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 11(2), 30-38.

² Xaba, Mzinga Brilliant (2016). 'A Qualitative application of Amartya Sen's 'development as freedom' theory to an understanding of social grants in South Africa' *African Sociological Review*. 20(2) 102-122.

³ Soyam, Lokendrajit, L. and Bishwanath Sharma (2017), *Identity and Crisis of Identity*, Imphal, Soyam Educational Foundation, p. 308.

⁴ Soyam, Lokendrajit (2013), *Who is a Terrorist?*, Imphal, Waba Publications, p. 167.

⁵ Soyam, Lokendrajit, and L. Bishwanath Sharma (2017), *Identity and Crisis of Identity*, Imphal, Soyam Educational Foundation, pp. 34-35.

⁶ Firstpost.com, Oct 06, 2018, viewed on Oct 6, 2019 < <https://www.firstpost.com/india/despairing-Kukis-mourn-massacred-kin-seeK-homeland-as-centre-gets-set-to->

implement-naga-pact-inked-inked-with-nscn-im-5326661.html >

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Sen, Amartya (2006), *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, London, Allen Lane, Penguin Books, p. Xiii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹² Soyam, Lokendrajit (2013), *Who is a Terrorist?*, Imphal, Waba Publications, p. 52.

¹³ Sen, Amartya (2006), *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, London, Allen Lane, p. xiii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁵ www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2022/feb/23/manipur-polls-divisiveness-over-st-status-demand-

¹⁶ www.ifp.co.in/manipur/st-demand-atsum-apprises-national-commission-for-scheduled-tribe

¹⁷ <https://www.eastmojo.com/manipur2022/12/02/meiteis-demanding-st-status-in-manipur-have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too/>. For more into the debate on demand for ST Status in Manipur read Piang (2014) and Haokip (2015).

¹⁸ Wikipedia, 'List of Indian states and union territories by poverty rate', https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Indian_states_and_union_territories_by_poverty_rate

¹⁹ Soyam, Lokendrajit, ed. L. Bishwanath Sharma (2007), *Identity and Crisis of Identity*, Imphal, Soyam Educational Foundation, p. 69.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

²¹ *Loc. Cit.*

²² Interview with members of Thadou Students Association in 2014

²³ http://e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=news_section.News_Links.News_Links_2015.Manipur_people_take_Myanmar-road-after_bridge-damaged_by_flood-20151221

²⁴ Soyam, Lokendrajit, *Who is a Terrorist?*, (2013; Imphal, Waba Publications), p. 101.

²⁵ NDTV, April 08, 2019, viewed on 6 Oct, 2019 <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/manipur-journalist-kishore-wangkhem-jailed-under-national-security-act-for-criticizing-bjp-r-2019794>

²⁶ The Tribune, 1 April 2022, viewed on 07 February 2023, <https://www.tribuneindia.com>

²⁷ Soyam, Lokendrajit (2013), *Who is a Terrorist?*, Imphal, Waba Publications, p. 119.

²⁸ Soyam, Lokendrajit (2004), *Why AFSPA should be Repealed*, Imphal, Manipur University Students Union, Manipur University, pp. 12-16.

²⁹ Findings of Santosh Hegde Committee.

³⁰ Soyam, Lokendrajit (2004), *Why AFSPA should be Repealed*, Imphal, Manipur University Students Union, Manipur University, p. 24.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

³² Dreze, Jean & Sen, Amartya (2013), *An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions*, London, Allen Lane, p. 247.

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