



Displaced Education and Revisiting Right to Education (RTE) in ‘Phumshang’ Floating Huts of Loktak Lake, Manipur

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Introducing in Brief the Loktak Wetland

Loktak Lake, the only largest freshwater lake in Northeast India, is located at a distance of 53 km due south-west from Imphal, in the Bishnupur District of Manipur. It covers 266 sq.km and is famous for its ‘phumdis’ or the floating vegetative mass that can support human habitations over it. The lake was included in the ‘Ramsar List,’ of Ramsar Convention or the Montreux Record on 26th June, 1993. The logical inference of the lake’s inclusion as one out of the total 26 Ramsar Sites in India, is the protection and preservation of the wetland and ‘Wise Use’ of the wetland body. This urges the maintenance of the ecological characters within the context of the sustainable development. It also means that the changes in the ecological characters have occurred, are occurring or are likely to occur in the wetland as a result of human interference. It is given the status of ‘World Heritage Site.’¹

The evolutionary myths and legends signify the importance of this lake in the lives of its people. This lake is accredited as the predominant facilitator in the nurturing of aesthetics and literature. It cradles the cultural heritage and the lake is often eulogised as the mirror of the state, literally cognizing the intricate significance of its presence. Legends like ‘KhambaThoibi,’ folk songs like ‘Moirang Parba,’ ‘Khunung Eshei,’ dance forms like ‘Thougal Jagoi,’ rare species like the ‘Sangai,’ and many more socio-cultural facets validates the closeness of intrinsic ties people maintained across the centuries. The lake is also an Important Bird Area, keeping in view the lake’s potential breeding site for waterfowl and also the enchanting stage site for numerous migratory birds. The myriad folklore of the state is rooted on this wetland.

The lake is the domain of livelihood to many thousands. Many hundred thousands people are known to be dependent upon the resources of this wetland directly or indirectly. It is referred to as the ‘lifeline of Manipur’ and is highly productive. The lifeworld this lake’s ecology supported is unique. The seasonal wetland vegetables around the year, the varieties of indigenous fishes, the forest products from its surrounding, the flourished agricultural products, the rich flora and fauna and the ecology it maintains makes this lake an inseparable part in the lives of its people. In fact, the Loktak Lake lays the foundation of the socio-economic and cultural lives of the people in this state.

¹Ramsar Sites in India- Ramsar Convention on wetlands, pmfias.com, May 30, 2016

Cultural Relativism of Water Bodies in the Meitei Cosmology

Water bodies and wetland have an edifice in the socio-cultural fabrics of Manipur. Folklores, myth, and mythology are imbued with values coded with the wetland ecology. From community fishing down to rituals, in diverse forms, the multi-myriad communities inhabited in the state eulogises the intrinsic core of wetlands' relevance to their lives. The Meitei cosmology is described to have faith in sky-water syncretisation, where water; the ultimate sacred sanctity, God dwelt upon. Manipur is a land whose narratives blended perfectly with natural water bodies.

The Meitei cosmology is described to be intricately connected with the water bodies. It conceived of the universe as a unity of several layers out of which heaven-earth-water has the supreme significance. Meitei religion has veneration of deities known as "Lai" (refer to both the god and goddess and in plurality known as 'Lais'). Heaven is the place of the male deity where deep water is the place of the female deity, the creation of life cycle takes place on earth. The spirits are to be beckoned on earth for their plays of creations. In 'laiharaoba' or the pleasing of gods ceremony, the ritual commence with the beckoning of the spirits from their abodes of heaven and water into the shrine on earth². However strict adherence in not followed of the sky-water syncretisation, as both the 'lais' are called from the water, the sanctity of water body being the ultimate. The rituals orbited around spirits and water bodies. *Maibis* recite hymns accentuating the bond of lives on earth with the water;³

O water, abiding alone, the first of the waters, all six dark layers and five bright layers: you are being appeased by the maiba and maibi; for the purpose of performing the haraoba to you, Sovereign God (name of lai honoured), and Devine Goddess (name of the female lai honoured), all your servants, the whole village, have offered in the waters the gold and silver pieces.

'Langban Heisoi Katpa'⁴ of the Meitei Sanamahi sect or 'Tarpan' of the Meitei Hindu or the Vaishnavite sect, in the six lunar month 'Langban,' marks the unflinching bond of water bodies' and the importance of daughters in the Meitei community. Rituals items to be bequeathed are brought home by the married away daughters, chopped in unique manner by the elders and are offered in the water bodies with associated hymns.

These are few out of many such examples. The Meitei cosmology envisages the embedded cultural identity in the dangling waves and undisturbed flows of water. Water bodies are metamorphoses as the wombs, emanating the perpetuation of the community. Rivers and wetlands are silhouetted as 'women' in unique quintessence. Folksongs, Poems, books, films and songs of great aesthetic values mesmerising the charms, support of lives, strives and humankind's destructive nature to the so called "Ema" (Mother) water body filled the racks of the artistic gallery of this state.

The fragile ecology of the state is inbuilt with numerous wetlands and riverine ecology. 'Pat' a local nomenclature of the word wetland is a word of frequent parlance with its multiplicity in number and limited cover like the Waithoupat, Wairipat, Loushipat, eekoppat, eeshokpat, pumlenpat, heinganag pat, Porompat, Lamphelpat, Yaralpat and so on. Every single wetland entails a transit of myths and narratives, accounting to history. Life ways, food habits, trade and commerce, transport, belief systems, socio-cultural aspects and many more life patterns could easily be reflected from the backdrop history of the lakes. Through the survivorship claimed by the wetland ecology, the matrix of the social-economic and cultural life could be unplugged. Water and wetland bodies represent both the tangible and intangible cultural entity in the Meitei community. The implicit value imbued in the water bodies vindicates the significance of water bodies in the people's lives.

²Saroj N. Arambam Parratt, John Parrat (1997), *The Pleasing of the Gods: Meitei Lai Haraoba*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd. New Delhi, pp. 5-17.

³i.bid, pp 73-76

⁴'Langban' is the Meitei nomenclature of the sixth lunar month, 'Hei' means fruits and 'soi' is the derivative word from 'soiba' meaning to slice or chop and 'katpa' means to offer. Thus the etymological meaning of the term 'langbanheisoikatpa' means offering sliced fruits of Langban.

Loktak as a Symbol of Resistance

Loktak wetland which is eulogised as the cradle of civilization has gradually evolved into a 'symbol of resistance' in the succeeding millennium. The implementation of the controversial Loktak Protection Act, 2006, crept into the lives of the fisherfolk as the essence of mayhem. Under this act the whole of the Loktak lake is divided into two main zones as the core zone and the buffer zones. Core zone comprises of 70.30 sq.km. It is demarcated as 'no development zone,' or 'totally protected zone.' The vital aspect of this core zone is the prohibition on building huts on Phumdis and fishing inside the zone. The reason for the prohibition is the claim over the indigenous peoples dwelling in Loktak Lake for polluting and contaminating the lake.

Under this act, the Loktak Development Authority, issued an eviction notice to the fisherfolk on 11 November 2011 and started the arsoning and burning down of the several hundreds of floating huts starting from 23rd November 2011 which continued till February 2013. The eviction drive mercilessly burnt down nearly 1147 floating huts displacing around 4000 fisherfolks and their family members. The government were to compensate Rs 40,000 only for each affected family.⁵

The affected community seek legal remedy. The Gauhati High Court had issued an order prohibiting the clearance of the Phumdi-huts on 16 February, 2013. Defying the court order, LDA continued to destroy the phum-huts. The fishing community strongly resisted the indiscriminate eviction and came forward to stop the destruction. A huge scuffle broke out and the police fired several live rounds in the air to foil the attempt to abort the eviction. Many women fainted, some injured while several others terrorised and panic stricken. Yet, they never gave up. They encircled the LDA officials and the machines unless they move back from the stand. After exchange of heated debate between the locals and the LDA officials, the eviction was put to a halt. However, the LDA officials move away with a stern warning that they would come back and certainly burn down the remaining floating huts. Nearly 2000 internally displaced children become the victims of eviction.

Eversince, the fishing folk, their livelihood, the inhabitation zone and their floating huts has become a 'symbol of resistance'. Nevertheless, introspection arises as pictures of *Phum-shangs*, their unique lifeworld have been attracting centrality in every major state sponsored events; seeking queries whether they connote supportive gestures or are they dignified reminder of the resistance.

Loktak Lake, insecurities and reflections in Manipuri Literature

Loktak Lake, which is often referred to as the mirror of the land is also reflected as the nature's paradigm embroiled with unrest and uncertainty in the literature. This lake has been the spring of aesthetic ground. Despite the fact how this lake is described of great significance, similarly there are also cases that marks the stories of insecurity in the state. Some remarkable selected cases that bear resemblance in study are two so called counter-insurgency military operations 'Operation Loktak Lake,' 'Operation Summer Storm' and a Manipuri Film called 'Mami Sami' etc. Operation Loktak 1999,⁶ which was started from 10th March and lasted till 16th March 1999, leave long trails heartwrenching stories of torture, arbitrary detention, destruction of properties, degrading inhuman treatment and other multiple human rights violations.

Operation Summer Storm 2009, started from April 11, was proclaimed as a counter-insurgency operation, to flush out the militants from the sheltering in the floating lake. 14 militants were killed in the operation, huge ammunition were recovered and 2500 people mentioned to be temporarily displaced. The operation was carried based on a 2004 report which mentions that the lake shelters different insurgent groups.⁷

⁵JitenYumnam, 2014, *Loktak Wetland Eviction: A Case of Development Crisis in Manipur, 2011-2013*, Centre for Research and Advocacy, Manipur.

⁶*Operation Loktak: A Case Study of Human Rights Violations*, Report of Joint Fact Finding Team, By; Committee on Human Rights (COHR), Manipur

⁷Bibhu Prasad Routray, 27 April, 2009, *Manipur: Operation Summer Storm*, *South Asia Intelligence Review*, Vol. 7, no. 42

Ningthouja Lancha's 'Mami-Sami' (Blurred Shadow), produced by Hemam Pamhei is based on the situation of arm conflict and the traumatic experiences of the people. The film centred around the life of an innocent village girl whose life got entangled with the fear psychosis and trauma afflicted by the system of clash between insurgency and the counter insurgency operations. The stereotypic perception of an 'ideal women,' with a dedicating self for the husband is highlighted on one parlance. The oppressive social milieu compressing lives as soft targets and how subjugation to such environment traumatise women reducing them as mere psychopath is portrayed at the other plane. The film critiques prevailing conflict situation responsible for depicting the wetland into a forbidden zone.

These few reflections set as testimonies on hardships by the fishing community in the middle of the lake. Disruption of peaceful life, propagating hardships aggravate conflict situation. Anguish and despair guided the victims. They become refugee in their own land. Internal displacement tarnished the history of Loktak Lake. The prolonged exposure to such situation stamped lasting impacts to the people; both physically and psychologically. People were deprived of their rights with increasing plight of vulnerability of women and children at all point of time.

Floating RTE in the Loktak Wetland: A Post-Eviction Riddle

On 2nd February 2017, the year's World Wetland Day observation, a floating elementary school (A Community Initiative Open School), was inaugurated inside the 'core zone' at Langolsabi Leikai of Champu Khangpok Village in Loktak. This school was described first of its kind in the country.

The new intriguing mission was initiated with an objective of providing education to the drop out students, who were rendered homeless by the forceful eviction. The school envisaged to accommodate 25 students and two volunteer teachers, the honorarium of which are to be sanctioned under the project called 'Empowering vulnerable local communities for sustainable development' funded by Action Aid Asia. The school is envisioned to gradually upgrade upto 8th standard to maximise the accommodation of the drop out students in the area.

In a country like India, where there are severe social problems like population explosion and poverty, the government dedicated itself in enacting new laws targeting eradication. Education is perceived as a way out to minimise these problems. With this view, the government of India enacted the 'The Right of Children to free and Compulsory Education act' or the *Right to Education Act*, also Known as the RTE, on 4th August 2009, which describes the modalities of the importance of Free and Compulsory education for children between 6 and 14 in India under the Article 21A of the Indian Constitution.

With the enactment of this act which came into force on 1 April 2010, India became one amongst the 135 countries to make education a fundamental right of every child. The 'Free and compulsory' education makes it a legal binding, the appropriate governments and local bodies to provide and ensure admission, attendance and completion of elementary education by all children in the 6-14 age group.⁸

When India is advancing towards the RTE, evicted family's children of fishing community of Loktak Lake, Manipur are curtailed from hopes and aspirations. The relevance of RTE losses its ground if a community's existence is not legally acknowledged. Nevertheless, Champu Khangpok is a constitutionally recognised village inhabited by citizens registered in formal electoral roll of the country.

The possibility of success story behind floating elementary school towards imparting education to the displaced children remains a riddle. Spontaneous queries rise on how an institution in a protected zone will effectively be functional to impart education. In that case, where should be the future of those children whose hopes have been shattered with the dismantled floating huts of the lake? Like the debris of the devastated burnt *phum-huts* swayed idly on the surfaced of the wetland, RTE floats on the surface of the Loktak Wetland.

⁸Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (Right to Education Act),

<https://vikaspedia.in/education/policies-and-schemes/right-to-education/right-of-children-to-free-and-compulsory-education-act-2009-right-to-education-act>

Conclusion:

The commissioning of the Ithai Barrage at Manipur River for hydro power is described as one the reason for degrading the Loktak's ecology. Inappropriate waste management in the expanding urban centres utilising naturally flowing rivers and streams as direct dumping spaces is another crucial polluting factors of the lake. Feeder streams and small tributaries that meander through the urban centres scoop up tonnes of waste and drained into the lake. Nambol river is one polluting factor. Yangoi Maril, the route which Nambol and Nambol rivers enter into the lake where pile of floating untreated waste validates the tragic testimony for the sporadic increase of pollution in the Loktak wetland ecology.

The legal version of lake conservation connotes a unique notion. The fisherfolk whose livelihood rely upon the lake is held responsible for deteriorating the lake. They are claimed as the polluter. Nevertheless, from times immemorial, the indigenous communities have been managing the wetland ecology through the traditional knowledge system inherited from the forefathers/ancestors. Apart from it, the lake has been sustaining wholesomely propelling prosperity to the mankind, before the blocking of its natural drainage system, the critical health threat of the lake.⁹

Yet, the identification tips of the transgressing factors for plundering the wetland ecology is rated over the activities of the fishing community, nurturing a blind sight over the culmination of the cumbersome acts deteriorating the lake ecology. The Loktak Protection Act (LPA) 2006, was hence adopted and enacted to evict the 'phumshang' (floating hut) dwellers around a demarcated 'core zone' in the name of conservation of the Loktak Lake.

Villagers of Champu Khangpok Leikai, the fishing community shared concern over reliable information of re-enacting the same act. The shared responsibility of NHPC and the urban dwellers to preserve the Loktak wetland ecology for a sustainable urban future need be overemphasised, than naming and shaming the fisherfolk solely. The Loktak Lake is specifically tied up with tangible and intangible aspects of the culture. Therefore, the shrinking wetland thereby demolishing the cultural constructs of the traditional community need be ponder upon.

Analytically, the verified reason for the eviction seems far beyond the control of pollution and contamination. The underpinning reasons for the mass evacuation and eviction, directly linked to the unsecured social situations. The demarcation of the Loktak wetland exclusionary of community dwelling in it may not be recommended as a wise act. Many innocent people are affected. That's how one of the senior remarked;

Inaugurating the elementary school logically have less meaning, forget school, it's core zone, protected and trespassing prohibited. The structure itself is insecure. That's how Loktak remains a 'symbol of resistance.'

⁹MamtaLukram, *Shrinking Wetland in Manipur: Culture Constraints*, e-pao.net

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