Development, Environmental Protection & Displacement in Northeast India

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The Loktak Lake

• Largest fresh water lake in the Northeast India. Covers an area of about 289 sq. Km.
• Designated as Wetland of International Importance under Ramsar Convention in 1990
• Considered to be the lifeline of the State of Manipur due to its importance in the socio-economic and cultural life of the people; plays a vital role in terms of ecological dynamism, socio-economic sustainability, cultural and habitat security of the people in the region
• “Loktak is our Mother” is a local saying
Map depicting the Loktak Lake

• Located 48 kms. from Imphal and spread in two districts of Manipur
• This natural wetland is still one of the world’s most productive ecosystems
• Three islands in the Lake: Thanga, Karang, Ithing and Sendra
  ➢ Sendra, once a tourist spot, is under army (Indian) occupation at present
Phumdi Dwellers at Loktak Lake

- Since time immemorial people have been living on floating biomass known as Phumdis
- Endangered brow altered deer known as Sangai is also found on the only floating wildlife sanctuary, Keibul Lamjao National Park at Loktak
- My presentation is on the lives of the Phumdi dwellers as a result development initiative, environmental protection/conservation drive and security concern undertaken by the Indian State
About the Presentation

- My presentation is on effect of Loktak Lake (more specifically, the lives of the *Phumdi* dwellers) as a result of interface between development intervention, conflict and environmental protection/conservation drive undertaken by the Indian State
- In our world view, the geography of our state is like a human organism and Loktak is considered to be the bowel of the human body
- Interface between the human and nature as manifested in the dynamics of this lake represents the well being and equilibrium of the Manipuri polity, any disturbance in her natural functioning or flow of energy shall represent the dysfunction of the organic Manipuri polity
- Or otherwise, this narrative serves as metaphorical representation of what is currently happening in Manipur in terms of developmentalism, armed conflict and environmental conservation
Developmental Intervention & Despoliation of Loktak Lake

- Root-cause of despoliation of the *Loktak Eco-system* and its *natural habitat* are due to the implementation of Loktak Hydro Electric Project by the National Hydro-Electric Project Co-operation (NHPC)

- **NHPC** implemented the **Loktak Multipurpose Project** in 1984, which promised
  - to *reclaim 60,000 hectares* of land in and around the vicinity of the Loktak Lake
  - another *40,000 hectares of land to be lift-irrigated* for double cropping and triple cropping to increase food production in the state
  - after the commissioning of the project per unit consumption of energy will be provided to the people of Manipur at *the rate below 10 paisa per unit* along with the growth of unpolluted industries in the State.

- None of the promises fulfilled after the commission of Loktak Hydro Electric Project and its main organ Ithai Barrage in 1984. On the contrary
  - Huge area of cultivable land around the Loktak has been submerged under water and people displaced
Developmental Intervention & Despoliation of Loktak (cont’d)

• The construction of Ithai Barrage across the Manipur River has led to
  – Changes in hydrological regimes thereby affecting ecological processes and functions of the wetland
  – Inundation of agricultural lands and displacement of people from flooded areas; and loss of native fish species
  – Decrease in the thickness of phumdis (floating swamps/Biomass) in the Keibul Lamjao National Park thereby threatening the survival of Sangai Deer
  – Excessive siltation and shallowing of Lake Bottom
  – As a result the water accumulation capacity of the lake reduces and thereby spreading the inundating area

“About 4 lakh fishing communities were deprived of their primary occupation based on the Loktak Lake”.
Loktak as the Site of Conflict: Concentration of Indian military forces in Manipur

MAP OF THE POSITIONS OF INDIAN OCCUPATION FORCES IN MANIPUR.

- Each number represents the location of a base or a battalion. Notice the concentration in the centre of the country, suggesting an occupying regime rather than defense of the border.
- Impunity is granted to the Indian armed forces under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958.
Loktak as the Site of Conflict: Paramilitary Forces Operating in Manipur

1. Under 57th Mountain Division (Headquarters : Leimakhong)

| A. 59th Mountain brigade (Churachanpur) | 19 Rajput Regiment & 9 Raj Rifles |
| B. 73 Mountain Brigade (Bishnupur) | 11 Garhwal Rifles, 5/8 Gorkha Rifles, 12 Grenadiers, 10 Assam Rifles (AR) |
| C. 44 Mountain Brigade (Chakpikarong) | 7 Sikh Light Infantry, 27 Madraj Regiment, 9 Rajput Regiment |
| D. 26 Sector Assam Rifles (AR) (Chandel) | 16 AR, 36AR, 37 AR, 24 AR, 18 AR, 33 AR |
| E. 57 Mountain Artillery | 9 Para Regiment, 26 AR Medium Regiment |

2. Under Inspector General Assam Rifles-South (Headquarters: Mantripukhri)

| A. 9 Sector AR (Mantripukhri, Imphal) | 4 AR-(at Mantripukhri), 34 AR-(at Thoubal), 32 AR (at Keithenanmbi), 22 Maratha Light Infantry (at Tulihal) |
| B.10 Sector AR (Ukhrul) | 1 AR, 12 AR, 19 AR |
| C. 27 Sector AR (Lairouching) | 14 AR (at Leirouching), 15 AR (at Mao), 35 AR (at Tamenglong), 38 AR (at Noneh), 2 Independent Operations (Leimakhong), Special Force-Para Troopers |

3. Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF)

| 10 Battalions under one inspector general |

4. Boarder Security Forces

| About two battalions |

5. Manipur State Police

| 10 battalions (including Indian Reserved Battalion) and Special Manipur State Force, Commandos deployed mainly in the valley |
Loktak as the Site of Conflict: Military Operations at Loktak

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SL No</th>
<th>Name of Operation</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Area of Operation</th>
<th>Security Forces Involved</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Loktak</td>
<td>10–16 March 1999</td>
<td>To flush out rebels from Loktak area. Thanga and Karang islands are considered to be stronghold of underground armed rebels</td>
<td>Thanga and Karang islands, Loktak Lake, Bishnupur District</td>
<td>Indian Army, CRPF &amp; Manipur Police</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Stinger</td>
<td>3–5 October 2005</td>
<td>To flush out rebels from Loktak area. Thanga and Karang islands are considered to be stronghold of underground armed rebels. After the Operation Indian Army set up a permanent Camp</td>
<td>Thanga and Karang islands, Loktak Lake, Bishnupur District</td>
<td>73 Mountain Brigade under the aegis of 57 Mountain Division based at Leimakhong Army base, Manipur</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Summer Storm</td>
<td>Intervening night of 11 and 12–20 April 2009</td>
<td>To flush out rebels from Loktak area particularly People’s Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK)</td>
<td>Loktak Lake area and adjoining Keibul Lamjao National Park, Bishnupur District</td>
<td>57 Mountain Division of the Indian Army based in Manipur, along with the para-military Assam Rifles and State Police</td>
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• These are out of some odd-50 military counter-insurgency operations in Manipur
• Drones and other sophisticated weapons made in Israel, UK and USA, etc used in the operations
• Schools remained closed during and after the operations
• Hundreds of civilians killed, injured and forced to leave their homesteads
• Civil society organization staged “Save Sangai” campaigns to stop the operations
Conservation of Loktak: The Loktak Protection Act 2006

- Government of Manipur introduced the Loktak (Protection) Act 2006 subsequently amended in 2007 to save Loktak from environmental degradation, illegal encroachment and despoliation, etc.
- Loktak Development Authority was created for the “management” of Loktak.
- Core and buffer zones were created in the Lake.
  - Core zone is the No-Development Zone or Totally Protected Zone consisting of 70.30 Sq. Km.
  - “Buffer Zone” means the remaining area of the lake excluding Core Zone area.
- As per the Act, fishermen cannot carry sharp objects or knives, arms and ammunitions or even net in the core zone.
- *Phumdi* Dwellers are located within the core zone.

- *Reminiscent of the 1st ever international environment conference “Convention for the preservation of Animals, Birds, and Fish in Africa” of 1900*
- *In these schemes of conservation the African did not fit anywhere. The white settler identified with the land but not with the men and women who had dwelt there long before their arrival*
- *Conservation was even viewed as a part of white man’s necessary burden to save the nation’s natural heritage from African despoliation*
Conservation of Loktak: Eviction & Internal Displacement

• Government of Manipur started forcefully evicting the fishermen from their habitats (*Phumdis*) at the Lake in the name of environment protection of the Lake
• Within five days starting from November 15, 2011, state forces burnt down the floating huts
  – More than 2000 fishermen including women and children became internally displaced people
  – More than 500 huts were reduced to ashes
  – Property worth lakhs of rupees including implements used in fishing such as fishing gears, nets, domestic articles, cloths, ornaments were lost
• No public hearing, peaceful democratic process, nor any workable rehabilitative plan announced prior to the violent act of eviction
  – Rs 40,000 (28000 pesos) as compensation to each family
• The fishermen denounced such notice and compensation since it could not ensure them any alternative livelihood
• They demanded repeal or amendment of Loktak Lake (Protection) Act. 2006, in order to assure their right to fishing and dwelling on the *phumdis*, which were practiced by their ancestors since time immemorial

*Change in occupation*
*To live on alienated land*
Eviction of *Phumdi* Dwellers