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Questioning exclusivity of Mt Koubru

Debates and conflicts are raging over attempts to declare the sacred mountain in Manipur as a 'protected site'

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The politics of forest reservation, protected forests and wildlife sanctuaries is nothing new, ever since the Indian Forest Act of 1878 was passed. The declaration of certain areas as "reserved" or "protected" forests and wildlife sanctuaries was met with strong opposition from local populations, who are the user communities of such resources. The intense debate on the Act effectively came to an end when the Government of India permitted the involvement of local people in the management of forests and its resources in 1990.

In North-east India, there are special provisions in several clauses under Article 371 of the Constitution that give hill communities the right to manage forests through certain committees and particularly, the autonomous district councils. In recent years, attempts have been made to declare vast swathes of land as reserved or protected forests and wildlife sanctuaries in Manipur.

The latest effort to declare Mount Koubru as a "protected site" has become a matter of conflict. It is a prayer mountain for peace and prosperity of the state, historically cutting across religious and cultural divides. Human rights activists on social media, who were against the move, have been allegedly arrested by the police without warrants, while those supporting the case with comments inciting communal violence were let off scot-free. One cannot help but say that it seems like a blatant example of majoritarianism in all its nakedness.

Koubru as 'protected site'

A notification was passed by the department of art and culture, Government of Manipur on 8 April for a field visit in order to verify and undertake necessary measurements or demarcation "in connection with the proposal for declaration of the Sacred Site of Lord Koubru and Lai Pukhri located at the Koubru Hill Range as protected site". That enraged the foothill settlers in Sadar Hills, and the visiting team were blocked by villagers at Saitu-Gamphazol sub-division.

Due to tensions on the issue, two state ministers met leaders of the Committee on Protection and Preservation of Mt Koubru "on behalf of the state government of Manipur". According to the agreement that was reached between them, "there will be no restriction of pilgrimages or worshippers to Mt Koubru" as has been the practice for ages, and to protect the sacredness and sanctity of the mountain "the traditional and present status of Mt Koubru shall be maintained". The committee also resolved to take steps for eradicating illicit cultivation to preserve the ecosystem and biodiversity of Koubru range.

A day later, however, Chief Minister N Biren Singh denied such an agreement had been made with his government.

It all began on 26 November 2020 when a notification was issued by the art and culture department, Government of Manipur, stating that the "Governor of Manipur is contemplating to declare the Sacred Site of Lord Koubru and Lai Pukhri located at Koubru Hill Range as a protected site under Sub-section (1) of Section 4 of the Manipur Ancient and Historical Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1976 in the interest of the public". It also added that "any interested person may file his/her objection to the declaration of the said site/monument as protected historical site/area under Sub-section (2) of Section 4 of the above Act within two months from the date of issue of the notification".

The objections

Tongmang Haokip, a retired bureaucrat and chief of Saitu village, was the first to file his objection to the state government on 20 January this year. He claimed that the move would amount to an infringement on his rights and privileges as chief over the ownership of the said area, which was allotted to his forefather by the Manipur Darbar Administrator. The land ownership document states that in the Court of President Manipur Darbar Hills Miscellaneous Case Number 969 of 1946-47, "Luntong Chief of Saitu, the petitioner, is granted the right of ownership of land bounded by Koubru Laikha on the North, Kanglatombi Thumkhong to the South, Imphal River to the East covered within milestone from 113 to 116." The document was signed by one Pearson, IPS MBE, dated 1 June 1947, claimed Haokip in his objection letter.

On 28 January, the Tujang Area Chiefs' Organisation also filed their objection citing five reasons. They claimed that an area of land between 111-and-a-half and 112-and-a-half milestones on the Dimapur-Manipur Road had been recognised as the ownership of Ngullen of Tujang in a case filed in 1947 to the office of Mr Pearson. The group pleaded that "the Koubru hill has been a perennial source of livelihood and food security for the Tujang" area. They also claimed that "the said site has historical as well as primal religious traditions and cultural significance for the Kuki community since time immemorial", and as such "Mt Koubru is an integral part of our cultural heritage, ancestral land and identity".

The Committee on Protection and Preservation of Mt Koubru also opposed the move of the state government, particularly the plan for construction of a temple dedicated to a particular religion on the mountain. The Liangmai Naga Council, Eastern Zone and Eastern Liangmai Chief Association also expressed their displeasure over the "thoughtless act" of the Manipur government on its move to declare Mt Koubru as a "protected site". They also lamented that despite the Liangmai Naga people guarding and protecting the Koubru Hills for centuries, the state government has been deliberately ignoring their rights.

Thus, the attempt to declare Mt Koubru as a "protected site" seems to be a violation of land ownership and a case of deprivation of the livelihood of hill people.

HAC and Manipur government

The Government of Manipur under Biren Singh has reiterated time and again that Koubru Hill Range is a reserved forest. It may be noteworthy that the Hill Area Committee recently made a pertinent decision in this regard. This committee of the Legislative Assembly of the state, consisting of select members of hill areas, has been established under special provisions of the Constitution. It performs its functions under the Manipur Legislative Assembly (Hill Areas Committee) Order, 1972 to "safeguard the interest of the people of the Hill Areas".

The HAC in its meeting on 11 March this year, under the chairmanship of L Leishiyo, unanimously resolved that "there is a procedural error in the Declaration of Reserved Forest after 1972. Any declaration of Protected Forest, Reserved Forest and Wildlife Sanctuaries on or after 20 June 1972 shall not be enforced by the Department until the approval of the Hill Areas Committee, since it pertains to Scheduled Matters of Article 371C of the Presidential Order of 1972". It also resolved that "Forest Territorial Maps should be made at par with the existing Revenue District Boundaries for administrative convenience".

The resolution of the HAC came at a crucial time. The Manipur government, however, seems to ignore, as it has in the past, the procedural requirements of scheduled matters that affect the hill people.

The way out

The attempt to declare Mt Koubru in the Sadar Hills as a "protected site" by looking at it from a perspective of cultural and religious exclusivity has invited strong opposition, as discussed above. It is in total disregard to minority cultures, and an attempt to legitimise and impose the majority culture and religion using state machinery. The mountain has always been open for trekking and visitors from all religious communities, who have performed their religious rites without any restriction. The Christians use it as a site for fasting, prayer and penance.

As much as the Meiteis and Hindus have attached great importance to Mt Koubru, many communities surrounding the mountain also have cultural and religious significance attached to it. The primordial culture and religion of the Kukis attach great importance to Mt Koubru. Legend has it that a woman from one clan of the Kukis was married to Koubru and till today, it is claimed that she reveals her presence in the form of incessant rainfall whenever that clan has an important ceremony.

All said and done, one feels the cultural and religious significance of the mountain to all communities must be recognised and *status quo* should be maintained for peace and tranquility in Manipur.

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