

Giving in to populism



There have been attempts made to conform Naga ways of life with the pan-Indian culture for political and economic benefits

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On 3 July 2020, the Government of Nagaland decided to ban dog meat in the state. Then chief secretary Temjen Toy tweeted about this decision, “The State Government has decided to ban commercial import and trading of dogs and dog markets and also the sale of dog meat, both cooked and uncooked”. On the same day People for Animals thanked the chief secretary for his immense support, and for listening to and acknowledging their cause.

The decision came after the Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organisations wrote to the state government urging an immediate ban on the slaughter of dogs, put a ban on the sale of dog meat in the state and

enforcement of stringent laws for the welfare of animals. It stated that “dogs are seen in terrified conditions, tied up in sacks, waiting at a wet market, for their illegal slaughter, trade and consumption as meat”.

The animal protection group also conveyed the high risk of contracting rabies in such markets as “they are slaughtered on demand in front of customers, exponentially increasing health and epidemiological risks of infections” during the global Covid-19 pandemic. Comparing the condition of such wet markets with those in Vietnam, they pointed out that “In Vietnam, 30 per cent of human deaths due to rabies were linked to exposure to the virus during slaughter of dogs”.

Maneka Gandhi, Union minister for women and child development and

founding chairperson of PFA, wrote an influential essay in a leading national daily on 30 June last year appealing to end “violence against animals”, particularly dogs, as encouraging such “violence against animals” will lead to “violence against people”. Due to the ready compliance by the Government of Nagaland, the PFA on 16 August announced their decision to set up a new unit in Nagaland to rehabilitate the dogs they rescue and sought help to complete this campaign in the state.

There was outrage and a flurry of opposition on social media and other mediums against this decision of the state government. Different hashtags were generated to campaign against such cultural imposition and interference. The Naga Hoho, an apex body of various Naga tribes, opposed the

ban and later the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (I-M) also joined the chorus. With the growing voice of dissent the chief secretary clarified that “the ban is just on trade and sale of dog meat, and not on its consumption”. The state government also made an official statement later that the notification was made to comply with the new food safety regulation of the country, where dog meat was not on the list among safe meat and meat products for consumption.

A petition was filed in the Kohima bench of the Gauhati High Court against the dog meat ban. The Kohima bench on 25 November provided an interim stay on the order “until the next returnable date”. This provided temporary relief particularly to those whose livelihood depend on such trade.

The dog meat ban has also brought back the discourse on the much despised “civilising the savage” project of the colonial government. It has thrown open a counter narrative to civilising projects and apologia to “savaging the civilised”, a relook into the power relations between different societies within the Indian Union and the efficacy of the asymmetric provisions of the Constitution.

The state of Nagaland was created in December 1963 to quell insurrections in the Naga Hills and provided asymmetric powers to the state. Under article 371A of the Constitution of India, special provisions were given to Nagaland. The relevant provision stated that no Act of Parliament could apply to the state unless the Legislative Assembly of Nagaland decides so by a resolution, in respect of religious or social practices of the Nagas, the Naga customary law and procedure, and administration of civil and criminal justice involving decisions according to Naga customary law, notwithstanding anything in the Constitution. This provision places upon the Nagaland Legislative Assembly the task of defending the same.

A dog is not seen only as a meat-providing animal, as weary eyes in other parts of the country would believe. To the Nagas, as well as among other indigenous groups in the region, there is an intimate bonding

and friendship between them and their dogs as much as such bonding is in other societies. They are a companion and assistant in hunting and foraging; maintaining hygiene in traditional societies by consuming faeces and guarding their master’s house and property. In some societies there is a belief that dog meat has medicinal value and serves various purposes in the rituals of traditional religions for healing and propitiation.

The hasty dog meat ban by the Nagaland government is not only servile, it also exposed the complex and delicate nature of the coalition government in the state. Born from the internal strife within the Naga People’s Front, a political party which aims to “work for and assist” socio-political issues of the Nagas, the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party came to power with the support of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The NDPP has not only hummed in tune with its coalition partner and the culture of the majority, it also abdicated the obligations that it placed to itself in serving the Naga people. The NDPP clearly cannot stand against an intrusion into the cultural life of the Nagas to which the Constitution guarantees immunity under Article 371A.

As of now, the interim stay order has given a temporary sigh of relief to the Naga public to resume their traditional dietary habits. The legal battle will continue. However, the real battle will be in two years’ time when the state goes to the polls. It will be in that Assembly election that the Nagas will fight against the imposition of a law which is against their social practices. It will be against a political elite that arbitrarily introduced a law against the “social practices of the Nagas”. Unless the Nagas elect a representative that will stand for their cultural values, the Constitutional provisions for the protection of their religious or social practices, and their customary law are meaningless. They need representatives that are not subservient to political and economic benefits.

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