

Impossibility of social distancing

Community-based organisations in the hills of the North-east are imposing time-tested traditional systems of local governance during the pandemic

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In these times, social distancing is an important public health measure to combat the extremely contagious coronavirus disease. There is a doubt about the practicability of social distancing in India given our high population density, especially among slum-dwellers and other high population concentration areas in cities.

When the Central government lifted restrictions on the movement of migrant workers and students in different parts of the country to allow them to return home from May onwards, social distancing was an impossibility in the *shramik* special trains and buses arranged for transportation. During the journey, many contracted the virus and some succumbed to the disease while others were treated in special Covid-19 hospitals.

In the North-east, the respective states arranged institutional quarantine centres. In many hill areas of the region, villagers arranged or built their own makeshift huts to act as quarantine centres as state infrastructure was lacking in such remote places. Culturally, they were informed also by past experiences and recognised the need to be well prepared to contain the disease or face the eventuality of community spread in their village.

Five months after the nationwide lockdown, the health department of the Government of Manipur issued a notification regarding modified standard operating procedures on the handling of returning or arriving people to the state on 25 August. That "all returning/arriving persons to Manipur will be tested immediately



for Covid-19 and if found negative, they will be allowed to go home" and "no person shall be detained in quarantine centres after a negative test result".

However on 5 September, an influential community-based organisation of the hills, the Kuki Inpi Manipur, issued a counter notification stating that no need for home isolation or quarantine in the new standard operating procedures for those who tested negative was problematic for hill-dwellers. Therefore, the Inpi instructed all its district and block organisations as well as village chiefs to continue maintaining the community quarantine centres and quarantine those entering the hills from outside for 14 days to ensure that they were free from the disease.

During this pandemic, stringent measures were adopted by indigenous communities that stemmed from their historical understanding of infectious diseases and trust in their shared experiences. The cultural instinct instructed them not to trust any measure taken outside but to take precautionary measures under their close watch. Such instincts from the past still shape a lot of the present social beliefs and practices, and therefore instructs them to take drastic public health measures.

Indigenous communities in the hills of the North-east have social systems that are largely communitarian.

They exist as a collective whole in the village in which social, economic, political and military obligations are performed in groups. They are indeed community bound by culture.

Most indigenous communities in the region have a traditional dormitory system. They are called Morung among Nagas, Nokpante among Garos, Zawlbuk among Mizos, Lom and Som among Kukis, and many others. Such traditional youth institutions act as the customary educational institution as well as a labour group for each household. In this social institution, staying collectively, labouring together, learning and even fighting against external aggression was a group exercise where elders lead and taught the younger ones.

Today the bachelor's dormitory system may have been discontinued due to the intrusion of modernity and Christianity, but the labour system has continued. That has been done through the institution of the church itself in order to pay off yearly contributions. The younger boys learn various crafts from elders – building huts, making cane and bamboo strips, baskets, stools, etc. Throughout the year, they lead a communal life.

Apart from such aspects, culturally those societies share every happiness and grief in the community by paying visits to one another. Indeed, visiting one another at any time is a

common habit of every hill community. The evening and night-time are best suited for such purposes when sharing of experiences, humour, folk stories and myths take place.

Till today, borrowing and sharing agricultural instruments such as spade, dao and sickle; and household items such as bamboo basket, bamboo stair, traditional fibre rope, etc. are quite common among villagers. In their scarcity, they also share home vegetable gardens among themselves. This sharing and exchanging of household items require frequent visits.

Practically for the hill people, most of their life is spent outdoors and in community. In the past, young boys would not spend most of their time at home but in the bachelor's dormitory where they would learn and rest together at night.

Since the hill people spend most of their time outside, either working in their *jhum* field or in the jungle hunting or foraging, confining themselves to the four walls of their house for even a day is torture. Even among middle class families, house confinement is something unfamiliar. In short, restricting social interaction among indigenous communities is impractical.

When a vaccine for the disease is not yet available and the only means to prevent the spread of the contagious virus is social distancing, how

will hill communities react? When social distancing is an impossibility among indigenous communities, it is only through two traditional but effective means that they can prevent the virus's spread.

First, closure of the village or what we call a lockdown. During the early months of the pandemic such closure of localities and villages were often reported and seen in the North-east on social media, despite the government's appeal not to do so. The other way is to quarantine all those who come from outside, under close community watch, for at least a week, so that they can be sure of the asymptomatic nature of the person.

Community-based organisations in the hills are invoking their cultural sensitivity and imposing time-tested traditional systems of local governance. The notification by Kuki Inpi Manipur is an exercise of such a cultural understanding and the impossibility of social distancing practices in their society. Such cultures and local governance systems of the so-called tribal people are recognised under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and other Central government acts and regulations. Imposition of state diktats without due process in this regard will be tantamount to infringement of the law itself.

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