

The mass stifling of college teachers in Manipur through imposition of the Central Civil Services (Conduct) Rules is an impairment of their profession

Shrinking democratic space

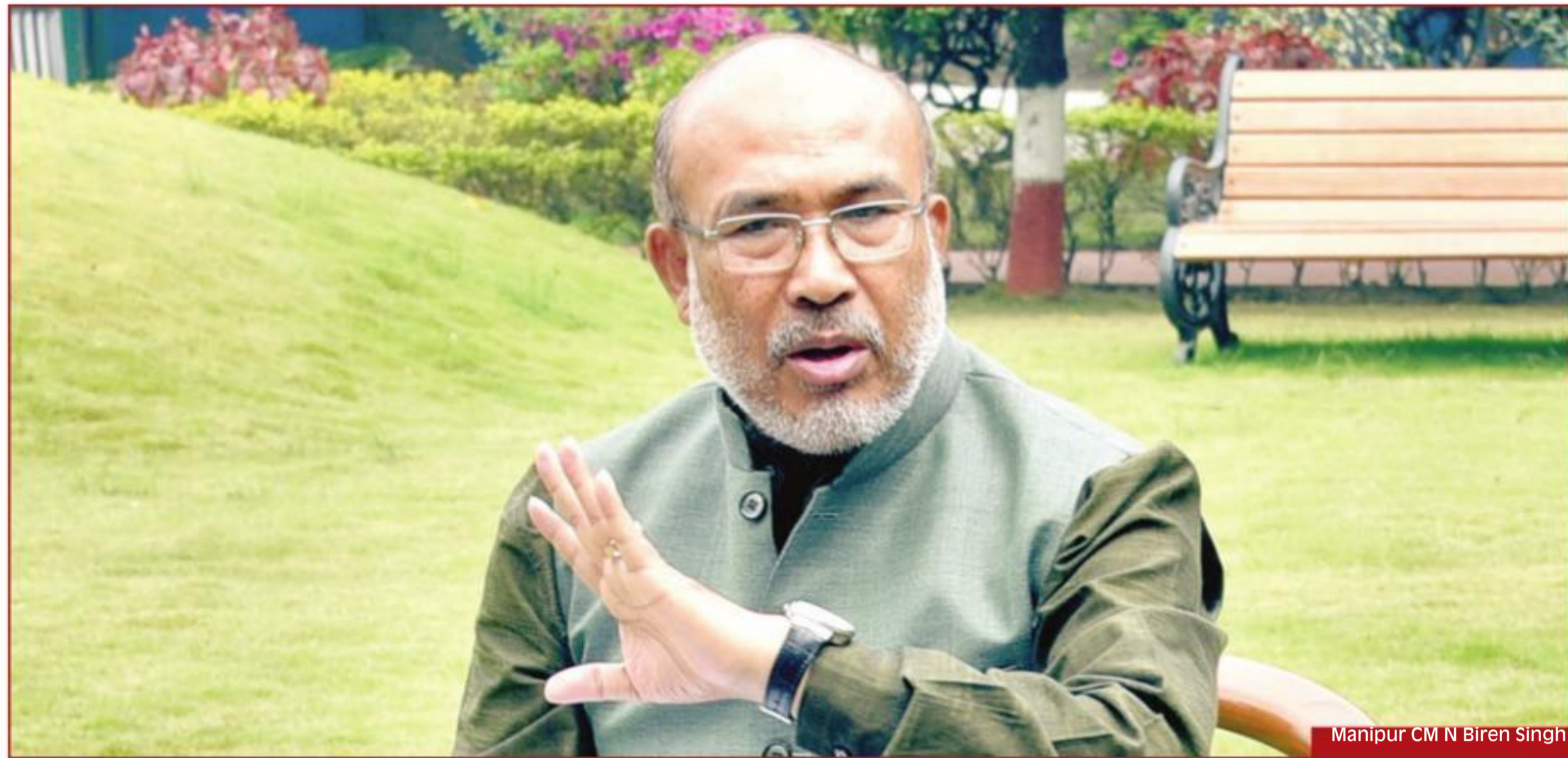
THONGKHOLAL HAOKIP

On 10 August 2020, the Nongthombam Biren Singh government in Manipur, through the Directorate of University and Higher Education, issued an office memorandum enforcing the Central Civil Services (Conduct) Rules, 1964 “to all Government College Teachers and other staff working under the Higher Education Department, Manipur”. The order requires “due approval from the competent authority” to “be taken before publishing or making statements regarding any Government Policy or Programme in the media, failing which appropriate disciplinary action may be initiated against them as per the relevant provisions of CCS (CCA) Rules, 1965”. The order is a fallout of political unrest in Manipur since April that culminated July this year and also the demand for implementation of the 7th University Grants Commission Pay and Regulations by college teachers.

The relationship between the state's Bharatiya Janata Party and one of its coalition partners, the National People's Party, soured in early April leading to a public spat between chief minister N Biren Singh and his deputy Yumnam Joykumar Singh of the NPP party. Following that, all portfolios assigned to the deputy CM were stripped and the NPP threatened to withdraw their support to the government.

The political environment further worsened in July when three disgruntled BJP MLAs also resigned just before the election to the lone Rajya Sabha Member of Parliament seat from Manipur. The Indian National Congress of Manipur, the single largest party in the 2017 Manipur Legislative Assembly elections, also took the opportunity in attempting to not only win the Rajya Sabha seat but also staked a claim to form the government by demanding a floor test. It was followed by five MLAs defecting from the party and joining the BJP.

The manner in which the BJP won the election and floor test as well as evaded the anti-defection law became a matter of public concern and discussion in the state and also beyond. Such matters were topics of debate on local television channels where teachers from various public



Manipur CM N Biren Singh

funded colleges were often invited. It triggered the Biren Singh government to issue the aforementioned order leading to widespread resentment by the public.

CCS rules and educational institutions

During the last two years, there have been attempts to impose CCS rules on teachers across the country. In the national capital, the Jawaharlal Nehru University and University of Delhi were in loggerheads with authorities on the issue. In October 2018, the JNU administration attempted to impose the rules on faculty members, which the JNU Teachers Association saw as an attempt to curb intellectual freedom by putting teachers under the umbrella of “government servant”.

The relevant section of the CCS rules restricts a “government servant” from expressing opinions in audio, visual, print or electronic media “(i) which has the effect of an adverse criticism of any current or recent policy or action of the Central Government or a State Government; (ii) which is capable of embarrassing the relations between the Central Government and the Government of any State; or (iii) which is capable of embarrassing the relations between the Central Government and the Government of any foreign State”.

However, the CCS rules are in contradiction to the UGC's regulations from 2018. The UGC regulations on “Measures for the Maintenance of Standards in Higher Education” clearly state that teachers in universities and colleges should be able to “express free and frank opinion by participation at professional meetings, semi-

nars, conferences etc, towards the contribution of knowledge”. They are required to “work to improve education in the community and strengthen the community's moral and intellectual life” and “be aware of social problems and take part in such activities as would be conducive to the progress of society and hence the country as a whole”.

Upon several protests by teachers and students, the JNU administration, after the 276th meeting of the Executive Council, released a press note stating that CCS rules had not been incorporated in the JNU ordinances.

What do enforcing CCS rules mean?

Enforcement of CCS rules on teachers, particularly those in higher educational institutions, mean impairment to the profession itself. Under the rules a political scientist can no longer freely discuss politics; an economist can be reprimanded for talking about the economic policies of the government; an educationist can no longer make critical opinions on the educational policy of the government; a scientist can be punished for expressing views on the science policy of the government, and a teacher of environmental science can be punished for discussing the environmental policy of the government.

The strictures on “publication or making statement” imply that daily academic activities of writing opinions in newspapers and magazines will involve bureaucratic scrutiny, hassle and red tape. Performing “academic honour” on the invitation to be a guest editor for a special issue of a journal in social sciences or humanities, or the routine work of writing an editorial

will become a violation of service rules.

In short, teachers can be criminalised for the very purpose that they are expected to perform.

Becoming an Orwellian state?

The imposition of CCS rules on teachers is only the latest development in the shrinking democratic space of Manipur. In the last two years, a series of curbs on democratic rights have been witnessed in the state wherein several writers and activists were criminalised for expressing their views on the government and its policies.

In December 2018, a television journalist Kishorechandra Wangkhem was arrested under the National Security Act for criticising the BJP government on social media. During the national lockdown in April this year, Mohammad Chingiz Khan, a PhD student of JNU from Manipur, was arrested for republishing an old co-authored article in a local vernacular daily. In the article, the writers voiced their concern regarding state policies and the marginalisation of Pangals or Manipuri Muslims. Laifungbam Debabrata Roy and Takhenchangbam Shadishkanta were also arrested for questioning and making critical comments on the state government's policies related to the pandemic.

A political activist Erendro Leichombam was arrested on sedition charges for his Facebook post on 25 July. In the picture post, Leichombam criticised the newly elected Rajya Sabha MP from Manipur, who is also the titular king of the state, Leishemba Sanajaoba for bowing before Union home minister Amit Shah while greeting him, with a caption that read

“meenai macha”, meaning son of a servant.

All is not well with women too. RK Ichanthoibi was arrested in December 2019 for her social media post on the contemporary issues of the state. Currently, a defamation suit filed by the chief minister is pending in Manipur High Court against Thounaojam Brinda, a police officer of Manipur, and 10 other editors and publishers of newspapers for carrying what he considered to be “derogatory” content.

During an interactive session of “Bharat Ki Baat, Sabke Saath”, a diaspora event at the Central Hall of Westminster in April 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said, “I want this government to be criticised. Criticism makes democracy strong”. The National Education Policy 2020 puts an emphasis on developing the cognitive skills of students through a curriculum that will make space for critical thinking. The new education policy also aims to shift the assessment of student development in schools from rote memorisation to higher order skills.

On the other hand, Biren Singh has not tolerated any critical comments against his government and policies. He has silenced his critics individually through the use of legal instruments of state power.

The mass stifling of college teachers with the imposition of CCS rules is an indication of the state inching towards an Orwellian dystopia. The Manipur CM seriously needs to rethink and act before he has done enough of “suppressing voices”, which would soon become his legacy.

The writer is assistant professor, Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi