

Perpetrators of the arson last month in Manipur's Chassad village seem to have gone unpunished

TRONGKROLAL HAOKIP

Chassad village in Manipur was in the news for more than a week for the arson committed by its neighbouring villages last month. Located at the district headquarters of the newly formed Kamjong district in the North-eastern hills of Manipur, Chassad has more than 200 years of written history. The chief of the village is the eldest of the Haokip clan, among the Kukis, and is the "perennial source of custom and tradition" however widespread and scattered the settlement of the younger sub-clans may be.

The house of the Chassad-pa has a long history of dominion with its "tributary off-shoots" and diplomacy with neighbours, including its involvement in the perpetual territorial conflicts between the Manipuri Kingdom and the Raja of Sumjok in Burma, and a subtle relationship with the British.

Chassad: A historic village

One of the first reports in the "History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal", by Alexander Mackenzie, which was later expanded and published in 1884, has sections on "account of the Chasad Kukis". During the 19th century when Colonel McCulloch, then Political Agent of Manipur, was in "direct political charge of most of the Kukis of Manipur", he invited the Chassad chief on a certain occasion and "under safe conduct". He was, however, murdered by a Manipuri official, then brother-in-law of the Manipur Maharaja. This "foul act of treachery", Colonel Johnstone gave an account, "had made them, at heart, deadly enemies of Manipur".

It was, to a large extent, responsible for the alliance of Chassad with the

Rajah of Sumjok, a tributary chief of Burma, and many fateful events that unfolded in, what Mackenzie called, "uninhabited" country or "unoccupied tract" to the north of the Kubo valley in today's Myanmar, particularly on Manipuri subjects. The mathematical line drawn by Pemberton, which divided Burma and Manipur, created "doubtfulness and... had led to several outrages" and instability in this part of the tract.

During World War I, Labour Corps were recruited for France in British colonies of Asia. The Manipur Maharaja was committed to supplying 2,000 men, among whom half would consist of recruits from the hill areas, though the Maharaja had no direct control over hill subjects. This labour recruitment, locally known as pothang, was opposed by the Kukis. The Kukis neither agreed to supply labour corps for France nor surrendered guns. The Chassad-pa, or chief of Chassad, took a leading part in this opposition and called a meeting involving those in the territories to the North-east of Manipur and the unadministered area called Somra tract.

It was "about the end of November or beginning of December" that Pache, chief of the Chassad, summoned a big meeting of the Kuki chiefs at Chassad. During the meeting, about 150 chiefs "resolved not to obey any orders or summons from the Government and to fight if the Government tried to enforce orders". Thus, the resistance was turned into a full-blown conflict after the Chassad meeting. The Anglo-Kuki war also ended with the surrender of Pache in March 1919.

Current conflict

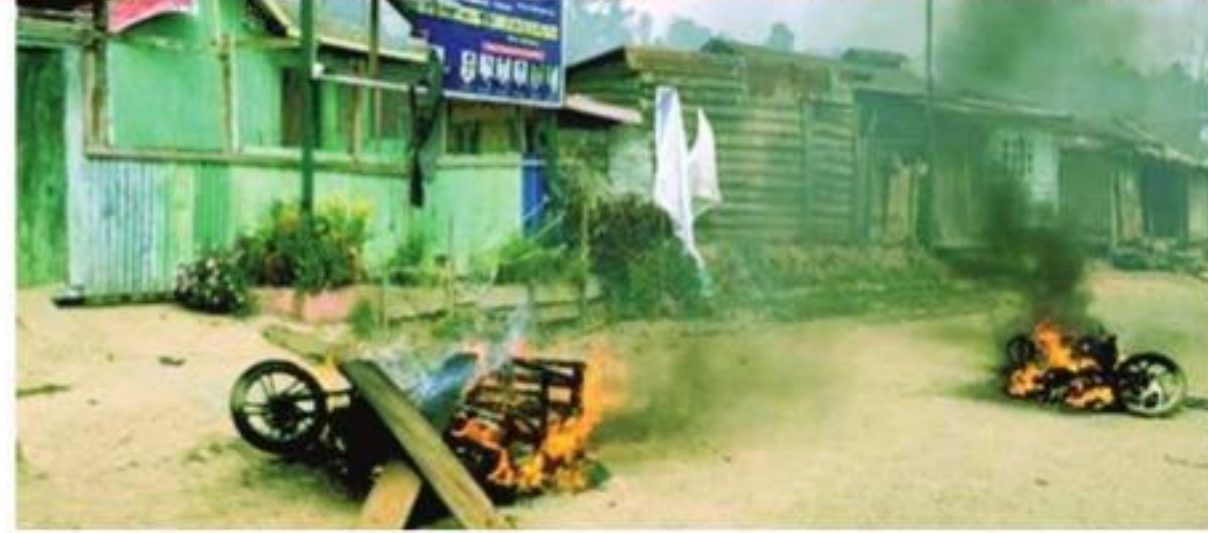
The land conflict between Chassad and Sampui village goes back to the colonial period. In 1944, Rithale, the chief or *khullakpa* of Sampui, filed

a case against Tongkothang, the chief of Chassad, in the Court of the Sub-Divisional Officer, Ukhrul. The "order" issued by then Sub-Divisional Officer of Ukhrul, RL Shaw on 6 July 1945 regards civil case number 36 of 1944-45 states that, "I cannot recognise Sampui's claim to the land which had previously been recognised as Chassad land. The defendant has the right to enjoy any *loushal* for cultivation done on his land by other villagers and plaintiff has no right to any *loushal*. Plaintiff's right to the land extends to being able to cultivate without payment of *loushal* to Chassad". Despite such clarification from the colonial administration after careful examination of the case, it did not stop Sampui from exerting claims to the Chassad land.

In February this year when Chassad cleared a portion of hill range for *jhum* cultivation, it was opposed by Sampui village claiming that the land belongs to them. Before the trees that were felled dried, it was prematurely burnt by unknown miscreants on 15 March, rendering the *jhum* field unfit for cultivation. Chassad blamed Sampui villagers and blocked the main road of the district the next morning in protest against such an act of arson and demanded the culprits to be nabbed. The blockade stranded many in Kamjong and adjoining villages, who were en route to Imphal and other places. The altercation during the blockade resulted in physical assaults. The neighbouring villages, mainly from the Tangkhul community, overpowered the blockade enforcers and that eventually led to the burning of over a hundred Chassad houses.

Bandhs in Manipur

In Manipur, a blockade or bandh has been a common feature for long. *Bandhs* were normally called to protest against and demand justice



from the state government. In 2011, when a bandh was enforced for months in the Sadar Hills area of the state to demand a full-fledged district status, a counter-bandh was launched by the United Naga Council. The valley area of the state is not an exception to this so-called bandh culture. Lightning *bandhs* or quick enforcement of blockades were frequently launched or threatened to be launched to press the state government into fulfilling certain demands.

At the peak of the United Naga Council bandh in 2010 against the Autonomous District Council election, a professor from Senapati district of Manipur at the North-Eastern Hill University, Xavier P Mao, defended such *bandhs* in a democratic country like India, and said that unless people resorted to violent agitations, their grievances were not considered. He argued that a bandh had become one of the means of the weaker sections of society to address their problems against the dominant section and draw attention of the authorities concerned. In a blockade-filled society like Manipur, therefore, the inconvenience caused by the one at Chassad cannot provide enough justification for such acts of arson and the damage inflicted on a huge number of houses and properties.

Peace without justice

In the aftermath of the Chassad arson, a peace committee was formed to work and formulate a plan for

peaceful coexistence. Several rounds of talks were held to restore normalcy and trust between the two communities. However, in the process of restoration of peace and normalcy, there is no talk about the criminal justice to be put in place. The burning of *jhum* fields and arson of Chassad houses is a crime committed by miscreants. Crime is a social phenomenon and the perpetrators need correction under the established procedure of law. Several videos and pictures that emerged of the Chassad arson clearly show the identity of those involved. Despite such evidence, legal actions have not been taken.

The destruction of the livelihood and home of anyone is against United Nations treaties and conventions. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights clearly point to these, and India is a signatory to both treaties.

The acts of the Chassad arsonists seem to have been treated as misdemeanor and glossed over. The cry for justice is dismissively ignored. However, one thing is clear. A crime that is unpunished, can be repeated and injustice will spread. The ball is in the court of the state government. It has to choose between enforcement of the "law" or ignore the criminal acts and perpetuate lawlessness.

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PLUS POINTS

Cash assistance



The Nagaland Government will provide immediate cash assistance to citizens stranded outside the state owing to Covid-19, says a report in the Guwahati-based *Assam Tribune*.

Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio said a patient would be given a cash assistance of Rs 20,000, a professional or working person would get Rs 4,000 and a student would receive Rs 3,000. A separate portal has been opened at iamstranded.nagaland.gov.in for this purpose, where any citizen of the state who is currently outside and is facing distress due to the ongoing nationwide lockdown, may apply for direct assistance.

The government has also decided to reach out to daily wagers, considering the hardships they are going through. Rio said relief packets consisting of rice, dal and other essential items would be provided to the daily wagers through the respective district administrations.

The Nagaland government has also disbursed Rs 2.32 crore as assistance under the Chief Minister's Relief Fund till 20 April. An update in the "new initiatives and announcements" section of the Nagaland Covid-19 dashboard said the disbursed fund included financial assistance to students and people outside Nagaland, deputy commissioners and the Nagaland State Disaster Management Authority.

The financial assistance to deputy commissioners stood at Rs 1.78 crore, while an amount of Rs 20 lakh was given to the NSDMA. The total amount given to those staying outside, including students and working people, stood at Rs 34.2 lakh, the dashboard stated. It added that a total of 2,278 working people have been assisted, while 881 students were helped through their respective Naga students' union.

The Chief Minister's Relief Fund has received a little over 2.95 crore as donations till 21 April, according to the Nagaland chief minister's website. The CMRF had over Rs 84.70 lakh as the opening balance on 26 March, while the total donations received after 26 March stood at Rs 2.11 crore, according to the details provided on the website.

"While every effort is made to project the exact amount, the actual figure may vary due to bank charges, interest accrual, etc.," it added.

Good doctor



A case of a doctor of Jorhat Medical College and Hospital going out of his way to extend assistance to a patient and her attendants by dropping them in his own car by driving over 230 kms himself has brought much relief to the patient and her family members.

Dr Shankarjyoti Parashar, assistant professor, pulmonary branch, JMCH, told *The Assam Tribune* that an elderly woman with multiple ailments from Jyotipur, Naharjan Tinali of Bokakhat Civil Sub-division of Golaghat district was admitted to a private hospital on 16 April and was under his treatment.

The patient identified as Binu Baruah was living with one of her daughters at the latter's residence and was brought to the hospital by the daughter. Dr Parashar said that though the patient was discharged on 19 April by him, he came to know the next day that the family members could not arrange an ambulance to take her back home due to the long distance and charge too was quite high. He said that seeing their plight, instantaneously, he offered them to drop the patient and the attendants, which seemed to be a big relief for them.

"I thought at this hour of crisis I should do whatever I could do to extend a helping hand to people in need," Dr Parashar said. He said that as the family members wanted to keep the patient at another daughter's place - Chakalia, Sepon, Dibrugarh district, he drove the patient and her two daughters to the said address which was east of Jorhat.

After dropping the patient and a daughter of her at Chakalia, Sepon (Dibrugarh district) the doctor drove back to Jorhat and went to drop the other daughter at Bokakhat as she had no other means of transport available to return home.



dignified livelihood. But deterioration of the socio-political situation in Assam put everyone in trouble. Now Covid-19 has emerged as a monster for the movement," said Tarali Sarma, a National Award-winning singer from Assam. However, she admitted that mobile theatre had lately lost its popularity because of low-quality plays with unnecessary doses of cheap entertainment. Even then, Sarma believes that the ailing mobile theatre groups deserve necessary support from the government. She also did not forget to appreciate the state government for a few recent schemes covering a large number of artistes and artisans.

Associated herself with the movement, the talented music composer pointed out that if the situation does not improve in the next few weeks, the groups would not be able to start their preparations. Moreover, if theatre lovers don't get to enjoy the plays, because of various administrative measures against the deadly virus, the entire movement would definitely face an uncertain future.

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As the human race fights a battle for survival against the novel coronavirus, a unique theatre activity in Assam almost faces extinction. Known as mobile (or touring/troving/*bhramyamani*) theatre, these groups go around the state presenting plays with all of their artistes, artisans and others. The commercial theatre session normally starts by August and it continues till the middle of April. After the Bohag Bihu festival, the groups halt production for three months and regroup by July every year. Even though Assam faced socio-political disturbances in the last few decades, the mobile theatre groups sustained its successful journey.

As the virus started affecting millions of people with a huge number of casualties across the globe, the Union government declared a complete lockdown initially up to 14 April and then extended it till 3 May so that the chain of infection could be prevented in the country. By now the pandemic has infected more than 21,000 people in India and over 600 have died. Assam has also reported over 30 infections with one casualty.

The life-threatening virus has put the theatre movement in an uncertain situation. First, the groups couldn't finish the session this time because of the nation-wide lockdown, and second, nobody knows whether they can start their new session on time. Third, even if they prepare a little late, who can assure the participation of viewers in their shows.

Theatre-goers in Assam today support more than 30 active theatre groups. Each group comprises around 150 performers and other workers. At an average, a theatre group performs two evening shows a day. More than 1,000 people can enjoy a play where the ticket costs from Rs 150-500 per person. The owner normally charges Rs 100,000 per show from local organising committees across Assam.

The groups share some similarities with the *jatra* parties of Bengal, but mobile theatre units are technically



Silence reigns on stage

Assam's mobile theatre groups are staring at an uncertain future due to the Covid-19 outbreak

more advanced and entertaining. The groups carry their pandals, multi-stages, seating arrangements, lighting and sound equipment along with their performers to every location where they exhibit shows. Owners have to feed all the people, arrange necessary lodging and also take care for illnesses during the nine-month session.

Most of the plays of these theatre groups are based on Assamese literature and folk tales. But sometimes mythological themes are also adopted by the playwrights. Many times, they have also adopted contemporary themes based on the lives of Lady Diana, Benazir Bhutto, Osama bin Laden along with dramatic versions of the Titanic, Jurassic Park, Othello, Hamlet, Anaconda, Kargil War, et al.

Though Assam has a long history of theatre movements starting from the great Vaishnavite saint Srimanta Sankardev in the 15th century, the pre-

sent day mobile theatre groups came to exist in the early 1960s. A creative cultural personality, Achyut Lahkar took inspiration from the mobile theatre model of Natyacharya Brajanath Sarma of the 1920s and launched the Nataraj Cine Theatre in 1963. Lahkar, from Pathshala town in lower Assam, developed the traditional way of presenting a play in the Assamese language. He started using modern systems of light and sound to enrich the productions and even went to showcase his plays in neighbouring states.

Today, the mobile theatre industry comprising Kohinoor Theatre, Awan Theatre, Sankardev Theatre, Hengul Theatre, Theatre Bhagyadebi, Theatre Binapani, Saraighat Theatre, Bordoichila Theatre, Ashura Theatre, Debaraj Theatre, Nataraj Theatre and Pragyoish Theatre among others, does a business of around Rs 10 crore annually where celebrated artistes earn

handsome amounts as remunerations. Many glamorous Assamese film actors have joined the theatre groups as the state's film business faced a shrinkage in the recent past. Now the theatre groups arrange splendid advertisements announcing the engagement of popular film personalities prior to the session. Hard times started for mobile theatre groups last year when the state witnessed a massive public outcry against the Centre's citizenship amendment initiatives. Brahmaputra valley, which is the roaming ground for mobile theatre groups, witnessed a series of protest demonstrations. The situation even turned volatile on some occasions. So the groups had to cancel shows last winter. Once the situation became a little normal, the novel coronavirus struck in the beginning of March.

"Mobile theatre groups support thousands of Assamese families with a

