



A silencing in Manipur

Rules for academic publication, conduct of teachers pose a risk to democracy

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ON SEPTEMBER 15, the government of Manipur issued an order that requires prior approval to publish books on the state. Listing certain topics that are under scrutiny, a committee will examine the manuscripts. The topics include works on the history, culture, tradition and geography of Manipur. The order stated that “any publication of a book in violation” of the order “shall be liable to be punished under the relevant law”. The order came in the wake of a book that the government considers “may either distort facts or disturb the peaceful co-existence amongst the various communities in the State”.

The regulation is a direct offshoot of the recent controversy surrounding a book that argues that only 700 square miles of the valley of the state was merged with the Indian Union in the merger agreement and not even a single inch of the hill areas was covered under it. Another order on November 9 declares every copy of the book titled *The Complexity Called Manipur: Roots, Perceptions & Reality* authored by Sushil Kumar Sharma as “forfeited to the Government”.

However, there is a larger malaise that has long existed in the hills. In the last decade, several vigilante groups in the valley have been actively engaged in spewing venomous claims about indigenous minority groups as “refugees”. The state government is complicit in this by allowing these hate groups to continue their activities despite several objections raised by community-based organisations. The unending hate campaign has unsettled many in the hills and they finally

found teeth in the contents of the book. It provided them with the counter-argument to strike back at the toxic hegemony and clamour that the hill areas are not parts of the territory of Manipur.

Two years earlier, on August 10, 2020, the N Biren Singh government issued an office memorandum enforcing the Central Civil Services (Conduct) Rules, 1965, to all government college teachers and other staff working under the state higher education department. This order requires approval to “be taken before publishing or making statements regarding any government policy or programme in the media”, and failure to do so will invite disciplinary action. Before this order was issued, the relationship between the ruling coalition partners, BJP and NPP, soured, leading to a public spat between leaders. The political environment worsened when leaders began switching parties between the Congress and BJP before election for the lone Rajya Sabha member from the state. The manner in which the BJP won the floor test and evaded the anti-defection law became a matter of public concern and discussion. This was debated in local television channels where teachers from government colleges were often invited. It was this that triggered the N Biren Singh government to issue the aforementioned order.

A vibrant liberal democracy requires a corresponding civil society and a knowledge system free of government interference. Freedom to publish and participate in de-

bates in the media is an essential part of the freedom of speech and expression. Any censorship on academic publication and restrictions of free speech is an affront to the Constitution. It implies that the dominant perspective acceptable to the government will prevail and alternative perspectives will be derided.

The enforcement of CCS rules on teachers, particularly those in higher educational institutions, is an impairment to their profession. Under the rules, a teacher may no longer have the freedom to train students in critical thinking and analysis. A political scientist can no longer freely discuss politics. An economist can be punished for discussing the economic policy of the government. The strictures on “publication or making statement” imply that the academic activities of writing opinions in newspapers and magazines, or participating in a discussion or debate in television shows, will involve bureaucratic scrutiny, hassle and red tape. Writing an editorial for a journal can become a violation of service rules. In short, teachers can be criminalised for the very activity that they are expected to perform.

The National Education Policy 2020 emphasises the development of cognitive skills such as critical thinking. For this, the quality of engagement of teachers is considered to be the most important factor. Therefore, “the criticality of faculty in achieving the goals of higher education” and “the criticality of research” is considered to be essential for the progress of the country.

In the last few years, not only were the CCS rules imposed on teachers, there were relentless attempts to stifle dissent in the state. Several academic and political activists were incarcerated for expressing their views against the policies and programmes of the state. A teacher of Manipuri was served a show cause notice by Manipur University on September 28 for criticising the state government’s “legalisation of liquor”. The imposition of CCS rules is also in contradiction to the UGC regulations on ‘Measures for the Maintenance of Standards in Higher Education’ of 2018. The regulations clearly stated that teachers in universities and colleges should be able to “express free and frank opinion by participation at professional meetings, seminars, 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”.

Academic disagreements need academic debate and engagement, not government censorship and intimidation. The clampdown on free speech and the imposition of regulation on publication is not only an impairment to academic freedom, it is inimical to democracy.

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