

Where is Lei–Ingkhol?

By A Correspondent

AT PRESENT, LEI INGKHOL IS located at village No 8 Mantripukhri, Sheet No 2, Tahsil Imphal East II, and about five kilometres away from the heart of the Imphal city in Manipur. It was originally marshy land whereupon bushes and reeds were grown, and without any occupation. It was isolated and considered as disgusted area where many would not dare to tread on for fear of diseases and other socially perceived evilness. Around 1940s when medical service was begun to be provided to lepers and tuberculosis patients in certain portion of the present location of the village, several socially stigmatised and ostracised landless patients suffering from these diseases who could no longer reunite with their original families, gradually filled the marshy land, cleared the surrounding bush and founded the village. For several decades, as late as 1970s, due to social fear of spreading the diseases, outsiders had compelled them to confine and rely upon hunting, fishing and water roots and other resources available in and around the village for survival. In course of time, migrant labours and landless families immigrated and settled on it. With the passage of time Lei-Ingkhol became a well established village dominantly inhabited by workers' families who subsequently enjoyed scenic beauty, favourable climate, rich natural resources and prospects of tourism in the village.

The six decades of Lei-Ingkhol from 1940s onwards correspond to two contradictory processes characterised by: (a) recognition of the existence of Lei-Ingkhol by the government, and (b) subsequent encroachment by policy makers. Firstly, electoral politics played positive role in terms of listing the villagers in the electoral roll, fund allocation to village entrepreneurs and recognised institutions, housing schemes and other facilities. Secondly, pertinent to the reaction trend of the rulers to occupy land at the cost of people; the government representing the interest of the ruling class took advantage of the minority condition of the villagers and accordingly decided to displace them in the name of development. As all India crisis of creating Special Economic Zones by displacing economically backward population would suggest; in Manipur, there is exploitation, oppression and suppression when public resource is being channelised by the reactionary regime, in the name of development, to pay for unrestraint and indiscriminate use of repressive forces whose brutal actions are buttressed by the colonial Land Acquisition Act 1894, thereby having destructive impact upon the affected population. The controversial Capital Project (CP) is being implemented without adhering to the international standard of Free Prior Information and Consent of the population to be affected by the project.

The CP is an above Rs 300 crore construction project financed by the Government of India under Special Plan Assistance (SPA) scheme since 2004. The potential inflow of fund through SPA opens up an arena of scramble for money among the commission seekers belonging to political elites, bureaucrats, contractors, and other stakeholders who by practice accumulate wealth through misappropriating public fund and bribery. High ranking bureaucrats and several other subordinate officials who subscribe to luxurious and splendiferous living, on their part, are too eager to have new bungalows and quarters to be located in Imphal. In the name of CP all these categories of parasites made collusion to construct a fortified elite zone. Accordingly, the State cabinet announced that the present

Legislative Assembly Hall and the Secretariat building were not large enough and that the existing Guwahati High Court (Imphal Bench) required a new building. These infrastructures including quarters had to be built in one compact area. To give a shade of 'people' in the proposed construction work, a 'People's Forum' structure was included.

The CP *per se* though cosmetic infrastructure innovation is not opposed by the Manipur public. However, the project became controversial and is protested for lack of transparency, public accountability, and for its displacement and destructive tendencies. Selection of construction site suffers from hastiness, arbitrariness and violation of prescribed norms. Not surprisingly, blue prints of the project were altered and changed from time to time as per whimsical cabinet decisions. For instance, as a result of protest against installation of foundation stone for Assembly Hall in the Kangla Fort premises without obtaining clearance from the Archaeological Department the site for construction of the entire components of CP was shifted at Chingmeirong Maning Lampak in Imphal. The Kairang Khong Wetland in Chingmeirong was filled up only to create environmental catastrophe, and foundation stone was inaugurated by Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh on 20 November 2004, without fulfilling legal requirements including Rapid Environmental Assessment/ Environmental Management Plan and clearance from the Union Ministry of Environment and Forest. Arbitrary notices were issued to acquire 1.22 acres and 2.73 acres of land respectively from Thangmeiband and Chingmeirong, and eviction order was issued to the Tharon village.

As a result of successful resistance the government withdrew its decisions and on April 20, 2005 a press release was issued to acquire 111.06 acres of land in the Mantripukhri area including the Lei-Ingkhol Village. Lei-Ingkhol resisted the decision and carried out several forms of protests, including road blockade and pitch battles with the repressive forces.

Despite protest the main route of the village leading towards the National Highway 39 was occupied permanently and fortified in 2006, thereby diverting the route without any compensation and rehabilitation. As the resistance intensified and in response to appeals from different circles, after one and half years of continuous relay hunger strike by Lei-Ingkhol, the then Union Minister of State for Labour & Employment, Oscar Fernandes made a visit at night on 12 September 2006 and gave assurance to exclude the village from the CP. However, after the lapse of about four years, the State cabinet took a decision on 16 December 2010 to destroy the village. In January 2011 the wooden bridge constructed by the villagers for the purpose of transportation was destroyed by the government agents.

What is crucial for understanding is the oppressive character of the government while upholding the interest of the parasites. Firstly, Lei-Ingkhol was neither informed, nor their consent taken before it was included in the project. On the contrary brutal repression of protest had created severe bloodshed, psychological and physical insecurity among the villagers. Secondly, piecemeal construction of components of the project in different sites, to evade EIA/EMP norms, does not rule out piecemeal destructions which put together is expected to be very high. Thirdly, the sudden change of site and size of structure suggest that the planning of CP is subjected to the changing interest of the rulers. Fourthly, militarisation of the project site to suppress protest and construct the project at any cost indicates reign of terror that has no respect for democratic rights, dialogue and consensus. Apart from this, destruction of pre-existing infrastructures, i.e., addition to economic burden to Manipur that have been suffering from economic backwardness and bankruptcy, exhibit vested profit motive of those who execute the CP.

The CP construction process involves psychological campaign to create development hype among the misinformed public, and to divert away public attention from (a) understanding accumulation of private wealth in the name of development (b) ongoing concentration of power to be exercised from a fortified elite zone (FEZ). Firstly, the rulers, as they lack capitalist investment in the primary and secondary economic sectors, relied upon misappropriation of public fund, bribery and corruption as means of wealth accumulation. They are shareholders in the CP. They destroyed pre-existing infrastructure so that; (a) they extract commission out of the total cost of expenditure to be incurred in the eviction/ demolition process and at the same time parcel out among themselves unaccountable materials derived from destruction / demolition, and (b) they extract commission and materials from reconstruction / relocation of the demolished infrastructure to new sites. Therefore, the CP is not constructed at a site where there would be no controversy, no displacement, and less destruction.

Secondly, as the illustration shows, the entire enclosed area constituted the CP site in the Mantripukhri area. In the last decade several agricultural lands in and around the Mantripukhri area have been acquired to construct government offices and institutions. National Highway No 39, is likely to be shifted away in the near future. Also, the hill range acting as the natural fort on the western site is going to be disturbed. The Irong Rivulet that passes through the entire area in the middle will vanish.

The entire area is located at about 5 km from the heart of the Imphal City. The area is noted for its scenic beauty and moderate breeze in the evening. As a result vast tracts of land stretching from the foothills and on the eastern side of the National Highway have been purchased by wealthy landed barons such as bureaucrats, contractors, businessmen and political leaders. As the past experience had shown, the possibility of buying up of the proposed CP quarters by the landed barons could not be ruled out. Logically, a belt of elite housing complex clubbed together and defended by the natural wall and security barracks would be established in the long run. All these selfish designs are covered up by using the official jargon such as development. Repression and intimidation are used to discourage protest, and local leaders are bribed to divide opinion and to create confusion and frustration among the affected population. However, it is very clear that controversies and protests against projects such as the Tipaimukh Dam Project, the Mapithel Dam Project, the Khuga Dam Project, the attempted construction of NUT campus on the agricultural land at Kyamgei, Airport Expansion on the agricultural land in Changangei area, and so on arose for want of transparency, accountability, and for undermining the role of people in developmental process. Not surprisingly the CP becomes controversial for the destructive and expropriating objectives. The Government of India is responsible for it.

When capital penetrated into Manipur in the guise of grant, investment, economic packages primarily for construction of dams, roads, military installations, office buildings and institutions; practically it sponsored local reactionary regimes to let the exploiters enjoy free control of resources, exploitation of people, and extraction of surplus value. The local reactionary regime, constituted by the parasites and who enjoys commission and bribes from capitalist intrusion, suppress democratic voice of the people. When economic livelihood is being targeted the democratic rights of the people remain practically suspended for the majority of the population who are leading towards poverty and slavery.

Village communities in Manipur such as that of Lei-Ingkhol have their own subjective perception of livelihood and objective relation attached with their village, e.g., history, natural boundaries, environment, economic survival, social network, common daily activities, and psychological makeup. Displacement will shatter these bonding and affect livelihood, particularly those of marginalised working people. The government has committed blunder by imposing displacement project and by denying them the right to stable existence and economic progress. The struggle to defend Lei-Ingkhol, therefore, may not be overlooked and unaddressed, but related to the international struggle for a world free from subjugation, exploitation and oppression. When majority of those elite in Manipur who became shareholders of the destructive project, and most of them are comparatively blind to the plight of the peasant and working families who are victims of oppressive regime in several parts of Manipur, it is crucial that the Lei-Ingkhol question is correctly understood from class perspective and it is more than urgent to raise ideological issue focusing on class character of the CP. □□□