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Commission On Human Rights
Sub-Commission on the Promotion and protection of Human Rights
Working Group on Indigenous Populations.
20th Session
22-26 July 2002, Geneva.



Agenda 5: Indigenous Peoples and Their Land Issues.

Sir, Chairperson, distinguished members of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, and respected representatives.

Within these past decades, the issues of the indigenous peoples, protection of their land rights and resources have been debated continuously to identify the issues as well as to resolve them. We submit our commendations to you, Sir, for your continued application of your valuable expertise to these important issues of the world's indigenous peoples.

Manipur is a land where more than 31 groups of indigenous people have co-existed for many centuries. It is a unique place where all the indigenous people have flourished by enjoying their rights including land rights for many centuries. These groups of indigenous people have collectively participated in the evolution of the Manipur State whereby every group of people could pursue their own culture and way of life for more than two thousand years.

The interference by the British since the early 19th Century has changed all this. With the defeat of Manipur in the Last Anglo Manipuri War in 1891, many traditional institutions were forcefully abolished. Land Rights were impinged upon and the State evolved a revenue system where land was transferred to the State from the indigenous people.

This system was continued again after the Dominion of India annexed Manipur in 1949 after she got independence from the British in 1947.

The Indian Constitution is devoid of any safeguards to the indigenous peoples' right to land, water and natural resources. Article 3, Article 270, Article 271 and Article 272 of the Indian Constitution unilaterally deprives us of our land rights. With these Articles, the Government of India gives itself all rights denying our collective rights to land and hold all the resources in usufruct.

At present, the destruction of agricultural land and forests is going on unabated. Fertility of Agricultural land is a gift of nature through her work of thousands of years.

The fertility cannot be regained for centuries once it is destructed. In the same manner it takes many years to reestablish forest, which is also, the gift of nature, once it is destructed.

The hilly country, as Manipur is, has her share of small valleys of agricultural land. It is because of these fertile valleys that the various indigenous groups could flourish in Manipur with their various distinct cultures for so long. But in the name of progress and development, the fertile agricultural land are being destructed. Loktak Hydroelectric Project has submerged more than 30,000 hectares of fertile agricultural land. Various projects like Thoubal Multipurpose Project, Dolaithabi Multipurpose Project are set to destruct more agricultural land. Various office complexes, Jails and housing colonies are planned and constructed by destructing fertile agricultural land which cannot be reclaimed again in future.

Forest has been snatched away from the indigenous people in the name of Reserve Forests, Protected Forests etc. by the State. And State has allowed wanton felling of trees and destruction of forests by many contractors and timber merchants. The result is that forest cover of Manipur is now reduced to 50 % from 75 % earlier. The State is further planning to destruct more forests by Loktak Downstream Project, Tipaimukh Hydro electric projects etc.

Madam Chairperson, for the survival and progress of all the indigenous people in Manipur, Agricultural land and forest should be saved. The indigenous population faces a situation of total helplessness concerning processes and mechanism to protect our agricultural land and forests. I request the special Rapporteur and the Working Group to continue to give attention to this core problem of destruction of agricultural land and forests in relation to land rights in Manipur.