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WEB SPECIAL
MANIPUR

‘We’re against political terrorism in all forms’

CPDM chairman Malem Ningthouja tells Suneha Dutta that people in Manipur have taken up arms only as a reaction to ‘police/army atrocities’



CPDM chairman Malem Ningthouja

The people of Manipur want the Indian government to put an end to the Armed Forces Special Powers Act and want to see development in the region on par with ‘mainland’ India, but there are others who are fighting for complete independence.

Campaign for Peace and Democracy in Manipur (CPDM) chairman Malem Ningthouja has been fighting against human rights violations. He was one of the speakers at the recent Kashmir Convention held in Delhi. In a chat with Tehelka, Ningthouja explained why the struggles of Kashmir and Manipur are similar and why both states want to break free.

Why is the CPDM supporting the cause of azad [free] Kashmir?

The CPDM stands for development, peace and unity. On the Kashmir issue, we have two understandings. First, the political community in Kashmir want to enjoy the right to self-determination. The UN has recognised Kashmir as a disputed region. Both Pakistan and India have militarised Kashmir and have fought disastrous wars. Both governments are considered oppressors by freedom-loving Kashmiris.

Is the Manipur movement secessionist as well?

Yes, if you are talking about the movement led by armed organisations banned by the Indian government. If we go by the propaganda of those who are fighting for an independent Manipur, it can be described as an ‘anti-colonial movement’, ‘freedom movement’, ‘liberation movement’, etc.

Hurriyat leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani said that azadi can happen only when Kashmir secedes from the Indian Union. What are the terms of freedom for Manipur?

If the people think that they are living in a colonial state under Indian rule and if they are against it, then the obvious pre-condition would be freedom from India.

Was it a conscious political decision to share the platform with a Naga leader in Delhi, keeping in mind the history of antagonism between Nagaland and Manipur?

I don't think there is antagonism between Nagaland and Manipur. However, there has been some tension over the issues of Nagalim and Manipur's territorial integrity. In this matter, the CPDM believes that there cannot be permanent obstruction to the unity of the oppressed people. N Venuh had represented the NPMHR and I had represented the CPDM. We have worked together on common democratic issues.

There are Naga groups in Manipur who want parts of the state to join Greater Nagaland. Manipur has more than 36 recognised communities.

Call it Greater Nagaland or South Nagaland or Nagalim or Zogam; accession or secession should be conditioned by the material relation where every community is a stakeholder of the common territory.

It has been said time and again that Nagaland and Kashmir have entered into talks with the Indian government to resolve their demands while Manipur hasn't even taken that first step. Has the time come for Manipur to take the initiative?

The government has responded with cosmetic economic packages mostly in the tertiary construction sub-sectors, police modernisation, AFSPA, other black laws, Manipur Police Commando, Village Defence Force and other repressive and divisive tactics. All these responses are the antithesis of democracy.

What about the violence unleashed by the insurgent groups?

We are for peace. We are against political terrorism in all forms.

Will the violence subside once Manipur is released from the 'oppressive' Indian government?

In a people's democracy, there will be justice and no place for political violence or terrorism.

What do you think is the best way to combat the Indian government's shortcomings?

The media should play an effective role in covering the real voice of the subjugated and the oppressed and expose political terrorism in any form perpetrated by the State.

In Kashmir, the military is held guilty if they fire at a stone-pelter. However, if they fire at an armed insurgent in Manipur, a similar empathy is not earned. Why?

Thangjam Manorama was a cadre of the banned PLA when she was raped and killed by the Assam Rifles in 2004. There was widespread protest that led to the institution of the Justice Jeevan Reddy Committee by the Indian government. Whether any section of the people could protest against a particular incident of killing of an underground cadre or civilian would depend on the degree of repression carried out by the government vis-à-vis such protest.

There are peaceful protests by Irom Sharmila and the Manipuri women's movement. What is your take on them?

Such individual initiatives have to be regarded as an integral component of the democratic movement. We endorse the struggle of Irom Sharmila, who has been on the fasting for the past 10 years demanding the repealing of AFSPA. Such peaceful demonstrations or revolt have not been adequately addressed by the government. This is unfortunate.

Do you support violent forms of revolt?

We do not appreciate violent forms of revolt. However, violent revolts, militancy or insurgency against the police/army are a reaction to the violent character of the rulers. We demand demilitarisation of Manipur, the repealing of draconian Acts and an end to the reign of terror so that political violence does not gain mass appeal.

Kashmir has agreed to hold a plebiscite to abide by the wishes of the people. If the Indian government agrees to consider a separate Manipur, will something similar be done?

What should be the formula of separation or integration will have to be decided by those who are part of the conflict. As far as the people's aspirations are concerned, there should be a platform where they can have free and fair expression of their democratic aspirations.

So, what methods should Manipuris use to fight for their cause?

We are a campaign organisation. We carry forward the democratic aspirations of the people towards development, peace and unity. We do not work beyond that. The people of Manipur must first try and understand the difference between what is revolutionary and what is reactionary activity. Freedom was in their hands but they did not realise due to the lack of consciousness and unity.

You recently said that the term 'nation' has been coined to trump other forms of identity. So, is India just a concept?

I said that India is not a nation in the strict sense of the Stalinist term of nationhood. There can be several collective identities within a nation. But to perceive India as a nation would be anachronous. The perception of an Indian nationhood comprising Kashmir and the Northeast percolated at the conscience of certain section of the Indian population rather informs about the institutionalised process of the down-linear infiltration of statist illusion of an imagined India. The term 'India = nation' de-contextualises the genuine democratic movement of the people who do not want to be in India. For instance, there can be killing, harassment, displacement, subjugation and exploitation in the name of Indian national security. To me, India is a geographical expression whereupon the Indian rulers exercise unrestrained armed power to perpetuate semi-colonial condition to fulfill their vested interests.

Should all Indian states then demand separate nationhood?

I'm not suggesting that India should be broken into different countries. All I'm saying is there should be no subjugation or oppression. The European Union had come into being on the basis of a formula acceptable to all members. There should be justice and recognition of the right to self-determination of the communities who are willing to enjoy this right. My simple question is: what is the problem if someone wants freedom?

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