PANELISTS’ PROFILES

Panelist 1: Oinam Rajen, the Secretary of ALLAFUM (The All Loktak Lake Areas Fishermens’ Union, Manipur) is a fisherman by profession. He is working for the rehabilitation and resettlement of the communities, who have been forcibly evacuated from Loktak Lake in the name of phumdi cleaning, Lake conservation and management.

Panelist 2: Bina Mayanglambam is a daily wage earner hailing from Kakching District of Manipur. Since more than a decade, she migrated to Chakpikarong, Chandel District along with her family for work.

Panelist 3: M.S. Takat Ali is Sales Professional from Manipur working in Bangalore for the last three years.

Panelist 4: K Sakpui, a postgraduate student in Ambedkar University, Delhi is the Women Coordinator of Maram Students’ Union, Delhi. She is the voice of her tribe’s (Maram) students’ union.

Panelist 5: Kamminlen Misao (Len) is an IT Professional. Len has just completed his graduation in Computer Applications. Eldest of the 6 siblings, he is in Delhi looking for jobs.

Panelist 6: Pfokrehrii Matekho Pekosii, President of Mao Students’ Union Delhi is a student activist, who has been actively working on various issues concerning students of Manipur in Delhi for the last four years.

Speaker 7: Sumpi Tonitha is currently a B.A. first year student in Delhi University.

Speaker 8: Lorina Anal is an independent researcher based in Manipur.

Speaker 9: Salam Rajesh is a member of Centre for Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy at Manipur University and has been appointed by the Government of Manipur as a member of the technical committee to the Manipur State Wetlands Authority. He is also the a non-official members of Loktak Development Authority.

Speaker 10: Gajendra Mohanty is the Project Director at Participatory Action for Sustainable Development Organisation (PASDO).

WELCOME NOTE

Tom Thomas, Praxis: Praxis particularly focuses on methods and ways of bringing in marginalized voices and engages in a dialogue with academicians, activists, policy makers, journalists, development workers or whoever is concerned with the ongoing scenario. COVID-19 Voices from Margins series is one such initiative to bring in the voices of those people pushed at the margins and hear from them what the reality is. While over the past 10 webinars, we have heard from inter-state migrant workers, garment and entertainment sector workers, DNTs, students with special needs and so on, we realized that the government is pretty much clueless and unconcerned about the situation of marginalized communities.
50 days of nationwide lockdown is unprecedented in the history of human kind. This one in the series has brought voices from North East. The first impression that this geography gives is the stories of long negligence. Do we really have any clue about what’s happening in so to speak the Seven Sisters? Even media doesn’t carry any news about the lockdown reality from this part of India. It’s only when very dramatic and unusual things happen, that becomes news for a very brief time. Iron Sharmila, the women activist who had the world’s longest hunger strike in protest of the excessive killing in Manipur was successful in getting media’s attention and became the news for a short span. Of late, no subsequent news has been covered by mainstream media.

**PANEL DISCUSSION**

**Panelist 1 (Oinam Rajen):** I am going to share the impact of COVID 19 on fishermen community in Loktak. There is a village in Loktak where fishermen live. We catch fish and sell off the next day. Fishing is our main source of income. Since 21st March, 2020 which is almost 40-50 days now, we are in great difficulty. We are unable to reach markets as they have closed down. We are unable to do fishing as we otherwise do. Everything has become expensive and we are at the verge of starving. We have requested the govt. to provide us relief materials. The appeal was published in a local newspaper but so far we have not received any aid from them. COVID 19 is already a threat to life while starvation is another problem. We are unable to purchase essentials as the markets have been shut down and there is no income too. People with elderly and children at home are concerned for their families. The children are not going to schools. Managing meals is becoming a challenge day by day. There are at least 6 people in one house, hence managing meals for all has become tough. We purchase vegetables in small quantity and get some from neighbours’ kitchen gardens. Accessing ration is also difficult as the markets are shut. We do not have enough stock of rice and other grains. We fear of dying in hunger. Reaching the main market is another issue. It takes around 3 hours to reach the market. We are unable to go out regularly to sell the fish. How will we work if we starve? We have received some relief materials like rice, pulses and sanitizers from the MP. However, for how long will the ration suffice? We want relief from the government but why haven’t we received it? If the market opens it will still be easier for us. Neither the market is open nor has the government provided us relief. The community is willing to hold a meeting to discuss the issue but due to COVID 19 we are unable to gather and discuss. If this continues we will be in great difficulty.

**Panelist 2 (Bina Mayanglambam):** My name is Bina and my native place is in kakching district. I currently live with my family in Chandel district for work. Due to lockdown we are struggling a lot. With little earning, we support children’s education but now that’s getting difficult. Here are many daily wage earners like me and all are going through same struggle. We don’t have work, hence there’s no money to stock food. Nobody is hiring us for labour and there are many who cannot find any work. Whatever little money we had, we spent on food items. Due to price hike of all commodities, I can barely meet my expenses with whatever I have.

**Panelist 3 (M.S. Takat Ali):** I have been working in Bangalore since last 3 years. I have received salary till March, not for April/May. I am managing the house rent and food expenses with the salary I received. We are in a great difficulty and only going out for buying essentials. Till date we have not received any support from the state govt. With whatever I earned, I am managing my expenses and sending some money back home. Not sure for how long we will be able to manage this way. We are all passing a hard time that is difficult to explain. We are neither able to go back home nor able to manage meals properly. The banks are shut, accessing everything is tough and on top of everything, we do not have any job security. We fear of dying in hunger. Though the govt is announcing their plans, however so far there has been no action. We migrated here to make a living and support our families. Once our savings get
over, we don't know how we will manage everything. Our friends who are in similar situation are reaching out to us but we can't really help them. We have also reached out to police for support but haven't received any positive response from them.

Panelist 4 (K. Sakpui): Let me narrate a story. One of these days of cry about the coronavirus and panic all around, I was sitting in a sharing rickshaw and waiting for others passengers to fill in. While the driver was calling out for passengers, two men walked towards the rickshaw with an intention to board the same. As they came and saw me sitting in the rickshaw, one of them showed a stern disgust and turned back. I was so stupefied by myself. I didn't know how to react. What’s ironic to me, people from Manipur or people from North East at large is that coronavirus was first brought to India by the upper class people who had the privilege to travel abroad and got contaminated with the disease. The first case was reported in Manipur on March 23, 2020. Though racial abuse and discrimination towards people from North East India was earlier prevalent, it has been on a rise ever since this pandemic situation. To be precise, the victims of racial discrimination are mostly women. Two days back, one Manipuri woman was physically assaulted in Gurgaon just because of her features. I am observing that racism with sexism towards people from North East is at the top-notch sheerly because of our ethnicity, we look different and our features are different. It's pathetic. I want to conclude by simply saying that, “If North East is about small eyes, then India is simply about small minds”.

Panelist 5 (Len): I came out of home to work in Delhi. Since I came, the lockdown has started and its extending day by day. I spoke to the officials of my company and they said they may let me join in between the lockdown. I am stuck here, passing through a hard time. One of the major problems that I am facing is the daily meal. When I was at home in Manipur, I used to have three meals a day, as much as I wished to. Since last three months I came here, I am managing my expenses from whatever my parents gave. Now the banks are closed, I am really depressed. Another problem is the house rent, which is supposed to be paid within 10th of every month. The house owner didn’t listen to me; I can’t explain the situation we are facing. He even threatened me to vacate the house. I called up my parents and shared with them the situation. As they intervened, I didn’t have to vacate the house finally. I was planning to go home but couldn’t. My company is closed, so unable to work as well. Currently I am having one meal a day. I have friends from Manipur facing similar issues. I hope to return home as soon as possible.

Panelist 6 (Matekho): I am social worker and student activist based in Delhi. There are lots of students in Delhi from Manipur. The situation is such when classes are closed; they have lots of queries and confusions in mind. We keep on attending calls, try to answer their questions of when they will be able to return home, listen to their issues and personally reach out to each of them. They are in fear whether they will be able to complete their degree or they will be losing a year. Though online classes are running, it only considers up to 75 students. There are many such students who came to Delhi to prepare for competitive examinations. Because of lockdown, there is no intimation of examination dates, hence they are also afraid of losing one year. Some of them left home just to appear for the examination and got stuck. Students have also been told to vacate hostels and Paying Guest accommodations. We have been in touch with the hostel authorities and house owners to cooperate with us and let the students stay for some time till we take the next steps. There have been lot of cases of racial discrimination and stigmatization in the university after the outbreak of corona and this has made them feel disheartened. They are demanding immediate help from Government to return home and we are trying to arrange that. People in jobs have lost it, business has closed down. They are facing problem in arranging food as well as house rent. We are collaborating with Delhi State Government and assigned police personnel for North East region to help the stranded people. We are trying to arrange
food and ration as much as we can from State Government and NGOs who are providing relief. In terms of health and medical emergencies, private hospitals have gone so expensive to afford. Students keep on asking and we guide them to reach out to Government hospitals. Even there as well, issues arise because of ‘the look’ we have. Parents back home in Manipur are also unable to send money. Hence, we try our level best to help them. As a leader’s responsibility in the hour crisis, we have reached out to people in Manipur for donations. But this cannot go on. So we are pressurizing both Delhi and Manipur Government to take students back but there’s no positive response from Government so far. We hope that Government will listen to us sometime soon.

Speaker 7 (Tonitha): I came to Delhi a year back and have been a victim of racism multiple times during my stay in Delhi. The most recent one I encountered when me and my friend went to a park. A bunch of teenagers in uniform came and said “Corona” pointing at us. We got so angry and asked them why they said so. When we confronted them, they abused us more instead of admitting their faults. Since they were more in numbers we took their video and decided to file a complaint against them. When we went to the police station to lodge a formal complaint, the officer in charge there advised us to drop the case as the boys were still minors. The attitude of the boys was so obnoxious. People think that its’ okay to bully people from North East just because we have mongoloid features, just because how we look. Not only this incident, whenever we go out, people stare at us and say “Corona”. They pass on crude comments and laugh at us, as if they have found something very funny. My friends also cried when people mock at them saying “Chinese Chinese”. I just want to say that we are all from same country singing the same national anthem. People should stop bullying us because it’s illegal and it’s not a good practice to bully people for their race and culture. No one has the right to make others feel bad because of how they are. Such things should not be encouraged. We must learn to live together.

Speaker 8 (Lorina): Sharing the findings of a rapid assessment on the information collected from migrant workers in Manipur to understand the impact and challenges of lock down:

Partners in Change along with Praxis conducted a rapid assessment between 20\textsuperscript{th} – 30\textsuperscript{th} April, 2020 with 32 daily wage earners from Manipur living in remote villages across the state. The respondents and their families (from hilly villages) interviewed in this study are daily wage earners who are engaged in agriculture, forestry, and fishing activities and some are in other occupations like money lending, small shop owners and drivers. Some are internal migrants and tribals. The study was conducted with 32 respondents across 6 districts of Manipur including 20 women and 12 men. The primary objective of the assessment was to understand the issues faced by the villagers in remote places of Manipur and their coping mechanisms. Their access to various government schemes during the lockdown was also assessed. The major findings of the study are:

- The major challenge during lockdown is the loss of livelihood. Since lockdown started, most of the farmers/landowners stopped hiring people on their lands, and this is affecting the livelihood of this population.
- The ration distributed under PMGKY was given free of cost to every household irrespective of ownership of a ration card. 22 out of 32 respondents were found to have a ration card and none of the migrant workers had one due to documents issue. All respondents except three have received rice under PMGKY scheme, however, the amount received varied from village to village. Only rice was distributed in the hilly districts while in others, pulses were also distributed. Initially each family was distributed 3kilos of rice whereas later, each member of the family received 5 kilos of rice.
- The most accessed government scheme appeared to be PDS and MGNREGA. However, out of 21 job card holders, only six of them were found to have received wages during the lockdown (as
on the assessment period). Most villagers are not registered under schemes like Ujjwala, Jan Dhan, and Kisan Samman Nidhi due to various complications with the application.

- With regards to loan, some of them have already taken it even before the lockdown. With the loss of income during lockdown, they are finding it very difficult to repay the same.
- Access to bank has always been a difficult task in rural villages even on usual days mainly due to travel distance. Since the lockdown, it has become a challenge to visit the bank due to the measures put in place by the government in light of the COVID-19 spread in other states. Many of the villagers have reported having to struggle to withdraw Rs.500 from their Jan Dhan and old age/disabled scheme account which was received from the government during the lockdown.
- They are mainly daily wage earners where the types of work vary from season to season, hence taking advance from any employer or accessing a loan from the bank is not an option because of the nature of the relationship they have with the employers. This made them financially vulnerable.
- Community support is the only viable option.

**Speaker 8 (Salam Rajesh):** I am sharing my personal assessment. Manipur government is not prepared to handle the lockdown. Initially there were lot of confusions regarding relief distribution like rice and pulses. Through there are central government schemes (Gareeb Kalyan Yojana) for distributing rice, the same has been procured by local MLAs from their own funds and got distributed. During the first phase of lockdown, 3 kgs of rice per family was distributed because nobody was aware. Then controversies emerged and got reported to local media. During the second phase, 5 kgs of rice per person in family was distributed- for instance if it’s 5 member family, then 25 kgs of rice. Fortunately during third phase of lockdown, Manipur government has slightly improved. They did set up a committee to handle the medical emergencies, distribution of essentials and bringing back stranded migrants from Rajasthan and Delhi. When the fourth phase is now about to begin, there emerged multiple problems of how to bring back many others who are still stranded in different corners of the country. A group of people from Chennai have been brought back to Manipur last week. Today morning, 60 buses brought back people to Imphal. Recent controversy that emerged is about the quarantine centres and how the people are being kept. The major issue that came up in local newspaper is about the washroom facility. The quarantine centre with 60-70 people has only one washroom. Now the government said that if the returnees don’t want to go to the quarantine centres put up by government, they can go to the hotels suggested by government. But these luxury quarantine centres are asking for huge money. It’s not affordable for majority of them as they haven’t received salaries due to sudden lockdown. The workers coming from outside don’t have money to stay in luxurious arrangements. The government has hardly any system in place to manage the entire situation. Another controversy that emerged in first and second phase of lockdown is that how people can be told to go out. None was allowed to move without the curfew permit from deputy commissioner. During the third phase, peoples’ movement was allowed from 6 AM till 2 PM. Though as per government instructions, people were allowed to go out with proper precautions like mask etc., the police were penalizing them. It happened may be because of the miscommunication between people at secretariat and people on street. That’s why there has been an apprehension in people that if they go out, they might get stuck or penalized. There is a lot of pressure on government from civil society organizations, student activist groups and various lobbying groups in Manipur. United NGO Mission of Manipur complained in a local newspaper about the government activities with regards to arranging buses or other means to bring back people from outside Manipur.

**Speaker 9 (Gajendra Mohanty):** Sharing the findings of a situation analysis carried out by him in Ukhrul District in connection with impact and challenges of lock down:
• Items under PDS (only rice, No pulses, sugar etc) distributed/reached to all targeted beneficiary however there is no transparency in most of the village/tang/colony.
• Almost all the beneficiary gets lesser quantity than what was supposed to get. (No explanations so far from the concern dept.)
• Other Government schemes like PM-Kisan money have been received. But there were many beneficiaries of PM-Kisan whose bank account were operated in United Bank of India (UBI), Ukhrul have not received (it says, Rejected due to no response from Bank)
• Price rise of essential commodities (Eg. Potato – 40/– instead of 30/–) has been reported, however so far, there has been no FIR filed with proof to the concern authority. Rice was not available in the market.
• Daily wage earners are having difficult times these days. Many of them left for their village and those who were at Ukhrul (especially Nepalese) are being helped by the Tang Shimva (in terms of rice, potato etc).
• Many parents think that the lockdown will deeply affect their childrens’ studies. There are neither online classes nor assignments given to them during lockdown since the schools have been shut down and no one have any clue how long it will be like this.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION
Children’s education and perceived vulnerability
Q. You are close to starvation and no help is coming in, how long do you think you can carry on educating your children sending them to school?
A. (from Rajen): From the beginning we have not received any benefit from the govt. We have asked for help from the govt. with which we might be able to manage conveniently. We have sent our children to boarding schools in town so that they can study as there are no schools nearby. If this lockdown continues, our as well as their future looks dark.
Q. In your area, is there probability that children could be sent to work in very adverse circumstances; and if so which sections of your community? What is their livelihood?
A. (from Rajen): Most of the children go to govt. school and nobody works for earning. They help their parents. There is an increase in number of drop outs these days so there might be higher chances of child labour now, as the present income of parents is insufficient for survival. Due to the construction of dam on Loktak River as part of a hydel power project, fishing has also become difficult.

Entitlement of welfare schemes
Q. Have you found in your assessment that dry rations are distributed to all in Manipur irrespective of the economic status? Is this was a planned exercise by the govt.?
A. (from Lorina): Yes, we found in our study that the dry ration has been distributed to all irrespective of economic status and ownership of ration card. I am not very sure whether it’s a planned one or not.
Q. What’s the status of Minor Forest Products if any? Do they play any role and if yes what’s about the MSP and its procurement? Is there any role of Jan Dhan Yojana?
A. (from Lorina): Forest products are quite limited to natural products like firewood, timber etc. I don’t see any major schemes coming in apart from very few horticulture schemes.

Livelihood of internal migrants
Q. What sectors are internal migrants involved in, specifically? What drives such migration?
A. (from Lorina): Internal migrants are from valley districts, not from hill districts. There is no fixed work, hence difficult to say which sectors they are involved in. Types of work vary from season to season. Like
in harvesting season, they go for agricultural work; in times of fishing, they go for fishing. Agricultural work is for both own consumption and sale.

**Addition from Gajendra:** As per our study in Ukhrul district, the migrant workers are basically drop-out students who migrated to town in search of work. They are largely engaged in hospital and beauty parlour sectors.

**Racial discrimination and violence against women**

Q. How should one address the issue of racism?
A. (from Sakpui): North East India has always been sidelined. This issue of racism is already up on twitter, but nothing happened. This should be addressed by the people who are influential and in power, like PM Modi. The issue can be dealt in a better way where people should treat people with kindness.

Q. What kinds of violence women migrants face?
A. (from Lorina): At least in my district, there is no such case of violence has been reported. People live in quite a cordial manner. Situation of migrant workers is very different in Manipur compared to other states in India.