

Economic Prospects and Challenges of Manipur: An Agrarian Economy

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Abstract- *This is an article to understand the prospects and challenges of the agriculture dependent state of Manipur. The state is small topographically, population and economically weak and backward despite having huge potential with very rich natural resources, ethnic diversities, and prospects of international trade. The prospects of the state have not been tapped and realized due to various factors which have taken the state economy for a spin and is currently struggling in a vicious cycle of ethnic violence. The current narrative of the state seems to have painted a very grim scenario of the state and therefore it is the endeavor of this paper to highlight the economic prospects of the state amid all the challenges. Surely with sincere and concerted effort it is possible to take the economy of the state in the path of growth and development.*

Index -Terms: *Act East Policy, Agrarian economy, Handicrafts, Handloom, Terrace farming, Jhum cultivation, Ethnic conflicts, Insurgency.*

INTRODUCTION

Manipur with a total land area of 22,327 sq.km, and sharing long international border with Myanmar is economically backward but it is described as the “Jewel of the east” for its richest in flora and fauna, culture, and ethnic diversity. The border town of Moreh in Manipur is supposedly projected as the most viable route to India’s ambition to “Act East” policy. The Geo-politics, the socio-economy of Manipur is clearly divided into the Hills and the Valley. The valley is economically more advanced, politically more powerful with 66% of the state assembly seats while the surrounding hills are economically more backward and politically weak. The valley is occupied by the Meiteis and Pangals while the hills are occupied by the tribal communities of the Nagas and the Kuki-Chin-Mizo. The religious orientation in the valley is the Vaishnavite Hindu and Muslim while the hill tribes are predominantly Christians. Thus, this small

easternmost state of India presents a very interesting unique narrative of socio-economic and political relation.

The state of Manipur is rich in terms of natural resources, and human resources. It is endowed with natural beauty, rich in flora and fauna. There are numerous rivers that can be tapped to generate electricity at the same time develop fisheries and tourism, it is rich in forest resources, natural resources such as minerals, and water.

Manipur is also rich in human resources as it hosts very diverse ethnic groups. There are 33 recognized tribes and numerous sub-tribes with very rich diverse traditions and culture. It is also the home of the Meitei community with its rich history, in fact one of the few princely states that attained independence from the British.

Economy of Manipur:

Manipur is primarily an agrarian economy. Rice is the primary agricultural produce cultivated in the valley wetlands, terrace farming, and jhum cultivation. The state is also rich in the production of many other vegetables and cereals. Horticultural produce such as pineapples, banana, papaya, oranges, lemon, plum, peaches, passion fruits, pear and many wild fruits and nuts is also popular. Animal husbandry is another important occupation and source of food and livelihood. Fresh water fish production from Loktak lake, rivers and fisheries, and consumption is another feather of Manipur economy.

Manipur is devoid of any medium or large-scale industry except for Handloom. It is the most important and the largest industry in the state. It is a traditional profession in the valley and the hills that supplements the agricultural activities. Handicrafts and food procession industry caters to meet the ethnic traditional demand of the economy.

Some of the common produces of the Valley are Rice, Fish, Exquisite Handloom products, Sugarcane, Fermented bamboo shoot “Shoipum”, Dry fish, Fermented Fish “Ngari”, Foreign goods that is traded through the international border, Vegetables, cattle, Garments, fruits and the longbeans “Yongchak”. While the goods commonly produced in the hill districts are Ethnic Handloom, Timber, Charcoal, Firewood, Fruits, Bamboo shoots, Forest products, Vegetable etc. It can be observed that much of the produce of the state economy is at a subsistence volume and self-consumption, and not on commercial basis. Yes, with the exposure to modern technology, education, employment opportunities and government policies and initiatives entrepreneurial development is steadily observable.

Prospects of the Economy:

The Manipur socio-economic and political scenario can be broadly classified into two broad classifications of the hill and the valley or the tribals and the non-tribals. The valley is inhabited by the non-tribal communities of the Meities and the Pangals (Manipur Muslims). The valley constitutes of four districts, and it is economically and socially more advanced. They can have more political power due as it constitutes 65% of the total population of the state and therefore 40 members in the assembly are from the valley in the 60-house assembly. The valley is fertile and productive even though it occupies just 10% of the total land area. Infrastructural facilities are more adequate, educational institutions are more advanced and more developmental funds are directed to the valley.

The 11 hill districts of the state are in the surrounding hills inhabited by the numerous tribes broadly classified into the Nagas and the Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes. They live in republic form of villages and their main occupation and livelihood are agriculture. The districts of Ukhrul, Tamenglong, Senapati, Chandel are mostly occupied by the Naga tribes while the Kuki-Chin-Mizo are the majority in Churachandpur and scattered in other districts of Senapati, Chandel and Ukhrul. They are engaged in agriculture (terrace and jhum cultivation), horticulture, animal husbandry and handloom and handicrafts. They are also famous for forest products too.

The valley districts of Manipur namely, Bishnupur, Imphal East, Imphal West, Kakching, and Thoubal are

rich historically, human, and natural resources. One of the largest freshwater lakes “Loktak” inhabited by the rare “Sangai” animal, suitable soil and climatic conditions brings rich agricultural produce, it hosts the famous historical “Ima or Women market”.

The hill districts of the state; Chandel, Churachandpur, Jiribam, Kamjong, Kangpokpi, Noney, Pherzawl, Senapati, Tamenglong, Tengnoubal, and Ukhrul are rich culturally in its diverse ethnic communities. The flora and fauna in the forest of the hills is one of the best resources besides the numerous minerals and natural resources. The hill districts especially share international border with Myanmar which is the most feasible and viable route to the Southeast Asian economies.

Possibilities of commercial production and business opportunities in the valley districts of Manipur

Possibility of commercial production		Business Opportunities	
1	Handicraft	1	Private farms
2	Handloom products	2	Handicrafts
3	Bamboo shoot	3	Medical tourism
4	Fruits	4	Horticulture
5	Vegetables	5	Transport and communication
6	Rice	6	Forest products
7	Fermented Soya	7	Handloom
8	Fish and Fish products	8	Eco-tourism
9	Silver Utensils	9	Poultry
10	Package water	10	Fisheries
11	Meat	11	Package water
12	Flower	12	Milk and milk products
13	Silk	13	Agro-based industries

Possibilities of commercial production and business opportunities in the hill districts of Manipur

Possibility of commercial production		Business Opportunities	
1	Vegetables	1	Mineral water
2	Rice	2	Fisheries
3	Fruits	3	Eco-tourism
4	Timber	4	Horticulture
5	Sand	5	Vermiculture
6	Fermented fish	6	Trade
7	Meat	7	Transport services
8	Yongchak “Long beans”	8	Hospitality
9	Stone	9	Handloom
10	Handloom products	10	Food processing
11	Household furnitures	11	Floriculture

12	Forest products	12	Handicrafts
13	Floriculture	13	Herbal medicine
14	Handicrafts	14	Forest products
15	Horticulture	15	Agro-based industries
16	Mushroom	16	Hospitality
17	Pottery	17	Animal husbandry
		18	International trade
		19	Quarry and stone crushing
		20	Educational institutions
		21	Organic farming and vegetable
		22	Sericulture
		23	Local alcohol
		24	Pottery

Compiled table

a. Manipur and Act East policy:

Manipur with its long historical relation with the neighboring country ethnically, politically and economically has been identified as the most viable land route to the Southeast countries. The border town of Moreh has been the most vibrant corridor in land route trade with the Southeast Asian economies. Further investment in the infrastructural facilities such as communication and transport will boost the trade prospect exponentially.

b. Tourism:

The beautiful landscape and climate, the rich flora and fauna, the largest freshwater lake “Loktak” in Northeast as the only habitat for “Sangai” can be a huge avenue for promoting Eco-tourism and an ideal destination for nature lovers. Manipur is not short of historical sites and history; the Kangla fort, the famous Japanese battle grounds, The Subhash Chandra Bose memorial in Moirang, the famous woman “Ima” market, The diverse ethnic groups and festivals surely can draw a lot of attention and attraction.

c. Agricultural practices and production.

Manipur is an agrarian economy. The people of the valley practice permanent agriculture while the tribals of the hills are known for terrace and jhum cultivation. They produce a variety of agricultural produce along with many other agricultural activities such as husbandry, horticulture etc. With the climatic condition and the fertility of the soil, the production can be substantially increased with further investment and development in infrastructural facilities such as

irrigations, water management, cold storage, transport, market expansion internally and externally.

d. The industrial produce

The resources and location of the state is suitable for large investment and production. It is presently very backward industrially due to lack of investment accounting to the present socio-political narrative, lack of finance, lack of entrepreneurs, lack of infrastructural facilities etc. but this can be overturned through good governance, paradigm shift in the ethnic relationship and concerted effort towards growth and development. The market for the famous handloom and handicraft industry of the state with its exquisite products can expanded beyond borders. The high literacy rate and unemployment is also an opportunity with easy and cheap availability of labor.

e. The market prospects.

The factor and product market are unlimited with its growing population, increasing income, high literacy rate, rich diverse tribes and communities, the loyalty to ethnic products, and the growing consumerism are opportunities for exchange. The Valley-hill economy of the state

Challenges of the Economy:

a. Lack of entrepreneurship

Even though the literacy is high, the people of the state lack entrepreneurial skill due to lack of training or motivation. The prevailing situation of the state is not ideal for attracting investment. The educated youth are not attracted in returning to the state as the social and political situation in the state is very fluid.

b. Poor infrastructural facilities:

The poor infrastructural facilities such as roads and transport, communication, banking, medical, power supply is in shambles due to various factors, corruption, ethnic and insurgency problems, and ethnic vote bank politics. Lack of such facilities restricts movement of goods and services and discourages investments. With the frequent bandhs, strikes and violence in the valley and hills, and the lack of connectivity by roadways restricts the movement of goods and services. This lack of connectivity is due to corruption, insurgency problems, difficult terrain, and ethnic politics.

c. Corruption

The prevalence of rampant corruption and extortion within and outside the constitutionally established institutions is a deterrent to exploitation of resources,

production, distribution, and consumption in the economy.

d. Ethnic conflicts and insurgency

Manipur, being the home of many tribes and communities, is a boon as well as a bane. Unfortunately, it has been used as a tool to advance the selfish interest of a few. The state has been in a perpetual ethnic related violence and conflicts, and ethnic centric insurgency activities ever since its accession to India. Such activities have resulted in loss of property, driving out investment and brain drain because there prevails the cloud of uncertainty, extortion, and damage. The problem of ethnic related conflicts and insurgency needs to be resolved in order to bring peace and prosperity.

CONCLUSION

The self-sufficient, subsistent state economy with its natural and human resources presents huge opportunities for growth and development. The strategic location and proximity, and historical connection to the Southeast Asian countries surely is a prospect to be tapped in the realization of the “Act East” policy of India. But, for the prospects to be tapped and the challenges to be overcome, all the stakeholders of the state must be proactive, sincere, and transparent. The challenges are man-made and not unsurmountable while the prospects are natural and God’s gift that need commitment to utilize for the good efficiently and effectively. Truly, Manipur can be the “Jewel of the east” with its rich resources and strategic location.

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