



CIVIL SOCIETY AGAINST CORRUPTION: A STUDY OF THE ROLE OF PRISM IN MIZORAM

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ABSTRACT

None of the countries in the world is 'corruption free country'. Despite the efforts of every country to curb the menace of corruption, the affected countries failed to contain corruption to the level of zero. It becomes a serious threat and challenge to most democratic countries of the world. At present civil societies which bridge the gap between the society and the government come to the forefront to fight against this menace. In Mizoram; for more than a decade, People's Right to Information and Development Implementing Society of Mizoram (PRISM) involved in fighting against corruption. However, after a prolonged campaign against corruption, the society has turned itself to be a political party on November 3, 2017 and contested election for the Assembly seats in 2018 and also contested an election for a lone seat of Member of Parliament from Mizoram in the lower house of the Parliament in 2019. The name of the erstwhile society was rechristened as 'People's Representation for Identity and Status of Mizoram' and retained the abbreviated form PRISM. Efficiency in governance, changing the political system and corruption free society are the main objectives of PRISM.

Keywords: *Civil society, Mizoram, Corruption, Political Party, Governance.*

I

Civil society

Civil Society is the basic precondition of democracy and the success of true democracy depends to a great extent, on the existence of a vibrant and active civil

society. 'The site at which society enter into a relationship with the state can be defined as the civil society' (Satapathy, 2007). The civil society is different from society which is a usual confusion. The sphere of civil

society is between the political individual and the state.

The state has always the tendency to accumulate more and more power and most of the time has the tendency to encroach into the private sphere of the individual. It is obvious that individual cannot stand against the mighty state. The state which is expected to ensure peace, security and good life to the citizen becomes a menace for them. In order to escape from the wrath of the atrocious state, citizens need a collective body which can protect him from the menace of the state and at the same time can limit the power of the state. That is how civil society came into existence. The main objective of the civil society is to defend the interests of the individual and negotiate with the state on behalf of the individual. Politics should not be the monopoly of the state alone; it is a public domain where individual, non-government bodies and the state have their respective share to take part. The members of the civil society are provided protection by elaborate institution of rights and rule of law. Adequate freedom is the basic antecedent of a healthy civil society, without such protection, civil society outlives its utility (Satapathy, 2007)

Free will of the participants is a prerequisite condition of civil society. Freedom of membership is denied in case of state in general. But the institutions of civil society are associational and representative forums, a free press, social associations in which citizens' associate voluntarily without any coercion. As the membership of civil

societies is voluntary and individual choose to be a membership of these bodies out of their free will, such institutions are truly representative and participatory in nature unlike the membership of the state. Because of this free will of the participants, loyalty towards the civil society of the individual is far greater than the loyalty of the individual towards the state.

Mizoram has strong civil society, owing to the close and well-knit society, Mizo society itself is suitable for vibrant civil societies to emerge. The role of different civil societies in various fields cannot be overlooked when trying to understand Mizo society. The major focus of the civil societies in Mizoram can be said as reformation of the Mizo society from their respective area of their influence. For that they negotiate and contest the state, a proactive civil society is no doubt the symptom of a healthy society. But it should be noted here that civil societies in Mizoram should draw boundary for itself keeping in mind its objectives. Crossing the boundary line of its objective is not only suicidal for itself but immensely harmful for the society. Sometimes, civil societies in Mizoram are transgressing their boundary while negotiating with the so called responsive state. Making a conscious boundary and setting limit for its sphere of activity is one of the most important tasks for a civil society. In fact, there is a dialectical relationship between the state and civil society. Both should limit each other and both should be counterweight to each other too.

II

Corruption

“Corruption is a general term covering misuse of authority as a result of considerations of personal gain, which need not be monetary” (Goel, 1993).

“behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private – regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains; or violate rules against exercise of certain types of private – regarding influence” (Malec, 1993)

“In the contemporary usage corruption means the betrayal of public trust for individual or group gain” (Dobel, 1978).

Definitions on corruption are many and varied; in the meantime in common usage corruption is used to mean the abuse of power possessed by a person to gain monetary or other undue benefits. Based on various definitions stated, the fundamental features of corruption may be summed up as an intentional abuse of one’s resources or position directly or indirectly for personal benefit including material gain or enhancement of power and influence by violating accepted norms against the interest of the community. The impact of corruption to the society is so diverse and in fact, no aspects of the public life left untouched by the impact of corruption.

Classification can be made on corruption as *grand, petty and political*. When abuse of power occurs at the high level of government which negatively affect the functioning of the state and policies of the government for the benefit of the

leaders, it is known as grand corruption. The abuse of power possessed by middle or low level public officials in their interaction with ordinary citizens in order to access basic goods or services in places like hospitals, schools, and other agencies is classified as petty corruption and the abuse of their position power by decision makers in manipulating policies, and rules of procedure in the allocation of resources and financing in order to sustain their power, status and wealth is known as political corruption.

Every year, Transparency International prepared corruption perceptions index and ranks countries and territories based on how corrupt their Public Sector is perceived to be. A country’s score indicates the perceived level of public sector corruption on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (Very clean). In 2018, Denmark ranks 1st in the list have a score of 88. India’s score in 2018 was 41 and stood at 78th position among the 180 countries and territories.

In India, the basic law which deals with corruption is the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1947. The following acts are included within its ambit and are therefore punishable

- a) Criminal misconduct by public servant in the discharge of official duty which, among others, may include habitual acceptance of illegal gratification for himself or for any other person

- b) Habitual taking of illegal gratification to influence a public servant.
- c) Possession of wealth disproportionate to the known source of income. (Gopinath, 1992).
- d) Attempt to misappropriate property entrusted to him as a public servant or attempt to commit similar act of obtaining pecuniary advantage. (Sharma, 2017)

III

Organization of PRISM

The most active anti corruption watchdog in Mizoram; PRISM believes in transparency for prevention of corruption and collects documents by utilizing the Right to Information and discloses them. The motto of the society reads *‘Together we can make a change’*. The organization worked for better informed citizenry, clean and effective government.

PRISM (People’s Right to Information and Development Implementing Society of Mizoram) was established on August 1, 2006. Having its General Headquarters at Aizawl, it was registered under Mizoram Societies Registration Act on November 19, 2007. The number of branches is increasing year by year and the current strength of branches over all Mizoram is 331 established branches. At the apex of the organization is General headquarters located at Aizawl. Southern Headquarters is located at Lunglei and is expected to supervise the functioning of PRISM branches in the south of Mizoram. Champhai, Koalsib, Lawngtlai, Mamit, Siaha and Serchhip districts are having their respective district headquarters. District headquarters are assisted by four sub district headquarters viz. Chawngte, Khawzawl,

Hnahthial and Saitual. There are 55 sub headquarters established in different towns and villages. At the bottom of the structure are the branches at 331 villages in the state. It also established links with various organizations within the state and also maintain cooperation with associations like North east Dialogue Forum, National Election watch and Asia Forum.

The governing body of PRISM is an enlarged body so as to open chances to the citizens to involve in fight against corruption. The President is assisted by the two Vice Presidents. Eight General Secretaries appointed by the President are assigned different tasks and are assisted by 11 secretaries. The Treasurer is elected by the governing body to deal with financial matters. The Governing body also consists of Advisory Board and Executive members consisting 57 members each and are selected from various walks of life.

To deal with various matters that falls within their purview, 6 working committees are formed in General Headquarters viz. Finance Committee, Investigation Cell, Legal Cell, Political Affairs Committee, Program Management Cell and Publication Cell.

Membership: Membership is open to all the well wishers of the motto and objectives of the organization on payment of rupees ten. Membership drive is initiated by the members themselves and social networking sites like Facebook, Whatsapp are utilized by the members to attract wider attention of the people. Number of members is in a flux and the record has crossed 70,500 in 2015 (PRISM, 2015)

Area of operation: The area of operation is divided into seven categories; Anti – Corruption, Development, Election watch, Monitoring and evaluation, Public education and RTI Implementation.

PRISM against Corruption

PRISM was formed to discuss issues such as corruption in government establishments, failure of the system at all levels of administration, deprivation of the poor and the needy etc. Within a decade of its existence, PRISM spearheaded the fight against corruption. It has made people to believe that no one, irrespective of how powerful he could be, escaped the long arm of the law. PRISM does everything possible to help people get justice and basic human rights. It organized seminars focusing on the impact of corruption and how it impedes development and progress.

Basically, PRISM was formed as a result of the passing of The Right to Information Act, 2005. The aim of the organization was to sensitize the people about the use of RTI and its effectiveness. However, the utilization and the use of RTI are mainly meant to uproot corruption and its practices in the functioning of the government. PRISM collected more than

1,000 information through RTI, the collected information are effectively used to reveal the actual work done by the development agency and if fallacies occurred; to inform the citizens about the misuse of public money by the responsible persons. It also conducted Social Audits in 22 villages to expose the utilization of public funds and the developmental works carried out in their respective local area by the government through the contractors. The society also visited 86 government infrastructure projects to monitor and evaluate the works. In pursuance of the evaluation of development projects, 53 concrete suggestions regarding development have been submitted to the concerned authorities. The society has also filed 2 Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Supreme Court of India and 11 PILs in Gauhati High Court. PRISM has also lodged 67 First information Reports (FIR) to the State Anti Corruption Bureau (ACB) and Criminal Bureau of Investigation (CBI) (PRISM, 2015)

After passing the United Nations Convention against Corruption on October 31, 2003, the United Nations declared December 9 as ‘Anti Corruption day. PRISM observed this day every year by organizing seminars and workshops on corruption, the phenomenon is studied from various perspectives like legal, biblical, Christianity etc. Through that, messages are conveyed on corruption to the general masses every year.

To sensitize the people on election and its related issues, ‘Election Watch’ and ‘Mizoram Watch’ are also organized. Mizoram Watch is organized twice every

year by the month of April and October. The main objective of the program is to have an insight of the efficiency of the ministry in governance by analyzing how far they have covered the projects as propagated in their election manifesto. The work of each and every minister is examined and exposed through the said program.

PRISM conducted a unique program in 2009 and held voting for corrupt officials (Eiru thlan bawm). Boxes were made available for the people to vote the corrupt officials. In its crusade against corruption, this idea helps a lot in popularizing the organization itself. In the Secret ballot box, people were expected to write the names and specific charges of the officials whom they believed to be corrupt. The boxes were opened at a public meeting; charges against the individuals are scrutinized for veracity and processed for filing of FIR. Moreover, the RTI is used to collect more information about those named by people as corrupt. Since then, PRISM has grown to be a nemesis of corrupt government officials and politicians.

Achievements: Seeking freedom for all from corruption, PRISM has achieved much success in its fight against corruption, though not to the level of expectations of the founders. The relentless efforts of PRISM resulted in the investigations by the government agencies which revealed 297 officials as corrupt, amongst these corrupted officials, one amongst them was imprisoned, 16 officials were suspended and 4 relinquished from their post as the employee. PRISM also targeted extraction of public money for personal gain which finds fertile ground among the general

people in the form of false compensation, the organization exposed 293 cases of false claims of compensation and the government cancelled the claims. Recruitment in government offices is where unfair means prevail, recruitment for 57 various posts under the state government remains cancelled and the selected employees lost their job. While disbursing the money for public under various schemes, officials used to deduct the share of the people which goes unnoticed by the ignorant people. 197 villagers mostly farmers got their benefits which was misappropriated by the officials. It is estimated that, the government has saved more than 1,800 crores of public money from graft and corruption because of the efforts of PRISM. (PRISM, 2015)

Conclusion

It is noteworthy that the work of PRISM receives support from the public in general and the anti – corruption minded people in particular. The existence of PRISM as a civil society for more than a decade vitalizes the hope of uprooting corruption in Mizoram. Meanwhile, it is undeniable fact that the organization itself is not free from problems, loopholes and criticisms. Problems include; Lack of financial resources which led the society at the brink of financial crisis, lack of popular support which creates problem to put pressure upon the government and to create awareness among the common people, Limited power to punish the corrupt officials for not having even the quasi – judicial power, cooperation with other civil societies etc. However, corruption affects societies in a diverse ways. Politically, it creates obstacle to democracy and act as an

impediment to rule of law. Democratic institutions lost their legitimacy due to misuse of democratic institutions for personal advantage. Economically, corruption depletes national wealth. Socially, it is detrimental to the unity and cohesion of the society. Corrupt systems also affect the environment leading to severe environmental degradation. And it costs lives in the worst cases. All these effects of corruption necessitate the effective means of counter measures which in turn leads to the formation of anti – corruption civil society like PRISM in Mizoram. And with the existence of PRISM as a civil society for more than a decade, we have learned a valuable lesson from their achievements that corruption can be checked though not eliminated when there is a concerted effort of representatives from government, people and civil society to work together in order to develop principles and procedures they all support.

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