

# Tamei cries for food and attention

By N Satyajee

**L**ife in the hill, thick and inaccessible forest of Manipur is really troublesome. Someone who dwells in the hill areas only can explain it. As a part of the Centre For Science and Environment, New Delhi media fellowship on "Forests as habitat" I was asked to study the life style, survival techniques of the hill dwellers and also what they do specially during the monsoon to survive.

Tamei sub division of Tamenglong district was chosen as it is considered to be backward comparatively in the state. The word sad is the beginning of the story. There is no proper road to reach Tamei considered to be the heart of the entire sub division. One can reach it from Kangpokpi of Senapati district through IT road or the Tamenglong headquarter, the distance is almost equal roughly above 40 kilometres. Every passing kilometre is a nightmare, it is bumpy. The one lane road (if we can call it a road) is not black topped. Only a single bus comes out of Tamei a day towards Imphal. The worst can happen if a vehicle coming from other either side breaks down in the middle of the road. It happened when I was coming back. We had to wait for hours until that bus

was repaired. The entire stretch of above 40 kilometre however provided a wonderful sight. On both sides one could see thick virgin forests. As we moved up slowly we could see clouds perched on the green and Blue Mountains. Throughout the journey one could listen to the sound of water flowing down as if there were a huge waterfall beneath the mountains. The land was believed to have been formed due to organic movement during cretaceous and Eocene period. The main rock formations are sandstone, shale and schist. The rocks are fragile and due to high gradient of the hill slopes, landslide is a common phenomenon in the whole district during rainy season. The average rainfall is 31.35 mm.

Tamei inhabited by the

soft-spoken Liangmei tribe is the heart of administration, livelihood of the sub division. However there was not a single stretch of black topped road from Tamei towards the 37 villages under the sub division. There are about 3000 people at Tamei. Not a single vehicle of any grade and bicycle could be seen in the sub division. The entire population of the Liangmei is around 30,000. A villager said that the only means of transport is his or her own legs. Villagers can buy vehicle but the problem is the absence of oil depot in the entire sub division. Petroleum products are brought in little quantity from the district headquarters for personal use not for commercial purposes.

Of the 37 villages under Tamei Sub division only five villages were electrified. The villages were Tamei, Lamla, Paulong, Langmei and Kabouram. When enquired about the load shedding programme in the five villages electrified they said it is in terms of months. For a full month there will be no

power and then for some days there will be power supply. There were only two officials of power department looking after the sub division. On July 3 a tree on Tamei - Tamenglong (District headquarter) road fell down, which uprooted about three electric poles.

The Chairman of the Tamei Village Authority Council, Reverend N Poukenpon opined that the only way available for repairing the electric poles is to get them repaired by the villagers themselves. The two Power department officials said they could not do the work without assistance. Waiting for the government to act would mean waiting for years. The Chairman then collected about 20 people on his own and hired two Shaktiman to repair the poles. The Chairman doled out the charge of the two Shaktiman, which turned out to be Rs 1300. The villagers who helped did not demand any money. Takou the village of the SCERT Minister Z Mangaibou is not electrified. The villagers complained that

Tapon in Nagaland which is adjacent to Tamei is electrified though it is not connected by road.

It was perplexing how did the people in the area had communication with the outside world. The office of the SDO was also visited but to find none in the office. It seems the office was closed for several days. There was not a single government official in the SDO office. There was no national flag flying. The pole stood lonely. The villagers said the SDO, K Gopal Kabui MCS and SDC, P Zانبui came to Tamei only for some flirting movement and they went away as fast they as they came to Tamei. The state administration has not reached Tamei.

Then the next target was the Employment Office. It was closed, the villagers said it is always closed. There should be some centres opened for vocational studies in the area so that the tribal can earn their livelihood. The Commerce and Industries office too closed.

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(contd from page 1) Epidemic is so common at Tamei as there is no proper sanitation. But there was not even a single doctor at the primary health centre. Only three local nurses man it. There is no medical facility. Last month in June this correspondent went to the Forest and Environment office in Imphal to enquire about the forest laws and customary laws prevalent at Tamenglong, sharing of forest wealth, protection, conservation and other forest related issues. One can know the ground realities and the data can be gathered at Tamei only I was told. So we went to the Forest department office at Tamei to seek assistance and gather information. But the Forest Office at Tamei has been closed for the last ten years. No forest related works are done in the region. The data issued by the state government are doubted. How can there be forest management when the forest office is not even functioning.

One can see virgin forests everywhere. The land is famous for the exotic orchids, rare and endangered plants, and wildlife. The forests can be grouped as Tropical-Evergreen forest, Sub-tropical forest and Bamboo brakes. The dense tropical Evergreen Forests are located along both the sides of rivers flowing in the district, varieties of ground flora, creepers, herbs and grasses are found here according to government report. These forests are the main source of timbers. Canebrakes are found in and around water bodies. The Sub-tropical forests are found on the highest altitudes. Varieties of orchids are found in this zone of forests. In the degraded forest areas the bamboo brakes are found in plenty.

The forests are rich in wildlife. According to local experts no proper research on the forest wealth and gene pool are done. Most of the forest areas are not covered during any sort of research.

During the journey on foot to the villages one can see beautiful birds. Pheasants, peafowl, jungle fowls are important birds of this area. The Sambar, deer, hog deer, bear,

fox, hyena, wild pig, wild dogs, slow loris, serow are reportedly found. The locals said none of the wild animals venture out from their respective places as hunters looking for prize collections and food are everywhere. Leopard and Tiger are also reported from Barak valley area and Tousem area. But in Tamei area the villagers said tigers are not seen though they were reportedly seen in earlier times. Migrated herds Elephants are sighted in Tousem during winter. Krait, Cobra, Viper and Python are found inside the forest. At Tamei there are large numbers of monkeys. European Kestrel, Falco tinnunculus, or Lesser Kestrel, Falco naumanni (local name is Akhoipuna/Kiuhoipuna), the migratory bird visits Tamenglong during the early winter till the last week of November.

Tamenglong is called the land of Hornbill. Great pied Hornbill (*Buceros bicornis homrai*), Indian pied Hornbill (*Anthraceroceros malabaricus malabaricus*) species are found.

A number of exquisite orchids are found. They are epiphytic, lithophytic and terrestrial in nature. *Thunia* species, *Paphiopedilum* species. The *Dendrobium*, *Vanda*, *Cymbidium*, *Cattleya* and *Lycaste* are found in abundance. The *Phaius tunkervels*, a rare terrestrial orchid is found in the Barak valley. *Thunia alba* which is known as bamboo orchid is found around Taobam village. *Paphiopedilum* is found in Leimatak area.

The Liangmei tribes fall under Zeliangrong group. Zemei and Rongmei are the other two tribes who together form the Zeliangrong. Zeliangrong belongs to patriarchal social system. Each clan enjoys equal status. Clan exogamy is strictly observed. The social and cultural traditions of the people, dramatically changed with the advent of Christianity. From 1949 onwards people started converting into Christianity. The first Church appeared in 1950 and the first Church Organisation was formed in 1973. All marriages are done in the Church.

This year the pass over ceremony was performed on 14 February 2003. The villagers expressed unhappiness over the failure of the government to black top just a 100 m road stretch from Tamei to the Pass. Over ground. The Works minister Gaikhangam assured to sanction the money. But the contractor started the work by throwing some stones and he never turned up. This is humiliation of the Liangmei tribes the villagers said. Church could be seen in every village. When they were enquired about their previous religion they said like the Hindus we used to pray every big stone or tree.

According to Prof Gangmumei Kamei Gaan-Ngai is the greatest festival of the Zeliangrong people. Zeliangrong is the combined name of three cognate kin groups namely, Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei. Puimei, another cognate group performs the same festivals of the Zeliangrong.

All the festivals of the Zeliangrong people like other tribes throughout the world are based on the different stages of agricultural operations; pre-operation and post harvest. This festival is also described as a New Year festival as it marks the end of the year and beginning of the New Year.

The villagers said, nowadays Christian festivals like Christmas, Easter are celebrated as those in the hills have fully converted into Christianity.

There is no water supplies. Rain water is harvested. People drink boiled water as they want to avoid water borne diseases. There are two rivers the Agaki and Ahangki. Beside the rivers agricultural works are carried out in plenty. On the mountain slopes mixed cultivation consisting of ginger, vegetables, rice etc were carried out extensively. Terrace cultivation is the major form of cultivation. The people are rice eaters.

There were about ten police personnel to check law and order in the sub division. The only government agencies, which were operating were the DIET centre of the SCERT,

Government of Manipur and the CIC centre. There is Internet facility, which started functioning a few months ago. But as there is no proper power supply and oil is scantily available it is hard to keep it functioning. The generator for the CIC was taken away by some armed persons so it was not functioning. The Village authorities negotiated with the armed groups and took back the generator without which the center can not work.

Albert the only Computer expert in the area said the locals are very enthusiastic and the coming of the Internet is like opening up to the world. There are some schools and the parents and the children are very enthusiastic about going to the schools. For higher studies those who can afford go to Imphal. The literacy rate is 50.16 % in the district.

When life at the sub divisional headquarter can be so pathetic imagine how difficult life can be at the 37 villages. The farthest village, which one has to go by foot, is Kuilong which is about 46 kms from Tamei. One can go by foot passing village after village resting on the way at the village. It takes two days to reach Kuilong so one has to spend the night at Chaton Part II village. Only about ten villages boast of having roads. The other villages have no proper roads. One has to move up the mountain through a small path filled with mud. Walking through the slippery mud an elderly villager said "I would fall down. I told them, I will not". They were right. I fell down while trying to come down. The survival technique lies in travelling. One would run out of shoes and socks if one has to walk through muddy path where water is flowing ceaselessly. Using knee high rubber shoes proved futile. It became very heavy, as water entered inside the rubber shoe. Most of the villagers used simple slippers, chapal. Some others walked bare foot.

The Chairman of the Chaton Part II Champonbou said he wanted the government to supply electricity to his village as now there is a



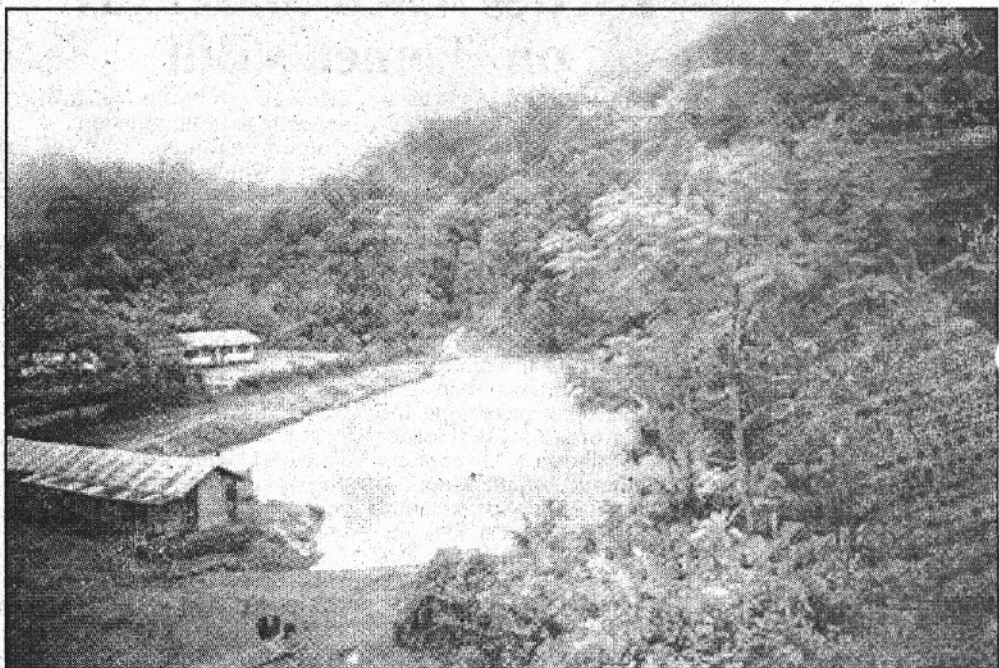
road up to his village. The condition of the UJB in his village is in a pathetic state.

Financial transactions are minimal. There is not even a single bank in the entire sub division. The primary function of the villagers is agriculture. A single bull is used to plough the land. The vegetables collected in every village are brought to Tamei every alternate day.

Market hour begins at dawn and there is nothing for sale after 6 pm. In all the villages I did not find a single shop to buy goods. There are large numbers of people but little production. There is only one hotel at Tamei. Hospitality is the hotel. The warmth and cooperation extended by the people was overwhelming in all the villages.

What people want is rice at all the villages. Rice is a luxury item. Rice for very poor families is not distributed and the government officials sell BPL rice at Rs 8.50 though officially it has to be sold at Rs 6 per kg. The villagers have no idea how many quintals of rice are given to the sub division. The Vice Chairman of the Tamei Village Authority Council W Thesongbou and General Secretary Ashangna said they had no idea about the quantity of rice they were allotted. The government officials never gave them any reply. They are afraid to complain also because the officials if they are angry may make their life worse.

Ch Dikubou a former General Secretary of the Council said the food for work programme is not properly implemented. The rice are taken away by political workers who bring DO letters. The villagers are not able to carry out agricultural activities as the area is full of thick forests and all the villages are distributed in small hamlets atop the hills. Movement is not possible due to the absence of proper roads. Agricultural goods have to be carried by bare hands and carried through the hilly terrain. Whatever is produced do not meet the requirements of the people. They entirely depend on the little government quota, which are sparingly distrib-



A pond atop the hill at Langmei, Tamei.

uted by the officials.

An exact figure of the land cultivated could not be gathered. When I tried to collect information about land sharing they told me it is done on the basis of the hill ranges. Difference hill ranges traditionally were used by people of particular village. Forest products are also shared. Felling of trees have stopped (not due to the Supreme Court order) but by the order of a particular underground organisation. In the entire sub division there is not even a single military camp. From Tamei onwards it is a free zone. Militants move freely in full combat dresses. The villagers said they want the military to conduct regular medical camp, as there is not even a single doctor in the area. Medical assistance from the government did not come they said so they could only expect the military to organise medical camps. Long ago there was a medical camp organised by the military and the people in the area.

There is a large communication gap with the administration also. The complaints of the villages are not addressed to. The President of the Village Authority Council Tamei Sub Division G Dithinbou said that

the revenue department should clarify on the issue of release of Rs 6 receipt as hill house tax though Rs 15 had been deducted.

The Council condemned the clarification made by Kancham Pamai, Social worker regarding the matter. He questioned if Rs. 15/-per house tax is claimed why it is not reflected in the cash receipt.

From every house the amount was deducted by the S.D.O. Tamei from every village Chairman of Tamei Areas, while disbursing JGSY. There are complaints galore against the village authorities as the amount deducted is not equivalent to the receipt amount. To city dwellers it may sound a trifle matter but to those who have to fight for every ounce of rice it is a huge amount.

Women are very hard working. They control the entire marketing business. They take the vegetables in a basket and take it for days to Tamei market and sell it. They can only take whatever they can carry in a bamboo bag hung on their heads. No wonder there is nothing to sell after 6 am in the morning. Women take part in agricultural activities and they are not lagging behind in education too. There were

many women teachers from the area who were teaching in the government and private schools.

They can only pray to God if any complexities arise during childbirth. They have to go to Imphal for every medical check up. Staying at Imphal is also costly for the villagers. They can not afford it. The least they expect is a doctor to look after 38-villages.

The Chairman of the Council N Poukenpon took pains to find people to talk to me. He even accompanied me in one of my visit to a village. Staying the night at his house I kept enquiring and planning the next move. The Newmai family did a wonderful job by coordinating the journey and guiding me.

But the human tragedy, inefficient and apathetic administration were mindboggling. We can make the beginning by giving the villagers what they need most, guidance and training in agricultural activities. The state agencies in the entire district need to be activated and the political leadership should do something for the villagers who would be happy if they are provided food which they do not want to take free but buy either by paying or working.