

The Naga Raj of Haipou Jadonang in North East India

Soihiamlung Dangmei

Department of Political Science & Human Rights, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Regional Campus Manipur

Abstract:

The Naga Raj or popularly known as the Zeliangrong movement was a remarkable event in the political history of North East India during the colonial rule. The Naga Raj was an anti-colonial movement. However, there were also socio-religious factors responsible for the outbreak of the movement. The article delves into the nature of the movement, and also attempts to understand the socio-political nature of Manipur society during the colonial rule.

Keyword: Jadonang, Naga Raj, Lallup, Zeliangrong Movement

Introduction

The Naga Raj or popularly known as the Zeliangrong Movement was one of the most significant events in the political history of British India. Despite the fact that the movement was short lived, it had a lasting impact. Largely, the Kuki Rebellion, and the Zeliangrong movement reflected the failure of the colonial policy towards the hill tribes of Manipur. Lokendra Arambam stated that “*British intrusion into the hills to secure revenue through house-tax, and the Empire’s demand to have hillmen serve as corps in the First World War emboldened the native of the hills to resist the imperial orders, and war and confrontation were the result*”. The British took two years to quell the Kuki Rebellion, and in the other punitive expeditions from 1932 to 1934 against the Zeliangrong Nagas” (Lokendra Arambam, cited in Aheibam Koireng Singh, et.al, 2015: 94-95). The intrusion of the British in the internal affairs and spaces of the hill tribes were responsible for the anti-colonial struggles in the state. The Naga Raj was one such native response and reaction against the colonial penetration of the tribal people. Different writers described the movement in different ways; J.P. Mills described Haipou Jadonang as the ‘Messiah King’, while Robert Reid described the movement as ‘Zeliangrong Uprising’ (Kamei 2009: 1). Jadonang, the leader of the movement was also referred as a religious mystic. Therefore, the term ‘Naga Raj’ was popularly referred to the Zeliangrong movement.

Jadonang, the leader of the Naga Raj was born in Kambiron, Tamenglong district of Manipur in 1905. Jadonang claimed himself as *Maiba* or priest, and claimed to have supernatural and divine qualities. The *Maiba* or priest is usually a practitioner of traditional medicine, and also a healer with divine connection. He was also described as shaman of Kambiron, a prophet, a messiah, and a king. Jadonang claimed that the god ordained him to reform the traditional religion of the Zeliangrong Nagas. The purpose of the reform was to ‘revitalize the traditional religious rites and beliefs in the face of advancing Christianity’ (Laishram 2013: 18). The traditional religion of Jadonang was considered by many writers as a debased

form of Hinduism. Jadonang introduced the concept of temple to the people. Arkotong Longkumer stated that “*Jadonang built temples for worship and claimed closeness with the Hindu god Vishnu. These temples were destroyed by the British in their attempt to halt the movement*” (Longkumer 2008: 61). In tribal religion, there was no place of worship as the tribal belief system practiced animism. John Thomas argued that “*temples were not part of the traditional belief system but were a structure that increasingly gained significance with the coming of Vaishnavism and Christianity in the neighbouring areas*” (Thomas 2016: 70).

However, Jadonang claimed that the god at Bhubon cave instructed him to build the temple so that there would be prosperity, and good health for the people. The reform movement was also aimed at countering the Christian and Hindu proselytization. The reform also removed many obscurantist practices of the traditional Zeliangrong beliefs. The traditional Zeliangrong beliefs was shrouded with mystery, and embedded with strict religious taboos. Therefore, the taboos had become a great burden for the poor people. The reform removed many taboos which were considered irrelevant. The reform was opposed by the Christians. The religious activities of Jadonang were considered as anti-Christian and therefore were reported to the Sub-Divisional Officer at Tamenglong. However, no action was taken by the authority.

Jadonang was believed to have visited Mesopotamia during the First World War, which in fact was remarkable in shaping his religious, social and political outlook (NC Zeliang 2005: 3-9). However, it is difficult to ascertain whether Jadonang visited Mesopotamia or not. Nevertheless, the colonial rule in fact facilitated the exposure of the Nagas to the outside world. The Naga Raj started as a socio-religious movement, and therefore, ‘Jadonang did not declare his policy of freedom openly at the initial stage, but tried to start a political movement which was flowing under his trend of religious and social activities’ (Thunbi Zeliang 2005: 15). The British expedition and levying of house tax to the Zeliangrong people, and the spread of Christianity were the main causes of the Naga Raj movement. However, there were various reasons for the outbreak of the Zeliangrong movement.

Lallup or Forced Labour

Despite the fact that Manipur had declared to have abolished the feudal service called the *Lallup*, forced labour was imposed on the Zeliangrong people by the British and the Maharaja. The Zeliangrong people “*had to render free labour for repair and maintenance of the government road, the Cachar road from Bishnupur to Jirighat. It was a continuation of the feudal service imposed by the rulers of Manipur. Then the British imposed a levy on the villages to meet the cost of local hospitality for the officials touring the hill villages and carry the baggage of the officials. The system was known as Pothang Begari, “forced labour” and Pothang Senkhai, monetary levies for the feeding of the Government officials. The people detested the house taxes, and despised the forced labour and the monetary subscription*” (Khangchian 2019: 51). The immediate cause of the Naga Raj was the result of the colonial policy of taxation and forced labour imposed on the hill people of Manipur. The movement was anti-colonial and anti-feudal, and against any kind of oppression and subjugation.

The Naga Raj

The motive of the Zeliangrong movement was to chase out the British rule and the ‘formation of Naga Raj by uniting all the different Naga tribes inhabiting the then Naga Hills’ and the Naga inhabited territories

of the hills of Manipur (Longmei 27; cited in Yuhlung & Richard 2015). Jadonang instructed the people not to cooperate with the British in any form, and expressed the desire to free from the British rule. The Naga Raj also aimed at uniting the cognate tribes of the Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei from the inter-tribal feuds. Dhanabir Laishram stated that *“Jadonang’s political aim was the establishment of a Naga Raj by driving away the foreign rulers i.e, the British. So he appealed to the Zeliangrong people to disobey unjust laws, to stop payment of taxes. His social programme was the integration of the three tribes by putting an end to inter-village, inter-tribal ill feelings. In the religious sphere, he abolished or modified many unnecessary taboos of birth and death ceremonies. He introduced some innovations in the traditional religion such as construction of temple which did not exist”* (Laishram 2013: 19).

Jadonang started his anti-British campaign to stop paying tax to the British and forced labour to the government. The British levied a house tax of Rs. 3/- per annum. Jadonang instructed that Zeliangrong people should not pay the house tax and also instructed them not to accept forced labour, and proclaimed political liberation from the British. The ultimate aim of the Naga Raj was the attainment of political freedom from the British, which Jadonang called as “Makam Gwangdi” which was loosely translated as “Kingdom of the Nagas”. The popular slogan of the Naga Raj was that “Makam mei rui Gwang tu puni” which is translated as ‘Nagas would be the ruler’ (Kamei 2004: 145). The colonial administration tried to quell the Naga Raj. The colonial administration also realized the need to instill confidence among the Kukis who were traumatized by the Naga Raj.

Historically, the Kukis were driven out by other powerful tribes, and therefore mostly settled in the Zeliangrong Naga territory. Sir James Johnstone stated that *“the Kukis had been driven north by kindred but more powerful tribes, and their first object was to secure land for cultivation; McCulloch, as they arrived, settled them down, allotting to them lands in different places according to their numbers, and where their presence would be useful on exposed frontiers. He advanced them large sums from his own pocket, assigning different duties to each chief’s followers. Some were made into irregular troops, others were told off to carry loads according to customs of the state”* (Johnstone 2010: 45). The colonial policy of divide and rule manifested in that the British wanted the Kukis to be assured of their protection from the Nagas aggression. However, the British failed to address the problem of Kuki raids and attack on Naga villages during the Kuki Rebellion of 1917-1919 despite numerous complaints made by the Nagas. Therefore, it was evident that *“during the Kuki Rebellion, the Kuki rebels attacked the Zeliangrong villages, killed men, women and children, and resorted to head hunting. The Zeliangrong Nagas expected the British authorities to give them protection. The Manipur Government not only failed to give protection but also ignored the request of the people for protection”* (Kamei 2004: 146).

The British made several attempts to arrest Jadonang. Jadonang’s campaign spread across the then Naga Hills, and the Cachar Hills in Assam. Finally, on March 8, 1931 he was handed over to the Political Agent (Chishti 1979: 61). Jadonang was framed for the murder of four Manipuri traders at Kambiron. He pleaded his innocence and ignorance to the British authority stating that he was at Nungkao at the time of murder, and that he never instigated the villagers to murder the four Manipuri traders. However, the petition of Jadonang was rejected by the British. Therefore, Jadonang was executed by hanging on 29 August, 1931 as a pre-emptive measure by the British Political Agent J.C. Higgins at Imphal. The Political Agent was empowered to try all civil and criminal cases in his court.

J.C. Higgins later stated that it was not possible to ascertain whether Jadonang was responsible for the murder of the four Manipuri traders. In fact, the four Manipuris were murdered at Kambiron by the mob for violating a genna performed at Kambiron. Gangmumei Kamei commented that “*Jadonang was a religious leader, a social reformer and a political revolutionary of the Zeliangrong people, who by design of the colonial authorities was falsely implicated in a murder in which he was not involved at all, but framed up with some of his followers going the way of Juda Iskariot and betraying him. Jadonang was definitely a martyr to the cause of the freedom of his people. Jadonang was projected by his people as the Messiah who was denied at the time of his death. Mills, Reid, Lady Astor, all called him the Messiah King, perhaps, he was or he was not. His last testament on the scaffold that he was not guilty is accepted as true, because a dying man never tells a lie*” (Kamei 2004: 156-57).

Conclusion

The execution of Jadonang spread fear and confusion, however, Gaidinliu took over the leadership and continued the movement. Gaidinliu ‘loved the Zeliangrong people as such she was like a mother of the whole population’ (Nayyar 2002: 13). Gaidinliu was described as *Maibi* or priestess, and also as sorceress with divine connection. The movement of Gaidinliu spread from the North-West of Manipur to the Naga Hills, and Cachar Hills of Assam creating problem for the British administration. The British therefore ordered the arrest of Gaidinliu. Several attempts were made to capture Gaidinliu, however, she managed to escape. The Manipur Government even offered reward for the arrest of Gaidinliu. On October 17, 1932, Gaidinliu was arrested from the Naga Hills, and “*in the court of the Political Agent of Manipur, she was convicted for abetment of murder, and sentenced for transportation of life*” (Chishti 1979: 84). In 1947, after the independence of India, Gaidinliu was released from Tura jail by Jawaharlal Nehru, and gave her the title of Rani. Rani Gaidinliu continued to lead the Zeliangrong movement in post-independent India demanding a homeland for her people. However, her dream could not be fulfilled. She died on 17 February, 1993 at her birth place at Nungkao in Manipur.

Bibliography

1. Chishti, S.M.A.W. 1979. “Political Development in Manipur 1919-1949”. Unpublished Thesis, Department of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University: Aligarh.
2. Kamei, Gangmumei. 2004. *The History of Zeliangrong Nagas: From Makhel to Rani Gaidinliu*. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications.
3. Kamei, Gangmumei. 2009. *Jadonang: A Mystic Naga Rebel*. Imphal.
4. Khangchian, Veronica. 2019. ‘Understanding Conflict in Manipur: A Socio-Historical Perspective’. *Social Change and Development*, Vol. XVI No. 2.
5. Laishram, Dhanabir. 2013. *Trust Deficit in the Largest Democratic Country: A Study on Civil Society and Governance in Manipur*. New Delhi: Ruby Press & Co.
6. Longkumer, Arkotong. 2008. Where Do I Belong? *Evolving Reform and Identity Amongst the Zeme Heraka of North Cachar Hills, Assam, India*. Unpublished Thesis, Religious Studies Department, School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, May.
7. Nayyar, Kusumlata. 2002. *Rani Gaidinliu*. New Delhi: Ocean Books Pvt. Ltd.
8. Singh, Aheibam Koireng. Et.al., eds. 2015. *Self-Determination in Manipur*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd.

9. Thomas, John. 2016. *Evangelising the Nation: Religion and the formation of Naga Political Identity*. New Delhi: Routledge.
10. Yuhlung, Cheithou Charles & Richard, P.G. eds. 2015. *North East India Tribal Studies: An Insider's View*. New Delhi: Regency Publications.
11. Zeliang, N.C. 2005. *Zeliangrong Heraka Movement and Socio-Cultural Awakening in Naga Society*. Zeliangrong Heraka Association: Assam, Nagaland, Manipur.
12. Zeliang, Thunbi. 2005. *Haipou Jadonang*. Guwahati: Heritage Foundation.