

Women Movements in Colonial Manipur: The 1st Nupi Lan and the 2nd Nupi Lan

Dr. RK Singel Sana

Assistant Professor of History, Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Govt. Model College, Katlicherra,
Hailakandi, Assam

Abstract

The women agitation of Manipur was of a peculiar character. It was a spontaneous movement directed against the economic policy of the colonial movement. Like other women movement which broke out in India and other countries of the world, it never asked for the upliftment of their status in the society. Due to this peculiar character the women movement of Manipur cannot be treated as alike with other women movement. The members of the participants in the women agitation of Manipur was instituted by the market's women. As we know that the women play a great role in the economic activities of Manipur. So, any type of economic activities that occurred was a directly related to the women, particularly market women. The members of the market women of Manipur were also composed mainly by the peasant and working class people. Due to this, they were the direct sufferer from any type of economic adversity and eventually the first reaction against the authorities always came from them. Therefore like other women movement, the women movement of 1904 (First Nupi Lan or Women's agitation) and 1939 (Second Nupi Lan or Women's agitation) was not for the upliftment of their condition and so their character was totally different from the other movements.

Introduction

The state of Manipur is situated on the north-eastern border of India with Myanmar and covers 8500 square miles. It is surrounded on all four sides with nine ranges of mountains, and the core of this state is the fertile valley which is the home land of the Meiteis.¹ Manipuri women played an eye-catching role in the socio economic life of Manipuri society. She even asserted her share in the legislative and judiciary life of the state.² Women in Manipur enjoy more freedom than their counter part in other parts of India. They are hard-working and perform most of the work. Buying and selling in the open market are mostly done by them, while at home they are energetically employed in weaving and spinning. They are smart, capable people and enjoy the fullest liberty at all stages of their career. Economy was in the hands of women, while men were engaged in defence and warfare, and in the absence of men women even defended the land.³

Nature of the movement

The nature and character of the movement are totally different from the other women movements in other areas. The basic objective of most of the women's movements was for the upliftment of their status in the society. They felt that they were badly treated by the society under the existing social laws. Therefore, they demanded for a political right and for the abolition of social evils. The nature of the movement in Manipur emphasized for the upliftment of the economic condition of the state and thus the

leaders of the movement challenged the colonial economic policy of the British. Therefore, this movement had the implication of certain political character which did not exist in other women's movement.

The outbreak of the 1st Nupi lan

The high social and economic status of women in Meitei society was frequently commented upon by British colonial officers. The women controlled the food supplies and the markets, and were therefore a central economic force. From the beginning of British period they had showed themselves capable and organised enough to take mass action when occasion demanded. The first Nupi lan or 'Women's War' in 1904 had successfully forced a former Political Agent to withdraw burdensome demands he had imposed on the population, and this set in train a tradition of women's political protest which remains to this day.

Social differentiation in Manipuri Society

Until the occupation by the British in 1891, Manipur was constitutionally a monarchical state. The king enjoyed almost absolute power of rule. He dictated and imposed the terms and conditions of enjoyment of civil liberty and of property rights by his subjects on the different inputs of production, such as, labour supply including personal labour, land and other natural resources, outputs turn out by them as well as on different items of immovable and moveable properties of individuals and groups of individuals. The nature, extent and effectiveness of enjoyment of property rights largely determined the people's incentives to produce beyond the subsistence level. The king benefited from increased volume of production of goods and services as his monopoly rent thereby went up. He devised the administrative, bureaucratic and military structure to keep the system going and for maximizing the extraction of monopoly rent in cash/or in kind, such as, in the form of land revenue, taxes, duties, levies and free labour services etc.⁴ In view of social differentiation as the process by which different ranks, roles, strata, and groups develop within a society, the nature of social differentiation in Manipuri society can be determined through Lallup system, mashin and service relationships.

Lallup System

In the pre-colonial time, Manipuri society was governed by a highly organized administrative system of Lallup. The state had two sets of people in the Manipuri kingdom, based on the spatio-historical region: (i) the Pana; and (ii) the Non-Pana. The Pana people had to attend the Lallup but would not pay any tax. The Lallup was administered at the level of the monarchy in terms of four panas: viz. Laipham, Khabam, Ahallup and Naharup.⁵ Lallup was the highest state militia, which literally means war association, (Lal means war and Lup means association). It was a feudal service rendered by the subjects to the king. Originally it was a military service, which was extended to other non-military or economic activities of the state. The general system of the Lallup was based on the assumption that it was the duty of every male between the ages of 16 to 60 years to attend Loishang (royal office) and render his service according to his skill and grade for 10 days of every 40 days to the state.⁶ Women however were freed from this service. As a reward for the Lallup service, a person was entitled to cultivate one patee of land (approximately 2.5 acres) for his support subjected to the payment of regular tax in kind to the king. In default of his Lallup the man had to penalty one rupee, and for this sum a substitute was hired. Lallup covered all the state works. In times of peace it worked for economic development of the country; in

times of war, it did military services. As a matter of fact, there was hardly any work, which was not covered by Lallup. Thus, the Lallup system was the pivot of the governmental machinery of the early Manipur state.⁷ The emergence of Lallup system was the manifestation of the emergence of feudalism in the social, administrative and political structure of the state. Thus the development of the institution was very significant in the process of centralization of power of the state. It also led to the reduction in the autonomy of the segmented social and ethnic groups ruled by different chiefs.

As the kinsmen of the family would be tied down to their services in the lallup at regular interval quite naturally the womenfolk could not help but confine themselves in their domestic works. They had to work hard for relieving the male hands in the household economy: be it farming, tending cattle, or any other household job. Thus all adult females would be regularly engaged in various production activities: weaving, blacksmith, fishing, agriculture, kitchen-gardening, etc. Moreover most of them would also be engaged in the central market place, and then exclusively reserved for females.⁸ Even the monarchy used to assign an unique role to womenfolk by preserving the Imphal Kangla central market place solely for females. In fact, males would not be allowed to go to the market place to buy or sell articles.

If any male member in the family would become sick, his counterpart would attend to the sick. And even the sick man's liability for default from Pana would be carried by the woman. In addition for such rainy days, a woman was expected to earn one rupee more and keep it in reserve so as to find a man for the substitution of her sick husband in his lallup.

When the Asiatic kingdom of Manipur was brought under colonial suppression by the British in 1891 CE, the king was naturally reduced to a mere puppet. There was widespread resentment over the appointment of Churachand Singh, a minor boy belonging to a distant Rajkumar lineage as the new king.⁹ In the process, the social institutions and associations of the traditional society slowly disintegrated. (After Manipur came under the British control in 1891, Lallup was abolished on 29th April, 1892. But the colonial authority disarmed the Manipuri army and imposed forced labour on the defeated army personnel. The society, on the otherhand, was systematically subjugated through various political and economic policies.¹⁰ Within a short period of time (1891-1904), the society witnessed drastic changes in every aspect of the then society. Introduction of a new revenue system to the economy of Manipur too sowed the seeds of discontent and rebellion among the general population.

In the month of July 1904, Manipur saw a series of burning of houses (bungalows) belonging to British officers right in the heart of Imphal (the then British Reserve). Some of the notable cases were those recorded on the 6th July (Khwairemband market sheds) and on the 16th July (bungalows of Captain Nathal and Mr. Dunlop). The British officers were quite naturally suspecting the hands of some unorthodox princes. Mr. Maxwell, the Political Agent and the Superintendent of the State issued an order on 30th September, 1904 asking all the able bodied men of Imphal to reconstruct the bungalows with teakwood from Kabo valley.¹¹ It was an extra burden on the already harassed and overworked populace. So, they appealed with the Superintendent to reconsider the order. But the appeal was denied. Despite the government's prohibitory order, a public meeting was organized on September 30 against Mr. Maxwell's order. The police arrested the six princes and exiled them from Manipur under a trial conducted by Mr. Maxwell on 10th November 1904. The general population was disturbed and awestruck. But the market women of Imphal Khwairemband market started an agitation. They stopped the able bodied men who came to build the bungalow and threw the building materials into river. They were protesting the expulsion of six princes, which they consider an act of extreme injustice.¹² The defiant women took upon themselves the task of challenging the colonial policies of the British and in

the process motivate the male population who were nursing the humiliating defeat at the hands of the British.¹³

The revolutionary mood was thus set for the emergence of the ‘agitator-woman’ and for her flowering and fruition in the coming years of colonialism and armed conflict. The general population was suffering because of the classic exploitation of a western colonial ruler as well as the initial pressures and counter-pressures of disturbance caused by the newly introduced structural changes in the society.

Thus for the first time in the history of Manipur, the womenfolk could forge a collective opinion without any dissension and agitate for a common cause. And, unlike their counterparts, they could have easily hoodwinked even the British intelligence personnel and mobilized in unity against the exploitative policies of the colonial masters and challenged an order of the state.¹⁴

T.C. Hodson records such a reaction: “The movement continued for several days. As a result of this, the market activities of the Khwairamband market were stopped. The women of the market became a serious concern to the government, as it affected the day-to-day life of the state”. Likewise, R. Brown would also cite how with the help of reinforcement the British could quell the uprising: “Finally the protest had to be quelled with reinforcement of force from outside the State. It can be said that the movement was partially successful.”¹⁵

The outbreak of the 2nd Nupi lan

The little state of Manipur, situated on India’s north eastern border with Myanmar, was one of the last to be incorporated into the Indian Union. But remarkably, during the brief twilight period of its re-emergence as an independent state between 1947 and 1949, Manipur conducted the first democratic elections on the sub-continent. That this happened at all was in large measure due a remarkable popular movement by Meitei women. Beginning as a mass protest against the economic exploitation of the rice supply by Marwari traders, who were assisted and aided by a corrupt king, it developed into the most important single catalyst for the movement for democratic reform, providing a popular platform which strengthened the political activism of the elites who eventually put an end to the old feudal order.

The outbreak of 2nd Nupi lan (women agitation) was a turning point in the advent of new trend of political and national consciousness in the state. The colonial authority considered the outbreak of this movement as the most important event of the year 1939. The deep-rooted cause of the movement was directly related to the misdeeds and misconducts in the administration of this state. Another factor was the economic exploitation by the authority aided and aided by the conspiracies of a section of colonial exploiters. The situation was created by the feudal rulers who exercised power with the support of imperialists. The new administrative system introduced by the colonial authority had caused a widespread dissatisfaction among the people of Manipur.¹⁶

The women of Manipur take a major part in the economic life of the state in which they enjoy maximum independence. The internal and external trade of the state was managed by them. Their centre of activities was at ‘Sana Keithel’, a major market place, located in the heart of the Imphal town. The whole market was managed by them only. Besides this the market place always works for an important spot for social and political dealings.

The economy of Manipur was an agrarian economy. In an agrarian economy rice played a major role.¹⁷ So, the most important trade of the women of Manipur was the rice trading business. They participated in this trade right from the beginning of the transplantation of rice up to the selling of the final product. But from the year 1891 CE, i.e. after the introduction of the direct colonial rule the whole system was

changed very soon, they began to exploit the whole traditional economy of the state in order to get the advantageous position in the introduction of their colonial economic system.¹⁸ In order to implement their desire very successfully, they utilised the service of the big traders from outside the state. Then they began to import goods from outside and also tried to control rice trading business of the state. This new economic trend ruined the importance of the womenfolk of Manipur in the economic life of the state. Then the outside traders gradually began to capture the monopoly of trade which at one time was under the management of the womenfolk.¹⁹

The establishment of the Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha, a socio-cultural organisation, under the patronage of the Maharaja of Manipur, was a great significant development in the future political history of this state. It was established on 30th May 1934 inside the palace ground. The first session was presided over by Maharaja Churachand Singh himself. The real motive of the Maharaja for associating himself with the elements of liberal reformist was that he wanted to scuttle any popular anti-feudal movement. But the motive of the radical leaders in the Mahasabha like Hijam Irabot Singh was that they wanted to use the organisation as an instrument to organise a mass upsurge against the oppressive rule of the British and Maharaja. But although the Maharaja was the president of the Mahasabha, he was more under the control of the priests of the Brahma Sabha. This religious organisation was an instrument of the Maharaja to oppress the people and through this organisation he tried to consolidate his position.

Then some radical members led by Hijam Irabat Singh began to remove these social evils and started convincing the members of the Mahasabha that in the absence of the democratic constitutional reform, the welfare of the people could not be brought in Manipur. Due to this radical stand, a tense relationship was developed between Irabot, using the platform of Mahasabha, began to protest against the excessive oppression of the Brahma Sabha. Finally, the Maharaja and many government employees who were associated with the Mahasabha started retreating from it. Then in the fourth annual session of the Mahasabha, it was changed into a political party and the name 'Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha' was changed to 'Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha' in 1938. Hijam Irabot was the first president of this political party.²⁰

Thus, the establishment of the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha as a political party and their demand gave a new drive to the common people of the state for having a new society in near future. While the demand for the establishment of a responsible government in the state was there, the women of Manipur launched a movement in the year 1939.

On 12th December 1939 a number of women came out in the streets and protested against the economic policies of the colonial and feudal interests. The outbreak had its immediate cause in the rise of the price of rice. Foreign merchants in Imphal, who had set up rice-mills, were buying the entire paddy they could get, milling it and exporting it. At that time, export was done with either Cart tax or Lal Pass. Under the cart tax system, the free movement of rice after paying Cart tax, was allowed and the second one (Lal pass) was made through an agreement between Manipur state and Assam. Under this second category rice were exported to Kohima and Assam Rifles stations posted in different areas.²¹

The women demanded complete end of rice exports and the closing of all rice-mills. On 12th December 1939 several hundred women came to the State Office and insisted upon the President of Durbar, Mr. T.A. Sharpe, to ban the export of rice. Mr. Sharpe pointed out that such an order would require the sanction of His Highness the Maharaja who was then camping at Nabadwip.²² The milling women still forced Mr. Sharpe to send an immediate wire to the Maharaja, as they demanded to receive reply to the same effect without delay. Major Bulfield, the Commandant of the 4th Assam Rifles and Major

Commins the Civil Surgeon, who came to rescue the President of the Durbar were also kept confined in the Telegraph Office compound by the crowd of women. At first their plea was ignored. Instead the security men were ordered to attack the demonstrators. Despite injuries over twenty womenfolk in bayonet charge, the spirit of the women agitators did not lie down and then followed a serial agitation for a month. But the character of the movement gradually changed to the nature of the national liberation movement.²³

Then the crowd turned their attention towards the mill owners. The women already took a written promise from the mill owners that they would not work their mills. But they came to know that some mill owners had soaked and boiled some paddy to Para-boiled rice. Thus, the women began to destroy all the rice mills working in the state.²⁴ The crowd stopped their action only after the electrical switches of the mills had been removed by order of the Political Agent. Still the activities of the women did not calm down. They began to organise meetings regularly at Police lane and some male members also began to involve in favour of the women agitators. At that time the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha was the only political organisation in Manipur and Hjam Irabot Singh was the President. When the movement broke out he was not in Manipur.²⁵ He arrived in Manipur on 16th December 1939. Next day he called a meeting of the working committee of the Mahasabha and a sharp difference of opinion was developed among the members. Some members were strongly against the movement. But Irabot and some of his close associates had a strong desire to support the case of the movement.

Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha

The formation of Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha in 1914 marked a turning point in the political history of Manipur because the agitation for constitutional reforms originated from the same platform.²⁶ The Mahasabha extended its network among the people and tried to impress upon them the long standing necessity of democratisation of political power and State machinery. The political mobilisation of the Meiteis had until then been somewhat slow and it now received an impetus in these efforts. The first political struggle was launched in 1939 CE which though initially started as a demand for stoppage of rice export by the women of Manipur was later bounded by the demand for full responsible Government in the state. As a result of this popular movement some make-shift reforms were introduced in the administration of justice, law and order, local self-government and land records as a remedy for the political discontent in the state.²⁷

Nupi Lan as Political Platform

The Nupi Lan was the first turmoil against injustice and oppression by the Meitei peasants in which the women played a splendid role. The movement laid bare the exploitation of the colonial rule and this stimulated Irabot to come out of his Mahasabha shell and abandon the principle of moderation as a means of ensuring socio-economic justice for his people. He, therefore, formed a new party “Praja Sanmilan” in order to identify himself completely with the peasants. During the course of the movement Irabot made all out efforts to encourage the confidence of the women agitators and ensure the organisational consistency of the movement.²⁸

Significantly, Irabot and his party workers had created awareness among the people for ensuring an end to economic exploitation and the boycott movement ultimately projected a number of demands including the one for constitutional reforms. It is thus obvious that the credit goes to the Meitei women for successfully mobilising the discontent against Maharaja’s administration.²⁹

The 'women's war' had succeeded in opening up to public debate issues which had previously been the concern only of the small emergent political elite, the nepotism and corruption of the rule of Maharajah Chura Chand and the need for constitutional reforms.³⁰

The issue of Constitutional reform

Movements for constitutional reform in the Indian states date from the 1930s and were actively encouraged towards the end of the decade. The women's war of 1939 effectively crushed what little respect retained for the Maharajah's authority among the common people.

The Meitei revolutionary leaders of course saw things differently. Hijam Irabot Singh, with his socialist anti-feudal agenda, was swift not only to jump on the band wagon of the women's protest movement but also to seize its controls. At a meeting of the Working group of the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha on the morning of January 7th 1940, Irabot's radical group split away and declared their cohesion with the women's movement. He obviously had a wide popular following and was arrested two days later.

The following week, on January 14th, an even more serious confrontation with the military police, took place in the Police Bazar. In this riot, several serious injuries did occur and arrests were made.³¹ By this time it had become clear to the British that the Indian congress was fishing in these troubled waters. The Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha, of which Irabot was a founding member, was certainly influenced by the Indian Congress.³² Irabot himself had contacts with Congress as well as with the Communist Party of India. These were powerful and complex currents and cross-currents in the political life of the state, but they owe to Nupilal of 1939-40 an incalculable debt. For the women's war was the event which above all generated popular political awareness and acted as the main facilitator for the movement which, after a protracted struggle, eventually succeeded in displacing the feudal ancient regime and bringing about democratic elections. Those elections were held in June and July 1948 - four years before the first democratic elections in India itself - and by November of that year the little state of Manipur had replaced rule by the Maharajah and his appointed Durbar with a form of 'responsible government' elected on the basis of full adult franchise.³³ That democratic government was of course swept away when India absorbed the state in 1949.³⁴

Conclusion

From these above discussions we may conclude that although the protests of the women and their demands were not met immediately it gave a profound impact on every aspect of the life of the people of Manipur. This movement was a spontaneous one. We can now rightly conclude that the outbreak of women agitation or Nupi Lan was a great landmark in the colonial history of Manipur. Although the movement was launched only by the womenfolk of the country, it brought a far-reaching positive impact in every aspects of the life of the people particularly in the administrative system of the state. After this movement, the colonial authority brought many changes particularly in the field of revenue, law and justice etc. which was a long demand of the people. The unique nature of the movement was that though it was started spontaneously against the rice export policy of the government and dominant character of the outside traders later on the character of the movement was changed and it became a strong movement for the constitutional and administrative reforms in the state.

However, it would not be wrong to say that the very idea for the establishment of a responsible government was successfully planted by the women on the fervent soil of the state. Therefore it was the suffering, yet fearless women of this land who were the van guard of these changes.

Notes and References (End Notes)

- 1 Jyotirmoy Roy, History of Manipur, Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Limited, 1999, p. 230
- 2 N. Basanta, Economic Transformation and Social Change in Manipur, New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2014, p. 97
- 3 S.C. Joshi, Manipur The Jewel of India, New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2002, p. 206
- 4 Lairenmayum Iboongohal Singh, Introduction to Manipur, Imphal: Shri S. Ibochaoba Singh, 1987, pp. 35-36
- 5 Ibid., p. 35
- 6 N. Basanta, op. cit., p. 27
- 7 T.C. Hodson, The Meitheis, New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2010, pp. 60-61
- 8 L. Basanti Devi, & Th. Asha Sinha, Socio-Economic Survey before 19th Century of North East India, New Delhi: ABS BOOKS, 2019, pp. 111-112
- 9 Lairenmayum Iboongohal Singh, op. cit., p. 195
- 10 N Joykumar Singh, Social Movements in Manipur, New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2005, p. 76
- 11 Napram Bihari, (edited & translated), The Cheitharol Kumbaba The Royal Chronicle of Manipur, Guwahati, Delhi: Spectrum Publications, 2012, P. 400
- 12 Sruti Bandopadhyay, Manipuri Dance An Assessment on History and Presentation, Gurgaon: Shubhi Publications, 2010, P.48
- 13 Lairenmayum Iboongohal Singh, op. cit., pp.47-48
- 14 S.C. Joshi, op. cit., p. 205
- 15 H. Dwajesekhar Sharma, New Insights into the Glorious Heritage of Manipur, Vol-III. New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2009, pp. 628-629
- 16 S.C. Joshi, op. cit., p. 205
- 17 N. Basanta, op. cit., p. 17
- 18 Ibid., p. 62
- 19 Saroj N Arambam Parratt and John Parratt, Collected Papers on the History and Culture of Manipur, Manipur: Patriotic Writers Forum (PAWF), 2017, p. 116
- 20 Sruti Bandopadhyay, op. cit., p. 49
- 21 N Joykumar Singh, op. cit., p. 83
- 22 Napram Bihari, op. cit., p. 486
- 23 Lairenmayum Iboongohal Singh, op. cit., pp. 49-50
- 24 Napram Bihari, op. cit., p. 487
- 25 Saroj N Arambam Parratt and John Parratt, op. cit., p. 120
- 26 N Joykumar Singh, op. cit., p. 103
- 27 Bimal J Dev & Dilip K Lahiri, Manipur Culture and Politics, Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1987, p. 114
- 28 N Joykumar Singh, op. cit., p. 102
- 29 Bimal J Dev & Dilip K Lahiri, op. cit., pp. 135-136
- 30 N Joykumar Singh, op. cit., p. 96
- 31 Napram Bihari, op. cit., p. 487
- 32 Sruti Bandopadhyay, op. cit., p.49
- 33 S.C. Joshi, op. cit., p. 34
- 34 H. Dwajesekhar Sharma, op. cit., p. 631