

Artificial Famines in Manipuri Society & Its Images on Manipuri Literature

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Abstract

This paper examines the artificial famines of 1939 and 1965 in Manipuri society and analyses their representation in Manipuri literature. Unlike natural calamities, these famines were the result of colonial exploitation, administrative negligence, exploitative trade practices, and post-Independence state failure. The famine of 1939, occurring under British rule, was triggered by large-scale rice exports and wartime disruptions, leading to acute scarcity and culminating in the Second Nupi Lan, a historic women-led mass resistance. The famine of 1965, emerging in post-Independence Manipur, was marked by a sharp rise in rice prices and official indifference, provoking widespread student protests remembered as the Hunger March (Chaklam Khongchat). The study explores how these man-made crises are transformed into enduring literary images in Manipuri poetry and fiction. Hijam Irawat's poem "*December 12*" memorialises collective suffering and women's resistance during the 1939 famine, while M. K. Binodini's short story *Ching-hi Manam* and Shree Biren's famine poems vividly portray hunger within domestic and social spaces during the 1965 crisis. The paper argues that Manipuri literature serves as a vital repository of collective memory and resistance, where hunger functions not only as physical deprivation but also as a political metaphor exposing state neglect, structural injustice, and the erosion of human dignity.

Keywords: Artificial famine, Manipur, Nupi Lan, Hunger March 1965, Manipuri literature, Hunger and resistance

Introduction

In the modern history of Manipur, two major artificial famines have been recorded—one in 1939 and the other in 1965. Both crises were not the result of natural calamities but were caused by administrative negligence, exploitative policies, and systemic governmental failure. Despite Manipur being an agrarian society, its people were forced into hunger and starvation due to man-made circumstances.

The famine of 1939 occurred under British colonial rule, while the famine of 1965 took place after Manipur had entered the post-Independence administrative framework. In both cases, popular resistance—particularly led by women and students—played a decisive role in exposing injustice and mobilising public consciousness.

The Artificial Famine of 1939

The artificial famine of 1939 was primarily caused by the large-scale export of rice by traders operating under British patronage. This practice severely disrupted local food availability, leading to acute rice shortages and a dramatic rise in prices. Ironically, although Manipur was an agricultural state, its people were compelled to face starvation.

In 1939, the outbreak of the Second World War disrupted global trade networks and regional supply systems. Simultaneously, excessive rainfall extended beyond the normal monsoon season until October, severely damaging agricultural production. This was followed by a hailstorm in mid-November, which further devastated crops and pushed the state toward an acute food crisis.

Anticipating a shortage, the State Durbar, on 13 September 1939, passed a resolution banning rice export by denying export licences to individuals (Lamyamba, 1973). However, rice continued to be exported to the Kohima Civil Station in Assam under an agreement to supply British military battalions. Soon afterwards, rice export was fully resumed following the Maharaja's order. This reopening of rice export directly intensified scarcity and ultimately led to the outbreak of the Second Nupi Lan.

In response, the women vendors of Nupi Keithel (Imphal Market) emerged as the vanguard of resistance. They organised mass demonstrations demanding an immediate ban on rice export and the reopening of local rice mills. On 12 December 1939, thousands of women marched to the State Durbar in Imphal. They detained officials, blocked the movement of rice, and enforced market strikes across the valley. (Bir, 22-27)

The British administration responded with repression, deploying police forces and the Assam Rifles. Many women were arrested, and markets remained closed for several months. Despite these measures, the movement succeeded in exposing colonial exploitation and significantly strengthening political awareness among the people of Manipur. This historic uprising of Manipuri women is recognised as the Second Women's War (Anisuba Nupi Lan).

The Artificial Famine of 1965

The second artificial famine began in July 1965. By August, the price of rice per maund (40 kg) had risen sharply from Rs. 25–26 to Rs. 60. For many families, rice became unaffordable, forcing them to survive through involuntary fasting. As hunger spread, women came out onto the streets and marketplaces, marching to the Chief Minister's bungalow to voice their grievances. However, senior officials dismissed these concerns, displaying marked indifference toward the suffering of the people.

On 27 August 1965, thousands of students—primarily from the Imphal Valley—launched a massive agitation against the government's failure to address the artificial famine. By evening, enraged protestors stormed the compound of the Chief Commissioner. This movement has since been commemorated as Hunger March Day (Chaklam Khongchat), marking a critical moment of popular resistance in post-Independence Manipur.

Images of the Artificial Famine of 1939 in Manipuri Literature

The artificial famine of 1939 and the Second Nupi Lan found express in Manipuri literature. During this period, a section of the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha, known as the Praja Sanmelani, split from the parent organisation to actively participate in the struggle. This faction was led by Hijam Irawat, who delivered a historic speech at Police Lane in 7th January 1940 (The Women of Manipur are charge with bayonets when they demand a handful of rice to keep off starvation. Handfuls of (women's) blood are shed. The blood of Meitei women is shed for the sake of rice. Please remember the event of the telegraph Office. In Russia and Japan masses of people have agitated in a body Why should we not have their courage?). Subsequently, on 21st Marcj 1940 Irawat was arrested and deported to Silhet Jail (present-day Sylhet, Bangladesh) for three years. (Bir, 21)

During his imprisonment, Hijam Irawat composed the poem “December 12”, memorialising the tragic events of 12 December 1939.

December 12 (Title of the Poem)

Spent is the night

A day is gone

Knot your hair, oh Devi

Your tousled hair.

One December 12 has passed

Another December 12 is on the way—

Forgotten, have you?

Ever believed that

You’ll pull back your wispy hair

Ever thought that this day will come?

(Translated by Umananda Sanasam)

Although the poem does not explicitly mention the word *famine* or directly describe its effects, it powerfully narrates the events surrounding the Telegram Office incident of 12 December 1939, where Manipuri women rose in protest against the artificial famine imposed during colonial rule. Through metaphor and emotional invocation, Irawat captures the collective anguish and resistance embedded in that historic moment.

To this day, “*December 12*” is regarded as one of the most powerful and enduring poems of modern Manipuri poetry. The poem evokes collective memory, resistance, and the indomitable spirit of Manipuri women, transforming historical suffering into a lasting poetic testimony.

Images of the Artificial Famine of 1965 in Manipuri Literature

1. M. K. Binodini’s Short Story

M. K. Binodini was a multifaceted personality—a fiction writer, sculptor, songwriter, and film scriptwriter. She was the first woman member of the Territorial Council of Manipur and the first Manipuri woman to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award. She was later honoured with the Padma Shri for her outstanding contributions to literature and the arts.

In her short story *Ching-hi Manam*, included in the collection *Nunggairakta Chandramukhi* (1965), Binodini powerfully depicts the devastating impact of the 1965 famine. The narrative centres on a middle-class family, with Tamubi as the focal character. For the sake of Tamubi’s pre-board examination, her mother gives a portion of their rice to her teacher. As the famine intensifies, the remaining family members—particularly Tamubi’s mother and elder brother—argue over how to survive on the little rice left, reflecting the family’s deepening crisis.

The story reaches a tragic conclusion with the death of young Tamubi. Although the author does not explicitly identify starvation as the cause, the post-mortem report reveals that Tamubi’s stomach was empty, indicating prolonged hunger and severe malnourishment.

In a poignant exchange between Tamubi’s mother and her elder son, the mother laments:

“How could one know that the artificial famine would happen, my son?”

(*Adumna chak tanggani haibadi kanana khanggani Ibungo*) (Binodini 185)

This statement explicitly underscores the man-made nature of the famine, distinguishing it from natural disasters.

2. Shree Biren's Poetry

In Shree Biren's poetry collection *Masina Imphalgi Warini* (1978), three poems—"Chakhum Amagi Report" (*Report of a Kitchen*), "Punsi Ama" (*A Life*), and "Ashibagi Lamdamda" (*At the Land of Death*)—directly address the trauma of famine.

In *Chakhum Amagi Report*, Biren presents the desperate condition of a poor household through a dialogue-based structure. The questions revolve around basic kitchen necessities—rice, vegetables, salt, chilli, and firewood—yet every response is negative. The hearth remains cold, and silence dominates the space, symbolising absolute deprivation (Biren 21).

In *Punsi Ama*, the poet reflects on the relentless hardships imposed on poor families. Just as morning and night arrive unfailingly, every human being requires at least one meal each day. Yet, instead of enjoying these necessities, the family remains trapped in constant anxiety over the availability of rice, vegetables, salt, cooking oil, and fermented fish (*ngari-ngatai*) (Biren 22). This unending struggle reveals the deep structural crisis produced by famine.

In *Ashibagi Lamdamda*, the poet presents one of the most haunting images of hunger. An infant, not yet a year old, cries helplessly from starvation. The mother, herself weakened by prolonged hunger, is unable to feed the child as her breasts have dried up (Biren 37). This stark image captures the devastating intergenerational impact of famine.

Discussion

The literary representations of the Artificial Famine of 1939, particularly in Hijam Irawat's poem "*December 12*", evoke collective memory, resistance, and the enduring spirit of Manipuri women. The poem transforms historical suffering into poetic testimony, preserving the emotional and political intensity of the Second Nupi Lan and reaffirming women's central role in anti-colonial resistance.

The literary representations of the Artificial Famine of 1965 reveal two significant dimensions:

Memory and Resistance

Literature serves as a repository of collective memory, ensuring that the suffering of ordinary people and the sacrifices of students during the famine are not erased from public consciousness. By documenting these experiences, literary texts strengthen the cultural and political identity of Manipur and nurture political awareness among future generations. They also underscore the power of collective action in confronting state neglect and structural injustice.

Symbolism of Hunger

In these works, hunger is not merely physical deprivation but becomes a powerful metaphor for administrative neglect, erosion of human dignity, and state violence. In both prose and poetry, hunger operates at the intersection of the personal and the political, revealing how macro-level policy failures penetrate intimate domestic spaces. Through this symbolism, Manipuri literature exposes the human cost of artificial famines and challenges dominant narratives that obscure responsibility.

Conclusion

The artificial famines of 1939 and 1965 occupy a critical place in the socio-political history of Manipur. Unlike natural disasters, these crises were produced by colonial exploitation, administrative failure, and state indifference, exposing the vulnerability of an agrarian society subjected to unjust governance. In both instances, the suffering of the people was not merely a consequence of food scarcity but a reflection of deeper structural inequalities and political neglect.

Equally significant is the role of popular resistance, particularly led by women and students, which transformed hunger into a powerful site of political mobilisation. The Second Nupi Lan and the Hunger March of 1965 stand as landmark movements in which ordinary citizens challenged authority and asserted their right to survival and dignity. These movements not only compelled the state to confront its failures but also reshaped political consciousness in Manipur.

Manipuri literature has played a vital role in preserving and interpreting these historical experiences. Through poetry and fiction, writers such as Hijam Irawat, M. K. Binodini, and Shree Biren have transformed famine from a statistical or administrative issue into a deeply human narrative. Their works ensure that the voices of the hungry, the marginalized, and the resistant are not lost to history. Hunger, in these texts, emerges as both lived reality and political metaphor—signifying neglect, injustice, and the erosion of dignity.

Taken together, the historical events and their literary representations demonstrate that artificial famines in Manipur were not isolated crises but collective traumas that shaped social memory, political resistance, and cultural expression. By revisiting these famines through history and literature, this study underscores the necessity of accountability, ethical governance, and sustained vigilance against policies that endanger human survival. The remembrance of these events continues to serve as a moral and political reminder that hunger, when man-made, is not inevitable—but preventable.

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