



Echoes of Resistance: Anti-Colonial Movements in the Early 20th Century Manipur

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Abstract: This research article explores the mass movements in Manipur during the early twentieth century, focusing on their causes, significance, and long-term impact. Following the British conquest of the state in 1891, a series of administrative and economic changes disrupted Manipur's traditional political and social systems, leading to widespread discontent. The study examines key movements such as the 1904 Women's Agitation, the abolition of the *Pothang* system in 1913, the Zeliangrong Movement (1930-32), and the *Nupi Lan* (Women's War) of 1939. These protests, often initiated by marginalized groups, especially women, were responses to economic exploitation, cultural suppression, and social injustice under colonial rule. The article analyzes how these movements, although fragmented and spontaneous, collectively contributed to the larger anti-colonial struggle. The *Nupi Lan* of 1939, in particular, transformed from a rice price protest into a political demand for democratic reforms, symbolizing the convergence of economic and political grievances. Through archival research and historical analysis, the study highlights the critical role of these movements in resisting British imperialism and preserving Manipuri identity. The article argues that these early movements laid the foundation for future resistance, helping to restore the state's pride and autonomy in the face of colonial exploitation.

Index Terms - Colonialism, Manipur, Mass movements, Womens Agitation.

INTRODUCTION

The early twentieth century marked a significant turning point in the history of Manipur, a region that experienced a series of mass movements driven by various socio-political and economic changes. These movements were a direct response to the administrative restructuring imposed by British colonial authorities after their conquest of the state in 1891. The new colonial system disrupted the traditional political, social, and economic fabric of Manipur, compelling its people to resist the injustices they faced. These protests

were largely initiated by marginalized segments of the population, including women and the rural masses, reflecting a broader dissatisfaction with British policies that degraded their sense of identity and autonomy.

The first major movement, the 1904 Women's Agitation, set the stage for future anti-imperialist actions by the Manipuri people. It was a spontaneous, non-violent protest led by women, particularly those affected by the British exploitation of local resources, such as the burning of the Khwairamband Market. This event was followed by other movements, such as the 1913 *Pothang* System Abolition Movement and the 1930 Zeliangrong Movement, each challenging the colonial and feudal structures that had imposed severe economic hardships on the local populace.

The most notable of these movements was the *Nupi Lan* (Women's War) of 1939, sparked by the sharp rise in rice prices due to British economic policies favoring foreign traders. This movement, which began as an economic protest led by Manipuri women, eventually transformed into a larger political agitation demanding democratic reforms. These movements not only challenged British imperial rule but also played a crucial role in preserving the identity and pride of Manipur, contributing to the broader anti-colonial struggles in India.

The 1904 Movement (First Women Agitation)

“The movement of 1904 was a great landmark in the history of Manipur. Although the duration of the agitation was short, yet it produced a very good impact on the political and economic life of the state and also paved a way for the future and anti-imperialist movements in the state” (Dena 58). This movement was the initial unstructured and spontaneous manifestation of anti-British sentiment that emerged shortly after the country's takeover in 1891. This time might be viewed as the incubation phase of the anti-imperialist movement that emerged intermittently in the following years. As the movement was initiated by the weaker vessels of this landlocked region, it constituted a non-violent form of agitation aimed at opposing the injustices perpetrated by the British authority. The emergence of this movement has yielded two significant outcomes. Initially, it provided renewed moral support to those residing inside the confines of the colonial authority. Secondly, it implicitly curtailed the colonial ambitions of certain elites towards the state's military personnel. This movement permitted future generations in the state to advocate for the reclamation of their lost identity from the grasp of British imperialism.

The decline of Manipur's political position from a sovereign kingdom to a British colonial state was the definitive consequence of the Anglo-Manipur War. This significant alteration posed a considerable problem and an intolerable political evolution for the populace of this state, who had never contemplated the notion of an inferiority mentality. Amid public discontent regarding the selecting process of the new king, the colonial administrator implemented a new policy that exacerbated the populace's ire. To quote Naorem Joykumar Singh:

Immediately just after the occupation of the country, the officers commanding of the field force had issued an order of disarming the whole population. Such type of policy of the British authority was regarded as a serious insult to the self respect of the people of Manipur. On the whole, the policy of the British authorities may be observed as a kind of action to treat the indigenous people of Manipur as a second class subject in their own motherland. According to an official estimate, the British authorities collected about 400 firearms. (99)

Another policy of the British was to make an economic exploitation of Manipur. The success of the colonizers always lay in the economic policy which was to be introduced in the colonial state. "It is true that the complete destruction of national independence was the most advantageous to the colonizers because state power over enslaved people provided the basis for a new form of economic exploitation" (N. J. Singh 100). The implementation of a new import and export policy by the colonial British administration in Manipur further exacerbated the economic challenges faced by the populace.

The populace encountered these issues due to the abrupt changes in the administrative and economic systems implemented by the British. However, due to the surrounding circumstances, the populace, particularly the prominent social elite, were unable to voice their dissent against this new system and consequently endured these new practices for an extended period. Ultimately, their anger and discontent with the new regime manifested indirectly in 1904.

"The immediate cause of the outbreak of the movement was directly related with the burning event of khwairamband market (sana keithel) and bungalows of captain Nathal and Mr. Dulop. On the 6th of 1904 the main market (Sana Keithel) was burnt down to the ground. All the 28 sheds which could have the capacity to accommodate 300 was completely destroyed" (N. J. Singh 102). In response to the aforementioned challenges thousands of women, mainly those from the market sector, spontaneously participated in a significant demonstration on September 3rd. They proceeded to the official mansion of the political agent and administrator of the state, where a protest persisted for several days. The market operations of the khwairamband were consequently halted. The women's movement became a significant worry for the administration as it impacted the daily existence of the state.

Movement for the Abolition of *Pothang* System 1913

The emergence of a mass movement advocating for the elimination of the Pothang system in 1913 marked a significant event in the social and political history of Manipur. This movement was a direct challenge to the prevailing feudal and colonial order inside the state. In addition to this successful initiative, it established a solid platform for the potential success of any future non-violent democratic movements.

The Zeliangrong Movement 1930-32

The emergence of the Zeliangrong Movement in 1930 was a pivotal event in the history of Manipur. It significantly influenced the social, economic, and political landscape of Manipur State. This movement

significantly contributed to the growth and preservation of the Zeliangrong people's identity, as it encompasses nearly all facets of their collective existence.

The Water Tax Movement

Shortly following the conclusion of the Zeliangrong movement, the populace experienced another protest initiated against the government's water tax policy. Subsequently, it became recognised as the water tax movement. Although it was not a large-scale popular movement, it holds significant relevance in the history of this state. The emergence of this movement was closely linked to the rise in the water tax imposed on individuals, particularly those who benefited from the water scheme. This campaign instilled the concept of democracy in the populace and established a fundamental basis for the development of a non-violent democratic movement. Consequently, although it was not a mass-based movement, it exerted a substantial influence on the future trajectory of the democratic movement in the state.

The Women Agitation of 1939

An epoch-making event, commonly referred to as Nupi Lan, occurred on 12 December 1939. The primary cause of the unrest was the increase in rice prices. The colonial system of indirect administration facilitated the influx of external traders, primarily Marwaris, Bengalis, and Sikhs, who established themselves in the British reserves located in the centre of Imphal, outside the authority of the state durbar. Individuals who established residence in the British reserve were likewise categorised as aliens. Nearly all basic commodities were imported under the monopoly grip of Marwari businessmen. In the words of Lal Dena:

The export of rice was carried on under two systems. One was the cart tax system and the other was land pass system. Under the first system, free movement of rice was allowed after paying the cart tax and the second system was made through an inter-state agreement. The state could earn a lot of revenue from the cart tax. But later on the mode of collection of the tax was entrusted to a trading firm and a fixed payment was made half yearly to the state. According to N. Joykumar, this new system gave a great help in the growth and consolidation of Marwari capital in Manipur and the quantity of the export of rice in 1932 reached 277,389 maunds as against 105,287 maunds in the previous year. Joykumar made a very interesting study between the increase of the area under cultivation and the increase in the volume of the export of rice. His finding was: "In 1925-26 the total area under cultivation was 175,537 acres and in 1938 the total areas were 185,213 acres. The increase was only 10,322 acres. (108)

"On the other hand, the volume of the export of rice in 1925-26 was 155,014 maunds and in 1938 it was 372,174 maunds. Thus the volume of the export of rice increased very sharply. It caused a serious economic effect on the normal life of the common people". Owing to poor harvest in the previous year and unrestricted export of rice to outside Manipur, there was acute scarcity of rice in Imphal bazaar" (Dena 108).

The mill owners exacerbated the problem by purchasing all available paddy and persistently exporting it. Consequently, the impoverished townspeople were enduring a decline in their previous income from husking paddy. On 12 December 1939, numerous women assembled and initiated demonstrations in the streets of Imphal, demanding the immediate stop of rice exports and the closure of all rice mills. They proceeded to the office of the durbar president, Sharpe, and implored him to halt the export of rice. Sharpe informed them that such an order necessitated prior approval from the maharajah, who was now in Nabadwip, Uttar Pradesh. The women forcibly removed Sharpe and escorted him to the neighbouring telegraph station to communicate with the maharajah of the cessation of rice exports. The white officer, dissatisfied with this move, was compelled to await the maharajah's response on the spot. Major Bulfield, commandant of the 4th Assam Rifles, and Major Cummins, Civil Surgeon, who attempted to rescue Sharpe, were also confined within the telegraph office property until 11:30 p.m. that day. The following day, a response was received from the maharajah, who authorised G. Gimson, the political agent, to prohibit the export of rice and thereafter issued an order to that effect. The women subsequently approached the rice mill proprietors, coercing them into providing written assurances that they would cease operations of their rice mills. Notwithstanding this assurance, a mill proprietor had soaked and boiled some paddy overnight.

“On hearing this, the angry women of about 10,000 spontaneously came out the following day and some of their leaders went to one of the biggest rice mills to see that the electric switches were removed by an order of the political agent. Only then, the agitated women could be dispersed” (Dena 109).

The situation remained tranquil and silent for a period. However, by late December 1939, several carters were observed transporting rice for export. The carts were emptied, and bags of rice were discarded into gutters. The Carters subsequently filed a lawsuit at the court of the political agent, identifying five women as their attackers. The political agent's office subsequently directed the state police to present the women for the purpose of documenting their remarks. The female leaders organised the individuals who encircled the police station for several hours. The leaders accused the police inspector of assaulting an elderly woman and called for his punishment.

In the subsequent days, the primary marketplace was shuttered, and public assemblies convened to deliberate on the evolving situation. The involvement of men, especially members of the newly established Praja Sanmelini led by Neta Hijam Irabot, caused the agitation to take on a political dimension. Neta Irabot ultimately transformed it into a movement of civil disobedience advocating for political reforms aimed at democratising the state's political framework. In this context, Resistance (an English weekly publication) observes: "The Nupi Lan was a pivotal moment in the political history of Manipur and in the life of Irabot." Liberal reformism had ceased to exist; radicalism had emerged.

“It is said of a prominent Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha leader that when some of his followers rushed to his (Irabot) home on the evening of 12 December 1939 to seek his advice on the bayonet charge that had just taken place at the Telegraph office, he calmly told them to file an application to the president of the

Manipur state durbar, a 'young chap' called T.A. Sharpe who had been the target of Manipuri women's fury on that fateful day" (Dena 110).

This small incident clearly highlighted the considerable gap between the ambitions of the Mahasabha and the realities of the colonial environment. Despite the significant inertia it had accumulated over the years, chiefly through the creation of extensive and trivial memoranda, the Mahasabha had not transformed its essential character as an elitist and urban organisation. The predominantly agrarian and roots character of *Nupi Lan* was inherently at odds with the bourgeois inclinations of the urban demographic, hence enabling the ascendance of the prominent freedom-centric Mahasabha leadership. The *Nupi Lan* demonstrated engagement within the state, with Manipuri women frequently displaying commendable behaviour and selflessness alongside their male counterparts.

Conclusion

The anti-colonial movements in Manipur in the early twentieth century were significant manifestations of the populace's aspiration to regain their autonomy, identity, and dignity under British colonial domination. These movements, particularly those spearheaded by women like the *Nupi Lan*, are notable for their distinctive mobilisation of marginalised groups that challenged the dual oppression of colonial and patriarchal systems. The protests extended beyond economic issues and evolved into a focal point for wider political demands, demonstrating the significant intersection of economic and political opposition. The 1904 Women's Agitation and the *Nupi Lan* of 1939, while largely addressing particular local problems, significantly influenced the trajectory of resistance in the region, establishing a framework for subsequent democratic movements. Ultimately, these movements represented a significant act of resistance against colonial oppression and established the foundation for post-colonial political reforms. By unifying diverse societal divisions, they exhibited the potential of popular mobilization to confront imperial authority. These movements exemplify the perseverance of the Manipuri people and their steadfast pursuit of self-determination, impacting the wider anti-colonial conflicts in India and safeguarding the state's cultural and political legacy.

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