



Hijam Irabot (Irawat): A Hallowed (Mahatma) Socio-Legal Reformer Of Manipur

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Abstract: This study has been undertaken to investigate multi-dimensional personality of Hijam Irabot (Irawat) [30 September 1896 - 26 September 1951], a hallowed (Mahatma) socio-legal reformer of Manipur. His role as a socio-legal reformer particularly challenging oppressive practices (rule of law), fighting religious apartheid, untouchable and oppression; advocacy for the marginalized, a cultural and educational activism during the British and Maharaja period in Manipur is a role-model to the formation of modern Manipur (also India) particularly shaping a unified Manipur and strong sense of idea of modern Manipur. His activism are parallel to those of Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi and many more. He is known as “Jana Neta” (People’s Leader) and “Lamyananba” (Pioneer). The present investigation is an attempt to focus on Irabot’s political life during 1939-1951, the socio-legal reformer phase with an attempt to draw a comparative study of past and contemporary leading individuals of the same or proximate characteristics with him elsewhere in the globe for a way for further serious research.

Key words: Cultural and educational activism, idea of modern Manipur, oppressive practices, socio-legal reformer, unified Manipur

I. INTRODUCTION

Socio-legal reformers are individuals who actively challenge and seek to change societal norms and structures that perpetuate inequality and injustice and finally bring legal reforms. Their work addresses systematic issues and challenges such as oppressive practices manifested as rule by law (not rule of law), caste discrimination, gender bias, emancipation of deprived peoples, economic disparity, apartheid, and access to education and healthcare and among others. By advocating for the rights, freedom and justice of marginalized communities, socio-legal reformers aim to dismantle oppressive practices (rule by law) and create a more just and equitable society and ultimately to bring law reforms in order to establish ‘rule of law’.

Throughout history of mankind, socio-legal reformers have emerged in various cultural and political contexts, often using grassroots activism, legal reforms, and public advocacy to drive ultimate change. Their contributions not only highlight the struggles of disadvantaged and oppressed groups but also inspire collective action and awareness about social issues. Hijam Irabot is one of such socio-legal reformers with immense far-reaching impact to bring idea of unified Manipur.

Hijam Irabot (30 September 1896 – 26 September 1951) was a prominent socio-legal reformer of Manipur, his whole life was dedicated for the welfare of masses and engaging in socio-legal reformation movement like Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of Nation of India in one side and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the Father of Constitution of India on the other. His efforts and tireless socio-legal movement focused on

challenging oppressive and unjust practices and imposition of harsh and unreasonable taxes. His legacy was akin to other well-known social reformers of the day in many aspects, including Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Swami Vivekananda, Kandukuri Veeresalingam, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Savitribhai Phule, E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar), Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Ram Monohar Lohia, Kanshi Ram, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and many others.

The present work is an attempt mainly to focus on Irabot's political life during 1939 – 1951, the phase could be termed as the socio-reformer phase or more aptly socio-legal reformer phase with an attempt to draw a comparative study of past and contemporary leading individuals of the same or proximate characteristics with Irabot elsewhere in the globe for a way for further serious research.

II. ROLE AS A SOCIO-LEGAL REFORMER

Irabot, also known as “Jana Neta” (People’s Leader) and “Lamyamba” (Pioneer), was a multi-facet personality who initiated significant socio-legal political movements. His reform activities aimed to eliminate social evils, an oppressive feudal system, and British colonial rule.

Challenging Oppressive Practices (Rule by law): He actively campaigned against unjust and exploitative practices prevalent in Manipuri society in those days, such as forced labour (*Pot-thang*), and the night vigil tax (*Yarek Santri*).

Fighting Religious Apartheid, Untouchable and Oppression: The period of king Churachand in Manipur was marked by unprecedented religious oppression of people directed by the Brahmasabha in addition to political subjugation under the British colonial rule. At that time the socio-religious life of the people was at the mercy of the Brahmasabha which received full patronage of the king. It was a fact the ex-communication and ostracism was the order of the day (reign of terror). Brahmins marrying Meitei girls and then keeping their wives as outcasts within their families and again prohibiting their wives to breast-feed and feed their own children was a common practice. Even if the Meitei girls, unable to bear such atrocities, got separated from their Brahmin husbands, they were not allowed to re-marry other men for whole life (Yenning, 2015). Such social norm imposed during that period may be termed as social apartheid and untouchable.

The Brahmasabha held each and every family of the Manipur valley in a vice-like grip without giving any room for personal freedom even at the time of death. The Brahmasabha could declare any family impure (*Mangba*) when there was a death in the family. In such cases, the bereaved family was prevented from cremating their beloved father/mother or son/daughter whoever he/she might be. The family was allowed to go for cremation only after paying purification fine to the Brahmasabha which was generally fixed around Rs 80, an astronomical amount during those days (Yenning, 2015). This practice, as expected, soon became an effective tool for religious oppression as well as economic exploitation of the mass for benefit of the Brahmasabha members and the king. In the simplest term, reign of terror and rule by law with apartheid regime prevail in Manipur in those days.

A few illustrative oppressive, degrading treatment and forced labour-imposed practices as a tool for rule by law prevalent during those days were:

- *Chandal Senkhai* – one of the most audacious practices devised by the Brahmasabha to earn an unflinching income from the mass. Under the rule of king Churachand, each and every people of Manipur valley who adopted Hinduism were forced to adorn their forehead with Chandal. For adorning one with Chandal, one had to pay a fixed sum of money and this was collected by the Brahmasabha.
- Other inhuman, exploitative and harsh taxes and duties imposed by the State administration under the British colonial rule were Amin Chakthak, Peon Chakthak, Dolaireng, Yarek Santri, feeding horses and elephants without payment of their work.
- Villagers were compelled to cater to all the needs of Amin and village chowkidar including food and lodging as and when they visited any village (Amin Chakthak).
- Official of Agriculture Department coming to villages for collection of tax were given food and other requirements by the villagers as a compulsion (*Peon Chakthak*).

- Government officials like peons, clerks visiting villages were carried on palanquins or litters from one village to another by the villagers without any payment of their work (*Dolaireng*).
- Villagers were forced to guard Government officials staying at their villages - day and night as well as the cash they collected as tax. But the villagers were never paid for guarding the Government officials (*Yarek Santri*).
- Forcing villagers to collect fodder for horses and elephants of royal families and Government officials without giving anything in return
- When high-ranking Government officials visited far off places, some common men were forced to render their service as porters without payment of their labour (*Pot-thang Puba*)
- At times of building roads, bridges and bungalows, a large number of people were forced to assemble themselves and work as labourers without payment of their work (*Pot-thang Shuba*)
- People were forced to bring fish, chicken, eggs, other domestic animals, rice as well as cash for offering to bureaucrats (*Pot-thang Salkhai*)

Irabot raised his voice vehemently against such religious oppressive, inhuman and degrading treatment and economic exploitation carried out by the Brahmasabha, which imposed hefty “purification fines” (*Chandal Senkhai*) and other taxes for adopting Hinduism just like one or other form of untouchables or apartheid regime. In this sense, he was a symbol of a man of secularism and strive for equality for all. His socio-legal movement were resembling of those of –

- Nelson Mandela, a South African anti-apartheid activist and statesman who was globally regarded as an icon of moral leadership, democracy and social justice.
- Martin Luther King Jr., an American civil rights activist using non-violent resistance, advocating for racial equality and justice, who delivered the iconic “I have a dream” speech and main architect of major protests like the Montgomery Bus Boycott and March on Washington, and inspiring landmark legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964, earning him the Nobel Peace prize.
- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the Father of Indian Constitution who fought for abolition of untouchability, and
- Kanshi Ram who worked for the upliftment and political mobilization of the Bahujan, the backward or lower caste people including untouchable groups at the bottom of the caste system.

Advocacy for the Marginalized: He dedicated his life to the upliftment of peasants, workers, and the marginalized, advocating for social justice, equality, and their rights. In this sense his movement were akin to –

- Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of Nation (India) who led major non-violent agrarian movements during the Indian freedom struggle, including the Champaran, Kheda, and Bardoli Satyagrahas, which addressed issues like forced indigo cultivation and unfair land revenue demands.
- N.G. Ranga (Gogineni Ranga Nayukulu) who was widely regarded as the father of the Indian Peasant Movement and an exponent of “peasant philosophy”.
- Sir Chhotu Ram better known for his advocacy for farmers’ rights and laws protecting them from exploitative moneylenders and who earned the title “Deenbandhu” (Friend of the Poor).
- Swami Sahajanand Saraswati who was a revolutionary and farmer rights activist demanding freedom from economic exploitation for all agrarian classes
- Sardar Vallabhai Patel who was a key leader in the Kheda and Bardoli Satyagrahas, working alongside Mahatma Gandhi to organized farmers and pressure the government for fair land revenue assessments.

Cultural and Educational Activism: A cultural and educational activist uses cultural products, creative practices, and educational initiatives to challenge dominant social norms and promote social change, often focusing on issue like equality, human rights, and community empowerment. Irabot promoted Manipuri cultural identity, literature, journalism, and sports. He was instrumental in establishing Schools and raising political consciousness among the masses. He used education as a critical tool for

emancipation and social reform. His work harnesses nature, culture, and education for community progress. In this regards his movement is resemble to those of -

- Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule: Pioneers in 19th century India, they challenged caste and gender discrimination by establishing some of India's first schools for girls and marginalized communities.
- Pandita Ramabai: A scholar and social reformer who advocated relentlessly for women's rights and education in India, especially for widows. She founded institutions like the Arya Mahila Samaj and the Mukti Mission to provide shelter, care, and vocational training to destitute women.
- Sonam Wangchuk: An Indian innovator and education reformer who founded the Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL) to reform the region's alien education system and connect it to local culture and environment.
- E.M.S. Namboodiripad: An Indian politician and literary critic who was also a cultural activist and social reformer. He utilized literature and staged plays to fight against social abuses like polygamy and to promote widow remarriage and women's education within his own community.
- Malala Yousafzai: A prominent global activist for female education, she survived an assassination attempt by the Taliban for speaking out on the importance of girls' right to attend school. She is the youngest Nobel Peace prize laureate and co-founded the Malala Fund to advocate for quality secondary education for all girls worldwide.

These individuals who are history maker and game changer including Hijam Irabot demonstrate how culture and education can be powerful tools for fostering critical thinking, building collective identity, and driving lasting social transformation leading to law reforms.

III. CONCLUSION

While Irabot worked to change the system of administration and injustice, he did so through social activism, political agitation, and later, armed struggle. He did, at one point, hold the post of a member of the Sardar Panchayat Court but resigned to fight against the system from outside.

In the simplest submission, reforms in Manipur during that period of history and beyond from the yolk of exploitation, inhuman, untouchability, apartheid, degrading treatment and forced labour was because of Irabot, the undisputed mass leader. In other words, revolution in Manipur in almost all fields was pioneered by Hijam Irabot. He trove till his last to build a firm and developed inclusive Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic Manipur.

Hijam Irabot was aptly described as a role-model, the architect of modern Manipur, a true patriot, a mass leader and above all - a MAHATMA who was indoctrinated by the ideas of secularism, democracy, socialism, justice, liberty, equality, unity and fraternity. The last but not the least Irabot should be honoured as the 'Father of modern Manipur'.

Note and References:

"Rule by law" means the government uses the law as a tool to control people, often unequally, making the rules themselves above the law, contrasting with the Rule of Law, where everyone, including the government, is subject to fair, transparent, and consistently applied laws, safeguarding rights. While rule by law can appear legal but be oppressive (like Colonial powers using laws to control subjects, authoritarian regimes creating laws to justify oppression, as seen in Nazi Germany's laws and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958), the Rule of Law ensures justice, accountability, and limits arbitrary power, forming the basis of democracies.

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