

Changes in the Dynamic of Politics in Manipur

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Abstract

Politics in Manipur witnessed tremendous changes after the Battle of Imphal (1944). Prior to the Imphal Battle, Manipur was a princely state, controlled by the British colonial power. However, after the battle, the British colonial rule over Manipur came to an end. There was a wave of change in the political space and the different political parties came forward demanding responsible government to be set up in the state. Along with this demand, the progress of integration by the agents of the Indian government began to take place. This paper explores the changes that took place in the politics of Manipur especially with regard to the integration of Manipur state with India; it is also an attempt to examine the discontent and the grievances that the people of Manipur faced after integration. It is also an effort to briefly highlight the inception of insurgent movement in Manipur.

Introduction

Politics in Manipur underwent significant changes after the Battle of Imphal (1944) which was part of the Burma campaign which was fought between the British and the Japanese during World War II. With the end World War II, the British colonial rule also came to an end. The people of Manipur who were under the British colonial rule finally became free. There was celebration in Manipur and the Maharaja finally gained full control over the administration of the state after 86 years (Nag, 1998). The Indian flag was seen everywhere, on the roads, in the maidans, the markets and villages; even women and children took part in the celebration (Nag, 1998). Manipur, in post-Imphal battle, was at a vital point in her history, as on the one hand it witnessed a significant demand for responsible government - (a

government who would look after the welfare of the people and of the state) by the different political parties. On the other hand, there was the Manipur State Congress which wanted the state of Manipur to merge with the Indian union. Different political parties began to voice their opinion and put forward their ideas on issues relating to their state.

Political parties like *Nikhil Hindu Manipur Mahasabha*, a socio-religious organization formed under the patronage of the Maharaja in 1934, was one of the first political parties that was established under the British rule. *Nikhil Hindu Manipur Mahasabha* gradually became a political organization and changed its nomenclature into *Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha* at its fourth session held at Imphal on December 30, 1938. *Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha* demanded “full administrative power for Manipur and a combined administrative unit of hills and plains” (Singh, 2008). *Krishak Sabha*, another political party of Manipur, on May 16, 1946 demanded that a responsible government be set up in Manipur. They further demanded the establishment of Panchayat in every village, introduction of free and compulsory education, immediate payment of the war compensation, and reduction of land tax from Rs. 9 per pari to Rs. 6, non-encroachment over the traditional communal sources of livelihood like forest and fisheries and compulsory ownership right for the tiller of the land (Singh, 1998). The *Praja Sanmilani* party of Manipur also demanded the immediate establishment of a responsible government in Manipur. The elitist *Mahasabha* also demanded the formation of a responsible government in Manipur, and steps for setting up a constitution making machinery with front-runners of public opinion (Singh, 1998). Manipur State Congress party which came into being on October 4, 1946, too demanded responsible government on the principle of democracy, adult franchises and abolition of monarchical rule (Nag, 1998).

In the midst of the demand made by the different political parties, Sardar Patel came up with a plan known as *Poorvanchal Pradesh* on August 1948. This *Poorvanchal Pradesh* was to consist of states like Manipur, Lushai (Mizoram), Cachar and Tripura (Nag, 1998). Hijam Irabot Singh, brother-in-law of the Maharaja Churachand Singh, strongly opposed this plan. He found that the whole idea would jeopardize the distinctive social,

cultural, political and historical identity of Manipur (Nag, 1998). He therefore asked the people to raise their voice and fight against this plan. Political parties like *Tomal Congress* also strongly raised their voice against the plan. They did not agree that Cachar, Manipur, Lushai and Tripura should form a *Poorvanchal* state. They also stated that the people of Manipur was a distinct race with their own separate culture, language and social and ethnic peculiarities and was intent on keeping Manipur autonomous unit of the dominion of India (Singh, 1998). However, parties like *Tompok Congress* supported it and continued to persist on it. In a public meeting held on August 22, 1948 Dr. P. C. Ghose of the All India Congress Committee stated that Manipur in itself would not be a self-sufficient state both economically and politically. He therefore, suggested that the four smaller states, i.e., Manipur, Tripura, Lushai Hills and Cachar should be merged together to strengthen the human and material resources of the states, so that their socio-economic problems could be addressed. He further stated that there would be no problem for the people to be united as all the four states professed Hinduism (Nag, 1998). However, *Praja Sangha* and *Krishak Sabha*, the newly elected members of the state legislative assembly, strongly raised their voice against it. On 15 September 1948, a meeting was held where the newly elected members took a decision that the Meities will never desire to have such an administrative set-up imposed upon them. What the Manipuris demanded was the existence of the Manipur state as a component and distinct unit of India with her own special entity and internal administration undisturbed (Nag, 1998). The general masses too protested against it and, thus, this plan could not materialize into reality. Along with all the above events happening, the process of integration by the agents of Indian government began to take place in Manipur.

Integration of Manipur with India

The process of integration began to dominate the political space of Manipur. The local Congress and the government of India began to press for the merger of Manipur because of the fear of the rising communist wave in the valleys and the hills. On April 29, 1949, Manipur State Congress adopted a resolution which stated that the Congress was deeply anxious with the international situation especially the communist revolt in the then Burma and felt that merging of Manipur with Indian state was of out-most

importance (Singh, 2008). The Indian government, looking at the turmoil in the hills and the rapid increased of the communist movement in the valley, decided to hasten its policy of merger. In order to speed up the process of merger, a new *Dewan*, Rawal Amar Singh, was appointed on April 16, 1949. The new *Dewan* was given extra constitutional powers, so that he could deal with the problems in Manipur.

Sri Prakesh, the Governor of Assam, in a letter to the *Maharaja* on April 14, 1949 instructed the *Dewan* to hold the charge of law and order directly, administration of the hill tracts, state force and the relation with the Government of India (Singh, 1998). In a desperate attempt to counter the moves of the merger, 26 MLAs of the *Praja Shanti Party* held a meeting on August 25, 1949 under the presidency of Kh. Iboton Singh. In the meeting they decided to send N. Ibomcha Singh and S. L. Lunneh to convince the government of India about the hopes and aspirations of the people. They also decided to press the government of India that the friendly relations between India and Manipur under the instrument of agreement should be continued for some years and Manipur should be allowed to be run by its own people under a democratic constitution, so that socio-economic and political development could take place (Singh, 1998).

People belonging to diverse sections of society in Manipur also strongly opposed the merger. Different political parties of Manipur also gave their views and opinions on why they did not want to merge with India. *Praja Shanti Party* Secretary, N. Ibomcha Singh, stated that since Manipur was culturally and linguistically different from the rest of India, it would be unwise to assimilate into India. It was also pointed out that as Manipur was economically backward, the integration would lead to exploitation of the place by the richer states (Singh, 1998). Therefore, on March 23, 1949 a memorandum was submitted to the Governor of Assam, requesting him to allow Manipur to retain its existing status. The Communist leader, Hijam Irabot, too opposed the merger and hence set up the Manipur Red Guard with a view to wage war for the liberation of Manipur from the Indian occupation. However, the revolt failed to draw mass support and it died out after his death.

The Hill people also reacted to the integration and held a meeting on July 27, 1949 under the chairmanship of S. Lunneh. They stated that the Meities of Manipur whose area is only 700 sq. miles can have no right at all to speak for the hill people of Manipur who occupied more than 7000 sq. miles, on the issue of integration or any matter which affects the primary interest of the people of the hills (Singh, 1998). The Muslim community also protested strongly against the merger and, on August 3, 1944, in Imphal they organized a huge public meeting under the joint presidency of Solel Hoakip, Habi Mai and Nandal Sharma. They stated that Manipur cannot merge with India and condemned the Manipur State Congress leaders as cheaters for their act of conceding the Manipur *Prajas* to India without taking public opinion, but falsely alleging that they have the peoples' support (Singh, 1998). The *Mahasabha Party* was divided - one group was in favour of integration and the other group against it (Nag, 2002).

The Manipur State Congress was the only political party who worked for the incorporation of Manipur into India. They continued to demand the merger, despite strong protest. The reason why they supported of the integration of Manipur with India was because they believe that it was the only opportunity for them to get support from the Indian National Congress and also achieve political power in Manipur. Some people realized that integration of Manipur with India was inevitable despite protests from the different sections of society. On August 11, 1947, Maharaja of Manipur signed the agreement of accession entrusting defence, communications, and foreign affairs to the Government of India (Singh, 2008). The constitution of Manipur was drafted at the initiative of Manipur State Durbar and the first assembly election on the basis of adult franchise in the country was held in 1948.

At the higher level of government, detailed plans for the integration of Manipur with India was made. The *Maharaja* left Manipur on September 14, 1949 and reached Shillong on September 17, 1949. He met Sri Prakasa, the Governor of Assam, to discuss issues relating to the increasing power of the *Dewan* and other important issues of the state as well. The government of Assam used every possible method of flattery and persuasion to force the *Maharaja* to sign the merger agreement. Prakasa, the Governor of Assam,

also informed the *Maharaja* that the Indian government was quite prepared to use force and impose harsh conditions on Manipur. In Shillong, on September 18, 1949, the *Maharaja's* residence was surrounded by armed security personnel and he was completely cut off from the outside world. It was under such circumstances that *Maharaja* Bodhachandra handled the issue of integration. On September 20, 1949, the *Maharaja* wrote to Sri Prakasa and said since he was a mere constitutional ruler he could not officially give his accord without the voice of the people (Singh, 1998).

Sri Prakasa also wrote to the *Maharaja* and said that “he had done his best and the *Maharaja* can always count on the support of the government of India, as their main objective was the ultimate interest of the *Maharaja* and his state (Singh, 1998). On September 21, 1949, Sri Prakasa had a long discussion with the *Maharaja* in his residence and finally *Maharaja* Bodhchandra Singh signed the agreement on the merger of Manipur with India at Shillong. Manipur was formally merged with the Indian union on October 15, 1949 as Part C state and the administration of the state was handed over to Rawal Amar Singh, the first Indian Chief Commissioner of Manipur. Rawal Amar Singh abolished the council of ministers and the assembly by securing all powers in his hand. In order to discourage any possible uprising against the merger, the Indian army was stationed at Imphal. Along with the integration into the Indian union, an era of heavy military presence was introduced in Manipur. There was so much talk about the merger and even rumours which stated that the *Maharaja* was forced to sign the merger at gun point. But there was little action and no voices were raised in Manipur assembly as most of the MLAs aimed at maintaining their privileged position under the new government. In spite of all the opposition, the merger of Manipur with India was finally concluded.

As for the people in the hills of Manipur, the *Maharaja*, while drafting the constitution invited representatives from the hills like Athiko Daiko and Tiankham. The hills representative wanted to incorporate a clause which stated ‘the right of the hill people to secede at the end of five years should the condition within the constitution not be satisfactory’ (Shimray, 2001). This clause was not accepted by the *Maharaja*. The Naga National League (NNL), headed by Athiko Daiko, was formed on September 1946

and it aimed at consolidating the Nagas of Manipur and to bring together the Nagas separated by the colonial boundaries. The Naga National League asserted that they refuse to be a part of Manipur, as the Manipur *Maharaja* had never subjugated the Nagas and declared that it is impossible for the Nagas to preserve their culture, tradition, customary law and political practices (Shimray, 2001). It also expressed a strong desire to merge with the Naga Hills. They boycotted the election of the first legislative assembly of Manipur in 1948. The Naga National League also refused to pay the house tax against the government of Manipur; but they decided to pay tax to the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills district in Assam (Shimray, 2001). The Manipur government took severe action against the people who revolted, in which three persons were killed and four received serious bullet injuries. Athiko Daiko and Modilo were arrested and imprisoned at Dum Dum central jail, Calcutta, on August 27, 1948. Another committee called Naga Integration Committee (NLC) of Manipur submitted a memorandum to Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister on July 26, 1968, requesting for the integration of Naga areas of Manipur with the state of Nagaland (Shimray, 2001). In spite of their demand for Naga integration, Naga Integration Committee with the up-gradation of Manipur into a full-fledged state of Indian union in 1972 entered the Manipur politics. Naga Integration Committee's active participation in the state politics weakened the Naga integration movement and eventually its aim and objectives also got diverted.

Amalgamation and Discontentment

After the integration of Manipur with India, people's discontentment and dissatisfaction arose against the Indian government. The people of Manipur were not happy with the way the Indian government behaved towards them. According to B. G. Verghese (1996), there was a deep sense of hurt felt by the people of Manipur as they were denied the autonomy they wanted *i.e.*, a Kashmir like state with special privilege and status like article 370 status. Verghese (1996) further says that the State Re-organisation Commission overlooked Manipur's aspirations and was made a Union Territory in 1956 with a Territorial Council which was elevated to a Territorial Assembly in 1963. The people of Manipur were not happy that states like Nagaland, Meghalaya and Himachal were granted statehood

much earlier. They had to wait for a long 23 years before they were granted statehood within the Indian union. Only after agitation of statehood grew and intensified were they granted statehood on January 21, 1972.

The people of Manipur, especially the Meiteis, had a lot of grievance against the Indian government after the integration. They were unhappy that the Manipur Land and Revenue Regulation banned the Meiteis from buying land in the hills, whereas hill people and outsiders could freely buy the land in Imphal valley. They were also unhappy that educated Meiteis were given the status of Other Backward Class (OBC) while the hill tribes were being given the status of Scheduled Tribes (ST) and enjoyed education and job reservations. Increase in corruption and unemployment problem of the educated youth in the state further aggravated the situation. According to Romesh Bhattacharji, when Manipur merged with India after the departure of the British, no concern was shown by the Indian government towards the economic development of Manipur. There was not enough water supply, no markets to sell their crops and very limited medical aid. In order to increase their income some of the people started cultivating cannabis illegally and traders from north Indian plains would purchase it. Many of the young men also took to drugs in order to escape their miserable future (Bhattacharya, 2002). Discontentment among the people further escalated when the economic activity was centered in the hands of the non-local people. Bhattacharji (2002) further states that if the people were treated with fairness and equals, and honest efforts were made to improve their economic lot, no one need to question their patriotism. The people of Manipur reacted to all these grievances by deciding to go back and revive the pre-Hindu *Sanamahi* religion: old names like *Kangleipak* for Manipur, old festivals, old calendar and old script were revived. There was demand for the evacuation of Assam Rifles from the Kangla Palace in Imphal as it symbolized their indigenous glory.

With all the dissatisfaction and discontentment towards the Indian government and also with the government of Manipur, insurgent movements sprang up in Manipur. With three major groups of people in Manipur, the insurgent movement was also divided into three groups Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis. For the Meiteis the factors responsible were the failure to recognize

the needs of the people by the Indian government and the growth of Naga insurgency which eventually resulted in the emergence of their insurgent group. Prakesh Singh (2008) says that Manipur nurtured a feeling of step-motherly treatment by the central government. The Meiteis also viewed the growth of Naga insurgency in Nagaland and its close link with the Nagas of Manipur as danger to their political supremacy in the state. Some of the educated Meitei youth, followers of Irabot, with a view to restore their pre-British pride, formed the United National Liberation Front (UNFL) in 1964 under the leadership of Arambam Somorendra Singh. It aimed to achieve national self-determination and a socialist society. Other insurgent groups which came into being in Manipur were Revolutionary Government of Manipur (RGM), People's Liberation Army (PLA), Revolutionary Party (PRL), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) and Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP).

The Nagas of Manipur supported and sided with the insurgent group of Nagaland (Isak-Muviah) and their demand was for greater Nagaland, consisting of Nagaland along with the Naga inhabited areas of Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Burma. The Kukis too formed their own insurgent groups and took to armed resistance because of discontentment, suffering and the increasing effect of Naga insurgency. The Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and Kuki National Army (KNA) came into being in 1988 and their objective was to bring together all the Kuki inhabited areas separated by boundary and eventually to create two Kuki states, one within India and one within Myanmar.

Conclusion

To conclude, one can say that there were waves of political change in Manipur. The people were happy that the colonial rule had come to an end. Different political parties came forward and put forward their demands for responsible government, but soon they had to come to terms with the fact that their state was going to merge with the Indian Union. Some of the political parties welcomed the idea of integration while some raised their voice against it. Their apprehensiveness to join the Indian Union was due to the following reasons: a) fear of exploitation at the hands of the mainland Indian, and b) social exclusion faced by some of the Meiteis who

lived in Cachar. The Meiteis, belonging to *Kshyatriyas* and the *Brahmins* caste, took pride in being Hindu and a part of Indian civilization. But in 1930's the Meities Hindu population who lived in Cachar had to faced socio-religious disapproval at the hands of the Bengali Hindus and was even excluded from the society. This made the Meiteis reject Hinduism and made them go back and embrace their former animist religion called *Sanamahi*. The Meities thus have an image of India having a hostile culture, economic and political system and India as part of that system (Nag, 1998).

With regard to the merger of Manipur with India, most of the writers from Manipur were of the view that it was forcefully done, as the Maharaja was put under house arrest and was forced by the Indian government to sign the merger with India. Writers like Waikhom Damodar Singh wrote that the merger of Manipur with India was forceful. It was not done with mutual agreement between the people of Manipur and dominion India as strictly required to have been done under the existing international law. He added that *Maharaja* Bodhchandra Singh signed not on behalf of the people of Manipur but on his own behalf (Singh, 2007).

Singh (2007) further opines that the way the fusion was carried out was appalling, because Manipur an independent kingdom was reduced merely to the status of Part C state (third class status), under Indian union while a mere district of Naga Hills was all of a sudden elevated to a full-fledged state. Lt. Col. H. Bhuban Singh (2007) says that the Manipur unification signed by the *Maharaja* was unlawful since the *Maharaja* Bodhchandra Singh was forced into signing it. Paratt and Arambam also highlight that the *Maharaja* was forced to sign the merger (Integration or Annexation, n/d). Dr. Khomdon Singh Lisam states that the signing of Manipur merger agreement was between a self-governing State called Manipur and the government of India and therefore should be free from all forces and pressures (Lisam, 2012). He further points out that Manipur was not given importance like that of Jammu and Kashmir.

After the merger, the people of Manipur, especially the Meiteis, were not at all happy with the kind of treatment they received from the Indian government. They felt that they should be treated well and given

special status. Instead, after merging with India, they were given the status of part C state which they considered as third class. The people of Manipur compared themselves with Kashmir and were quite unhappy with the kind of treatment they got from the Indian government. While Kashmir was given special status, Manipur was given no such rights. The fact that the Naga Hills got their statehood first was also not liked by the people of Manipur. Being part of India they felt that they were not treated well; instead they believed that they were given a step-motherly treatment. The people of Manipur, especially the Meiteis, prided themselves as part of the former princely state and could not accept the way that they were treated by the Indian government. They were unhappy with the way the Indian government failed to respond to their demands and in the later years their relations further deteriorated. The failure of the Indian government to address the needs of the people was also one of the reasons that led to the inception and rise of the insurgent movement in the state.

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