

The Merger of Manipur into India
(A Study in the political integration of a kingdom into Indian Union)

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On the 15th of October, 1949, Manipur was merged into India. This historic event marked the end of an era of "independent" kingdom of Manipur and the beginning of a new one, that of a "constituent state" of the Indian Union. This political integration was a significant development in the political history of Manipur.

The process of integration of the kingdom of Manipur into India was closely interlinked with the history of the growth of political development in the country. Two important factors were responsible for this compelling phenomenon. The first one was the internal political conditions of the state, and the second was the pressure of the psychological invasion of the ruling party of the government of India.

For the first time, the people of Manipur acquired the idea of modern political consciousness only in the first part of the twentieth century. The delay was, perhaps, due to her geo-topographical position. Whatever the case may be, for the first time the people of Manipur witnessed the working system of a political organisation only in the year 1938. The name of the party was 'The Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha'. In the beginning, this Mahasabha was a social and religious organisation under the chief patronage of the Maharaja of Manipur. Indeed, the birth of this political organisation may be described as a gestation period of the emergence of the idea of the integration of Manipur into the Indian Union. In this regard, two important factors can be examined : the political affiliation of the members of the Mahasabha and their political action in the later period.

The composition and the political affiliation of the members of the Mahasabha clearly revealed that the Mahasabha was constituted by two groups of people having two different political objectives. One group was in favour of the integration with India and other was against this. These differences were clearly demonstrated by their later political action. The later group wanted to

preserve a separate political identity of Manipur. But the majority and most influential elite group of the organisation was for the first objective. Thus from the very inception, this organisation was in the hands of these two groups of people. However, in the early stage their political differences did not clearly come up on the surface because in the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal question their opinion was always identical.

But in the year 1939, the demarcating line of political differences between the two groups came to a visible point. In this year the party was split into two. The outbreak of 'Nupi Lan' or the 'great women's agitation' in Manipur was the immediate cause of the split of the party. The reason was that one section of the party wanted to give a blanket support to the movement but other group did not like it. H. Irabot Singh, the President of the Mahasabha belonged to the former group. The members of the former group felt that this movement was basically aimed at the upliftment of the economic condition of the state. The character of the movement also indicated such an objective. In fact, their main target was fixed against the exploiter groups of the state who carried on their exploiting business under the protection of the umbrella of the British imperialism and feudal lord, the Maharaja of Manipur. So they strongly supported the movement. But the other group of the party did not give any reasonable grounds in support of their arguments. Finally, this sharp division of opinion led to the split of the party into two and the minority section of the party came out and formed a new party. The name of the party was known as the 'Praja Sanmeloni' and the later course of the movement was carried on under the leadership of this party. The nature of the political motive of the majority section of the members of the Mahasabha was contradictory or ambiguous; though they posed themselves to be an anti-feudal but in practice they were not. Thus for a few years these groups of people remained quite silent and did not carry on any positive political activities. During this intervening period there were a lot of political developments in the state. But they did not take an active part in it.

Another notable political development in Manipur after the outbreak of Women's agitation was the formation of the Manipur State Congress Party. This party was formed at the initiative of some elite people of the state. Before the formation of this party they invited all the leaders of the existing political parties in Manipur and expressed their desire to form a common platform for the

formation of a united party which could represent the general political feeling of the masses. All the leaders of the different parties warmly welcomed this idea and agreed to convene a joint conference of all the political parties on the 4th October, 1946. But when the meeting was about to start some delegates objected to the presence of H. Irabot Singh as a participant of the meeting on the ground that he was in touch with the Communist Party when he was in exile. The organisers also appeared to be in favour of this objection raised by other members. All the members of the Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha also joined hands with this objection against Irabot. At this stage only, the organiser had disclosed their real political motive. Their only political intention was to establish a political organisation which could have the capability to focus their political outlook which was basically very much different from the other delegates. Irabot was forced to abstain permanently from the meeting. After he left the meeting place, the remaining members in the hall had unanimously resolved to form a new political party. Thus the Manipur State Congress Party was formed in Manipur on the 4th October, 1946.

The establishment of the Manipur State Congress Party was a grand success of the organisers. Their ultimate aim and objective for the establishment of a permanent political platform through which their political ideas could be spread to the common people of the state was also finally fulfilled with the establishment of this party. Not only this it also paved a way for the integration of Manipur into the political boundary of the Indian Union. Now the Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha was abolished and all the members of the party also had begun to take part in the newly established party.

Then their last effort for the fulfilment of their long established aim and objective was made in the year 1948. During this short period the state witnessed a large number of political movements, which aimed at the establishment of a Responsible Government in Manipur. The Manipur State Congress party also had fully participated in this movement. As a response to the activities of the movement the Government of Manipur finally prepared for the establishment of a 'Legislative Assembly' which was to be constituted by the members elected on the basis of universal adult franchise. After having a full preparation the election date was fixed on the 11th June, 1948. In the election, no party could secure an absolute majority and later on a non-Congress coalition government was formed. The new ministry was headed by Maharaj-

kumar Priyobrata Singh, the younger brother of Maharaj Budha-chandra Singh.

The election result gave a serious set-back to the policy and programme of the Congress party. However, immediately after getting this deplorable defeat some elements inside the Congress Party began to take up a strong initiative to form a separate province comprising Manipur, Cachar, Lushai Hills and Tripura. At this stage the Manipur State Congress Party began to establish a contact with the All India Congress Committee. The establishment of the relationship between the Manipur State Congress Party and the All India Congress Committee brought a new dimension to political situation in Manipur because with the help of this relationship the government of India got an opportunity to interfere in the day-to-day administration of Manipur State. In order to give a proper shape to their demand and to get the favourable opinion from the leaders of the All India Congress Committee, they even invited Dr. Prafulla Chandra Ghose, an eminent Congress leader of Bengal to Manipur. On the 22nd August, a public meeting was arranged for him by the Congress Party. In the meeting Dr. P. C. Ghose, by supporting the proposal of the Congress Party stressed that "Manipur State in order to make equilibrium, according to the motto of the Congress required to be amalgamated with the three places, Tripura, Cachar, and Lushai Hills".¹ As a result of this the political situation of the country became very tense. But their proposal was strongly opposed by a large section of the people of Manipur. At a public meeting held on the 18th September, all the leaders of both hills and plains strongly opposed the proposal of the Congress Party and declared that the people of Manipur would resist any type of imposition of proposed province.² The Government of Manipur was also not in favour of this idea. Therefore, due to strong opposition from the majority of the masses the proposal of the Manipur State Congress for creation of the 'Purbachal State' was nibbed in the bud.

The political motive of the Congress Party behind this movement is to be analysed. It can be rightly stated that though the movement for the creation of 'Purbachal State' was not materialised but it produced a positive indirect impact in favour of their political line. Firstly, it gave an open contact route between the Congress Party of Manipur and the Congress Party of India. Now the Manipur State Congress Party was able to get the recognition from the All India Congress Committee and since it became a political unit of the AICC they were also in a better position to place every poli-

tical movement of the Manipur State Congress Party to the knowledge of the leaders of the Congress Party of India. Secondly, the establishment of the relationship between this two parties itself provided a great advantage to the leaders of the Congress Party of India as well as to the government concerned, because, with the help of the local Congress Party, the Government of India and the leaders of the Congress Party had got every advantage to interfere in the internal political affairs of the state. Therefore the internal political situation which was deliberately created by those groups of people was also an important cause for the successful implementation of the merger movement in the country.

The motive of the leaders of the State Congress was greatly encouraged by the expansionist policy of the All India Congress Party, the ruling party of the Government of India. The ultimate aim of the Indian National Congress was to bring all the native states during the time of British rule, into the fold of the Dominion of India. At the session held on the 15th of June, 1947, the Congress Party adopted a resolution in which they openly declared that "they could not admit the right of any state in India to declare its independence and to live in isolation from the rest of India". From this fact it convincingly indicates that the only aim of the Congress Party was to bring all the native states and princely states into the Indian Union before the declaration of the 'Republic'.

In the context of Manipur the Indian Government desired to settle the merger issue by means of conciliation and pressure⁴ policy. As a first step they asked the Maharaja to sign the 'Stand Still Agreement'. The Maharaja of Manipur desired to establish a close relationship between Manipur and the Dominion of India. So he agreed to the conditions of the Stand Still Agreement and signed the agreement on the 11th August, 1947. According to the agreement, the Government of Manipur accepted to entrust the responsibilities of defence, communication and external affairs to the care of the Indian Government. Apart from this, other ancillary subjects like custom, excise, and coinage etc. are also surrendered to the Government of India. So far the internal administrative affairs of the state were concerned the Maharaja of Manipur was the sole authority. The Government of India also firmly assured for the protection of the internal autonomy and authority of Manipur.⁵ But unfortunately the acceptance of the provision of the Stand Still Agreement created a confusion with regard to the question of the future political status of Manipur.

On the 15th of August 1947 both Manipur and India became

independent. But in order to have a close relationship between the two countries, a communication system was established through an agent who was known as 'Dominion Agent'. The nature of the power and functions of the 'Dominion Agent' was slightly different from the position and power of the British Political Agent. The British Political Agent acted as an administrator and agent of the British Government to deal with Manipur, whereas 'Dominion Agent' could have the power to act on all relevant matters which were agreed upon between Government of India and Manipur. Due to this position he got an advantage to play a positive role in the internal politics of the state.⁶ In fact the establishment of the office of the Dominion Agent in Manipur was a great opportunity on the part of the Government of India, because through this office they could play an active part in the internal politics of the state. With the help of this office, the government of India, committed a series of calculated violation of the autonomy of Manipur State. On the other side, they also took a full advantage from the weakness of the state. Therefore the main objective of the violation of the autonomy of the state was nothing but to prepare a ground for the imposition of direct rule of the Indian government over this tiny state. The appointment of Debeshwar Sharma, the then Chief whip of the Assam Congress Legislative Party, as the 'Dominion Agent' in Manipur itself was a shrewd calculative move of the Congress Party. Through his political personality, the Congress Party of India and the leaders of the Manipur State Congress Party could play a big game in the politics of the state. Sometimes he acted beyond the limit of his power and position. Due to this condition, Sir Muhammad Salch Akbar Hydari KCIE CSI, ICS, the Governor of Assam, had a very poor impression of the activities of Deveshwar Sharma and finally the Governor decided to abolish this post. In a letter dated, 24th May, 1948, which was addressed to Sardar Vallabhai Patel, Sir Hydari pointed out the three allegations against the Dominion Agent in Manipur. He wrote that Debeshwar Sharma, "was giving encouragement (1) to the leaders of the movement among the tribals, (2) he was trying to upset the arrangement under which the Tulihal airfield and suitable area surrounding it would be handed over to in return for the old British reserve and (3) he was taking an active part in the manoeuver of the various portion in Manipur, adding to the confused politics which are a constant affliction to the State Government". Thus Sardar Patel also was in favour of the Governor and with his approval, Sir Hydari abolished the post of Dominion

Agent on the 22nd August 1948. Akbar Hydari wrote a letter to the Maharaja of Manipur and asked him to appoint a 'Dewan'. The duty of the 'Dewan' was to watch the treaty obligation between the State and the Indian Dominion⁸. The Governor of Assam also further expressed his desire to put the responsibility of this post to Maharajakumar Priyobrata Singh, the younger brother of the Maharaja. In the meantime Sir Akbar Hydari died suddenly and he was succeeded by Shri Prakash. Like his predecessor, he also asked the Maharaja to appoint a 'Dewan'. On the 21st March 1949, Governor Shri Prakash alongwith Shri Nari Rustumji, the Advisor to the Governor, A. B. Chatterjee, the joint Secretary to the Ministry of States of the Government of India arrived for a four days visit at Imphal. His surprise visit created an alarming situation in political circles of Manipur. In fact, at that time the people of the State had a strong apprehension about the possibility of the loss of their political identity very soon. So the Governor, Shri Prakash strongly asserted that the Government of India had no intention to destroy the political identity of Manipur. But he strongly emphasized to appoint an intelligent man as 'Dewan'. The Maharaja was very much annoyed at the behaviour of the Governor of Assam and wanted to know the administrative power of the proposed office.⁹ The Governor Shri Prakash instead of giving any positive reply to the query of Maharaja he simply said that the appointment of 'Dewan' would strengthen the relationship between Manipur and India. Then on the 10th April the Maharaja received a telegraphic message from Governor, Shri Prakash about the appointment of Major General Rewal Amar Singh as the 'Dewan' of Manipur.¹⁰ Again on the 14th April, Shri Prakash again wrote a letter to the Maharaja in which he mentioned that the power and fuction of the Dewan would be divided broadly into three categories :

First : - "The administration of Manipur State shall be carried on under the General Superintendence, guidance and control of the Dewan. The Dewan shall have the right either on his own initiative or on representation being made to him in behalf, to call for papers from any of the Ministers in charge of any of the Department, and passed such orders as he may consider fit and proper, on consultation with the Minister concerned.

Second : - The Dewan shall hold direct charge of the portfolios of (1) Law and Order (2) Administration of Hill

tracts (3) State forces and (4) relation with the Government of India.

Third ¶ - The disintegration of portfolios of the Ministers shall be subjected to confirmation by the Dewan¹¹.

He further mentioned that there was no question of merging Manipur into India and the decision of the appointment of Dewan would not effect the integrity and entity of the Manipur State and personal dignity and prestige of the Maharaja. Finally he asked the Maharaja to hand over all the administrative responsibilities to the Dewan.¹² He also mentioned that the Dewan would be assisted by Major Khating, a tribal Officer of Manipur.

The appointment of Major General Rewal Amar Singh as the 'Dewan' in Manipur was a great political achievement of the Governor of Assam in general and the Manipur State Congress Party in particular. But a serious question which could not be ignored very easily was that when the proposal of the appointment of 'Dewan' was made by the Government of India through the Governor of Assam, except the Maharaja of Manipur none of the members of other political parties did make any type of opposition to the move of appointment. Such type of political atmosphere gave a very good opportunity to the Government of India. Thus with the appointment of this administrative position the Government of India began to interfere in the internal administrative policy of the state.

Now the secret political intrigue between the Manipur State Congress Party and the All India Congress Committee for the merger of Manipur into India became an open secret. There were a lot of hue and cry among the other political parties except the Manipur State Congress Party. A strong and serious reaction came from the Praja Santi Sabha, an important party of that time. They took a strong opposition against this merger idea. All the members of the party in the Legislative Assembly adopted a strong resolution against the merger policy of the Manipur State Congress and Government of India. The resolution stressed that "... If integration or merging be imposed here irrespective of our unfortunate (and) helpless circumstances and (against) the principle of Bapuji without the consent of the people, the present moral submission of the Manipuris to India, which is most precious, may disappear bidding good-bye to the physical control of imposition and the bitter experiences thereof may be a short of handicaps in the political races of India with other countries a double loss for India and Manipur. If the people have been sinned against and

wronged the people themselves have to be watched over in addition to the watch over across the frontier".¹³ Just contrary to the reaction of the Praja Santi Sabha, the Manipur State Congress Party was strongly in favour of the merger movement. On the 29th April 1949, they organised a meeting and adopted a resolution in favour of this movement. They even decided to send a delegation of the three members of the party to meet the A.I.C.C. leaders of India and States Ministry to facilitate the possible ways and means of the merger of Manipur. It is mentioned that in support of their opinion, the Manipur State Congress Party had placed three basic points.

They were :

- (1) the incapability of the government of Manipur to maintain law and order situation of the country.
- (2) the apprehensions from the activities of the communist revolution in Burma.
- (3) the integration of Manipur into India would have peace and development.¹⁴

As a result of this conflict between pro and anti merger groups, the political situation of the country was in a very bad position.

In the midst of this unhealthy political atmosphere another conflict had developed between the 'Dewan' and the Maharaja of Manipur. At that time there were some confusion in the administrative power and position between the Maharaja and the Dewan. But taking the opportunity of the confusion the Dewan had repeatedly intervened in the internal administration of the State. The Maharaja of Manipur was very much annoyed at this repeated intervention of the 'Dewan' in internal administration of the state and wanted to remove this confusion. So on the 15th of September 1949 the Maharaja left for Shillong and reached there on the morning of the 17th of September. But when he reached there he was completely upset to see the unexpected political development. He was informed by the Governor that the Government of India had instructed him to complete the negotiation with Maharaja by the 20th September, 1949. Not only this, the Government of India, through the Governor of Assam also made a lot of psychological torture on the Maharaja. Due to this existing condition the position of Maharaja became quite delicate. Then on the 18th he wrote a letter to Shri Prakas and in which he pointed out his position as a constitutional monarch of the Manipur State. He stressed that "the sovereignty of the state has been vested in the people, it would be in the fitness of things to hear the people's

voice and learn their sentiments so that the line of action may not in any case be unconstitutional"¹⁵. Governor Shri Prakas, instead of giving a reply to the letter of the Maharaja, took up various methods for the fulfilment of his plan. The military personnels were posted in the surrounding areas of the 'Red-Lands' where the Maharaja used to live in. All the outside communication from the palace of the Maharaja was totally cut off. In the meantime Governor Shri Prakas had repeatedly asked the Maharaja to sign the proposed merger agreement. As a result of this the Maharaja was in a helpless position and without having no alternative, Maharaja Bodhachandra signed the merger agreement on the 21st September 1949 but it was officially announced on the 15th October 1949. With this integration the political status of Manipur was changed from the sovereign independent kingdom to the political unit of the Indian Union and she became a 'Part C State' of India.

Thus the internal political situation and expansionist policy of the leaders of the A.I.C.C. had created a political situation which compelled the Maharaja to accept the merger of Manipur into India.

Again if we look back to the nature of the movement right from the appointment of the 'Dewan' down to the integration of the state, it can be observed that the merger movement was mainly due to the homogeneous attitude of the leaders of the ruling party of the government of India. It is well known fact that the policy and programme of the Congress Party particularly towards the native and princely state in and after the transition period, was not very much different from the British imperialist policy. Their only objective was to bring all the princely and native states into the political boundary of the Indian Union. Due to this fact they had boldly adopted a resolution on the 15th June, 1947. The declaration of the Congress party was severely condemned by Mahatma Gandhi who said, "such declaration was tantamount to a declaration of war against the free millions of India"¹⁶. Just on the contrary Pandit Nehru said that "any recognition of any such independence by any foreign power whichever it may be and whatever it may be will be considered an unfriendly act"¹⁷. On behalf of Sardar Patel, the Home Ministry of India, N. V. Gadgil, the then Minister of Works, also made an official statement in the Constituent Assembly on the 15th March, 1949. He said, "there is no desire on our part, in any way, to compel or coerce them into merger or integration. If they wish to remain a separate auton-

mous units, we could have no objection, but if the Ruler and the people of any of these states desire to merge with the neighbouring province or form a Union with the neighbouring states on a voluntary basis obviously the Government of India cannot say 'No'.¹⁸

Again on the 5th March of 1948, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru made a statement in the Session of the Constituent Assembly. This statement, in fact, was a serious contradiction from his earlier statement. He says : "There has been an actual merger of a large number of small states with India ; there has been a bringing together of a number of states into the Union of India and a certain number of major states remains as separate entities. But what is actually important --- and if I may say so, even more important--- is not this integration externally but the inner integration, that is the growth of democratic institution and responsible government in the States, because that brings about a real integration not at the top level of the government but at the level of the people."¹⁹

In the context of Manipur, it can be mentioned that the appointment of Dewan without the official consent of the Maharaja of Manipur may be undoubtedly regarded as a major step for the implementation of their objectives. The manner of appointment and the power assigned to this office by the Government of India without the consent of the Maharaja of Manipur itself may be treated as a naked invasion against a sovereign independent country. Here the government of India got two important advantages in favour of their success. Firstly, the awkward position of the king of Manipur and secondly, the strong support from the Manipur State Congress Party. As it has already been mentioned above, due to the existing political development in the country, the position of the Maharaja was in a very precarious condition. Since the people of the state was greatly influenced by the anti-feudal, anti-imperialist and anti-colonial stance of the India National Movement, the Maharaja was not in a position to receive any moral and physical support from the masses. Like the people of the rest of the country they were strongly in favour of the anti-feudal movement and joined hands with the movement leaders who demanded for the establishment of a democratic movement. Over and above, his acceptance to the provision of the Stand Still Agreement has further created a deplorable political position to the existing political system of the country. As a result of this the position of the Maharaja was in nowhere. This unstable and weak political position of the Maharaja was a great advantage to the Indian

Government.

In addition to this, the open anti-monarchical political action of the Manipur State Congress Party and their strong support in favour of the merger question was also a great advantage to the Government of India. This political weakness was the sole strength of the leaders of the ruling party of India for the materialisation of their objective. However, the policy of the government of India was severely criticised as a "double standard" tactics. In this connection it can be mentioned that when the responsible government was installed according to the constitution, the government of India suggested the Maharaja to follow the path as a constitutional ruler and advised him not to ignore the provision of the constitution.²⁰ But in the meantime the government of India made a proposal for the appointment of 'Dewan' in Manipur. When this issue was brought to the knowledge of Maharaja he was very much reluctant to accept it. He expressed his inability to take any decision against the provision of the Manipur state constitution. He says that a 'since there is no provision for the appointment of the "Dewan in the State Constitution Act I could not make any commitments independently of any of the provisions in the constitution in the absence of any reference to and consent from the State Assembly Council of Ministers....."²¹ Thus, he, as a constitutional head of the State tried to honour the decision of the peoples' representative which was also once a desire of the government of India.²²

But it is interesting that in a letter addressed to Maharaja Governor Shri Prakash said that the Government of India did recognise neither the Manipur State Council nor the State Assembly but the Maharaja only.²³ In this respect it can be mentioned that at that time the Government of India did not have any legal right to recognise or to derecognize the political status of either the the Manipur State Council or State Assembly or the political position of the Maharaja, because Manipur was not under any obligation of the constitution of India. She had got her own political status of a sovereign power and the Manipur State Council and State Assembly was also an executive part of the constitution of the State. Therefore the political action of the government of India and official statement was nothing but to make an undeclared aggression against Manipur.

Another notable development after the appointment of 'Dewan, was the question of integration of Manipur into India. Here also we find a very interesting contradiction in the rank and file of the

leaders of the Government of India. When the Maharaja refused to sign the merger agreement, they pressed him with these following words. They said, "The government of India have throughout, dealt with Your Highness directly as the Ruler of the State and are not prepared to make any deviation at the present stage from the procedure hitherto followed-Your Highness may rest assured that the Government of India will take complete responsibility in the matter of meeting whatever objection may be raised by the people of the State".²⁴ He further mentioned that this was the policy which they had adopted to other states also. Here we can recall the very word of the ideal statement of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. He stressed that the real integration was not at the top level of the government but at the level of the people. N. V. Gadgil also had strongly emphasized to value the desire of the people of the state concerned. Thus we have come across a lot of contradictory official statement from the leading political personnels of the Government of India.

From these above facts it can be deduced that the integration of Manipur into the political boundary of the Indian Union was mainly due to the Indianised political attitude of the Manipur State Congress. However, the political action of the Government of India was more important than the internal political problem of the state.

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