

The Marwaris and the Economy of Manipur

Salam Irene

The Marwaris in Manipur from the time of entry into the state became a predominant business community, contributing much to the economy of Manipur. They came to Manipur from Assam to which state they had migrated from their original homeland in Rajasthan - where certain compulsions had compelled them to leave and search out alternative, and better means of livelihood, than were available to them at home. The arid land of Rajasthan, the paucity of means of earning a comfortable livelihood, poor facilities for education, and lack of other amenities and infrastructure, combined together to make them seek an alternative to an unprogressive, stereotyped existence at home. These Marwaris who are now a part and parcel of Manipur, which they have made their permanent homeland, originally came to Assam in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.¹ Assam was then a region comprising the present states of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. The first Marwaris who wended their way into what is now the state of Manipur were primarily traders and suppliers, agents, for a variety of essential commodities to different British companies and army units stationed in Assam. These first Marwaris of Manipur were originally belonging to the three families of Ganesh Lal Kaluram, (now known as Kasturis), Shri Agarwal (now known as Jamuna Lal Mangi Lal) and Saligram Rai Chunni Lal Bahadur (now known as Bakliwal).²

The first two were general merchants, but the third's business centred around the supply of petrol and kerosene. These families were closely inter-linked in business and through matrimonial and family ties, and established a firm in Assam in 1861, for the supply of groceries.³ They also ran a Railway line from Dibrugarh to Sadiya, expanded into other enterprises such as tea plantations, timber mills, coal mines, timber supply and finally the exploration of oil at Digboi. The last was an accidental discovery, when it was observed that the elephants transporting timber in Assam were found to have traces of oil on their feet. At that time, facilities for the extraction of oil were primitive and inadequate. The Bakliwal family first became agents for the sale of red kerosene in Assam, and later agents of the Burma Oil Company for the sale of petrol in the state. The family attained much prominence in business, and Mr. Rai Bahudar Chunni Lal was invited by the Chief Commissioner of Assam to attend the Darbar at Delhi in 1911. In fact he became such a well-known figure, that it was said that

when he wanted to board a train in Assam, he had to merely wave his hand for the train to stop to allow him to board.⁴

The family of Mr. Ganesh Lal Kaluram came to Manipur in 1892 with the British Rajputana Regiment, as suppliers of ration to the army, coming by steamer up to Golaghat, and then by bullock carts, horses and dolis to Dimapur, Kohima and finally, Manipur. There were then no further halts for the British army unit beyond Imphal.⁵ So the Marwari traders quite naturally also settled at Imphal, and once having made this their place of residence, they continued to remain here, so that today, nearly a hundred years after their advent, they continue to direct their economic activities in Manipur from Imphal.

Prominent among these first entrants of the Marwari community into Imphal were Mr. Sadasukh Chabbra, Mr. Kaluram Patni, Mr. Ganesh Lal Patni, and Mr. Motilal Kalal.⁶ They initially came to Golaghat, then a railhead in 1878. From here they gradually made their entry into Dimapur, a trade centre, vital to their business transactions. It was at Dimapur that they came in contact with the Manipuris who visited Dimapur, bringing with them hand-carts for conveyance of essential commodities. Very soon they established contact with the Manipuris, and finding that they would be welcomed in Manipur, they came to Imphal and made it a base for the direction of their trade in Manipur.⁷ Conveyance and transport was slow and primitive, travelling was arduous and wearying. Travelling mainly in bullock carts with frequent halts at short distances of ten to twelve miles, at dak bungalows conveniently located, the journey from Dimapur to Imphal generally took about 12 days. Just as the Banjaras supplying the Mughal army on march, travelled in thousands with pack-laden oxen, so also these first Marwari traders travelled to Imphal in bullock carts carrying a few thousand people. Some traders travelled on horseback and some were carried in dolis by batches of porters who were changed at the various halts enroute.⁸

These first Marwari traders were able to establish cordial relations with the local populace, which became strengthened over the decades, relations based upon understanding and mutual co-operation. Manipur's staple crop, rice, was in excess of the state's requirement, and was exported outside. There was, however, a paucity of other essential goods especially cloth and yarn, and it was the Marwari traders who supplied the requirements of the native population. This supply of essential goods brought them closer to the Manipuris, and they began to be invited to Manipuri homes, and to participate in Manipuri festivals.⁹ They also maintained close relation with Manipur's Maharaja, and were invited to become members of the advisory board.¹⁰ They were also allowed to buy land and were issued pattas by the British Political Agent. This land which was initially given to them in pattas, roughly covered the major portion of the area between the present Sanjenthong and Nagampal in Imphal.

Agriculture is and has been the mainstay of the populace, and the Marwaris too turned their attention to rice, the premier

agricultural crop of Manipur. But instead of directly engaging in cultivation, the Marwaris went into the rice-milling business. The first Marwari family resident in Imphal owned 3 rice-mills. Dimapur and Assam both imported rice from Manipur, and a particular variety known as 'chempak', was in great demand in Assam.¹¹ However, when the Nupilan broke out, the women of the state asked the Marwaris to stop their export of rice, and this the traders agreed to. The Manipuri women also stopped the issue of the Red Permit (a pass issued for the export of rice by the Political Agent of the British Government.) The rice-mills owned by the Marwaris were kept closed until after Independence, after which the land on which they stood was acquired by the Government of Manipur, and the Marwaris gave up the rice-mill business.¹²

Prior to their entry into Manipur, the Marwari traders had been engaged in business at Golaghat and Dimapur primarily. But they had already begun to supply salt and kerosene to Manipur. They found in Manipur a favourable selling market, and were able to meet the requirements of the Manipuri people for a variety of essential goods, particularly yarn and cloth which they imported from Bengal and Assam. The first kerosene and petrol depot was set up near the present Dharmasala in the heart of Imphal town. However petrol was rationed and the Bakliwal family became the sole agents for the sale of kerosene and petrol in Manipur. But this business practically came to a standstill when Imphal was bombed during the Second World War. Marwari traders fled the state in fear because of insecurity of life and property, and disturbed conditions within the state. In their haste to leave, they left behind many of their belongings, including pattas to the land they held, as pattas then did not possess significance and importance, unlike conditions of land tenure in Imphal today, when the land held by the Marwaris in the two main bazaars of Imphal commands a premium price. The journey out of Manipur for most of the Marwari families was a traumatic experience, they availed of limited transport facilities, many travelling by foot, or mules along lesser known bridle paths, others still by bullock carts.¹³

But after India attained Independence, these Marwari families returned to Manipur, and took up their business activities practically where they had left off. For instance, the Bakliwal family once again became the sole agents for sale of kerosene and petrol in the state.

Another trading business that engaged the attention of the Marwaris was the textile business, part of which centred around the handloom products of Manipur. These handloom items were produced all over the state, but because of lack of contact with the rest of the country, very few of these products which had attained a high degree of excellence, were exported outside the state. But the Marwari traders of Manipur had contacts outside, especially with Rajasthan, and began to export these handloom products thither. They soon discovered that the Manipuri white chaddars and bed covers were becoming increasingly popular in Rajasthan, and they established a regular trade in these goods and also other

handloom products. These products were first exported by postal parcels, but from the 1930's onwards, the volume of trade within and without Manipur increased, and now not only were bullock carts used to convey and transmit commodities, but also two-ton trucks capable of carrying approximately 26 maunds of different trade products. ¹⁴ On receiving permission from Maharaja Churachand, the Kasturi family began to run a postal mail service (van) between Imphal and Dimapur. They also brought the first Ford car into Manipur, and sold it to Maharaja Churachand in the early 1930's, for a sum of Rs. 3,200 only. ¹⁵

The Kasturi family maintained close ties with the said Maharaja and operated with him in the economic and financial development of Manipur by increasing investments in trade and commerce, expansion and diversification of trading activities and investment in new business ventures. The Marwaris were so absorbed in these multifarious business ventures that they were left with little time to participate in any other form of activity. A few of the Marwari families found it difficult to adapt and adjust to Manipur, where everything was completely different to conditions in Rajasthan and even Assam. But most of the Marwari businessmen adjusted very soon, linking and building close bonds with the Manipuris which induced them to permanently reside in Manipur. After Independence and Manipur's merger with India, the inner line permit to Manipur was abolished, and there was an increase and influx of non-Manipuris into the state, also a corresponding increase in the cost of livelihood, and the value of land, especially at Imphal. The Marwari businessmen were already well-established, and their trade activities, and location of their business centres, enabled them to hold a pivotal position in trade and commercial activities of Manipur. Their business centres were in the two main bazaars of Imphal which were and are, the focal points for all marketing and trade in Manipur. ¹⁶

Having established, consolidated, expanded and diversified their economic activities, and feeling one with the original residents of Manipur, many leading Marwari businessmen in the last two decades, turned their attention to social welfare, and in fact ploughed some of the profits from their business enterprises into schemes for the betterment of society and state. It was they who undertook the cost of the present public library at Imphal, of dharmshala, open to people of all communities for functions, ceremonies and stay, at a very nominal charge, of a Chamber of Commerce hospital, equipped with the most recent computerised medical machines, of a special ward at the Regional Medical College, Imphal, are engaged presently in putting up an Arogya Bhavan, near the Regional Medical College for housing attendants of out-station patients admitted to this hospital for treatment, and have afforded much relief in cash and kind during periods of distress and calamity in Manipur; have been instrumental in bringing the Rotary and Lions Clubs to Imphal, have organised free medical camps, social awareness programmes and so on. ¹⁷

In this last decade when the potential for industrialisation of

the state is being increasingly realised, many Marwari businessmen have taken the incentive and set up different manufacturing units, as for example, an automatic plant for the manufacture of bread at Imphal, a cement factory, vanaspathi and sugar factories, which will benefit both the people and the state, giving employment to many, and reducing the dependence on goods from outside. The Marwaris continue to engage in the transport business of conveyance of essential commodities by means of trucks, and as there is no railhead in Manipur, this business is essential to the state economy. Some of the Marwaris are also engaged in the Government supply business, but this has made no major change in their business organisation, excepting of course, that the volume of business is greatly increased.¹⁸ Some of the Marwaris are wary of venturing into the industrial field, because of the lack of raw materials and the uncertainty of an internal market for their manufactured goods. But whether engaged in trade, supply or industry they have become a vital component in the state economy and tend to dominate trade activities in a number of essential commodities. No doubt, the Marwaris have worked very hard and long to attain the premier position they hold as regards marketing activities in the state.

Notes & References

References 1 to 18 are based on answers to questionnaires and interviews with different Marwari businessmen of Manipur.

This is a preliminary survey based entirely on field research, consisting of interviews and written answers to prepared questionnaires.