

Education and Society in Manipur

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Prior to British occupation, some enthusiastic British political agents tried to import modern education to the Manipurians. They felt that it would eventually lead to better administration of justice and a gradual sweeping away of abuses. During the political agency of Captain Gordon (1835-1841), an English School was established in the State by the political agent at his own expense². In 1872 another school was set up at the behest of the political agent W.F. Nuthel³. The British Indian Government supplied books, maps and other materials worth Rs. 500 for this school⁴. During the time of James Johnstone, the political agent persuaded Maharaja Chandrakriti Singh to open an English School and this eventually led to the establishment of the Johnstone Middle English School in 1885⁵. All these schools, however, could not survive long. The English School of Captain Gordon wound up immediately after his death. The other school established at the initiative of W.F. Nuthel met the same fate. The Johnstone Middle English School was destroyed by the Manipuri during the Anglo Manipuri war of 1891. Thus none of the English Schools could function properly before 1891.

The main reason for this is that the social system in pre-British Manipur stood as an obstacle to progress. It is a well known fact that the main object of education is to serve the needs of the individual in particular and of the society in general. The new educational system introduced by the British could not meet the societal requirements of the pre-British Manipuri society. Since Manipur is situated in a strategic point and always haunted by the threat of external aggression from the neighbouring countries like Burma, China, etc. and by inter-tribal or inter-communal feuds, physical education and martial arts rather

than literary education were vigorously encouraged by the people and the king despite literary education was known to a limited specialized group known as 'Maichous' or local elites. Thus in the pre-British period those persons who could show merit in sports, hunting and fighting were highly honoured and respected. Among the tribal people, a young man had to show his mettle among his group so that he would gain the privilege of wearing the coveted warriors' ornaments and of acquiring a beautiful bride. In the valley also a man could climb the ladder of social recognition if he could show his physical prowess. Besides, under the 'lallup' system, it was the duty of every able bodied male member of the Meitei society to act as 'lalmee' or soldier of the State and the main qualification of a soldier was physical fitness and prowess in martial arts.

For training in martial arts and physical education, the tribal dormitories of the hill people and village clubs of the Meiteis rather than modern schools played a vital role. This club or dormitory was known as 'Khangehu' by the Rongmei Nagas, 'Longka', by the Thangkhus, Buonzaat by the Hmars, and 'Pana Loisang', by the Meiteis. According to J.Roy, boys reaching puberty had to sleep in these houses together with their fellow friends. Boys entering these clubs had certain community tasks. It was the place where the younger generations were trained in the art of warfare, state craft, dance and music. It was the centre where instructions on morality, discipline and other community services were given by the elderly people to the younger groups. Thus, this form of education in spite of its crudeness, fulfilled some of the highly valued and cherished objectives such as disciplined living, corporate existence and self reliance. In short, the society as a whole was oriented in such a fashion that there was ample scope to fulfil its requirements through its traditional schools.

On the other hand, after 1891, when the British Indian Government brought Manipur under their control and introduced a new administrative system in the state, a number of educated individuals were required to staff the new administrative apparatus. But *it* was a costly affair to bring all clerks and other officials from outside. Moreover, the British Government met with certain practical difficulties to run the administration in an alien land without the help of the natives. To seek the support of the influential Manipuri by preparing them for government jobs, modern education was once again introduced in the State by the British India Government with renewed vigour.

On 1 June, 1892, the Johnstone Middle English School was reopened and an 'excellent' building was constructed to provide sufficient rooms to the students at the state's expense. Though the school was a middle English School, it gave education up to high school standard¹⁰. The Government also made a humble start for establishing primary education at different parts of the state. There were 14 such schools in 1902-03¹¹. At the close of 1906-07, there were 52 lower primary schools in the valley¹². During this period, a considerable number of Manipuri text books were produced to encourage the Manipuri students. According to the Administration Report of the State of Manipur, 1930-31, there were 119 lower primary schools in the State.

Besides, provisions were also made to give education to the Manipuri girls. The first girls' school was started as early as 1899¹³. In 1906-07, another school for girls was established¹⁴. However, few Manipuri girls responded. In those days, only the Bengali girls whose parents were in the service of the British, attended these schools. The situation remained more or less the same for quite sometime. Want of female teachers, the Manipuri conception of womanhood and religious orthodoxy of the Manipuris were some of the hindrances to the

growth of female education in the state.

In the hills, the Christian missionaries played a vital role in spreading modern education. Their object in the spread of the new education system was mainly evangelical. Here, Downs has rightly observed that "Obviously a written language is of little use if people cannot read. A Bible that cannot be read is useless; tracts distributed among an illiterate people are seed fallen on barren land"¹⁵. This motive led the missionaries to the opening of schools in the tribal areas. This was also one of the reasons for giving emphasis on primary education by the missionaries.

In 1896 for the first time, the American Baptist Mission established a school at Ukhrul, a Tangkhul Naga area in the north-eastern hills of the State¹⁶. In 1907, the number of schools in the Tangkhul area was increased to seven¹⁷. In the southern hills, western education was imparted mainly through the Welsh Mission with its head-quarters at Aizwal¹⁸.

In spite of the continued efforts made by the missionaries and the British Government, there were at first little enthusiasm for modern education among the tribals. Downs states that the Ukhrul boys were very much undisciplined and refused to remain at their studies for any longer period of time. The simple reason was that the tribals had not yet learnt the importance of modern education at its initial stage.

However, the tribals as well as the Meiteis gradually realised the benefits of modern education. The British Government had already paved the way for a modern Manipuri society by effecting changes in different spheres-administrative, economic and social. Such changes automatically demanded further advancement in science, technology, literature and in other fields of human knowledge. This could be fulfilled only with the help of modern education. The modern educational institutes provide doctors trained in modern medical science, engineers conversant with modern technology, lawyers versed in the structure of the new legal

system and other efficient professional people. Thus, there was a gradual growth in the number of schools in the State. With the increase in the number of schools, there was also a corresponding growth in the number of the students. The following table shows the growth rate of literacy in the State from 1901-1941¹⁹.

*Trend of literacy in Manipur according to
1901-1941 censuses*

Total population			Literate	Percentage to total population			
Year	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1901	1,39,632	1,44,833	2,84,465	2596	62	2658	0.9
1911	1,70,666	1,75,556	3,46,222	6889	217	7,106	2.1
1921	1,88,119	1,95,897	3,84,016	14,396	291	14,687	3.8
1931	2,15,815	2,29,791	4,45,606	19,806	689	14,495	3.3
1941	2,49,183	2,62,886	5,12,069	24,339	1594	25,933	5.0

Though the Government gave considerable importance to modern education, the educational policy of the colonial British Administration was rather one-sided. During the long period of British administration, the State could not establish any medical or engineering college. For these 'professional courses' the Manipuri students had to be trained outside the State. In those days, Manipuri students had to go for such training to the Berry White Medical School, Dibrugarh, Dacca School of Engineering etc.²⁰ Besides, the Manipuri students had to go to the neighbouring states for higher studies in different subjects. Most of them went to the Cotton College of Gauhati, the Shillong²¹ Government High School and the Sylhet High School.

In spite of certain defects, modern education was a progressive act of the British rule. Unlike the system in the pre-British period when literary education was only in the hands of some 'Maichous' or local elites whose role in politics rather enhanced power and prestige of the king, the new educational system was secular in character, liberal in essence and open to all irrespective

of caste, creed and sex. Moreover, western education was the expression of western ideas, ideologies, culture, custom and civilization. It was the store-house of western literature developed by Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and a host of other European writers. It was through western education that the educated Manipuris were introduced to the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx and Lenin.

It is a well known fact that ideas and ideologies are powerful levers of social change. One of the positive aspects of modern education was that there grew up a group of western educated Manipuris who could show their marks in different fields literary, political and religious. In the realm of literature, there grew up a number of poets and novelists. Their talent got expression in various literary forms- lyric, novel, drama, short play and short story, history and grammar. Of these literary talents, mention may be made of Chaoba (1895-1950), Kamol (1899-1935) and Anganghal. Some other educated Manipuris made their mark in the field of politics. Among these people, Irabot Singh was the most prominent. In the field of religion, Naoria Phullo, a Metei from Cachar was the first man who visualized the need of a reformist movement in Manipur to remove the ills in the socio-religious life of the Meiteis.

In the hills, modern education through the Christian missionaries played an important role in bringing about a change in the outlook of the tribal people. It helped fight some of the old social institutions like head-hunting²² and inter-tribal feuds. The breakdown of these too social institutions was soon followed by an erosion of barriers of clan, village, and tribe. Moreover, with the spread of modern education English and Manipuri became the media of educational instruction. Thus English became the conversational exchange of educated tribals while Manipuri was the lingua franca among the different tribes. Some of the local dialects such as 'Ukhrul lon'

which was formerly a local dialect of the Ukhrol village only, were also introduced among some sections of the Nagas. This forged a feeling of oneness among them. This manifested itself in social and political spheres.

The Tangkhuls were the first who reaped the fruit of this new-found concept. The gradual evolution from a tiny self-centred village to 'Tangkhul long' an organisation for the Tangkhul in 1930, was, in fact, a great leap towards tribal unity²³. Soon other tribes followed suit. The Zemis, the Liangmeis and the Rongmeis also started the 'Zelianrong' movement to forge unity and integration among them²⁴. In the forties, the Anals, Mayons, Monshangs and Lamkangs organised a unification movement under the generic name 'Pakan'. It was also a time when the 'Kom-Rem' conference was organised with a view to bringing the Kom, Koireng, Chiru, Aimol and Purum Tribes under one-banner. This gathered momentum in the late forties. The different Naga tribes of Manipur and Nagaland were launching a Pan-naga Movement which took a proto-nationalistic dimension in the post-colonial period.

In one sense, introduction of modern education meant the virtual end of Manipur's relative isolation. Now she was exposed to the ideas and ideologies of the external world. This meant breakdown of many old barriers and obliteration of traditional landscapes in Manipuri society in spite of the fact that new ambitions and tensions began rumbling in the womb of the old traditional harmonic Manipuri society.

After India's independence in 1947 and the merger of the State of Manipur with India in 1949 the relationship between education and society took a new turn. The Constitution of India gave more emphasis on modern education in the States of India with a view to promote some of its desired goals. The following Table shows the increase of expenditure on recognised educational institutes from 1955 to 1981²⁵ for the State of Manipur.

	Year	Total Expenditure
1	1955-56	Rs. 23,04,045
2	1960-61	Rs.1,09,64,171
3	1965-66	Rs.2,20,11,202
4	1970-71	Rs.4,25,72,683
5	1975-76	Rs.8,62,99,336
6	1980-81	Rs.18,55,75,632

Consequently there has been an increase in the number of schools, colleges and other educational institutes²⁶.

Thus, there has been an intensified expansion of education in the State. This in turn, led to the growth in the number of the student population. The following Table shows the growth rate of literacy in the State²⁷.

Growth of Literacy in Manipur According to 1951-81 Censuses

Total population				Percentage to total population			
Year	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1951	2,83,685	2,93,950	5,77,635	58,933	6,961	65,895	11.4
1961	3,87,058	3,92,979	7,80,037	174,656	62,620	237,276	30.4
1971	5,41,675	5,31,078	10,72,753	249,383	103,707	353,090	32.9
1981	7,21,006	6,99,947	14,20,953	384,231	203,387	587,618	41.4

Here, it is worth mentioning that after the incorporation of Manipur into India. One of the main function of modern education is to accelerate the pace of social change within the democratic framework of Indian Union. Now the constitution of India is in vogue in the State and all the enactments of the Indian Parliament are applicable *ipso facto* to Manipur. It is a well known fact that the framers of the Indian constitution had conceived of their constitution as an instrument of social change. In other words, it is a historically responsive document based on social justice, secularism and above all cultural pluralism.

Thus, it has become a challenge for education to fulfil the demands of a democratic country so that the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity could be maintained with the changing pace of the Manipuri society. Modern education has fulfilled some of its cherished desire. Yet much work is left to be done before the benefits of education reaches to every person in the state.

Notes & References

1. Jonstone, James, **Manipur and the Naga Hills**, Delhi, 1971 p.144.
2. Roy, J. **History of Manipur**, Cal, 1973, p. 167.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Johnstone, op. cit., p. 144.
6. Shakespear, J., **Manipur Under British Management 1891-1907**, p.6.
7. Horam, M., **Social and Cultural Life of the Nagas**, New Delhi, 1977.
8. The literal meaning of 'lallup' is war-club derived from the words 'lal' meaning war and 'lup', club. In the early period, when there was no regular standing army in the State, every male in the State had to act as 'lalmei' or soldier.
9. Shakespear, op. cit., p.6
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid p.7.
12. Ibid
13. Ibid
14. Ibid
15. Downs, S. Frederick, **Christianity in North East India**, Madras, 1976 p.21.
16. Shimray, Y.K. **The Tangkhul**, Quarterly Journal of Manipur State Kala Akademi, Jan. -March, 1977,p.37
17. Shakespear, op.cit. p. 13
18. Ibid.
19. **Statistical Hand book of Manipur**, Imphal, 1985,p.56

20. **The Administration Report of the State of Manipur 1915-16, p.14.**
21. Ibid.
22. Among the different tribal groups head hunting was practice for number of reasons. The Nagas had the tradition that a man could not climb the ladder of social recognition till he brought enemies heads (Shimray:p.72) It has religious sanction too. It was practised with the belief that the spirit of the killed would become slave of the killer in the next world.
23. Formerly each tribal village has a seperate language culture, tradition
24. Zeliangrong is an acronym formed out of the first letters of the names of three tribes - Zemis, Liangmeis & Rongmeis
25. **Statistical Hand book of Manipur, 1985, p. 48**
26. Ibid p. 34
27. Ibid p. 57.