

## Oral History of Nupi Lal 1939-41

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Domain of history is the 'known' past which keeps on extending with the efforts of breaking new grounds for the 'knowable' past. The ever extending frontiers of the knowable pose challenge before the historians to know more in terms of more facts and more convincing rational explanations and interpretations. If the known account leaves gaps in logical understanding the search for more facts and better explanation becomes ever more imperative. History of Nupi Lal of 1939-41 is one such case.

The known account of Nupi Lal has been popularly and academically accepted as more or less definitive but on keener historical examination it leaves unanswered several pertinent questions. Hence the search and research for more acceptable account. Archival evidences and other contemporary documents and accounts hitherto studied are not ample and need to be complemented and supplemented by oral evidences to put the account in perspective.

Oral accounts in this regard are all the more significant because the phenomenon was popular and spontaneous and is a distinct case of people making history. It is getting more and more evident that peoples' history cannot be complete without resorting to peoples account of themselves. On the other hand, the available account of Nupi Lal does not tell about the role of certain involved parties like traders and the people in the peripheri. This can be done through oral evidences.

Oral history is not yet quite accepted as a discipline by the skeptics who clamour that it is not dependable and there are definite chances of distortions. Here, one is reminded of what Carlyle said about facts - 'speak your sincerest, think your wisest, there is still a great gulf between you and the fact'. To silence such scepticism it has been asserted that historical reality should be approached through all distortions,<sup>1</sup> because there is an element of distortion, inspite of all sincerity and wisdom, in all reconstructions of the past. It should be noted, on the other hand, that 'oral history literally allows people to speak for themselves'<sup>2</sup> and therefore, oral his-

tory as history from below or horizontal history, is a necessary instrument to supplement the history from above or vertical history.

It is true that as one of the methods of collecting oral evidence interview provide informations 'subjectively coloured' and are second or even third hand, but it is more or less true of other sources too. Even archival documents suffer from similar limitations. Are not most of the official documents 'subjectively coloured'? The methodology applied by us takes care of these limitations. First we have interviewed participants, onlookers, contemporaries, officials, traders and others of first or sometimes second generation. The information provided by them vary and can be cross-checked and corroborated by other sources. Secondly, we have taken the interviews at two levels - allowing total spontaneity to the interviewees in the first instance - letting them narrate whatever they remember and think of Nupi Lal and then we have put questions and cross questions where a little motivation can not be denied but it did not mean putting words or ideas in their mouth.

In the first part of the paper we are presenting a brief outline of the established account of the Nupi Lal with issues that remain totally or partially unanswered. In the second part, we have tried to find if oral evidences can provide, even if tentatively, some answer to these questions.

## I

### NUPI LAL (1939-41)

The world wide economic depression of 1930s affected the border state of Manipur. Because of a depression in trade, market price of rice, the only important commercial crop of Manipur went down and the Meitei peasants in the Valley were unable to pay the land revenue. The amount of land revenue collected which averaged around 90% of the estimated amount between 1909 slashed down to only 27.047% in 1932-33. In 1938-39, the total amount of land revenue collected increased to 64.95% of the estimated amount<sup>4</sup> but it still shows a depression in the revenue paying capacity of the peasants. To compound the problem of the peasants, the colonial authorities not only increased the rate of fine for land revenue defaulter but also imposed a number of new odd taxes like Dog tax, Vehicle tax etc. in 1931-32.<sup>5</sup> The colonial authorities further tightened its grip over the people by restricting the hunting and fishing rights of the people,<sup>6</sup> although, the new rules affected more

on the hill people and the Meiteis in the peripheral areas of the valley. Traditional communal rights over the forest products were also encroached upon by opening three new toll stations<sup>7</sup> in the valley in 1932-33 for the collection of forest revenues.

The opening of Manipur to external trade had prostrated the traditional economy and thoroughly altered the former economic structure. While the intrusion of manufactured goods discouraged indigenous production system the exploitative activities of the traders particularly, the Marwaris who directly or indirectly interacted with the Meitei masses for the purchase of rice and handloom products and the sale of basic consumption articles like cloth, kerosene, brass and aluminum utensils etc. further exposed the native people to the hard realities of the modern economic system. The forcible use of two forms of maunds : one with 48 seers, used in the time of buying rice from the local farmers and the 2nd with 40 seers used in selling rice to the farmers<sup>8</sup> are strong indications of trader's naked exploitation of the native people and the system was rationalised by the Manipur State Durbar only in 1940. In 1940 the Durbar resolved that only a standard maund of 40 seers should be used by the traders. By the 1930s, the outside traders began to exercise increased influences among the official of the authorities and in 1932, a trader Sadasakh Mansukh Roy Saraogi obtained the right to collect 'Cart tax' from the government, in return for a fixed annual amount. Along with it there was a tremendous spurt in the export of rice in the 1930s. The rice export increased from 2,77,389 maunds in 1932-33 to 3,72,174 maunds in 1938-39.<sup>9</sup>

The results of such changes in the economy were that, while many of the native producers were thrown out of their jobs, the masses were more and more subjected to the trader's hoarding, record manipulating and other oppressions. Although the price of rice was usually low due to the impact of trade depression, hoarding and other artificial machinations shoot up the price of rice from a mere Rs. 1.20 a maund in 1938-39 to Rs. 2.00 per maund in 1939-40. The Census Reports of 1911, 1921 and 1931 show that during the colonial period many of the local people were thrown out of their jobs. The number of persons depending on cotton textile industry declined from 46,747 (with dependents) in 1911 to a mere 6,923 (without dependents) in 1931.<sup>10</sup> The number of persons depending on food industries like 'grain parchers', 'rice pounders', 'flour grinders', etc. who were mostly female had declined from 1171 (with dependents) in 1911 to 249 (without de-

pendents) only in 1931.<sup>11</sup> This decline was primarily because of the installation of rice mills in Manipur. In 1948 there were as many as 48 rice mills in Manipur.<sup>12</sup>

It is against such a backdrop that the women's agitation (1939-41) started in December 1939. In 1939 there was a comparatively unfavourable monsoon and other weather conditions affecting a good harvest. Realising the situation, the colonial authorities tried off and on to restrict the export of rice by the traders. The traders however, continued to clandestinely buy rice from the local farmers either for hoarding or for export. November-December being the harvesting months were usually the best months for the people because rice and paddy were normally cheap. December 1939 was however an exception and the price of rice per maund shot up to Rs. 2.00 per maund and such a market situation certainly was quite unusual. Not only this, because of hoarding and monopolisation of the purchase of rice and paddy by the traders and their agents, neither the women grain dealers could do their usual trade nor the commoners could buy it from the traders' shops. The market women who were aware of the situation started stopping the local rice dealers from the villages to supply rice and paddy to the traders from the 1st week of December onwards.<sup>13</sup> Such moves however, did not change the market reality and on 12 December several hundred women led by the Bazar 'Imas' (Women) demonstrated at the Durbar office where the members were having a meeting. The women shouted and demanded an immediate ban of the export of rice. The members of the Durbar were however divided on the issue. Mr. Sharp, the President was for export whereas the other 4 present pleaded for an immediate ban. Since a positive decision could not be taken all the other members except Sharp tried to avoid the crowd and left the office unnoticed by the demonstrators. Mr. Sharp who was left alone to talk with the agitators tried to convince the crowd that as per rule no decision could be taken without the approval of the Maharaja, who was then at Nabadwip. The agitators however insisted the President to go to telegraph office and communicate with the Maharaja. The women accompanied Mr. Sharp in crowd to the Telegraph Office. Even after the message was sent the angry crowd confined Mr. Sharp in the Telegraph Office to await the Maharaja's reply. Major Bulfield, Commandant of the Assam Rifles and Major Cummins who came to the place were also gheraoed. The sieze continued for a number of hours till quite late in the evening. When it became almost dark and the crowd was becoming increasingly tense some people supposed to be sympathisers of the Congress started pelting stones. That created a con-

fusion in the crowd and it led to the charge of the crowd by a detachment of the Assam Rifle. The women countered the force and in the scuffle that followed 21 women were injured by bayonet and gun butt. Of the 21, 5 were severely injured and taken to the hospital.

The incident of the 12th December created a lot of unrest among the people in Imphal in general and those of the agitators in particular. On 13th, the next day, crowds of women particularly the 'Imas' gathered at Khwairamband Bazar without much of mobilisation. Normal activities of the Bazar were boycotted and the women were seen moving in groups to intensify the struggle. G. Gimson, the Political Agent of Manipur, who was away on tour of some distant villages in the valley, rushed to Imphal when the news reached him the same night. As an efficient administrator and as a person who knew Manipuri society pretty well, he tried to thrash out the issue with the agitators themselves and therefore met the women at Bazar in the afternoon of the 13th December. He informed the women that the message from the Maharaja had come and the export of rice would discontinue with immediate effect.<sup>14</sup> The agitators, however were not satisfied with the new assurance. They rather demanded that 'all the rice mills should be closed down'<sup>15</sup>. In fact, like the 'Luddities' of 18th century England, the agitators particularly the rice dealers, paddy huskers, grain parchers looked upon the newly installed 'rice mills' as their enemy, for having deprived of their livelihood.<sup>16</sup> In the evening of the same day a huge gathering of about 10,000 persons held a meeting at the 'State Police Bazar' (outside the British reserved areas) and unanimously decided that all rice mills including those belonging to the Manipuri owners should be broken.<sup>17</sup> After the meeting, a group of agitators visited some of the Manipuri Mill owners and got 'chits' from them that they would not operate their mills. They even pressurised the petrol suppliers to discontinue supply of petrols to lorries loaded with rice<sup>18</sup>. Subsequently the women once again gathered at the Bazar and dispersed quite late around 8.0. p.m. at night.

On 14th December, the women agitators were in a frenzy. They became furious when they learnt that a Marwari Mill at Mantripukhri, about 6 kms. from Imphal was running the Mill. In the evening crowds of agitated women walked on foot with an intention to break the Mill. Gimson who came to know about the developments rushed to the spot before the agitators arrived. When the women came, they became quite violent and threatened of 'smashing up houses and boilers',<sup>19</sup>. The crowd, however, calmed down when the Political Agent removed the main fuses. In fact, electric switches of fall Rice Mills in the State were subsequently removed by an order of Mr. Gimson.

Meanwhile, Irabot Singh, who was away at Cachar and Tripura to canvass for Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha<sup>20</sup> returned to Manipur on 16th, the day Maharaja Churachand also came back from Nabadwip. Many women received him at Chingmeirong where he addressed the crowd and supported and appreciated their movement.<sup>21</sup>

The arrival of Irabot changed the complexion of the movement. Irabot, in fact wanted to convert the women's agitation into a broad based popular movement for fundamental democratic changes. The colonial administrators observed that "the Mahasabha took it over and fomented the agitation on Congress lines".<sup>22</sup> On further investigation, it has been revealed that Praja Sanmelani rather than Mahasabha was active and involved in the movement. Despite pressure from some of the pro-agitation members, the leaders of the Mahasabha refused to support the movement. Irabot subsequently formed Praja Sanmelani along with some of the enthusiastic members like L. Kanhai, L. Bijoy Singh, E. Tompok Singh, T. Amuselung Singh etc. With the support coming from Praja Sanmelani men began to take prominent part in the agitation.<sup>23</sup>

It took about 2 days for Irabot to assess the situation and strengthen the movement. During this period, the women continued to boycott the market and in some cases they stopped carts of rice or paddy from going to the traders in the Bazar.<sup>24</sup> It may in this context be pointed out that the boycott of the Khwairamband Bazar continued for more than a year, till February 1941 and the boycott definitely was a manifestation of the market women's struggle for their grievances. On 29th December many of the women along with some of the leaders were in an ugly mood. They went and gheraoed the Inspector of Police, Kh. Dhanachandra Singh at the State Thana for having assaulted a woman in the process of interrogating some of the women leaders on charges of throwing into gutter some rice and paddy of some local rice traders on 28th December, the day before. The women continued to gherao the Inspector till quite late in the evening and demanded a 'bichar' (justice) from M. K. Priyobarta, the Police Member of the Durbar. Although the women were angry and even threatened the Inspector,<sup>25</sup> when it became late, they dispersed around 9.00 p.m.

By this time the movement had spread to some of the neighbouring villages and Gimson wrote that on 29th some women of Yairipok village, about 14 miles from Imphal burnt the goods of Manipuri shopkeepers.<sup>26</sup> Rajani Devi, in her memoir also talks about some of the women going to Pukhao Village and Lamlai Village to mobilise the masses to fight against fishing tax and toll tax.<sup>27</sup>

The agitation was gradually intensified and on 7th January, a massive meeting was held at Police Line Bazar. Irabot Singh addressed the crowd and whipped up the mass emotions by speaking that the split blood of the Brahman lady should be avenged.<sup>28</sup> The speech coupled with the increasing unrests among agitators compelled the colonial authorities to arrest Irabot Singh on 9th January and he was subsequently shifted to Sylhet Jail with a sentence of three years imprisonment.

The arrest of Irabot increased the frustration and anger of the agitators. Gimson wrote that many more meetings were held and the defiance of the authority also increased.<sup>29</sup> The Manipur State Durbar subsequently decided to prohibit all political and public meetings for three months. Despite such an order more meetings were held. In the evening of 13th January, a crowd of angry women came to the Bazar and surrounded the shop of 'Babu Kisturchand Saraogi' who was supposed to have said that he would buy up all the rayats in Manipur and feed them paddy husks.<sup>30</sup> Gimson tried to control the situation. Kisturchand, realising the viscious mood of the agitators sent in a note saying that he didn't say anything like that and if he had said anything offensive he may be pardoned. The women's anger however did not cool down and demanded that the Political Agent should get rid of the Marwaries in a few months time.<sup>31</sup> The crowd was very agitated and they dispersed quite late at night. After this the agitators started coming out openly against the Marwari traders.

On 14th January, the agitators about 8,000 in number gathered at the Police line ground for a meeting. Majority of the people were male although there were many females also. The crowd shouted slogans like 'long life to Irabot Singh', 'Bande Mataram'<sup>32</sup> etc. Some of the Police personnel who were there to dissuade the members from holding meeting arrested one of the leaders when he was addressing the crowd. This provoked the mob and a serious scuffle went on between the police and the crowd. Many agitators and police personnel were injured and the crowd dispersed as it became late.

The incident of 14th January made the authority strengthen its police force. Conversely the violence of the 14th and the arrest of Irabot made the Mahasabha as well as Praja Sanmelani a bit hesitant to be violent. The Durbar members and the Maharaja were however becoming extremely unpopular among the agitators and the boycott of Bazar continued.

In the middle of January, the traders decided to counter the agitation and boycotted the purchase and sell of Manipuri goods for a month. This probably gave severe pressures to the women agitators and the leaders began to split. Since the Marwaris had boycotted the Manipuri products, the question of sustenance came up and many of the agitators were interested in breaking the boycott. A group of women wanted to sit at the Khwairamband whereas another group wanted to sit at the Bazar near the state police line. It is clear that the women were no longer that organised by the end of January. In fact, many of the local rice traders started supplying carts of rice and paddy to the traders at night.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, the leaders of Mahasabha and Sanmelani submitted a few petitions to redress the grievances of the women. Of the two organisations Praja Sanmelani was more militant and genuine to the cause of the agitation. In the last week of January, one day around 9.00 p.m. a group of people mostly leaders and supporters of Praja Sanmelani went for a demonstration near the palace and shouted slogans like 'Irabot Ki Jay', 'Bande Mataram'

etc.<sup>34</sup> The leaders who went there, were arrested for shouting pro-Irabort slogans but released only the next day.

By February, trend of differences of opinion and infact division among the women agitators as well as the Mahasabha leaders were quite clear. While 4 leaders of the women were colluding with the Maharaja, some leaders of the Mahasabha campaigned in favour of export of rice by the Marwaris.<sup>35</sup> As a result of such infights, the tempo of the struggle subsided considerably although the boycott of Bazar continued. By this time the impact of the agitation was certainly felt at some distant villages like Bishenpur, Lamlai etc. but the stirrings were not strong enough to sustain the movement. The villagers submitted numerous memoranda to the authorities to do away with many of the oppressive taxes but those initiatives were not properly pursued.

By May - June, except for the boycott of the Bazar the situation was almost normal. In August, 1940, in order to scare the market women Gimson notified that the Bazar sites would be reallocated.<sup>36</sup> Such a move from the authorities created a lot of anxiety among the market women. Meanwhile, on 25th August, the Vth session of Mahasabha was held at Thoubal but the meeting did not take any resolution concerning the women's demands. It seems that apart from the boycott of the Bazar the agitation had almost declined. Many leaders of the agitation started retreating from their earlier militant stances. In September, seven leaders submitted a petition expressing their grievances against (1) Durbar members, (2) Inspector of Police, (3) Excesses of Police and (4) Conviction of women leaders.<sup>37</sup> The memorandum did not specify any of their real demands - it merely stated that once their demands are fulfilled they would come back to the market.

In February 1941, normalcy was almost restored and 400/500 women began to sit in the Bazar.<sup>38</sup>

Although a brief account of the agitation based on the available primary and secondary sources are given above many crucial questions are still unexplained. Available oral evidences certainly help to explain at least tentatively some of the many pertinent questions and thus enriches the understanding of the 1939-41 agitation.

The first question which could not be explained before was the relevance of the name of the agitation popularly accepted i.e. Nipil Lal. 'Lal' in Manipur is a very borad word including war, agitation, movement, infact almost every collective protest activity. The agitation of the women in 1904 is called 'Lal' so is the battle of Khongjom (Khongjom Lal) in 1891. Since such a situation creates problem in determining the nature of the event and thus its significance, oral evidences are examined and it has been revealed that Nupilal was agitation and not a movement nora war.

The second aspect which needed clarification was that of the issues involved in the agitation. The general opinion is that the agitation was against the export of rice and against the rice Mills. If it was so then the question is why did it continue even after the export was stopped and if it was against the rice mills, what was

its reasons d'être when Mills stopped. On closer examination of the oral evidences it has been proved that women agitators were increasingly politicised after the return of Irabot Singh. After the arrests of Irabot, Praja Sanmelani was trying to intensify the struggle in line with Irabot's ideas although the attempts could not succeed.

The third crucial question which could not be comprehended was that of the composition of the agitation. It was also not clear whether the agitation was launched by the Bazar 'Imas' in general or the 'Imas' dealing in grain. It was further not very clear about the spread of the agitation and also the support from the masses. Oral evidences have shown that the rice dealers and the grain parchers were particularly affected because the Rice mills had deprived them of their source of livelihood. It has also been revealed that the agitation was mostly confined to the Imphal areas and the support from the rural masses were not much. Although Khwairamband Bazar (Inside British Reserved areas) was boycotted, normal business transactions were carried on at places immediately outside the British Reserved Areas and therefore normal life of the people were not much affected.

The fourth inexplicable question was whether there was any collusion between the British officials and the Darbar and the traders. Although many questions are still left to be investigated, it has at least been proved that Maharaja Churachand Singh had a very cordial relationship with the Marwari traders.

The fifth issue to be clarified is the way the Marwari traders dealt with the situation. Oral evidences have proved that the Marwaris did not take a rigid counter agitation stance. Apart from the boycott of Manipuri products in February 1940, the traders exhibited a more or less withdrawn attitude.

The sixth and no less important question is regarding the impact of the agitation on the psyche of Manipur society in general and women folk in particular. Oral evidences have shown that the agitation had left a deep impact on the psyche of the people. This may be due to the continuous and consistent struggle of the Manipur women to the various socio-economic and political problems during and after the colonial rule.

And finally, to the question of whether it could be integrated in the broad anti-British movement of the sub-continent, it has been revealed that the agitators used slogans like 'Bande Mataram' and wore 'Gandhi Cap'. It can therefore be argued that there was more or less a link between Indian National Movement and the NupiLal.

Thus, it can be reasonably pointed out that oral evidences have helped in giving deeper insights into the manifold dynamics of Nupi Lal, although much are still left to be investigated.

#### Notes & References

1. *Poetics - Sounds of Silence*, Vol. 15, April 1986.
2. *Ibid.*

3. M. Bhattacharya, *Gazetteer of Manipur* (Calcutta, 1963) p-327; *Administration Report of Manipur State for the year 1932-33*, p. 7.
4. *Administration Report of Manipur State for the year 1938-39*, p. 5.
5. *Administration Report of Manipur State for the year 1931-32*, p. 49.
6. *Ibid.*, Game rule, Appendix - III.
7. *Administration Report of Manipur State for the year 1932-33*, p. 15.
8. Petition of Manipur State Subjects, dated 25.9.1920.
9. Administration Report of Manipur State for the respective years .
10. *Census of India , Assam*, Vol. 3, Part-II, 1911, 1931.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Techno Economic Survey of Manipur* (New Delhi, 1961).
13. An undated Confidential letter to Mills.
14. C. Gimson's Confidential letter to Mills dated, 13.12.1939.
15. *Ibid.*
16. This argument has been corroborated by the Statement of Trilokchand Patni, a Marwari businessman of Thangal Bazar.
17. C. Gimson's Confidential letter to Mills, dated 14.12.1939.
18. *Ibid.*
19. C. Gimson's Second Confidential letter to Mills dated 14.12.'39.
20. Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha was an association of the emerging English educated middle class Meitei of Manipur, Tripura, Assam and Burma established in 19341.
21. C. Gimson's Confidential letter to Mills dated 16.12.1939.
22. *Administration Report of Manipur State for the year 1939-40*, p. 2.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Gimson's Confidential letter to Mills dated 25.12.1937.
25. Gimson's Confidential letter to Mills dated 27.12.1739.
26. *Ibid.*
27. L. Meitei, *Nipulan* (Imphal), p. 61.
28. Criminal case No. 4 of 1940. Manipur State Vs H. Irabot Singh
29. C. Gimson's Confidential letter to Mills, dated 20.1.1940.
30. C. Gimson's Confidential letter to Mills, dated 14.1.1940.
31. *Ibid.*
32. A Report on the incident of 14th January submitted by Judicial member of the Durbar.
33. Gimson's Confidential letter to Mills, dated 24.1.1940.
34. Memo No 808, p 11 - 1 dated, 21.1.1940, from Maharaja to the Political Agent.
35. C. Gimson's Confidential letter to Mills, dated 2.2.1940.
36. Notice issued by Gimson dated 23.8.1940.
37. Petition submitted by 7 leaders of the agitation to the Political Agent, dated 25.9.1940.
38. C. Gimson's Confidential D. O. letter to Mills No. 5660. G.A., Imphal 21.3.1941.