

Movement for the Responsible Government in Manipur (1938-48)

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The period from 1938-1948 was a great landmark in the political history of Manipur. During this short period Manipur witnessed some remarkable political developments which brought great changes in her political and administrative systems. Among these, the demand for the establishment of a responsible government in Manipur was the most important one.

The genesis of these political developments was very much closely interlinked with the outcome of the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891. This war had undoubtedly made very significant impact on the future political history of this tiny state. One of the most important impact was that it gave a death-blow to the distinctive traditional economic and political system by debasing her political status of a sovereign independent kingdom. The introduction of the colonial administration had greatly changed the traditional administrative system of the country and, on the other hand, it also had brought forth some new ways of thinking as far the modern political consciousness was concerned. In fact, the changes of traditionalism, the introduction of new ways of thinking and breakup of the older regimental feudal social order had tremendously stirred up the political consciousness which was not evident during the early period among the people of Manipur.

The demand for the establishment of a responsible government in Manipur is closely related with the birth of political party in Manipur. For the first time the people of Manipur came to know about the working system of a political organisation in the year 1938. Before this there was no political party in Manipur. At that time there was a social and religious organisation which was established in the year 1934 under the chief patronage of the feudal lord, the Maharaja of Manipur. The name of this organisation was the *Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha*. All the leading personalities of Manipur were members of this organisation. But as it was a social and religious organisation, there was no scope for any political action. So, some

leading members of the organisation, mostly the elite group, who were greatly influenced by the political programme of the Indian National Movement, had strongly felt the immediate need of a political organisation in Manipur. They wanted to replace the present colonial and feudal administrative system by introducing a new political and administrative system based on the principle of democracy. Therefore, they had a strong desire to change this social and religious organisation as a political party. Their objective was fulfilled in the fourth session of Mahasabha, which was held on 29th and 30th December, 1938, at Imphal. In this session, the Mahasabha became a political party and its original name was also changed as the *Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha*. Their main demand was the establishment of a responsible government in Manipur. After this session the Maharaja of Manipur had declared the Mahasabha as a political party and according to his official order no government servant was allowed to be the member of this party. As a result of this all the government employees except H. Irabot Singh and Tempok Singh resigned from the party. So, the emergence of this party may be marked as a stepping stone for the further development of political consciousness in Manipur.

But in the year 1939 the Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha was split into two. The outbreak of *Nupilan* (Women's agitation) was the main reason of this split. The radical group led by Hijam Irabot Singh wanted to support the movement but other groups did not share his view. As a result of this the party was split into two and immediately a new party was formed with H. Irabot Singh as the leader. The name of the party was the *Paraja Sammelani*. The main objectives of the party were the abolition of the colonial and feudal rules and establishment of a responsible government in Manipur. With this demand, the party started a peaceful and non-violent political agitation against the practices of the feudalism and colonialism. Thus, the demand for the establishment of a responsible government came into focus with the birth of these political organisations. But at the early stage the intensity of the movement was not strong.

Again in the year 1945, a new party with the name, *Praja Sangha Party* was established. The fundamental aim and objective of this party was to endeavour for the achievement of independence of Manipur, abolition of feudal rule, establishment of a responsible Government and introduction of adult universal franchise in the country. Besides this the party also strongly stressed the need for having a classless society in the country. By dint of this programme

the party received a very encouraging response from the people particularly from the rural peasant group, or masses. During this time there was a peasant society in Manipur which was known as *Krishi Sanmelani* and it fought for the redress of the grievances of the peasants. But on 16 May 1946 at the second session of the society, it was converted into a Political organisation and its name was changed as the *Manipur Krishak Sabha*. This was the only peasant based political organisation in Manipur. It also strongly emphasised the establishment of a responsible government in Manipur, introduction of adult universal franchise, the integration of the people in hills and plains. Another important catching demand of this party was that all the cultivable land in Manipur should be transferred to the tillers.

Finally, the *Manipur State Congress Party* also came into existence on 4 October 1946. This party was established at the initiative of some individuals, mostly educated people. Later on this party became a unit of the All India Congress Committee. All the members of the *Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha* also became the members of this newly established party. Like other parties, it also strongly emphasized for the establishment of a responsible government on the basis of the principle of democracy, abolition of social injustices of the feudal rule. This they began to fight for the achievement of political right under the banner of democracy.

Indeed, the birth of these political parties tremendously enhanced the spirit of political consciousness among the people of Manipur. Their demand for the establishment of a responsible government gave a strong impetus to the political movement and finally, brought a sweeping change in the political system of Manipur.

Just after the end of the war, every Indian began to feel that the independence of India from the colonial rule was now only a matter of time. Sensing the mood of the time, every princely state in India also began to prepare for having a separate administrative unit of their own. Like the other princes of India, Maharaja Budhachandra also wanted to establish a separate administrative unit of his own. On the other hand, he was also aware of the political demand of the people. From his letter dated 30th Oct., 1946 vide D. O. No. 660 P/11-1 addressed to the British Political Agent in Manipur, it seems that he was in favour of the introduction of democratic system in the administration of the country. On 21 September 1946 he asked the British authorities to allow him to make a royal proclamation regarding the new administrative report to the people of his state.¹ British also had shown their inclination

and Mr. Gimson, the British Political Agent in Manipur requested the Maharaja to supply a draft copy which the Maharaja proposed to announce. Maharaja Budhachandra wrote a letter on 30th Oct., 1946 in which he explicitly expressed his desire to establish a democratic system of administration with an '*Elected Advisory Assembly*' constituted by the representatives of both hills and plains.

But when it came into practice, it was found that instead of accepting the demand of the political parties i.e. establishment of the responsible government in Manipur, the Maharaja produced some '*Administrative Rules*' for the country. These contained the rules for the relationship between the State Durbar and the Maharaja and the powers of the individual members of the '*State Council*' which had been proposed in this rule. In fact, this new rule had no provision for the establishment of the responsible government in the state. It was confined only to the strengthening of the Maharaja of Manipur. So, this new administrative rule of Maharaja was not accepted by the representatives of various political parties. Their main object was to establish a Legislative Assembly under the guidance of a separate constitution of the State. To check the attitude of the Maharaja of Manipur, the political leaders of the state began to agitate for the fulfilment of their demand. On 1 November, 1948 the Congress Party had submitted a memorandum to the Maharaja and urged him to make a royal declaration for the establishment of legislative assembly on the basis of the democratic principle² in Manipur very soon. The Maharaja also sensed the increasing political development in India and the mood of the time. He began to prepare for a separate constitution of Manipur. On 12 December 1946 the Maharaja issued a formal order to constitute a '*Constitution Making Committee*'³ to prepare a new constitution for the governance of the state.

The formation of the '*Constitution Making Committee*' itself was a great political achievement on the part of the leaders of different parties. According to the official order of the government the proposed Constitution Making Committee would be constituted by the following members i.e. (a) Three members from the Durbar nominated by the President of the Manipur State Durbar, (b) One member from the palace nominated by the Maharaja, (c) One representative deputed by each Tahashil Circles from the five Tahashils (Valley), (d) One representative each of the Ukhrul, Mao, Tamenglong, Churachandpur, and South-East areas. The President of the Manipur State Durbar would be the Chairman of the Committee. The manner of selection of the Members of

the Committee had clearly demonstrated the positive outlook of the authorities in favour of the demand of the political leaders. It proposed to give privileges to every political party to take part in the preparation of the constitution of the State. Accordingly, all the political parties had prepared to contest for the membership of the Constitution Making Committee. For this the Maharaja formed an election Committee which was constituted by three members. Somorendro Singh, Jail member of the Durbar, was the Chairman. On 21 January 1947 the Chairman of the *Election Committee* submitted the list of the elected persons and thus the Committee was formed with fourteen members excluding F. F. Pearson. On 27 July, 1947 Committee submitted the constitution to Maharaja. In fact, the enactment of this constitution of Manipur State had undoubtedly laid down the solid foundation for the establishment of a government which was based on democracy.

However, Maharaja was not fully prepared to implement the demand of the political parties. Instead of this, he had founded an *'Interim Government'* in Manipur. On 1 July 1947 the Manipur State Durbar, which was established in 1907, was abolished and it was named as *'Manipur State Council'*. On 15 July 1947, Pearson, the President of Manipur State Durbar, became the Chief Minister of Manipur. But he was replaced very soon by Maharaj-kumar Priyobrata Singh, the younger brother of the Maharaja of Manipur. And on 15 August 1947 Manipur regained her lost political status of a sovereign independent kingdom.

All the same, the manner of the formation of the *'Interim Council'* was not up to the expectation of the political parties. They severely criticized the policy of the authority and urged the Maharaja to dissolve this type of government. On 4 October 1947, the Working Committee of the Congress Party adopted a resolution and urged the Government to make an immediate declaration of granting a *'Responsible Government'* before the 1st April of 1948.⁴ The resolution was endorsed to Maharaja. But having received no positive response, they again sent two reminders on 16th and 18th October vide Memo No. 143-I/MSC and Memo No. 144 157-L/MSC respectively in which they further argued to dissolve the present *Interim Council*, They also mentioned that "during the intervening period a popular Interim Council should be established by dissolving the present Interim Council and that steps should be taken for framing a Constitutional Assembly composed of people's representative only elected on adult franchise."⁵ After observing these

political developments, a meeting of the Manipur State Council was held on 12 October 1947 with K. C. Chakravarty, the Legal Remembrancer to His Highness the Maharaja of Manipur. On behalf of the Maharaja, he assured that adult franchise, elected legislature and ministers elected by the legislature would be under constitution.⁶ But the political leaders, particularly Congress Party, could not rely upon his words and with the help of other parties they started agitation from 6 November 1947.

Demonstration and picketing in front of the State Offices, at the residence of the Government Officials was the major programme of the movement. As a result of this non-stop agitation, the normal life in the state was completely paralyzed and the function of the Government was seriously affected. The government also tried to suppress the movement. On 10 November, the Government issued a public notification in which it stated that 'the distribution of war compensation would be stopped so long as the Congress would not call off this agitation'.⁷ But this did not stop the movement and it became more serious. After such development the Chief Minister of Interim Council made a declaration on 23rd November that a *Responsible Government* would be introduced in Manipur within six months.⁸ The decision of the Government was warmly welcomed and appreciated by all the political parties in Manipur and as a mark of respect the party leaders called off the agitation on 26 November 1947.

Just after the withdrawal of the agitation by the party, the Manipur State Council geared up the preparation for election. They formed a '*Franchise Sub-Committee*' which was constituted by nine members with L. Ibongohal as the Chairman. According to the franchise rule the valley area of Manipur was divided into twenty-nine constituencies. The hill reserve area was also divided into eighteen constituencies. The rule also prescribed the qualification of a candidate and voter. According to the rule any bonafide Manipuri who had attained an age of twentyfive could contest election and a person who attained an age of twentyone was eligible to cast his vote. So far the disqualification of a candidate was concerned the rules pointed out that a person who was alleged as guilty of corrupt practices, an offence relating election, criminal offence etc. was not eligible to contest election. The committee established an 'Election Tribunal' which was constituted by three members who were equivalent to the District Judge. R. K. Bhaskar was the Chairman of the Tribunal and P. C. Deb was appointed as a Returning Officer on 3 April 1948.

The election was fixed on 11 June, 1948. In the election no party could secure an absolute majority. The party position was as follows :

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|---------------------------|----|----|
| 1. Manipur State Congress | .. | 14 |
| 2. Socialist Party | .. | 3 |
| 3. Manipur Krishak Shava | .. | 5 |
| 4. Hill Areas | .. | 18 |
| 5. Praja Santi | .. | 12 |
| 6. Nomination | .. | 1 |
| Total : | | 53 |

But the Congress Party, though acquired the single majority in election they could not form a ministry. Consequently, a non-Congress coalition Government was formed and Captain Maharajkumar Priyobrata Singh became first Chief Minister of Manipur. The maiden session of the Legislative Assembly took place on 18 October 1948. In his inaugural address, the Maharaja expressed his happiness over the establishment of a legislative assembly which was a long cherished desire of the people of Manipur.

From what has been discussed above, it can be concluded that the establishment of a legislative assembly which was constituted with the representatives elected on the basis of democratic principles, was a landmark in the history of Manipur. With the formation of this legislative assembly the long standing demand of all the political parties was finally fulfilled. But when we look at the class character of the movement, it was the emergent elite groups which dominated the movement and, therefore, the new responsible government served the interests of the new dominant groups. Along with the movement for responsible government, H. Irabot Singh had launched a revolutionary movement for the emancipation of the poor masses. So, the establishment of new government hardly fulfilled the aspirations of the people of Manipur.

References

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4. Resolution No. 10 of the Working Committee of the Manipur State Congress held on 4-10-1947.
5. Resolution of the Working Committee of the Manipur State Congress held on 18th October, 1947.
6. Minute of the meeting of the Representative of the State Council and the Legal Remembrancer held on 12-10-1947.
7. Notice issued by the Publicity Officer, Manipur, dated 10-11-1947.
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