

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT OF 1939 IN MANIPUR

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The subject of the status of the women in a society and their participation in the fields of economic and political activity is now one of the central concerns of many social scientists seeking still unexplored areas for research. Women's movement is a new and attractive field of social science research in our country as in many other countries.

There are different types of women's movement but most of them related to the special grievances of women under the existing social system, laws, and religious customs of the society in which they live and work. The problem of the women was made an issue of social debate in a systematic way for the first time in our country by the Brahma Samaj in the early part of the 19th century and later by the Arya Samaj. Women's participation in public activities in America and Great Britain was first noticed in the early part of 19th century. Their involvement in the public activities was largely due to the impact of the growth of industrial capitalism in those countries (J.M. Everett, 1981, p.8). Under the new economic system the role of the women in the society and their social values underwent big change. This growth of capitalism not only legitimized the restriction but also idealized women as moral guardians in society. Engel has rightly said that "the overthrow of mother's right was the world's historic defeat of the female sex". Further, because of this new economy the women was degraded to the position of the slave of the men, to a mere instrument for breeding children. Finally, it led to a new social development: the emergence of the patriarchal family. In course of time, male chauvinism was developed and women became the victim of this new trend in society.

In India, the women's movement started in an organized form in 1917. Earlier, there were a number of organizations who took up the cause of the women, but these were not effective. In 1917, the Women's Indian Association was established under the leadership Miss Annie Basant, Margaret Cousins, and others. They started an active campaign for the emancipation of the Indian women from the evils of the existing laws and social practice. Some writers have tried to identify the women's movement as an attempt to validate the social claims of the sexually victimized women for a fair deal. (J.R. Chapmen & Margarate Gate (Ed.), 1978, p.10.

The women agitation or 'Nupi Lan' was one of the most notable events in the modern history of Manipur. This agitation marked the emergence of a new element in the political and national consciousness of the people of Manipur. Even the British authorities regarded the Nupi Lan movement as the most important event of the year 1891 (A.R.M. 1939-40, p.1). The nature and character of the Nupi Lan movement were not similar to those of most of the women movements in other areas which had the upliftment of the status of women in the society as their main objective. The women's movement in Manipur mainly aimed at the betterment of the economic condition of the Manipur State, and thereby, the leaders of the Nupi Lan movement challenged the colonial economic policy of the British, the Paramount Power. This movement in Manipur had distinctly political implication which is not commonly found in the women's movement elsewhere.

I

The main objective of the present paper is to describe and analyse the role of the women of Manipur in the economic development of the Manipur state and the women's movement in Manipur in 1939.

Since early times, in Manipur the women have played a great role in the social and economic life of the State. The women enjoyed the maximum freedom in Manipur society. They participated in work of economic nature as well as in cultural life, in dance, in religious functions and other kinds of social activity. The main objective of this paper being confined to the economic activities of the women of Manipur, their role in the social life does not need detailed notice here. The highest economic status enjoyed by the womenfolk of Manipur is regarded as the 'greatest pride of Manipur'. The internal and external trade of the Manipur state was managed by the women. The economy of Manipur was an agrarian economy, in which rice played a major role. The trade in rice was the principal commodity of trade in the state. The women participated in this trade at every stage from the transplantation of rice seedlings up to the selling of the final product, the paddy crop and the rice. Because of their economic role, the women of Manipur had a strong feeling for self-sufficiency in the economy of the State. Every household was indeed a great centre of economic production. Naturally, the women were respected by the men in the Manipur society. But from the year 1891, this traditional system of Manipur economy was exposed to the exploitation of the British authorities.

There were irregularities and malpractices in the administration of the Manipur state, which made the exploitation of the traditional village economy of Manipur easier for the British. This was the main reason of the women's movement. Georgy Rudenko rightly observed that the main aim of the colonial conquest was to satisfy the desire of the conquerors to secure for themselves the most advantageous strategic economic position (G. Rudenko, p.17). Just after the establishment of the colonial rule, the British authorities with the help of the big traders from the outside of the state, began to

control the rice trading industry of the Manipur state. This new policy introduced by the colonial government degraded the importance of the womenfolk of Manipur in the economic life of the state. The outside traders gradually began to capture the monopoly of the Manipur trade which till then belonged to the womenfolk of Manipur. As a first step, the British authorities introduced a free trade policy, under which the British authorities began to export a large quantity of rice from Manipur. In the year 1891-92 several thousand maunds of rice was freely exported to Kohima; the same practice was continued in the subsequent years also. Then the British began to import a large quantity of Liverpool salt by way of Tamu. It is recorded that the main reason for the import of Liverpool salt was to compete with the product of the Manipur state brine wells. These brine wells had become more expensive to work, after the abolition of the impressed labour in the State (ARM 1892-93, p.3). This new British policy seriously affected the salt industry of Manipur. Further, they imported into Manipur other types of goods also, which hastened the decline of the indigenous industry of the Manipuri people. It was noticed that "the manufacture of iron has fallen off and was approaching extinction" (ARM 1892-93, p.4).

In the year 1893-94, articles of the value of Rs. 22,040/- were exported from Manipur, while goods of the value of Rs. 45,351/- were imported. In the following year, the export value of Manipuri goods was only Rs. 3,761/- and the value of goods imported rose to Rs. 83,457/- (ARM 1894-95, p.2). The above data indicated that the real intention of the British was to ensure the free flow of foreign capital into the state for the exploitation of the natural resources and the traditional village economy system, to turn the state into a market place for the finished products of the British.

In order to fulfill their economic objective, the British agents began to export rice in a large quantity from Manipur. In 1898-99 the British exported 36,436 maunds of rice. It was a sharp increase of 25,230 maunds, compared to that of the figure for 1897-98. By 1922-23 the volume of rice export reached 80,000 maunds. However, till the year 1925, the export was done only by hand cart and bullock cart. After the introduction of the motor vehicle in the year 1925, the position in export began to assume a peculiar character: "the Marawari traders" began to take over the monopoly of export industry from the local Manipuri traders. In the year 1925-26, 1,55,014 maunds of rice was exported from Manipur. The duration of rice export was officially permitted for six weeks only. But due to the use of motor lorries, the rice export business could be carried kmore quickly and in greater bulk than by carts. As a result, the price of rice rose rapidly and produced a dangerous situation. So the export of rice business was stopped for some time in 1926 (ARM 1925-26, p.1).

The export of rice from Manipur was carried on under two systems i.e. 'Cart tax' and 'Lal Pass' system. Under the first system the free movement of rice was allowed after payment of cart tax; under the second system, the export was carried through agreement between Manipur state and Assam Government. Under this second system, rice could be exported from Manipur to the Kohima Civil Stations and Assam Rifles posted in different areas in Assam. From the cart tax system the state could collect a lot of revenue, but later the mode of collection of cart tax was changed. Earlier the tax collection was made by an order issued by the office of the British Political Agent in Manipur, but later the responsibilities of the collection was given to a trading firm and a fixed payment was made to the state half yearly (ARM 1932-33, p.33); this work was started in 1932. This new system greatly aided

the growth and consolidation of Marawari capital in Manipur and the quantity of rice export in this year reached 2,77,389 maunds as against 1,05,287 maunds in the previous years (ARM 1932-33, p.33). In this connection, a comparative study can be made between increase in the area under the rice cultivation and increase in the volume of rice cultivation was 1,75,537 acres and in 1938 the total area was 1,85,213 acres, marking an increase of only 10,322 acres. On the other hand, the volume of rice in 1925-26 was 1,55,014 maunds and in 1938 it was 3,72,174 maunds. Thus, under this new system the British authorities were able to strengthen their colonial economic position in Manipur by destroying the self-sufficiency of Manipur village economy. The increase in the volume of rice export from Manipur had serious economic effect on the normal life of the common people of the state. Such was the economic condition of the Manipur state before the women's movement in the 1930s started.

Apart from the economic factors noted above, the common people received a blow from the hands of the feudal ruler, who was supported by the British imperialists. The assumptions of the administrative authority by Churachand Singh as a Raja under the British paramountcy, on the 15th May 1907, may be taken as the beginning of a period of misery for the people. During his period, Churachand Singh introduced several oppressive taxes like - 'Chandon Senkhai' a subscription for the Sandal Paste mark which was a sign of the followers of Vaisnavism; 'Pancha mapal', a tax levied from the people at the time of the first "earning ceremony". The Raja also introduced 'Peon Chakthak' rations for touring peons or officials, and 'Yarek Santri', keeping vigils over officials of tours. At first, the people did not have the courage to protest and fight against the Raja's oppression. The political awareness and national consciousness of the people were yet undeveloped, but these factors also played a great role for the outbreak of the women's movement in later years.

II

The immediate cause for the outbreak of women's movement of 1939 in Manipur was directly related with the prevailing export policy of the authority and the rice milling by the Marawari traders. The serious economic problems in the State created by the colonial authorities was intensified by the shortage of foodgrains. This was caused by two factors, one was the excessive rain in Manipur during the last week of July and first week of August, followed by another heavy rainfall in the last part of September and early part of November, 1939. The rain of July and August damaged the standing paddy crops and vegetables; the second spell of heavy rain adversely affected the harvesting of the early paddy crop. In mid-November, a hailstorm damaged the standing crops ready for harvesting. Due to such unexpected natural catastrophe, the quantity of rice production was very low. Another factor to be noticed was the heavy export of rice in the previous year. The price of rice in the State increased from the average price of Rupee One and four annas to Rupees two, per maund. Besides this, rice was not available in plenty in the market. Some members of the Manipur State Durbar were greatly concerned by this situation; thanks to their efforts, the Durbar by a resolution of 17th September 1939 stopped the export of rice from Manipur. But soon this resolution of the Durbar was revoked at the directive of the Maharaja of Manipur, and the Durbar granted permission for the export of 800 maunds of rice for the month of September 1939 and 2000 maunds for subsequent years (Durbar Resolution No.2: 23/9/39). The Durbar, however, agreed that the export of rice should be a monopoly of the State of Manipur. The Marawari traders pressed for freeing the export of rice from the State. At this juncture, the Private Secretary to His Highness, the Maharaja of Manipur forwarded to the Durbar some application for export of 'Chira' (a type of flattened rice). Thereupon,

the Durbar unanimously agreed to lift their recent ban on the export of rice with effect from 24th November 1932 (Durbar Resolution No.1, 9/11/1939). After the lifting of the ban, the Marawari businessmen aided by colonial officials resumed the business of exporting rice from Manipur. Acute scarcity in fact near famine condition, was fast approaching the State. On the other hand, the Marawari traders and other traders were setting up rice mills. They purchased paddy as much as they could obtain, milled it and exported it from Manipur. It is recorded that the milling policy of the Marawari traders and the bad harvest of 1939 further added to the suffering of the people from the loss of their earning from husking paddy in the old way. (Administrative Reports of Manipur 1939-40, p.1).

III

On the 8th December 1939, one Aribam Chaobiton Devi from Tera Keithel, organised a small group of about four or five women of her own business circle and tried to stop bullock carts carrying paddy for Marawari traders. The women requested the cart drivers not to sell paddy to the Marawari traders. The women also requested the State authority to stop all the rice mills operating in Manipur.

Soon, the movement spread generally among the people of Manipur. On 12th December 1939, in the forenoon, about one thousand women of Khwairamband Keithel (market) gathered at the market. From there they went to the office of the Political Agent. At that time, Mr. Gimson was the British Political Agent in Manipur. The agitating women demonstrators went to the office of the Manipur State Durbar and submitted a petition for the immediate stoppage of the export of rice. During that time the Durbar was in session and they were discussing a petition from certain villages asking that the export of rice

should be stopped immediately. The women shouted slogans against the export policy of the government. They demanded that the export of rice should be stopped immediately, and the running of the mills should also be stopped. The women surrounded Mr. Sharpe, the President of the Manipur State Durbar, and asked him to issue an order to stop both the working of the rice mills and the export of rice. But Mr. Sharpe replied that as the Maharaja of Manipur was out of station, and that he could not do anything in the matter without the sanction of the Maharaja. The crowd of agitators swelled gradually to about four thousand persons. Along with the women agitationists, Mr. Sharpe then went to the telegraph office to send a telegram to Maharaja who was then at Nabadwip in Bengal seeking the approval of the Maharaja in this case. But the women agitators repeatedly insisted that the approval of the Maharaja was not really essential in this matter; the situation was tense by this time. Mr. Sharpe tried to convince the women by saying that the reply from the Maharaja could not receive for some hours. The women would not listen to what he said to them; they confined Mr. T.A. Sharpe, Major Cummins, the Civil Surgeon, Major Bullfield, Commandant of the 4th Assam Rifles, together with some other officials, in the Telegraph Office and refused to allow them to leave the premises even to take food. At about 2.30 p.m. a platoon of the Assam Rifles arrived at the Telegraph Office to clear the crowds. On the arrival of the sepoy with bayonets fixed to their guns, the women became more militant and in spite of the respectful appeal of the sepoys, they refused to leave the telegraph office. As a result there was a clash between sepoys and the crowd of women. The women were pushed back from the telegraph office compound but the soldiers could not completely disperse them. They remained on the road outside the compound, till midnight. According to a newspaper report about 30 women were injured in the clash with the soldiers. Ten women were

admitted to the hospital. This was the beginning of the "Nupi Lan" or the Women's War, in Manipur. This was a purely spontaneous movement by the market women only, who were highly conscious of the prevailing economic hardship produced by the feudal and colonial authorities.

The women agitators next turned their attention towards the mill owners. The women took written promises from the mill owners that they would not work their mills. But the women came to know that some mill owners had soaked and boiled some paddy to para-boiled rice. On getting this news, the women decided to destroy all the rice mills. They went to the houses of some mill owners and destroyed the mills. The crowd of agitated women stopped their action, only after the electrical switches of the mills were removed by order of the Political Agent (ARM 1939-40, p.2). In order to meet the disturbances, the Durbar adopted a resolution to place 30 state military and 15 Dolai Paba at the disposal of the Police Member (MSD No.2, 15,12,1939). On the other side, in order to consolidate their activities, the agitating women organised meetings regularly at the Police Lane. Some male members, L. Kullabidhu Singh and T. Ibotombi Singh and others became involved in this movement by the women. In the meantime, the police arrested about 18 women from Wangjing. After this the movement gradually assumed a new political dimension. Hijam Irabot Singh, a leftist-oriented leader of his time, entered the scene. Under his presidentship, the Praja Sanmelon Party of Manipur adopted some resolutions in favour of the women movement, they strongly made a demand for a complete ban on the export of rice from Manipur. They urged the authorities not to allow outsiders to stay in Manipur (M. Ritichadra, p.30). Besides this, the Praja Sanmelon also demanded that a responsible government should be established in Manipur. Thus, after the involvement of the leaders of the Praja Sanmeloni the activities of the women's

movement became more political in character. Activities of the main rice market were completely stopped. On 28th December 1939 some carters brought rice and paddy for Marawari mill owners. The women stopped them on the way and threw the grain into the gutter. (ARM 1939-40, p.2). The owners made a complaint against some women leaders and Political Agent asked the police to arrest them. The women were very angry; they lodged a complaint to the Maharaja against the action of the Political Agent. On their way back from the palace, the women were rebuked by the Inspector of the State Police. The angry women besieged the Inspector for several hours and threatened to murder him (ARM 1939-40, p.2). The government took a serious view of this incident and ordered for an enquiry to find the real facts of the incident. On the 7th January 1940 a public meeting was held at Police Lane area in which H. Irabot was the main speaker. The government considered Irabot's speech was violent on this occasion; he was arrested by the police. According to the record which was reported by P.W., Irabot said:

"Remember the Telegraph Office incident we begged for rice and in return received bayonet wounds and wounds from gun butts. For handful of rice we paid two handfuls of bloods. Had we not paid blood, we should not have in closing the export of rice. The export of rice has been stopped and the Mills closed at the cost of the blood of a Brahmani womenfolk have shed their blood for the sake of food and the menfolk should no longer remain silent through fear of arrest and going to jail". (Criminal Case No. 49, 1940 Manipur State Vs. Hijam Irabot Singh).

The Durbar found him guilty of making such violent speech and under Section 124 of Indian Penal Code he was sentenced for the term of three years simple imprisonment. To avoid such an emerging difficult political situation, the Durbar, by a resolution of the 13th January 1940, prohibited all the public meeting and gathering in the Police Lane area. The women took it as a serious challenge and so in defiance of the Durbar resolution, the women were assembled in the Police Lane area. But Police dispersed them.

The Government of India believed that the causes of the movement were related to the administrative lapses in the State. R.N. Reid, the Governor of Assam asked the Maharaja to make some considerable reforms in the administration of the state so that the intensity of the movement could be stopped. He further suggested the Maharaja to make a determined effort to grapple with the situation, before it worsened. Meanwhile, the Political Agent gave a threat to the women by saying that if they did not attend the market he would allot the seat to anyone he choose. In reply to this the women asked the Political Agent to review the whole system of the administration right from the members of the Durbar down to the police officer. They assured that if their demands were fulfilled they would attend the market. Mr. Gimson, the Political Agent, also admitted the grievances faced by the people of the state particularly the women section of Manipur. Regarding the activities of the women he stressed that the economic distress of the political excitement might lead the women of Manipur to take up other forms of agitation as they had shown in the past. (Confidential letter from Gimson to Mills). But just to control the activities of the movement the government arrested five women leaders, on the ground of anti-government activities and put them in jail for six months. After the arrest of then leaders the tempo of the movement was died down gradually.

However, the boycott of Knwairamband market was continued till the 1st part of 1941.

From these above discussions we may conclude that although the grievances of the women and their demand were not met immediately, it gave a profound impact on every aspect of the life of the people of Manipur. Indeed, it was a spontaneous movement. There was no evidence of any organisation for apprehensions arising out of the export of rice. In this regard, Robert Ried wrote: "the occasion for this was the economic grievances arising out of a rise in the price of rice due to the excessive exports coupled with a genuine fear of a shortage means starvation, because it is impossible to import rice at a price which Manipuri can pay. The heavy export in turn were the result of the numerous rice mills which have sprang up in Manipur." (Robert Ried, p.91). C. Gimson tried to link the causes of the women's movement with the administrative lapses of the state and observed that the introduction of new administrative reforms in the State would alley the unrest in the state and lasting peace could be established (Gimson's letter to Maharaja dt.28.2.40). Although the movement of the women started basically against the export policy of the British, it brought a drastic change in the administrative system of the state. After this movement the authorities introduced many changes in the administrative set-up of the state. Thus, the very idea for the establishment of responsible government in the State was successfully inspired by the women's movement.

As mentioned above, the women's movement in Manipur was of a distinctive character. Like many movements of the women elsewhere, it never asked for the upliftment of women's status in society; in this respect it differed from any other women's movement. But some elements in the character of the women's movement in Manipur may be compared with the activities of the women who actively participated

in the French Revolution, particularly in the march to Versailles. The women participants in the Versailles episodes were from the market place; most of them came from the lower middle classes. Their involvement in the political movement was directly related to their economic hardships for which they held the feudal lords responsible. In the case of Manipur also, the market belonged to the peasant and working classes. They suffered from economic hardship. The women's movement of 1939 in Manipur was not a movement for the upliftment of the social status of women but for the removal of acute economic grievances of the people of the State.

Notes & References

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