

Students in Manipur Politics

Ningthoukhongjam Urmila

Students play an important role in shaping the course of history in our country and other developing countries. Being educated and easily available in large groups, they can be organised more easily than the mass. At the same time, they easily respond to the calls given by the politically conscious leaders. Moreover, student life is a stage in which they are trained for future leadership. Many well known political leaders were formerly student activists. This is true in many societies and countries. In this respect Manipur is not an exception.

While tracing the history of students' movement in Manipur we are naturally compelled to trace the history of education, for, educational institutions happen to be the centres of their activities.

Manipur received modern education the British Indian way much later than the rest of India. When the first three Universities were established in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, Manipur had not started even the high school education. It was only in the first half of the twentieth century that high schools came into being in Manipur. The number was limited. There was no facility even to appear in the Matriculation examination for which they had to go out of the state to appear in the said examinations. Interestingly the first master's degree holder is still alive many of the first graduates are still alive though some of them are no more.

It is no wonder that the youths went outside the state to receive higher education at the nearer centres of learning. Most of them went to Guwahati, Calcutta, Dacca, Sylhet etc. Though they went to these places in the hope of receiving higher education it is no wonder that they were largely influenced by two things (1) Western political ideals, institutions and practices and (2) On going freedom struggle in the country. They became aware of democratic ideals like liberty, equality, fraternity; democratic institutions and practices like parliament, election of peoples representations etc. Nonetheless some of them

also were impressed by leftist ideology (Socialists and Marxist ideologies). At the same time on-going movements such as Swadeshi movement, Non-cooperation Movement, Quit India movement etc. impressed them. These students who witnessed these movements were inspired by the tactics and strategy adopted by Gandhiji and other leaders of the Indian National Congress. They were also politically aroused when Gandhi made his clarion call to the nation during the Quit India Movement in which he emphasised the importance of the role to be played by the educated youth. Gandhiji even hoped that the leadership in the said context should come from the students who were more informed and enlightened than their elders who were less educated or illiterate. He cited the Chinese instance in which the educated youth were in the forefront of all reform movements. Gandhiji's view was widely accepted and appreciated. His strategy to involve the students in the freedom struggle was considered to be correct and timely. It was not considered to be an attempt to wean them away from their schools and colleges aimlessly. They were rather inspired to lead the country to freedom. "When your house is on fire nothing can be more urgent than saving the house, he said.

Inspired and influenced by the strategy and tactics adopted by the Indian National Congress under Gandhi, and also supplemented by those western democratic ideals, principles and practices, the young educated Manipuris started various socio-religious movements during the inter-war period (1918-1939) Protest against foreign goods was of political significance. Movement against monarchy and colonialism was another political activity. It is not possible to incorporate all those movements in this limited space. However, briefly, all these socio-religious and political movements were spearheaded by the educated youths.

Apart from socio-religious and political movements there were other activities well connected with literary activities. Though many of these educated youngmen entered either politics or government service. Others were involved in organising literary activities like debates, recitations, establishment of libraries, clubs, scout movements etc. However these activities were interrupted by the outbreak of the second World War.

When the war came to an end in 1945, normal life was restored. The period from 1945-47 was an important period in many

ways. It was during this period that the students Union of the D.M. College came into being with the establishment of the College. Later on following its model students' unions of Johnstone, Churachand, Ram Lal Paul and Tombisaria High Schools were formed. At the state level, a students' organisation known as the All Manipur Student's Federation came into being in 1946. The organisation represented by students belonging to various political parties - Congress, Communists, Socialists. On 30 October 1946, the body organised a conference at Churachand High School. The basic objective of the conference was to work for the "unity of students, community of Meiteis, Muslim and of the Hills". The Federation organised five conferences. Such conferences became the beginning of students movement in Manipur. They demanded (1) establishment of responsible government in Manipur (2) development of Imphal city and rural municipalities (3) free primary education system (4) establishment of new schools and colleges (5) proper facilities for students (6) combine administration of the Hill people and the valley people (7) Human rights.

The aforesaid students federation could be regarded as the starting point of students' political activities. For about two years the organisation provided a democratic forum for future politicians some of them are still active in the political arena both at the state and national levels. However, this forum did not survive as in its original form. The Congress and the Socialists were separated from the federation which was left to the communists. The Congress wing came to be known as Students' Congress. After one year the Students' Congress was split. The socialists formed their own organisation, Young Socialist League.

In the following years (1946-1949), the students were mostly concerned with their own activities. Active involvement in literary activities like debates was significant. Secondly, meeting the Maharaja and the member of the Darbar, students demanded for printing of text-books and improvement of school facilities. During 1948-49, students activities were mostly against the government. The then ruling party Praja Shanti did not have a students's wing. Almost all the activities of the students were controlled by the Congress, communists and the socialists. Penetration of the socialists elements in the students community was deep and at the same time effective.

The period upto the formation of the All Manipur Students Union (AMSU) (1965) is a period in which socialist elements were

so active. As the Congress party was the ruling party, student activists of the party had to struggle to make political impact on the society. During this period the socialist elements controlled the students Union of the D.M.College- Communist supporters among students were also there but were less widespread in the student movement as a whole. The Congressite students with their sprinklings here and there in the statewide student movement tried to contribute their shares in the political awakening of the state.

The emergence of the AMSU after 1965 with a very effective and powerful hold on the society and the general politics of the state was undoubtedly the beginning of a new chapter in the history of student movement in the state.

With so many schools and colleges besides the Manipur University, the student population in the state is quite big and the students therefore play through their organisations a significant role in the politics and socio economic sphere of the state. Student power is thus an established fact whose reality has to be recognised and respected. Those in the role of leadership have therefore to discharge onerous responsibility as future leaders of the community.

References

1. L. Jeyaseelan, *Impact of the Missionary Movement in Manipur*. p. 159.
2. S. Ibomcha Singh, *The Congress in Manipur (1946-57) its Growth and Development*.
3. D. G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma, Life of Mohandas Keramchand Gandhi*, V. 6.
4. M. Lokendra, *Education and Society in Manipur*, The Ninth NEIHA Session, Guwahati 1988.
5. K. Sethajit, *Government and Politics in Manipur*.