FREEDOM MOVEMENTS OF MANIPUR AGAINST THE BRITISH IMPERIALISM

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INTRODUCTION

In the pre-independence India, there were around 565 odd native states. These native states were sprinkled all over the British India. These native states were independent only in name and in fact the Britishers were ruling these states through Princes, Nawabs and Chieftains. The story of India’s freedom struggle will remain incomplete without reference to the struggle of these native states for liberation from the imperial colonialism. Like the British India, these native states also fought for their freedom. In this fight, people of Manipur too were not sitting idle. They also fought for their right and freedom in their own way. To make a well deserved reference for those people who contributed to our freedom movement would be incomplete if we do not include the name of those who initiated the First and Second Women Agitation (Nupi-Lan), leader of the Kuki revolt of 1917-20 and Jodonang and the brave activities of a dawntress young tribal fair sex crusader Rani Gaidinliu. Their names have been written in golden colour in the history of Manipur.

FIRST WOMEN’S AGITATION OF 1904

The first organized form of anti-imperialist movement broke out in Manipur in 1904. This movement is popularly known as ‘the First Women’s Agitation’ (Nupi-Lan-I) followed by ‘the Second Women’s Agitation’ (Nupi-Lan-II) in 1939. In these agitations the brave and courageous women of Manipur came out of their hearth to face the bullets of the Britishers and their puppet ruler. Its way of life from the very ancient times, Manipur women always led non-violent and peaceful movement before men folk used to take arms.

Women’s agitation or better known as Nupi-Lan has been one of the unique cases of political movement in the history of Manipur. Not only was it unique in the state but also in the history of mankind. The reason being that it was solely women who took up the charge of agitation, that too against the most powerful imperialists (Britisher) of that time. The courage and valour of the Manipur women are known to the world. Even the colonial writers were impressed by the contribution of women in Manipur society and they never failed to express their admiration. T.C. Hodson stated in his book, “The women hold a high and free position in Manipur, all the internal trade and exchange of the produce of the state being managed by them.”

The outbreak of 1904 movement was directly related to the rapid changes which took place since 1891. A proclamation was issued by the British authorities on 21st August, 1891 in...
which the frame work of the new system of administration was displayed. As a first step, the authorities selected a minor boy, against the wish of the people, as the ruler of Manipur. Another step was the policy of disarmament of the population of the country which further inflamed the enraged masses. The people of Manipur felt a great insult because of this repression by the British officers. The action and policy of the British authorities was nothing but to treat the indigenous people of Manipur as second class subjects in their own motherland. They also inflicted various oppressive measures against the people as a mark of punishment.

The immediate cause of the resentment in people was that the British started exporting thousands of maunds (bag containing 40 kgs) of rice to Kohima under their free trade policy which resulted in a tragedy for the masses as people began to face the problem of the scarcity of rice. Suddenly, on the 6th of July 1904, 28 sheds of 300 seats of the women’s market at Khwairamband Bazar were torched to the ground. Again on the 15th of the same month the bungalows of Captain Nattal and Dulop were also destroyed by fire in the middle of night and again on the 4th of August another bungalow was also gutted down after midnight. These incidents alarmed the British authorities in Manipur which finally decided that it was an organized crime of some people of Manipur, particularly of urban area. They wanted to punish those who had done these crimes. With this intention, Marwell, the Superintendent of the state of Manipur issued an order on 30th September, 1904 that the people of Manipur, particularly of Imphal area, had to rebuild the British officials bungalow and for that they had to bring teak wood from Kabaw Valley. This angered the people of Imphal area. They made a written representation to the British authorities to cancel the order. Maxwell refused to entertain the plea of the people of Imphal area. He even announced that if the inhabitants of Imphal did not carry out the order to rebuilt bungalow, a punitive force would be posted in the town and the inhabitants would have to bear the cost of the force. The people were very much shocked at the merciless attitude of the British officials. Frustrated with the authority, the public decided to convene a meeting to decide whether they should accept the order or not.

Meanwhile, the superintendent issued a prohibitory order on 30th September, 1904 to restrict the meeting. The people were not detered by the prohibitory order of the Superintendent. They were very much firm in their decision and they defied the order of the authority. A meeting was held near Cheirap court in the heart of Imphal on 30th September, 1904. In the meeting, they unanimously decided not to obey the order. The British wanted to suppress the meeting by using force but failed to do so since the people were too much rigid with their decision to meet. The authorities arrested six people who were supposed to be the chief instigators. The British instituted a court on 4th November, 1904 and summoned the six Raj Kumars for the trial. The court issued an order to exile six of them on 10th November, 1904. The repressive measure of the British authorities had severely demoralized the people. The male population of Imphal, having no alternative, began subscribing the building materials and prepared to rebuild the bungalows which were destroyed by fire.

When an illegal forced labour was imposed on the innocent male population of Imphal, the women folk did not sit quietly rather they came out of their hearth and fought for justice. Thousands of women of the Khwairamband bazaar came out spontaneously and began to launch a big demonstration and entered the residency to see the Political Agent and Superintendent of the state. The Bazaar was closed down due to this agitation. The demonstration of the women
continued for several days. The agitation began to affect the day to day life of the state and the government decided to call army from outside. The agitation severely unnerved the whole administrative machinery of the government and normal life of the town was also completely paralysed. As a result, the British authorities at last decided to withdraw the order for the reconstruction of building which was imposed upon the male population of the state. The movement of 1904 was a great land mark in the history of Manipur. Although the duration of agitation was very short yet it produced a very good impact on the political and economic life of the country and also paved a way for the future anti-imperialist movements in the state.

SECOND WOMEN’S AGITATION OF 1939

The outbreak of the second Nupi-Lan was a spontaneous eruption of the suppressed energy of the exploited people whose genuine aspiration for justice and human dignity helped in creating this great upheaval. The immediate cause for the outbreak of second women’s movement of 1939 was directly related to the prevailing export policy of the authorities and milling activities of the Marwari traders. The serious economic problem created by the British was further intensified by the shortage of food grains. Above this, the excessive rain during the last week of July and the first week of August and again another heavy rainfall in the last part of September and early part of November, 1939 worsened the condition. The rains of July and August damaged the standing crops and vegetables and the second rain again adversely affected the harvest. Again in mid November, rainstorm damaged the standing crops ready for harvesting. Due to this unexpected natural catastrophe the quantity of production was very low. As a result, price of rice, the staple food of Manipur, increased sharply above its average price. In spite of this, rice was not available in the market. Gradually the conditions became very serious and it was fast approaching near famine in the state.

In a rare act of judgment Mr. T.A. Sharpe the president of the state Durbar made a resolution on the 13th September that the export of rice from Manipur would be closed until further orders. When harvesting was in full swing for no apparent reason, the ban was lifted. The Marwari traders and other traders began to set up rice mills. They purchased the paddy as much as they could get, milled it and exported it outside. It was recorded that the milling agency of the Marwari traders and the bad harvest further added to the suffering of the people. Administrative Reports of Manipur of December, 1939 said that Aribam Chaobiton Devi from Terakeithel organized a small group of about four or five women of her own business circle and tried to stop the bullock carts which carried rice for the Marwari traders. They requested the cart drivers not to sell paddy to the Marwari traders. They also requested the authority to close all rice mills. On 12th December, 1939 a few hundred women of Khwairamband Bazaar gathered at the market from there they went to the office of the Political Agent, Mr. Grimwood. While they were marching towards the office of the Political Agent, they raised slogan against the export policy of the government. At that time, Grimwood had already gone to Sugunu. Then they came to the state office and surrounded Mr. T.A. Sharpe, the president of Manipur State Durbar and insisted that he issue an order to stop the working of the mills and the export of rice. Mr. Sharpe pointed out that such an order would require the sanction of the Maharaja who was then at Nabadwip. The number of crowds were also increased gradually and reached about four thousand. Sharpe, along with the women came to the telegraph office to send a telegram to Nabadwip to get the approval from the Maharaja. Sharpe shot his message and felt his duties had been done but the
women requested him to stay on till the Maharaja’s reply was received. Major Bulfield, the Commandant of the 4th Assam Rifles and Major Cumins the civil surgeon who had come to rescue the president of the Durbar were also kept confined in the telegraph office compound by the crowd of women. It was a gherao, perhaps the first ever in India to make history. The crowd of women held their ground till one O’clock in the morning in the icy cold December of Imphal. They left only when it was known that the British civil and military officers had disappeared.

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The Political Agent felt that there were valid grounds for closing the export of rice as the price was more than double the normal price in 1939. The next day when the Political Agent was talking to the crowd of women a telegram was received from Maharaja asking the Political Agent to help in the stoppage of the rice export. Order was issued to stop the export of rice and the functioning of the rice mills. The movement was successful as the Maharaja after his arrival in Imphal approved the Durbar resolution stopping the rice export to Kohima. Thus the first and second Nupi-Lan were very important events in the political history of Manipur as they changed the political directions of the state. The Manipuri women were and are always ready to take mass political movement if any action of the government affected their interest as well as the interest of the people at large.

KUKI REBELLION OF 1917-20

The Kuki rose in open rebellion against the British in April 1917. The rebellion is undoubtedly a great watershed in the history of Manipur. Though the Kuki rebellion was short lived, it successfully exposed the shallowness of the British control over the hill territory of Manipur. The immediate cause of the rebellion was the objection of the Kuki chiefs to allow their subjects to be sent to war with the labour corps which had been raised for the second time. It was also surmised that the rebellion of the Haka Chins in the Chin hills district of Burma might have encouraged the Kuki in Manipur to break in to active rebellion.

Driven by the urgency of the task, Higgins, the Political Agent proceeded to the hills in September, 1917 to meet a deputation of chiefs and discussed the problem of recruiting for the labour crops with them. After a prolonged discussion the chiefs decided to give coolies but later offered to give money instead. Frustrated with the outcome of the meeting Higgins ordered each village of the Kukis to supply coolies from each two houses. He flatly told the chiefs that they had either to recruit within a fixed period of time or submit to punishment. As a challenge to this stern warning Ngulkhup, chief of Mombi tribe sent a message to the neighbouring Kuki inhabiting villages that if they sent coolies, their villages will be burned down and their women and children will be killed. Arrogant as he was, Higgins took this as a issue of prestige and proceeded to Mombi to punish the recalcitrant chief on 17th October, 1917. Being failed to arrest the chief he burned the village to the ground.

On being apprised of the whole situation, the Chief-Commissioner of Assam deputed Cosgrave to Manipur to take charge as Political Agent at the end of December, 1917, setting Higgins free to deal with the rebellious Kukis. Around that time, a person called Chingakhamba Sanachaoba Singh who professed to have supernatural powers spread a rumour that the British imperialism was coming to an end and at the same time along with their downfall they should
kill the British. He went to Wakha, looted the forest toll station of Ithai along with his followers and continued his rebellion but within a few months he was captured and his followers dispersed.

The authorities began to deploy columns of the Assam Rifles and the Burmese military police in the hills. A detachment of 100 rifles from Kohima also moved up the cart road to reinforce the Manipur garrison. Immediately after Christmas, Higgins with his escort of 150 rifles started protected tours. They were less successful as they were attacked by large forces of Kukis and had to be extricated from an awkward position. Whatever might be the reasons, the leaders of the Kuki rebellion were determined enough to lose their lives and homes rather than recruit for the labour corps. The officials for the first time understood the magnitude of the rebellion.

On the other hand, the British officials wanted to break the spirit of the Kukis to such an extent that they would be left completely demoralized and ready to surrender without any condition. The officials were also planning to penalise the Kuki population heavily in the form of fines and other odd activities. But the Kukis were not ready to submit themselves. So the government of India then sent two companies of Gurkhas to reinforce the garrisons of Imphal, Kohima and Sadya. Deeply conscious of the grave situation 800 Naga coolies who had been enrolled from Kohima for service in France were diverted to the Kuki operations. Despite all these intensive operations the situation did not improve. Dejected as he was, Cosgrave in his letter to the government of Assam on 21st February, 1918 recommended that further punitive measures should be taken in the next winter. He even went to the extent of suggesting that aeroplanes should be used to bring the rebels to subjugation.

The final operation was launched in November 1918. By March 1919, Pachei, the last of the leading Kuki rebel chiefs was arrested and after that the rebellion slowly subsided. The rebellion though short lived, did have far-reaching consequences in the history of Manipur. The most significant result of the rebellion was the overall re-organization of the administration. The administration of the tribal area was placed under the Maharaja but it had to be done under the guidance of the Political Agent. In actual terms it was just an eye wash, the real administration was under the British authorities.

ZELIANGRONG MOVEMENT

During the twentieth century the most powerful organised tribal movement in the north-east India was the Zeliangrong movement led by Jadonang and later by Rani Gaidinliu. It started as a local movement of a group of tribal communities. The movement was to preserve their indigenous traditions and culture but as it progressed it came to be guided by the spirit of the national movement as it was in rest of the country.

The movement started after the artificial demarcation of administrative boundaries by the British which led to their economic hardships. The Zeliangrong comprised three Naga tribes namely the Zemi, Liangmei and Rongmei. Zeliangrong is an acronym formed out of the first letters of the names of these three Naga sub-tribes. Before the coming of the British this place was governed by the traditional chiefs and tribal councils. After 1830, British penetrated into the area in different phases and eventually territory inhabited by the Zeliangrong was apportioned to the Naga (Nagaland), North Cachar Hills (Assam) and Manipur. In fact this political
disintegration of the Zeliangrong area was a sore point against the British and proved crucial in the movement.

Jadonang was born in 1905 at Kambiron in the western hills of Manipur. He was brought up by his widow mother. He started his public career as a social and religious reformer. Being religious minded, he wanted to save their religion from the onslaughts of the alien religion and reformed and revitalized the religion of his people. He brought reforms in the traditional religions. In his work he was ably assisted by his cousin Gaidinliu who joined him as a teenage girl of thirteen. Jadonang and his closed confidants decided on nothing less than driving out the British and setting up a Naga Raj. The Zeliangrong attributed to him the powers of divination and believed that Jadonang would liberate them from the misery of living under alien rule.

Politically, Jadonang was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress. He came to know about the national movement when he visited Surma Valley in Cachar, an important theatre of political activity in north-east India. Gandhiji visited Assam during the Guwahati session of Congress in December 1926. In January 1927 Gandhiji was supposed to visit Cachar. Jadonang made all preparations to welcome him. He even arranged a contingent of 100 boys and 100 girls to present dance in his honour. In praise of Gandhiji he specially composed a song which beseeched the Mahatma to guide the Zeliangrong in their struggle against the British. The particular song became very popular among the Zeliangrong and inspired them in their later movement under Gaidinliu.

Jadonang raised his voice against the oppressive law enforced by the British in the hills of Manipur and stirred the masses to resist the policies of the government. Driving out the British had become a passion for him. He prepared for an open struggle. Inspired by the Civil Disobedience movement in 1939, he asked the people of Zeliangrong not to pay taxes to the government and to disobey the oppressive law which demanded compulsory labour and provisions for the troops, but there was nothing of Gandhian non-violence about Jadonang’s movement. In the traditional Naga movement non-violence had no place. He collected arms for the struggle against the Britishers. He also proclaimed to form ‘the Naga Raja’ and asked the people to pay him tribute for the cause. The Zeliangrong responded spontaneously to his call. Perhaps this was the first strain of Indian nationalism heard from the Naga hill area.

Alarmed by the growing popularity of Jadonang, the British decided to crush his movement before it spread to the neighbouring areas. The British were on the lookout for an opportunity to put Jadonang out of the way and the Meitei murders came in handy. J.C. Higgins the political Agent of Manipur started operation against the rebels with a column of the Assam Rifles. Many villages were burned and some temples built by Jadonang were destroyed. Collective fines were imposed and guns seized. Jadonang was located by the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar in the Bhuban hills where he was said to have gone on pilgrimage. He displayed Gandhian resignation and non-violence. He allowed himself to be arrested without any resistance. An extradition warrant was issued for his transfer from Assam to Manipur. He was charged with the murder of four Meitei traders in the north Cachar hills and sentenced to death without permitting defence counsel. Jadonang was executed in Imphal on 29th August, 1931 at the age of 26 leaving the burden of leading the movement to Rani Gaidinliu.
The execution of Jadonang could have been a setback for the movement but he had already created his successor in Gaidinliu who raised a standard form of rebellion in 1931 against the British government from Manipur, Naga hills and North Cachar hills of Assam.

RANI GAIDINLIU

Rani Gaidinliu was born on 26th January, 1915 at Nungkhao, a Rongmei village of Tamenglong. She was the third daughter of the eight children of Lothomong and Kalotlenliu. She had become a legend in her own life. She was just 16 year of age when she took up the leadership of Zeliangrong movement after Jadonang was executed. Rani concentrated her rebellion in Trans Barak basin. Her aim was to spread the ideas of Jadonang. Jadonang had earlier came to know of Mahatma Gandhi but it was Gaidinliu who used the name of the father of the nation in her political struggle. In her call to the people she said, “we are a free people, the white men should not rule over us, we will not pay house tax to the government, we will not obey their unjust laws like, forced labour and compulsory portor subscription.”

The people in the Zeliangrong area were ready to rebel and avenge the cruel punishment meted out to Jadonang. The people looked up at Gaidinliu as leader and believed in what she said. She utilised this support and convinced her people about similar agitation in the rest of the country. They responded spontaneously to her ‘no tax’ and ‘civil disobedience’ campaigns. The people contributed for the cause and a large number of people volunteered for the cause and a large number of people volunteered for the fight against the British.

Gaidinliu travelled widely in the Zeliangrong areas of Manipur, Naga hills and North Cachar hills and supervised herself the preparations and inspiring the people to strike against oppression rule at its root by holding tax payments and labour services. She also tried to keep a link between the revolutionaries of the hills and plains of the region but the communication gap on the one hand and the iron rule of the British on the other foiled such efforts.

Apprehending the grave danger from this rebellion, the British government decided to suppress the rebellion and capture Gaidinliu. The Assam Governor-in-Council ordered that the operations against Gaidinliu were to be centralized under the direct control of J.P. Mills, the Deputy Commissioner of Naga hills. He was authorized to use the men of the 3rd and 4th Assam Rifles. The S.D.O. of Haflong (North Cachar hills) and an officer of Manipur state were to assist him. British employed various means to arrest her. Her photographs were circulated to ascertain her identity and distributed widely throughout Manipur, Naga hills and North Cachar. Mr. Harvey, the president of Manipur state Durbar, announced a reward of Rs. 200/- for the arrest of Gaidinliu. Any village giving information about her was promised a remission of taxes for ten years. It did not help them in anyway. The British therefore raised the amount to Rs. 500/- but none came forward to co-operate with them. The Assam Rifles men and the police continued the search on their own to capture Gaidinliu which resulted in attacks and counter attacks. Long and difficult operations followed in the attempts to arrest this young rebel leader.

In October, 1932 Gaidinliu moved to Polomi village in the Naga hills and started the construction of an amazing wooden fortress which would accommodate four thousand warriors and would be a formidable one at Hangrum. Gaidinliu told her followers that the next
months would be a crucial period either she or the British would win. In the meantime, Mills got intelligence reports and dispatched a strong force of Assam Rifles under the command of Captain Macdonald accompanied by Hari Blah to Polomi. The fortress was not yet ready and the rebels did not take any precautionary measures. Captain Macdonald made a surprise attack on Polomi village at dawn on 17th October, 1932. The rebels were completely surprised and could not offer any effective resistance. They surrendered and Gaidinliu was also arrested from a house of the village. She was taken to Kohima in chains and then to Imphal for trial. About ten months later Haggins, the Political Agent in Manipur sentence of her for life imprisonment. She was just 17 years old when she was imprisoned.

Her followers were arrested and imprisoned for various terms. The arrest and conviction of Gaidinliu could not suppress the movement immediately. However, Gaidinliu imprisoned was more popular than she was at large. The movement was continued by her followers. Despite severe repression, the movement continued in various parts of the Zeliangrong area. It was inspired by Gaidinliu herself, even after her arrest. The arrest and conviction of leaders and mass repression by the government no doubt weakened the movement but the agitation never entirely died down and there were periodical rumours of fresh attempts to revive the Gaidinliu movement. Gaidinliu spent 14 years in British jail. She was released from Tura jail only after the country attained independence in 1947.

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