

# Reconstructing The Role Of Women In Political Reformation: Manipur

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## Abstract

*Political reformations throughout the past have been greatly influenced by the constant resistance against any form of oppression, in which every level of the society has impacted the past and the present. In Manipur, a state in the North Eastern region of India, unlike the stereotypical association of women to domestic chores, women in Manipur have occupied a pivotal role in the economic as well as the political domain which largely contributed to the political consciousness in Manipur. It is in this context this paper aims to highlight the role played by women, bringing into study the major women's movement known as the Nupi Lan in 1904 and 1939, which consequently laid the foundation for change and political reformation.*

**Keywords:** Political reformations; Economic; Consciousness; Nupi Lan.

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## I. Introduction

“The ultimate aim of government is not to rule nor to restrain by fear nor to exact obedience, but contrariwise to free every man from fear, that he may live in all possible security; in other words, to strengthen his natural right to exist and to work without injury to himself or others. ... In fact, the true aim of government is liberty”. Harold Laski in 1930 wrote, “it becomes necessary in each age to restate the case for freedom if it is to be maintained” (Lutz: 1950). The history of mankind is full of examples of introduction and opposition of change, in brief social political and economic consciousness since time immemorial, in the context of India in its freedom struggle Mahatma Gandhi once said “Real freedom will not come by acquisition of authority by a few, but the acquisition of the capacity of all to resist authority when abused” (Sahgal: 2013: 1). Manipur experienced the wave of the freedom struggle that sprouted from the oppositions against the exploitative administration of the colonial rule. The year 1891, marks the inception of British power in Manipur, with the sovereign authority of Raja Kula Chandra Singh declared to an end. What led to the British interference in Manipur was triggered by the incident on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1891, when five British officers, including the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Assistant Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam and the Political Agent of Manipur were murdered followed by the destruction of government property in the state which also involved the government treasury containing Rs. 1,85,729. The state was fined to pay Rs. 2,50,000 and an annual penalty of Rs. 50,000 (Singh:1989: 1-2). The state came under the indirect control of the British with the decision to appoint a native ruler, Manipur became a princely state under the British control The administration of the state was taken over by the British who appointed a minor king Chura Chand Singh to be the chief of the state. During the minority of the king Major H. St. P. Maxwell was appointed the Political Agent of Manipur and Superintendent of the state with full powers on 13<sup>th</sup> September 1891. Manipur from this period onwards experienced new administrative, economic and political policies which were formed as per the interests of the colonial rule. The changes introduced in the economic and political administration continued even after 1907 (Mutuwa:2018). Women in Manipur since the colonial period have played a prominent role both in and outside the household, from taking care of the household to actively voicing out against the colonial administration, women in Manipur are often credited to have started the first fight for freedom. Prior to the establishment of the colonial administration in Manipur, the state was engaged in warfare for political hegemony among the lineage chiefdoms, surrounded by hostile neighbours, necessitating women to fulfill the domestic chores, and involve in agro-marketing network. In 1891, the Burmese invasion and the Anglo-Manipuri War, caused a male depopulation and left Manipur under a devastating situation, this created a need for women to perform the male duties as well, changing socio economic and political relations. The change in roles and duties also involved women to take part in social gatherings and ceremonies as the head of the family. This created an environment of social, economic and political consciousness among the women and the market place

Khawairamband bazar where the economic activities took place, became a place of meeting and discussions (Sudhir: 2002) The Khawairamband market in Imphal holds a significant place in bringing the women (Meitei women) in unison, it is the place where historic movements took birth, with women gathering there to discuss issues and execute solutions. A sense of collective identity brewed from the daily interactions.

## **II. The First Nupi Lan 1904**

*Nupi Lan* which translates to “women’s war”, is considered to be the first women led mass uprising. What led to the mass agitation of women was the reintroduction of the system of *Lalup*, which means forced labour. The system of *Lalup* mandated males from the ages between seventeen to sixty to render free labour for the administration. (Chakravarti: 2022: 11). During the former rule of the Maharajas, the system of *Lalup* was exercised to carry out public works, but later Major Maxwell abolished the system of *Lalup*, as it affected the poorer sections of the society, and exempted the privileged sections from these duties.

The system was reintroduced following the incident on 16<sup>th</sup> March 1904, the state Bungalow in the occupation of Captain Nuthall, and Dunlop, Assistant Political Agent, were burnt down. After this the second fire incident took place on 6<sup>th</sup> July, the Khwairamband Bazar, which accommodated thousands of women vendors was destroyed by fire, a police enquiry was set up to investigate the cause of the fire but no offenders could be traced, then on 5<sup>th</sup> August 1904, the Bungalow occupied by Captain Nuthall and Mr. Dunlop was destroyed by fire for the second time. In all the cases of fire destruction though the offenders could not be traced the suspicion of incendiarism grew stronger, as a bamboo with an oiled rag attached was discovered in the site of the ruins. In the process of enquiry, some men were put under interrogation, which somewhat implied the involvement of the Raja. Under this suspicion, the cases of fire were considered a deliberate attempt to express resentment and so to rebuild the Bungalow, Major Maxwell issued an order to resuscitate the system of *Lalup* to rebuild the bungalows. This order to resuscitate *Lalup* faced the resentment of the people and on 3<sup>rd</sup> Sept 1904, thousands of women marched to Maxwell’s official residence with the demand to retract the order, the situation was brought under control somehow when the British authorities agreed to retract the order. Though the British authorities managed to disperse the crowd on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, the order was not withdrawn. As a result of which on 5<sup>th</sup> October 1904, around 5000 women gathered and held another meeting in Khawairamband market which not just aimed at retracting the order but abolishing the system of *Lalup* itself, leading to violent agitations where thousands of women participated (Reid: 1942: 89) The agitation grew so intense that the women demonstrators had to be handled by force, despite the presence of the British force trying to suppress the protest, the women continued the protest. Ultimately the British authorities retracted the order and had to build the Bungalows at their own expenses. This was the first agitation against the colonial administration, with women spearheading the protests, the success of the protest sparked more women led uprisings that generated an anti-colonial consciousness among the people (Yambem: 1976).

## **III. The Second Nupi Lan 1939-41**

The second *Nupi lan* took place under serious circumstances that affected the daily livelihood of the people leading to situations of starvation and the uncontrolled rice exports and price rise. In 1939, Manipur was struck by a severe famine which affected the agricultural production, causing a scarcity of food. Because of the decline in the production of rice, which was the only staple food of the Manipuris, the price of rice which was one *siccee* (equivalent of four annas of that time) per *shangbai* (about thirty-two kilograms), rose to two rupees. This hike in price affected everyone and more particularly the poor people, at the same time the women folk who depended on employment generated from hand pounding of the paddy were rendered unemployed. The price hike burdened households and discontentment towards the administration who did not take any step to tackle the crisis grew (Home Department: 1940). On the other hand though women were engaged in the economic activities, the Marwaris had the monopoly over it. Marwaris had monopolized the export of rice and even in the time of crisis when there was shortage of rice within the state the exports of rice continued. This attitude of the traders solely guided by self-interest had already raised concerns amid the local population. The administrators took no action against the Marwaris, and in the month of November 1939, large quantities of rice were exported and the government also permitted this export ignoring the crisis in the state. Neither the Maharaja nor the Durbar took any initiative to curb the crisis. This negligence on part of the traders and the authorities left the people helpless, facing financial crisis and some people to the point of starvation. On 12<sup>th</sup> December 1939, thousands of women protested openly against government and the traders demanding the immediate stoppage of the export of rice (Lyndall: 1943), women went to the extent of lying on the road where the loaded trucks carrying rice were prepared for exports. While the women protested, the Durbar was yet to take a decision as the members had different opinions. The president of the Durbar T. Sharpe and a member R. K. Bhaskor Singh were in favour of the rice export, while the others proposed a total ban on the rice export. The Durbar unable to reach a discussion opined to consult the Maharaja. The women protestors who were waiting outside the Durbar hall with the hope of receiving a positive response, on hearing the inability of the Durbar to come to a solution, women became

furious and pressurized the President to immediately send a telegram to the Maharaj, who was in Navadip (Bengal). The women protestors had made up their mind to not leave without their demand being fulfilled, and until the Maharaja responded to the telegram the women did not allow the president to leave the telegraph office. The wait stretched to 11:00 pm, along with the Durbar president T. Sharpe the civil surgeon Major P. H. Cummins was also detained. Amid the tensions Cummins managed to slip a note to his driver seeking help from the military. The commandant of the Assam Rifles Colonel Bulfield arrived with his troop, and a clash took place between the women and the military forces, with some of the women protestors injured, somehow the British officers were saved from the spot. After a long struggle on both sides the Assam Rifles managed to disperse the crowd. This incident did not remain isolated from the eyes of the neighbouring states experiencing the wave of the freedom movement, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported on the incident highlighting the struggle of the women injured during the protest. The following day the political agent in Manipur received a reply from the Maharaja who instantly issued an order suspending the export of rice.

Though the export of rice had stopped, the situation remained heated as the women protestors were now determined to shut the rice mills. Some mill owners agreed to close their rice mills, but as some cases of rice export continued, the protests intensified and as a result an angry mob of nearly 10,000 women marched towards one of the principal mills in order to stop the mills. A massive crowd threatened to burn down all the rice mills, if the authorities fail to stop them. Having no choice the political agent personally ordered the removal of electric switches of the mills. Women did not stop their protest against the export of rice and continued checking any export activity. (Chisti: 2005; 84-86) This movement against the colonial rule and the traders was backed by the social reformers like Hijam Irabot, who advocated social and political reforms. The *Nupi Lan* which started as an agitation against the economic policies of the Marwaris and the British, advocated the need for a constitutional and administrative reform. The initial demand which was to put a ban on the exports of rice, further focused on the change needed in the administration of the Durbar, the realisation on the influence administrators have on an individual's livelihood and the presence of a foreign authority was felt. The women movements later came to be recognized as the struggle for freedom.

#### IV. Conclusion

From the above discussions, it can be said that the women did not remain aloof from the political and economical situation of the time, the economic and political consciousness can be traced in the first and the second *Nupi Lan* which took place under genuine circumstances that prepared the ground for the emergence of a new Manipur. The market that which was the centre of economic activities connected women developing into a mechanism of political consciousness. The economic independence of the women fostered a strong mutual understanding that culminated a feeling of oneness. The strong resentments sowed the seeds for economic and political reforms and later contributed largely to the freedom movement. What sets the first and the second *Nupi Lan* unique is the participation of the ordinary women, visibilising the voices of the margins. Hence, the role of women in the political reformations cannot be ignored in reconstructing the history of Manipur and the freedom struggle of the country as a whole.

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