

GOVERNMENT GIRLS COLLEGE, BETUL

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INTRODUCTION

Nupi Lan –which means women’s war in Manipuri- is one of the important movements in the history of Manipuri women. It sowed the new seeds of economic and political reforms for a new Manipur in the early 40’s. It was started in 1939 as an agitation by Manipuri women against the oppressive economic and administrative policies ruled by the Manipur Maharaja and the Political Agent –Mr. Gimson- of the British Government (1933-45) in Manipur, and later on, evolved into a movement for the constitutional and administrative reform in Manipur.



How *Nupi Lan* broke out and how it gave motivation to the people of Manipur to start for a new political revolution are the important questions that have been addressed over the years. To know the issues related to the movements of Manipuri women, it would be worthwhile to understand their status in the then society. The role of Manipuri women in the agrarian economy of Manipur is a crucial one to reckon, right from the involvement in the production to the selling and marketing of food grains. They manage most of the internal trade of food and clothing and they hold a free standard of living in the society. They were the most important buyers and sellers in the main market *Khwairamband Bazar* – a bazar which was founded by Khagemba Maharaj around in 1580AD and which is also known as *Ima Keithel*. This bazar was also ‘the place’ where the outbreaking of the *Nupi Lan* took place (*Lamyamba*, 1973).



However the status of a Manipuri woman was not very significant individually, despite their main contribution to the economic prosperity. The practice of polygamy which was quite prevalent at that time, made them as unmaniculated and unsatisfied participants in the society. Perhaps, outbreak of two big wars -- one against the *Awans* (or the *Myanmars*) in 1817 which led to the Seven Years Devastation and the other against the British Empire in 1891 which led to a great reduction of the male population-- made them to a greater acceptance to have the practice of polygamy (one can, even now, see in a family which has very few boys, the boys are much more taken care than their sisters). After Manipur lost its independence, the women started to play important role in seeking for political and economic independence. It was the women who protested against the then Political Agent -Mr. Maxwell- against the forced labour -*lalup kaba* in Manipuri- on Manipuri men. Under their aggressive pressure amounted, the British had to withdraw the use of forced labour in 1904. They also involved in the wide spread demonstration against the increase of Water-Tax by the British Government (*Sanamani*, 1976). The point made here is that women played important roles not only in the economic activities but in the political reforms of Manipur also. The rest of the writing is organized in the following manner. In section II, we see how the policy of rice trade especially the rice export was the main cause the outbreak of *Nupi Lan*. Section III gives a brief summary of the incidents of December 12 and the developments of various political movements following the *Nupi Lan* is analysed in section IV. The overview ends with a small conclusion on the overall survey of *Nupi Lan* in section V.

II. The Export Policy of Rice and *Nupi Lan*:

As Manipur lost in the Anglo-Manipuri War in 1891, she was put under the British Administration by installing the young boy Churachand as the Maharaja in 1907 and by giving him the responsibility for governing the state. A Durbar headed by a President

chosen by the British assisted the Maharaja in the state's administration. The Durbar had the highest original and appellate court both in civilian and criminal matters.

Though there was some trade between Manipur and Assam governments before 1891, it became significant when Manipur was merged under the British Empire. Consequently there was a large scale export of rice to its neighbouring states. But considering the limited amount of rice produced in the valley, exporting of rice was regulated the state government by the turn of 1930's. Nevertheless, the rice export was going on to a large extent. One of the factors that had made the export of rice to a large degree was the introduction of the motor vehicles. Before the motor vehicles came to Manipur, most of the major transport of all kinds were by means of bullock, horse or handcarts and local people were able to control the exporting of rice easily. But since the introduction of the motor vehicles and the increase of the *Marwari* (also part of the so called *Mayangs* or foreigner by the local people) Traders, the export policy started changing. The outflow of rice by motorised vehicles, by then, had increased substantially, much to unawareness of its limited stock, and hence the price of rice started soaring high. The problem of price rise and dwindling of rice-stock was seen because of the high correlation between the increased of the number *Marwari* traders and the volume of rice exported outside the state. The *Marwaris* started their business early in the 1900's and were settled in the British Area in Manipur, which was not administered by the State Durbar. They slowly captured the trade of cotton and handloom products and also excelled in the rice trading since the arrival of the motor vehicles.

The State Durbar controlled the export of rice under two regulatory actions: 1) the Cart Tax which was levied on the rice exporters and 2) the *Lal Pass* which was a contract between the Manipur and Assam governments. In a statistical study by Sanamani Yambem, the rice exported per unit acre of cultivated land increased quite phenomenally from 1921 to 1938. A precarious situation was reached in 1939 when there was an all record of the highest export of rice and any failure of rice harvest in the following year would bring a huge shortage of rice and might bring forth a near famine. Then, lo! The inevitable came! In 1939, there was the outbreak of the World War II which swept the world over, and there was the excessive rain which continued well beyond the monsoon season -till October- which affected the harvest to a great extent. Sure enough, with the hailstorm that followed in mid-Nov, the state faced a severe shortage of food. On 13th September, the State Durbar, in apprehension of the food shortage as rain still continued beyond the usual monsoon season, passed a resolution to ban rice export by denying any license for export to any individual (Lamyamba, 1973). However they had to still commit the export of rice to the Kohima Civil Station in Assam as per agreement to the supply for the battalions of British soldiers. But soon, the rice export was resumed following the Maharaja' order. This reopening of rice was directly responsible for creating additional shortage of rice and hence to the outbreak of *Nupi Lan* (Lan Dena, 1990).

As the war broke out and the harvest became low, the price of rice soared by nearly 80 percent. Since the stock of rice produced was the only source of income and livelihood for the peasants, they were forced to sell their limited stocks of rice to the *Marwaris* who were wooing them by offering to buy at a lower price than the local traders. This made a huge amount of rice to be in the hands of these 'foreigner', and the local women who were traders in rice and paddy were deprived of their means of livelihood by then. Meanwhile, the *Marwaris* set up their own mills and still continued to export rice to the neighbouring states.

III. Incidents on Dec 12:

As usual, on Dec 11, the women traders had arrived at the *Khwairamband Bazar* to do their business, but there was nobody to sale an even a morsel of rice. Totally disappointed, they gathered and were all prepared for an agitation. Meanwhile there was another group of people campaigning against the price-rise of rice. These two groups combined together and started looking for 'foreign' traders to check if they were buying rice from any local people. On Dec 12, thousands of women gathered around the State Durbar Office asking for the immediate stoppage of rice export by shouting slogans and threatening to face various consequences. While the Durbar Members fled through the back door, but Mr. Sharpe, the President of the Durbar could not escape and had to face the agitated women alone (Lamyamba, 1973). Meanwhile, the number of women going on rampage kept on increasing and all directing towards the Durbar Office. When the President told that the order of banning the rice-export couldn't be done without the order of the Maharaj --who had gone to Nabadwip on pilgrimage-- the women took him to the telegraph office and confined him there till there was a response from the Maharaj. Hearing the news of the confinement of the Maharaj of the Durbar President and other officials, a platoon of Assam Rifles arrived then to control the situation.



The women raised their moral by shouting slogans like "Manipur Matakai Jai" and they became more aggressive. The situation had become fierce as the soldiers tried to clear the place around the office. However, the women did not dispersed totally as they

remained on the road till they received a positive reply from the Maharaja. In the charge of the soldiers, some 21 women got injured from the bayonets and butts of the soldiers' weapons. *Here, the readers are drawn their attention to note that the firmness of conviction and unity of women cannot be undermined especially in view of the fact that, this was occurred without any male participation or leadership.* This incidence made it clear that once the Manipuri women were convinced of their purpose, they never lacked militancy with the example like sleeping on the road in front of the lorries -a similar kind of reactions which can be seen at the present time also when their children fall prey in the hands of soldiers. Then a message came from the Maharaja on Dec. 14. But still the women were still around many mills overnight as they heard of some people converting rice into par-boiled rice and they urged the Durbar to ban all rice export completely as the Maharaja's message did not give any clear indication of banning all the various groups of exporters or recipients of rice.

IV. Nupi Lan and New Political Movements:

It's important to see how *Nupi Lan* helped in bringing the political reforms to move away from the then form of British Administration to a more democratic new Manipur. As *Nupi Lan* broke out, young political activities like L. Kanhai and T. Ibotombi of Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha started to discuss the issues of the women's agitation. However they could not do much as most of the Members of Mahasabha were rigid to do anything in the absence of Hijam Irabot who was away to Cachar by that time. When Irabot arrived on Dec. 16th, the *Nupi Lan* entered a new phase as the women received the male support, which were in the dormant state till then. Irabot formed a new political party –Manipur Praja Samelini—, as most of the members of Mahasabha did not agree to support the women's movement. Large public meetings were held with Irabot being the principal speaker. But on Jan. 9, 1940, he was arrested under section 124 of IPC on the grounds of inflammatory speeches (*Lamyamba*, 1973). After Irabot's arrest, his followers like Kanhai and others took up the cause of Nupi Lan and organised several meetings. Many people started following sort of Civil Disobedience by refusing to pay feudal dues and taxes. Thus the movement initiated by the women received active support from their male counterparts at a later stage.

As the boycott of *Khwairamband Bazar*, which started since the outbreak of Nupi Lan, continued almost till the end of the summer of 1940, the economy of the state suffered badly. Facing the situation, the administrative authority tried all means to force or convince the women to attend the Bazar. They arrested four women leaders and even threatened to sell off the empty places of the Bazar to outsiders, which however did not happened. In August 1940, the Manipuri women filed a petition signed by Kumari, Rajani, Maipakpi, Sanatombi and Nganbi pointing out their main grievances as given below (Sanamani, 1976).

- 1) The unfitness of the Durbar Members,
- 2) The unfitness of the Police Member,
- 3) The illegal action of the Inspector of Police,
- 4) The illegal action of conviction of four women,
- 5) The unexpected police assault on the Public on Jan 14, 1940 and
- 6) The illegal action of Dulap Singh, *Amin*.

They assured that once their grievances were redressed, they would attend the bazar. The handling of the women's boycott of bazar had some appreciation of the militancy of Manipuri women, as there was a great change of degree of handling the crisis from that of Dec 12 incident (Sanamani, 1976). Though the grievances of the women were not immediately redressed, the women certainly made themselves felt. But the boycott itself came to an end with most of the population of Imphal fleeing for safety as the II World War approached Manipur.

V. Conclusion:

The *Nupi Lan*, the Manipuri women's movement of 1939 was a result of the trade policy of the state Maharaja, which was more export oriented irrespective of the limited production of the food grains. As the production of rice became very low because of the excessive rain in that year and uncontrolled export of rice by the Marwari monopolies continued, the price of rice soared very high which was too much for the local people to continue their trade. Then the women who were more vocal and volatile than their male counterparts –because they were directly involved in the market activities—initiated the agitation and sustained it till a new political movement of Irabot and his followers took over it. While the original demand was confined to the banning of rice export, their later demands also included the changes of Durbar and Administrative set-up. Thus there is little doubt that *Nupi Lan* which started as a rice agitation against the policy of Maharaja and Marwari Monopolies, later evolved into a movement of constitutional, political, and economic reforms in Manipur.