

The Growth of Modern Political Consciousness and Political Parties in Manipur¹

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Abstract

Manipur is one of the north-eastern states of India where different communities such as Meetei, Meetei Pangal (Muslims), Kuki, Naga, etc. lived together for centuries. The issue of political consciousness is not a new phenomenon in Manipur as it had constitution, *Loiyumba Shilyen* at least since 11th century CE. But the growth of various political parties as modern democratic institutions emerged in the princely state of Manipur especially after the colonial encounter. The British colonial period witnessed combined oppression of colonial and feudal authority. The various forms of exploitations such as political and economic exploitation, social subjugation and ostracism through the invocation of the concept of *mangba-sengba* (impurity-purity), etc. provided the fertile ground for the growth of political parties especially in 1930-40's. The politically conscious middle class played significant role in shaping the popular democratic ideas and values and ultimately the rise of political parties in Manipur. In this seminal piece, an attempt has been made to understand the emergence of modern political consciousness and political parties in Manipur by making inquiries such as what was the historical context and how did political parties were formed? Further an attempt has been made to critically examine and explore the Merger Agreement 1949 signed between the Government of India and Maharaja Bhodhachandra Singh in shaping the political ideas and growth of political parties.

Keywords: Political consciousness, *mangba-sengba* (impurity-purity), political parties, democratic ideas, economic exploitation and the Merger Agreement

Introduction

In Manipur, there had been in existence of political consciousness since the pre-colonial period. But there is a problem in the claims of the existence of political parties in the sense of the modern term before the pre-British period in Manipur. The growth of modern political consciousness especially amongst the literate sections of the Manipuri society during the colonial period paved way to the growth of political parties. The growth of the Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha which at first founded essentially as a socio-cultural and educational organisation in 1934 and later became political party could be discerned in the historical context of colonial-feudal rule. It marked the beginning of a new era in the annals of Manipur. The situation of political dominancy, economic exploitation and social subjugation and ostracism led to increasing tendency of open manifestation of popular movements in the first half of the 20th century. The collective sentiments and wisdom that was expressed in popular movements inturn helped in shaping the political consciousness

among the people especially the educated middle class. The language of constitutional rule, growth of increasing publications and journalistic activities certainly created a greater awareness of democratic rights, such as right to assemble, free speech and thought, right to vote, and so on. This was evident among Manipuri on the demand of Manipur Constitution Act 1947 and subsequently in the election of 1948.

Genesis of Political Parties

Maharaja Churachand Singh who was patronised by the British and his close confidants started a plan to tide over the political, economic and socio-cultural fabric of the state so as to serve their interests as the administration was in the hands of the British officials especially after the Anglo-Manipur War 1891. The local ruling elites who were the collaborators of the British wanted to assert their legitimacy to rule. On the other hand the need for reforms to bring changes in polity, economy, education and socio-cultural domain were also felt by the newly emerged educated people such as H. Irabot Singh, S.

Thambou Singh, N. Thanin, H. Angahal Singh, H. Angou Singh, Ch. Pishak Singh, M. Angangjao Singh, T. Damudor Singh, Damdarchandrapal, L. Kamdeb Singh, Ph. Atombapu Sharma, H. Birahari Singh L. Ningthemjao Singh, Bankabihari Sharma, Dwijamani DevaSharma, N. Gopal Singh, Samarendro Singh, Ak. Amubi Singh, Kh. Mahendra Singh, Lalita Madhop Sharma, S. Lalit, Dr. Leiren Singh, etc.² In fact they had connections with their counter parts in Cachar, Tripura, Assam, Bengal, Dacca and Burma and were influenced by the on-going Indian struggle for independence. The growth of politically conscious educated middle class though small in number provided the ground for nurturing the collective sentiments against the prevailing oppressive regime and formulating the popular demands to the wider public. The period witnessed the increasing publications and journalistic activities such as *Meetei Chanu* by H. Irabot Singh in 1922, *Yakairol*, edited by N. Leiren in 1930, *Lalit Manjuri Patrika* in 1933, etc. In this aspect, elsewhere in colonial India, B.B. Misra also informs, 'a middle class was in the process of formation during the colonial rule with a general vision, a competent leadership and a body of social ideas'.³ In the similar vein, the educated middle class in Manipur played an important role in the formation of organisation. The politically conscious middle class first felt the need for unity among the Manipuri as they aspired for a new political system based on democratic values and ideas. But perhaps due to the prevailing combined oppression of colonial-feudal rule, they were sagacious enough to avoid any outright confrontation with the established rule. After series of deliberation, with the initiative from the royal palace, the Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha was established under the leadership of Maharaja Churachand Singh. It was formed with the primary objective of bringing unity amongst the Manipuri who had settled in different parts of Assam, Tripura, Dacca, undivided Bengal and Burma.

On 21st May 1934, as part of the inauguration of the first conference of the Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha, Manipur Mela was organised which displayed the spectacular Manipuri cultural items such as music, dance and drama. The first plenary session of the Mahasabha was held on 30th May 1934 at the royal palace in Imphal with Maharaja Churachand Singh as the chief guest. It was

attended by three hundred eleven delegates from different places such as Cachar, Tripura, Assam, Bengal, Dacca and Burma and took 22nd resolutions on education, language and script, socio-culture, sports, religion, etc. The resolutions included such as imparting primary education in Manipuri vernacular language, to promote girl education upto primary education, to establish a historical society to write the history of Manipur, to learn Meetei script, protection of women from sexual offences, to encourage scientific learning of traditional martial arts and sports i.e. *thang-ta* (martial arts), *mukna* (traditional wrestling) and *sagol kangjei* (polo) at the grassroots level, to set up an organisation to preach and spread Vaishnavism, to prohibit smoking by implementing Assam Juvenile Smoking Act, etc.⁴

The second conference was organised from 26th to 30th January 1936 at Silchar which was attended by four hundred delegates from Manipur, Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Cachar, etc. with Maharaja Churachand Singh as the chief guest. In the session, fifteen resolutions were adopted that included the promotion of Manipuri literature, to request the Burmese authority for setting up of Manipuri language department so as to preserve the language by the Manipuri who lived in Burma, helping in setting up primary schools to impart Manipuri language at Manipuri villages outside the state, etc.⁵

The third conference was held from 28th February to 2nd March 1937 at Mandalay (Burma) whose chief guest was Hijam Irabot Singh and it adopted fifteen resolutions dealing with social, economic and political problems of Manipur. The resolutions included setting up of Manipuri medium school at Mandalay, to request Manipur state education authority to add Hindu religious literatures in school texts to promote and preserve Hinduism, to work for the betterment of the Manipuri women in Burma, to open a branch of Gouriya Dharma Prachari Sabha, Historical Research Society and Burma Manipur Pandit Jyotish Samaj in Burma, to request the concerned authorities of India and Burma to facilitate the trade and commerce, etc.⁶

It is very clear that the resolutions of the Mahasabha were initially focused on socio-cultural, educational and economic issues to uplift the Manipuri and to make strong and

developed society. But reforming society was not an easy task as Maharaja was greatly influenced by the Brahma Sabha, the highest body in the socio-cultural domain that sanctioned '*mangba-sengba*' (impurity and purity).

The Chinga Session: A New Turn

The fourth session of the Mahasabha was held on 29th and 30th December 1938 at Chinga which is popularly known as 'Chinga session'. The session was a great landmark in the growth of political party in Manipur. Till 1938, Mahasabha was deeply engrossed in socio-cultural and Hindu religious activities prescribed by Maharaja and his Brahma Sabha. In the fourth session the Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha decided to rename the organisation as 'Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha' to make the organisation secular. It was led by Hijam Irabot Singh as President and Ch. Pishak Singh as General Secretary. It formed a working committee of ten members such as Lalita Madhop Sharma, G. Bankabihari Sharma, E. Tompak Singh, N. Thanin Singh, S. Krishnamohon Singh, N. Nabakishore Singh, RK Ratansana Singh, L. Jugeshwar Singh, L. Khogendrajit Singh and K. Kunjabihari Singh. The change in the name of the organisation was not merely superficial as the objectives of the organisation were also changed. The complex character of the Mahasabha which on one hand Maharaja wanted to control and on the other a vehicle of popular anti-monarchical aspirations and a non-sectarian formation parted ways. It reflected within the Mahasabha, the rise of new generation that did not like to identify with the monarchy that was patronised by the British. It laid the foundation for the establishment of a new political organisation based on secular and democratic values and ideas.

Such political and socio-economic resolutions were clear indication of the direction in which the Mahasabha was started moving. It is interesting to note that the resolutions before the Chinga session were in fact based on the social composition, status and position of the ruling elites. The Brahma Sabha, in connivance with the king regulated and strengthened the socio-religious hierarchies. The local ruling elites and Brahmins were the legitimate source of purity in the society and hence they would decide everything based on

the social status and position. Whereas the Chinga session was the first call to abolish the established rule under the patronage of the British and simultaneously urged for the secular and democratic rule in the state. The attack on the Maharaja and the Brahma Sabha that allowed social hierarchy and extracted forced labour was a serious engagement at the 4th session of the Mahasabha.

Such political development was taken seriously by the state authority and issued an order that forbade the employee of the state government to be member of the party and state pensioners were not allowed to assist and take part in it in any way.⁷ As a response to royal order, large number of government employees who were at once member of the Mahasabha left. However, H. Irabot Singh, a member of Sadar Panchayat and E. Tompok Singh, clerk in land revenue department resigned from their respective government services. Mahasabha was reorganised with H. Irabot Singh as President, N. Thanin Singh as General Secretary and M. Gopal Singh, K. Bidur Singh and T. Asuselung as members.⁸ Nevertheless the government continued to exert pressures and restrictions on them.

Despite of the restrictions, the political activities gradually intensified and spread to different areas. The ongoing Indian national struggle and its ideas of national unity, *swadeshi*, non-cooperation, *satyagraha*, boycott of foreign goods especially imported cloths, etc. impressed deeply the educated middle class leaders such as H. Irabot Singh who organised a bonfire of foreign cloths in their possession at the Cheirap Court campus and began to popularise the use of *khadi*. The popular slogan 'Bande Mataram' was used in the political mobilisation against the colonial rule in Manipur.⁹ The political activities began to spread in different areas such as Wangkhei, Khurai, Kakching, Wangjing, Pukhao, Andro, Nambol, etc.

Nupi Lan (Women's War) and Radicalization of Politics

Towards the end of 1939 people's discontentment increased manifold. Reaching their threshold of tolerance, Manipuri especially women have opted for direct confrontation with the authority. The women asked the authority to stop the export of rice and demanded fulfillment of democratic

rights which they felt that they had long been denied of it. The main grievance was caused by the British economic policy especially the unilateral export of rice from the state to Kohima and Assam for military personnel. Starting from early 1890's the export of rice increased gradually over the years without bothering the local requirements and in 1930's it was the single most important item for export. In 1892-93 eight thousand maunds of rice were exported to Kohima.¹⁰ In 1897-98, eleven thousand two hundred six maunds of rice which was of Rs. 20,716 were exported. In 1898-99, the volume of the export of the rice reached to thirty six thousand four hundred thirty six maunds which was of Rs. 40,991.¹¹ In 1911-12, it was 108086 maunds and increased to 181370 maunds in 1923-24. The export of rice was rapidly accelerated since mid-1920's especially after the use of motor vehicle in 1925. In 1926 because of the alarming situation due to inflation and acute shortage of rice in Manipur, the export was stopped for few months.¹² In 1931-32, 2,77,389 maunds, 2,54,619 maunds in 1935-36 and finally increased to 3,72,174 maunds in 1938-39. Such increase was in fact, in the tune of 2,27,160 maunds between 1925 to 1938. Not only this increase in the volume of export made the situation worst but also the way the export was done especially after the *Lal pass* system was introduced. The export of rice was first done through the *Cart tax* system i.e. the state controlled over the assessment and collection of the tax. But under the new policy of *Lal pass*, assessment and collection was franchised to trading firms which were to make a fixed payment to the state half yearly.¹³ The new system helped the Marwari traders such as Kistur Chand Siraogi, SadaSukh, Gobind Lal, Chuni Lal, KhetrajSurjamal, Duli Chand Kundan Lal, Sanoi Ram, etc.¹⁴ It helped in the consolidation of the Marwari capital in the trade office.¹⁵

In July-August 1939, there was excess rain that damaged the crops. Again, there was heavy rainfall in September-October that badly affected the harvest.¹⁶ Normally average price of rice per maund during the years was around Rs. 1.12 annas but in 1939 it raised to Rs. 2.¹⁷ But the authority continued the unilateral export of rice. Realizing the unusual inflation, on 13th September Manipur State Darbar ordered to stop the export of rice

from Manipur until further notice.¹⁸ Because of the heavy pressures from the Marwari traders such as Kistur Chand Siraogi, Darbar held a meeting on 23rd November 1939 and allowed the export of rice.¹⁹ The rural poor and especially women had been hard hit by the inflation, the shortage of rice and essential commodities.²⁰ The situation could not improve and was fast moving towards a worse situation.

In the following days there were complete *hartal* at many places and bazaar areas were completely deserted. The activities of the women did not calm down as they organised regular meetings and targeted Marwari mills.²¹ In the meantime, some women leaders sought the co-operation and guidance from the Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha. They approached to Lalita Madhop Sharma, Bankabihari Sharma, L. Kunjabihari, E. Tompok Singh, etc. After returning from Cachar, H. Irabot Singh, President of the Mahasabha convened an emerging meeting of the working committee on 7th January 1940. There was a great deal of debate among the leaders on the issue of supporting the women's movement. In the meeting H. Irabot Singh expressed his desire to support the agitation and raise the movement to a higher pitch and exposed the colonial authority. However, members such as Lalita Madhop Sharma, Bankabihari Sharma, Kh. Magho Singh, etc, did not agree with the idea of supporting the movement. H. Irabot Singh and his supporters such as K. Bidur Singh, Amuselung, Khagendrajit, etc decided to form a new political party called Praja Sanmilani. H. Irabot Singh was the President and E. Tompok Singh was the General Secretary of the new party. The formation of the party was significant as the tempo of the movement raise to another level as they demanded for the establishment of a responsible democratic government. On 7th January 1940 a public meeting was held at Police Lane Ground. H. Irabot Singh addressing the people recalled the incident of telegraph office. He says,

'Remember the telegraph office incident. We begged for rice and in return received bayonet wounds and wounds from gun butts. For one handful of rice, we paid two handful of blood. Had we not paid blood, we would not have rice. The export of rice has been stopped and the mills closed at the cost of the blood of

Brahmin womenfolk who have shed their blood for the sake of food. Men should no longer remain silent for fear of arrest and going to jail. Let's pay back the sacrifice of the womenfolk'.²²

He asked the people for non-cooperation and civil disobedience movement against the colonial and feudal authority. The main mobilization was done through extensive meetings, speeches, pamphlets and door to door persuasion. Special emphasis was made on the mobilization of urban dwellers, peasants and women. Rural areas became the scene of no tax campaign – refusal to pay ferry tax, not paying *pothang senkhai*, defiance of forest laws, boycott of foreign cloths, complete *hartals*, etc. The government resorted to suppressive and coercive measures. On 9th January H. Irabot Singh was arrested for making seditious speech and a case was registered in the court of Manipur State Durbar under Section 124/I.P.C. On 11th January other leaders such as Th. Angou Singh, E. Tompok Singh, etc. were arrested. On 13th January, Government prohibited all types of meetings and processions inside the British Reserve Area which was kept under section 144 of C.R.P.C.²³ On 21st March 1940, the court passed the judgement on H. Irabot Singh with the remark,

'In the circumstances the Darbar maintained that the accused's speech (H.Irabot) which was a gross misrepresentation of fact was one which would be highly successful in bringing into hatred and exciting disaffection towards the state authority. The Darbar therefore find the accused guilty of making a seditious speech under section 124 (A)/IPC and sentences him to a term of 3 years'.²⁴

Despite of such repressions, the people especially women openly defied the authority.²⁵ The boycott of the bazaars was still continued. Ultimately R.N. Ried, Governor of Assam asked the Maharaja to make considerable reforms in the administration of the state so to end the political impasse.²⁶ The Praja Sanmelani played a very crucial role for the growth of modern political consciousness amongst Manipur. During the 2nd World War, H. Irabot Singh was at Sylhet Jail where he got the opportunity to meet Communists and Congress leaders. After his release from the

jail 20th March 1943, the authority in Manipur did not allow him to enter Manipur. In this regard, on 9th April 1943, Maharaj Bodhchandra Singh writes to the political agent,

'If Sir Irabot Singh is a member of the Communist Party and his attitude remains unchanged, I do not think it advisable that permission should be granted to him to return to Manipur especially for the duration of war'.²⁷

While he was outside Manipur, he worked with the Kishan Sabha, a branch of All India Kishan Sabha and organised peasants for 'grow more food' campaign in Cachar, Surma Valley and Sylhet.²⁸ He joined the Communist Party of India, Assam unit and attended the 1st Congress of the CPI held at Bombay from 23rd May to 1st June 1943.²⁹ In 1945, he contested the Assam Legislative Assembly Election as a candidate of the CPI but lost to Satindra Mohan Deva of the Indian National Congress. At the end of the World War in 1946, he returned to Manipur. Slowly and gradually, he started involving in organising and strengthening the Praja Sanmelani, the Krishak Sabha³⁰ and the Manipur Praja Mandal³¹. Later the Manipur Praja Sanmelani and the Manipur Praja Mandal merged together to form the Manipur Praja Sangha on 21st August 1946 as both leaders of the parties felt the need for having a single party. In fact, both these parties were under the leadership of H. Irabot Singh. R.K. Bhubonsana Singh was the President and H. Irabot Singh was the General Secretary of the party. Prominent leaders of the party were L. Bijoy Singh, T. Bokul Singh, L. Kanhai Singh, T. Ibotombi Singh, K. Parijat Singh, Th. Angou Singh, etc. And above these, women leaders were T. Sabi Chanu, T. Thoibi Chanu, H. Indurekha Chanu, A. Yupti Chanu, MK. Binodini, Kh. Pramodini, Ch. Purnimashi, T. Piyai, etc. The party strongly demanded for a constitution, the establishment of a responsible government based on democratic values and principles, election based on adult franchise, socialist pattern of economic growth, amalgamation of hill and valley administrations, establishment of schools, hospitals and panchayats at the villages, reduced the land tax through land reforms, stopped the arbitrary ejection of peasants, improved the irrigation facilities, abolished unpopular taxes such as cycle tax, etc.³² The

party organised public meetings and campaigns in different parts of Manipur to raise the issues and demands.

Post World War Phase

After the world war, everybody in Manipur felt the days of the British colonial rule would be over and there would be an opportunity for having a responsible government. Therefore, the need for a common political platform was equally felt by many leaders to express and represent the desire and expectations of the people. On 18th September 1946, a conference of the representatives of political parties such as the Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha, Manipur Praja Sangha, Krishak Sabha, etc. was held at Aryan Theatre Hall. To materialise the objective, they formed a Co-ordinating committee with Y. Khoimacha Singh as the convener. Another conference of all parties was held on 4th October 1946 at Aryan Theatre Hall with R.K. Bhubonsana Singh in the chair.³³ In response to the Co-ordinating Committee's request, different parties sent their representatives who would be representing their respective parties in the interim body to work out the common platform. Lalit Madhop Sharma, E. Tompok Singh and L. Jugeshwar Singh represented Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha, Manipur Praja Sangha was represented by R.K. Bhubonsana Singh, A. Gouramani Sharma and A. Anjo Singh. Manipur Krishak Sabha was represented by M. Madhumangol Singh and Kanhai Singh. The Co-ordinating Committee was represented by Y. Khoimacha Singh, S. Indramani and S. Krishnamohana Singh. At the outset, members present agreed to form the political party named Manipur State Congress.

H. Irabot Singh was not given a chance to present his views at the conference. Finally, as a mark of political dissent, he left the conference hall with his supporters such as T. Bokul Singh, L. Kanhai Singh, T. Ibotombi Singh, L. Khogen Singh, O. Ibomcha Kabiraj, etc who were the members of the Manipur Praja Sangha and the Krishak Sabha.³⁴ While other members and sympathisers of the Co-ordinating Committee and the Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha who were remained at the conference hall, unanimously resolved to form the Manipur State Congress. RK Bhubonsana Singh was the President of Manipur State Congress and Y. Khoimacha Singh as the

General Secretary. The initially executive members of Manipur State Congress were Dr. Leiren Singh, S. Krishnamohan Singh, L. Jugeshwar Singh, Priyo Gopalsana, Ratansana Singh, Dijamani Dev Sharma, Phurailatpam Bedagava Sharma, Potsangbam Tomal and A. Nimai.³⁵

Members of the Krishak Sabha and the Manipur Praja Sangha who believed in Marxism intensified political mobilization of the masses after they had disagreement with the leaders of the Manipur State Congress. They reached out to different ethnic groups and tried to arouse political consciousness among the groups. On 30th November 1947 with the initiative of the Manipur Praja Sangha, a joint meeting of eight organisations from valley and hill areas of Manipur was held at MDU Hall. The members present unanimously agreed to form a united front to bring unity and peace among the different ethnic communities and to push forward for the demand of a democratic government.³⁶ As movement for the democratisation of the polity was picking up its pace, the members of the Krishak Sabha and the Manipur Praja Sangha organised a meeting for the establishment of District Organising Committee (DOC) of the Community Party on 23rd August 1948 and appointed T. Bokul Singh as the Secretary. A committee of eight members – H. Irabot Singh, T. Bokul, T. Ibotombi, L. Bijoy, L. Kanhai, T. Amuselung, T. Jubati Devi and Th. Bira Singh was constituted to form the Communist Party of India in Manipur.³⁷ Gradually youth leaders such as N. Budhachandra, L. Ibotombi Singh, M. Meghachandra Singh, N. Binoy Singh, M. Ibohal Singh, Ng. Muhindro Singh, etc. joined the party.³⁸

Political issues in Manipur (1947-49 CE)

In fact, during the 2nd half of the 1940's the open display of popular political consciousness on various issues concerning the nature of polity in the state and democratic rights of the people were picking up with full vigour. The political parties were consistently demanding for the establishment of a responsible government. In such situation Maharaja Budhachandra Singh felt the need to introduce some new constitutional reforms. As an initial step, he issued the Royal Order No. 30P on 12th December 1946 for the formation of a constitution making committee

on the basis of democratic principles. In fact, the political trend that was witnessed could be broadly divided into two groups i.e. The Manipur Praja Sangha and the Krishak Sabha under the leadership of H. Irabot Singh on one hand and the Manipur State Congress on the other. In early part of 1947, keeping the impending political change in view, the Manipur Praja Sangha and the Krishak Sabha were demanding to postpone the scheduled election of the members of the Constitution Drafting Committee. But the state authority did not yield to their demands and as a result these parties boycotted the election. On the other hand, the authority made efforts to make leaders of the Congress to participate in the election process of the drafting committee.

While the Constitution Drafting Committee was involved in finalizing the draft constitution, an Interim Government called the Manipur State Council was established on 1st July 1947 with Major Pearson, the President Manipur State Darbar as the first Chief Minister of Manipur. In the meantime, some leaders of the Congress had collusion with F.F. Pearson on the question of interim government formation. As per the understanding, RK Bhubonsana and S. Krishnamohon Singh were included in the government.³⁹ Such connivance was condemned not only by all political parties in the spectrum but also by a large section of the Manipur State Congress. On 21st July 1947 the Congress split into two i.e. 'Tompok Congress' which condemned the opportunist activities of some Congress leaders was led by E. Tompok Singh as President and Irom Chandahas as the General Secretary and 'Tomal Congress' which was led by RK Bhubonsana as the President. The split was primarily because of the vested interest of the individual leaders rather than any fundamental differences on ideology. Both the groups claimed each other as the real Congress. In view of the emerging political imbroglio, on 23rd July 1947, F.F. Pearson warned the Tompok Congress that their action was liable to punishment to a criminal charge of misrepresentation and cheating as they breached all existing norms of transparent political process.⁴⁰ Sensing the situation, on 14th August 1947, Maharaja dissolved the Manipur State Council and established a new Interim Council with MK. Priyobrata Singh, younger brother of the Maharaja as the Chief Minister.⁴¹

In the meantime, Maharaja was closely monitoring the political developments and looking for the opportune time to act so as to fit him in the new changing situation and to capture power in the election. In fact, the authority had collusion with some Congress leaders and made them members of the Constitution Drafting Committee and of the Interim Government so as to isolate H. Irabot Singh and his Manipur Praja Sangha and Krishak Sabha. But after complete disillusionment with the two factions of the Congress, Maharaja was looking for an alternative to the Congress. In fact, he was trying to put his own men in the Legislative Assembly. A group of people with the tacit support of the Maharaja formed a new party called Praja Shanti Shabha in 1948 with N. Ibomcha Singh as the President and W. Radhamohon Singh as the General Secretary. In the given situation, the Praja Shanti Sabha, being Maharaja's favorites became a leading party. He also reached out to tribal chiefs in the hills to be his supporters in his effort to capture power.

In the general election held under the Manipur Constitution Act 1947, no political party could secure an absolute majority. The Manipur State Congress managed to get fourteen seats, the Praja Shanti Sabha got twelve seats, the Krishak Sabha got only six seats, the Socialist got three seats and eighteen seats from hill constituencies. As no, political party could secure an absolute majority, a non-congress coalition government headed by the Praja Shanti Sabha and supported by Krishak Sabha and independent hill MLAs was formed. The first ever elected government on the basis of adult franchise was headed by MK. Priyobrata Singh with a council of eight members.⁴² On 18th October 1948, the Manipur State Assembly was formally inaugurated by the Maharaja Budhachandra who expressed,

'I (Maharaja Budhachandra) now bring to the mind of the people that I had transferred my powers and responsibilities other than those of a constitutional ruler to the state council since 1st July 1947 before the lapse of British paramount and since then, I have already remained as a constitutional ruler'.⁴³

It was certain that after the inauguration of the Manipur State Assembly on 18th October 1948, Maharaja was just a nominal head of

the state and had no legal or constitutional powers as far as law making in the state was considered. Indeed, legal and constitutional power had been totally transferred to the elected representative assembly. Maharaja did not have the legal or constitutional power of signing an agreement on behalf of Manipur without the approval by the Manipur state assembly. The Manipur Merger Agreement was signed between the Maharaja Budhachandra and the representatives of the Indian Union on 21st September 1949 and it was effective from 15th October 1949. The historical events and processes that resulted in the signing of the Manipur merger Agreement 1949 were important because many political parties took different positions. Several political organisations, associations and every individual questioned the validity and legitimacy of the Indian State's rule in Manipur and expressed in strong words their voice against the agreement.

The Merger of Manipur and the Roles of Political Parties

On the eve of the transfer of power the Indian political leaders had an extensive territorial vision for modern India to serve the geo-political interests. A narrative of 'integration of princely state as V.P Menon preferred to call'⁴⁴ brings out the political trends in states and Manipur in particular. India's transition from a British colony to a modern sovereign state witnessed the emphasis of what Benedict Anderson describes as 'political imagination'⁴⁵ of communities especially in the frontier areas such as Kashmir, Northeast or for that matter in Manipur. This vigorous mission for what Sanjib Baruah describes as 'nationalizing space'⁴⁶ especially in the frontier areas provides a basis for Indian nation-building process.

Deputy Prime Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who was the arch manoeuvre of the integration policy of India⁴⁷ played a crucial role that included among other tactics both diplomatic persuasions and force.⁴⁸ For this role he had been described by Barbas N Ramusack as a 'hard headed dictator'.⁴⁹ He saw of the people of the Northeast region as disloyal other and with Mongoloid prejudice. On 7th November 1950, he writes to Nehru, 'the people inhabitants these portions have no established loyalty or devotion to India. Even the Darjeeling and Kalimpong areas are not

free from pro-Mangoloid prejudices'.⁵⁰ The Indian state's calculation was for the Northeast or for that matter Manipur was a border state, backward and a geo-strategic necessity for India.⁵¹ On the part of India, the situation was especially handled by Governor of Assam, Sri Prakash, accompanied by Nari Rustomji, Advisor to the Governor of Assam, AK Chatterjee, Joint Secretary Ministry of States and V.P Menon, Advisor to the Ministry of States, Government of India who were under the guidance and supervision of Sardar Patel. On the other hand, after the general election in 1948 in Manipur, the newly elected members were actively engaged in government formation. At that time, there was a proposal for the creation of a separate province called 'Purbanchal Pradesh' consisting of Manipur, Cachar, Tripura and Lushai Hill to preserve their culture, identity and language. On 22nd August 1948, a public meeting was organised by Manipur State Congress. PC Ghose, a member of the All India Congress Working Committee asked the people to accept the proposal as Manipur would not be a viable state both economically and politically.⁵²

The proposal for the 'Purbanchal Pradesh' was equally opposed by both the general public and many political parties such as the Praja Shanti Party, the Krishak Sabha, etc. H. Irabot Singh opposed it and organised a public meeting on 21st September 1948 at MDU hall to denounce the plan. On that day an incident took place at Pungdongbam, where a scuffle broke out between the participating delegates and Manipur state police. One police personnel died. The Manipur Government declared the Krishak Sabha and the Manipur Praja Sangha as unlawful and H. Irabot Singh too became outlawed. Such prevailing political situation in Manipur was closely observed and monitored by the Indian officials. In fact, Sir Akbar Hydari, the Governor Assam arrived at Imphal on 22 December 1948. But he died of heart attack on 28th December 1948 and Shri Prakash, a Indian National Congress leader succeeded as the Governor of Assam who came to Manipur on 22nd March 1949.

Sardar Patel instructed the Sri Prakash, Governor of Assam to speed up the formalities of merger and not to let the opportunity slip away. On 18th September 1949, on the instruction of the Sri Prakash,

V.P. Menon put the Maharaja under house arrest which had been described by Nari Rustomji, advisor to the Governor of Assam as 'protective guard to ensure that all should be well'.⁵³ It was the most difficult and traumatic situation for the Maharaja who happened to be the nominal head of the state. It was under coercion and pressure, Maharaja Bodhachandra was handling the issue of the merger of Manipur which had been described as 'take over'.⁵⁴ Ian Copland, informs about such situation for princes of the native states – 'the princes did not go willingly and succumbed only because of the implacable demands of the Congress dominated Union Government-demands backed by implicit threats of public exposure, manufactured rebellion and if need be of military force'.⁵⁵

Certainly, the pro-merger voice of the Manipur State Congress was strongly opposed and rejected by other political parties such as the Praja Shanti Sabha that headed the coalition government in 1948, the Krishak Sabha, the Community Party of Manipur, the Manipur Socialist Party, etc. On 23rd March 1949, in a memorandum to the Governor of Assam, N Ibomcha Singh, General Secretary Praja Shanti Sabha requested him 'to allow Manipur to retain its existing status since Manipur was culturally and linguistically different from the rest of India and also economically backward and he argued that integration would lead to an exploitation of the place by the richer states of India'.⁵⁶ On 25th August 1949 the Praja Shanti Sabha made its position clear by resolving to send N. Ibomcha and S. L. Lunneh to convince the Government of India substantiating the reasons against merger.

The Communist Party of Manipur and H. Irabot Singh opposed and condemned the pro-merger tone of the Congress in strongest term and called the move as the forced integration.⁵⁷ He stressed the need for free Manipur retaining its political autonomy, its distinct culture, language, scripts, history, etc. He asserted that if Manipur joined India it should be strictly based on consensus and democratic principles and public opinion.⁵⁸

On 27th July 1949 the hill members of Manipur State Legislative Assembly held a meeting under the chairmanship of S.L. Lunneh to express their voices of protest against the subversive activities of the

Congress to merge with India.⁵⁹ The then speaker of the Manipur Legislative Assembly, T.C. Tiankham, expressing his position against the merger wrote to S. Gourahari Singh, Private Secretary of Maharaja that 'this assembly that represents people of Manipur should decide the issue and the Maharaja should discuss the matter in the assembly'.⁶⁰ The speaker of the assembly questioned the rights of the king to arbitrarily decide the issue as Manipur had an assembly elected based on adult franchise.

Despite of such objections, the Indian state affected the Manipur Merger Agreement with Maharaja Bodhachandra on 21st September 1949 without the sanction of the democratically constituted Manipur Legislative Assembly which was unceremoniously dissolved on 15th October 1949 with the issue of Manipur Administration order 1949 by MK Vellodi, Secretary Ministry of States Government of India.

Conclusion

It can be safely concluded that the notion of political parties as a modern democratic institutions being felt among the Manipuris is perhaps rooted in the British colonial period though it started its episodic journey since the pre-colonial period. Or it can be said that this was the creation of British colonial power in Manipur. The combined oppression of colonialism-feudalism which was based on impurity-purity (*mangba-sengba*), economic exploitations and political dependency, etc. played considerable roles for shaping popular political consciousness. The period witnessed the popular movements for the democratic rights and values. Such political consciousness of the democratic rights and values especially among the educated section of the society ultimately paved way to the founding of the first political party i.e. the Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha in Manipur. Hijam Irabot Singh played a major role for democratic rights and values and establishing democratic institutions in the state. Many other political parties such as the Manipur State Congress, the Krishak Sabha, the Manipur Praja Sangha, the Praja Shanti Sabha, the Manipur Socialist Party, the Communist Party of Manipur, etc. also emerged in Manipur during the period and they played significant roles in shaping

popular political consciousness of the time.

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Conflict of Interest

This paper has no conflict of interest and is an original piece of work carried out by N. Malemsanba Meetei, Assistant Professor, Department of History, GP Women's College, Dhanamanjuri University, Imphal.

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²⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

³⁰ It was basically a peasant's organisation formed in 1935 as Manipur Krishi Sanmeloni at Nambol with S. Herananda Singh as President and M. Modhumangol Singh as General Secretary. The important peasant leaders were O. IbomchaKabiraj, M. Madhumangol Singh, S. Tomal Singh, H. Thambou Singh, M. Shubol Singh, M. Tomba Singh, Lamphel Singh, N. Narton Singh, Mera Naga, etc. On 16th May 1946, it became a political party and renamed Kishan Sabha with H. Irabot Singh as President and O. IbomchaKabiraj as the General Secretary. See M. Ritichandra, *Meeyamgee Luchingba Irabot*, p. 46.

³¹ It was established on 7th March 1946 with the objective of solving the problems especially shortage of essential commodities after the end of the Second World War. H. Irabot Singh was the President and L. Ibobi Singh as the General Secretary.

³² M. Ritichandra, *Meeyamgee Luchingba Irabot*, pp. 44-45.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49

³⁵ Laikhuram Ibobi Singh, *Manipur Praja Sanmeloni Amasung Anisuba Nupilan*, Imphal, 1978, p. 138.

- ³⁶In the joint meeting M.K. Shimre, Mr. Lune, Mr. Kkhangai, Mr. Teba, Mr. Dena, O. Ibomcha, M. Ibungngohal, H. Irabot, Mr. Shuleimiya and Mr. Lamphel represented the Thangkulong, Kuki National Assembly, Kabui Association, Khulmi Union, Mizo Union, Manipur Kishan Sabha, Nongpok Apunba Marup, Manipur Praja Sangha, Yairipok, Meitei Marup, respectively. M. Ritichandra, *Meeyamgee Luchingba Irabot*, pp. 54-55.
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- ⁴²The Council of Minister were MK. Priyobarta Singh, Chief Minister, Home and revenue, R. Khating, Hill affairs, A. Ibotomcha Singh, Finance and Local Self-Government, Dr. N. Leiren Singh, Education, Press and Industry, Teba Kilong, Forest, Agriculture and Veterinary and Md. Alimuddin, Jail, Medical, Public Health and Sanitation.
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