



Received: 12-04-2025
Accepted: 22-05-2025

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

ISSN: 2583-049X

Unwavering the Essence of Manipuri Women: The Movement of 1904 & 1939

¹Sapam Manglem Singh, ²Dr. Nongthombam Sushil Kumar Singh

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Defence Studies, Dhanamanjuri University, Manipur, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of Defence Studies, Dhanamanjuri University, Manipur, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62225/2583049X.2025.5.3.4369>

Corresponding Author: Sapam Manglem Singh

Abstract

The Anglo-Manipur war of 1891 annexed Manipur kingdom to the British India. This annexation process led to the adoption of several new administrative norms in the state. However, the social and the economic life of the people were greatly affected by the new norms. In fact, it was considered as an evil act by the then population. Many anti-British agitations began to organise by common folks

from time to time during the colonial period. From among such agitations two unique movements came forward in 1909 & 1939 that is led by women folks only. These movements stand out uniquely from the women movements of other parts of the British India in terms of their role and objective difference.

Keywords: Role of Manipuri Women, Movements of Meitei Women, Nupi-Lan

Introduction

Common people even without formal power or authority often try to challenge the governing authority when their voices are unheard. The result is either a success or failure. In many instances it yields a fruitful result. In case of failures, their efforts triggered significant changes in the administrative provisions of the governing authority. Such were the incidents that happened in Manipur during the British colonial era. But the irony is that only women led and took part in the entire movement. These women's movements were known as 'Nupi Lan' in the history of Manipur.

Manipur is among the eight sister states of the North Eastern Region (NER) of India or simply put North-East, as commonly refer to. The remaining seven states of NER are Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Nagaland. The geographical coordinates of Manipur is 23°83'N to 25°68'N latitude and longitude of 93°03'E to 94°78'E. The state itself covers an area of 22,327sq.km. Manipur is surrounded by Nagaland in the north, Mizoram in the south, Assam in the west and by Myanmar in the east as well as in the south.ⁱ It is a state with diverse ethnic makeup, where tribal groups reside in the hilly regions and non-tribal, primarily the Meiteis, inhabit the valley areas.

Manipur has well documented royal histories dating back to 33 AD when it was an independent state. Even in ancient times, women played a role in governing the kingdom. Research has revealed the existence of a women's court known as "Patcha" in Manipur during the year 33 AD where legal matters concerning women were addressed and settled. Laisana, the chief queen and a member of the council of ministers, served as the presiding officer of this court.ⁱⁱ Mrs. St Clair Grimwood, in her publication titled "My Three Years in Manipur", quoted that comparing to prevailing customs in many parts of India, that Manipuri people does not force restriction on their women folks. This freedom resulted to their enhance awareness and intelligence.ⁱⁱⁱ Even today Manipuri women hold a distinctively higher position and status in the society though the state itself is a patriarchal society like the rest of the Indian states.

The women of Manipur have contributed a pivotal position in the state's history, which is a rarity in global history. They have fought against various forms of injustice, including social discrimination, atrocities, colonial occupations, and the struggle for independence. Among the most courageous and virtuous women are the Meitei women, who have always been highly esteemed by their community and have actively participated in socio-economic affairs. In Meitei society, women have never been subjected to subordination. On the contrary, their roles have remained exceptionally unique throughout time. Even the British colonial commanders acknowledged the wealth and social standing of Meitei women. They demonstrated their capability and organisation since the beginning of the British era, showing that they were ready to undertake large-scale operations whenever necessary.^{iv}

The Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891 annexed Manipur to British India. The British regime resulted to the outbreak of many movements due to their new administrative system. This new administrative process affected the existing social and economic conditions of the common individuals. As a result many anti-British movements arouse in the state. Among such movements the women's movement of 1904 and 1939 which are famously known as "First Nupi Lan" and "Second Nupi Lan" is an ideal example.

First Women's Movement of 1904 (First Nupi Lan): The state bungalows where Captain Nuthall, the tutor of King Churachand Singh, and Dunlop, the Assistant Political Agent of Manipur, resided was engulfed in flames on the evening of March 15, 1904. Once again, on July 6th, the Khwairamband Bazar, which had 28 shelters accommodating 3000 market women, was completely devastated by fire. However, the state failed to gather any information in that regards. The residents reported no issues as trade flourished and food remained abundant and reasonably priced. Despite police inquiries, the culprits behind the fire remained unidentified.^v Afterwards, the cottage that the government had recently obtained from Mr. Mitchel, the Executive Engineer, was again inhabited by Captain Nuthall and Mr. Dunlop. Somehow the cottage was completely obliterated by fire once again on the night of August 4, 1904. This time officials recovered a stick attached with a piece of clothes and oil stained on it. The British officials then came to conclude that these fire incidents were an act of some groups who are well organised and perhaps from the urban population. On 30th September, 1904, the assistant political agent's house, which had been set ablaze by residents of Imphal, was ordered to be reconstructed by the then Superintendent of the state, Mr. Maxwell. This directive order sparked the initiation of the Nupi lan, or women's war in Manipur. More than 5000 market women came together in a powerful protest that lasted for a week. Eventually, the British authorities revoked their order. Despite its short duration, this movement had a significant impact on the political and economic landscape of the state. It also paved the way for future anti-imperialist movements and instilled a sense of oneness among the people of Manipur against the British Imperialist forces.^{vi}

Second Women's Movement of 1939 (Second Nupi Lan): The British and the foreign traders from mainland India greatly benefited from the exportation of rice from Manipur. Initially, this external involvement did not pose a threat to the livelihood of Meitei women, as the demand and supply in the state remained balanced. However, due to an unusually high amount of rainfall in 1939, resulting in a poor harvest, prices began to rise. The Marwari traders promptly resorted to hoarding and exporting. Prior to the outbreak of actual riots, the state was already facing a grave risk of hunger, and the situation was deteriorating rapidly (Rakhee Bhattacharya, 2012).

On December 12 of 1939, after a long wait thousands of women from Manipur united to resolve the disagreement with Political Agent Gimson regarding the rice export ban. The movement began as a result of the denial by the cart owners who were carrying rice grains for the Marwari traders, to sell in the local market instead of taking it to the mill of the Marwari traders (Naorem Joykumar, 2002). The initial protest began from the large gathering women of Khwairamband Bazar. The agitated women made the decision to dismantle the Marwari rice mills. Despite

Gimson's attempt to diplomatically handle the situation, he was unsuccessful. This incident also caused a significant shift in public perception towards the Maharaja and Darbar of the state, who were responsible for solving the issue. Around this time the number of women agitators had gradually increased to more than four thousands. Finally it was the Governor of Assam, Robert Reid who instructed the Maharaja to make changes in the administration so that the movement concludes as he considered it was due to the lapse in the administration.^{vii}

As a remembrance to this incident, every year on 12th December, the people of Manipur celebrated "Nupi Lan Day" honouring those brave women. Both these instances were unique in the history as there has never been a colonial struggle where women fought so passionately for their political and economic rights. Some British commanders including Sir Robert Reid, the Governor of Assam at the time, were forced to acknowledge the reputation of Manipuri women for their independence and their willingness to take direct action to achieve their goals (Rakhee Bhattacharya, 2012).

When we look into other parts of the British India, many women were formed aiming to protect the interests of the women in their society. They were fighting, agitating for the women's right and to avail the equal status as that of men. Headed by Margaret Quincy, the Women's Indian Association was formed in 1917 aiming for the equality of women and men in different aspects.^{viii} It is seen that the status of women in British India apart from Manipur were treated unjustly and subjugated by the male population. But the Manipuri women's movement began in 1904 even before the formation Women's Indian Association and their objective was not for equality of status but against the societal injustice administered by the British India. We can also observe that the status of women in Manipur has never been an object of subjugation by the opposite male folks.

Apart from the movements, Manipuri women also played a great role in improving economic conditions of the state. In this regard, one fine remark would be the statement of James Johnstone, "The women are famous as weavers and in many cases have completely killed out the manufacturers of clothes formerly peculiar to certain hill tribes, over whom the Manipuris have obtained mastery by superior intellect." While in rural areas Manipuri women sells home grown vegetables and other daily needed food items in the market.^{ix} There is also a big market in Manipur run by women folks only and is known as "Khwairamband Ima Market". It is also the same market that cornerstone the women movements of both 1912 and 1939.

Conclusion

The aims and objectives of both these Manipuri women's movements were quite unique and contradict the women movements in other parts of the world in those days. While shaping the history of Manipur, the role of women cannot be disregarded. We can even proudly say that Manipuri women are the bravest and most upright as stated by Rakhee Bhattacharya. From the historical perspective Manipuri women had enjoyed a unique level of independence and their role in shaping for the betterment of the society in various fields.

As we venture through the landscape of the present era, Manipuri women still involve in various peace building processes headed by local non-profit civil organisations.

Manipuri women involvement in peace rallies and protests are at its peak if the issues are related to death, abduction and other forms of issues that havoc the situation of the state. Moreover, such active participations are led by women organisations of the valley regions.^x And the irony is that most of these organisations are non-governmental and non-political. Every locality has 'Meira Paibi', formed by group of women from each household of the same locality to look after the misconduct or offensive actions. In short women from every section of the society urges for the peace in the state.

ⁱ <https://manipur tourism.gov.in/about-us/>. Accessed on 15/04/2024, 8:12 PM

ⁱⁱ Jayalaxmi Brahmacharimayum,, Role of Women in Manipur, 2009 https://e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=features.Spotlight_On_Women.Role_of_Women_in_Manipur_1. Accessed on 22/04/2024, 2:23 PM

ⁱⁱⁱ Chanambam Anjana Devi, Position of Manipuri Women, IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 27, Issue 11, Series 1 (November, 2022) 52-54, 2022, e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISSN: 2279-0845

^{iv} Rakhee Bhattacharya, Identity Consolidation of Meitei Women, cited in Nationhood and Identity Movement in Asia, New Delhi, 2012.

^v Usham Dhananjay Singh, The Women's War of 1904, https://www.e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=manipur.History_of_Manipur.Nupi_Lan.The_Women_War_of_1904, 2006. Accessed on 12/05/2024, 11:24 AM

^{vi} Naorem Joykumar Singh, Colonialism to Democracy: A History of Manipur 1819-1972, Spectrum Publication, 2002, Guwahati: Delhi

^{vii} Dr. Lal Dena, History of Manipur (1826-1949), Orbit Publishers, 1991, New Delhi, pp145-149

^{viii} Kamalesh Podder, Women's Movement in India: An Outline, International Journal of Research Culture Society, 2022.

^{ix} Dr. Konika Khuraijam, the Role of Women in the Freedom Struggle: The Manipur Chapter, IJCS Publication, 2022.

^x Human Development Society, Role of Women in Conflict Management: A study of Insurgency in Valley areas of Manipur, 27-O, Pocket 2, MIG Complex, New Delhi-110096, <https://bprd.nic.in/uploads/pdf/201609180122544835989Su>.