POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN MANIPUR, 1919-1949

The study deals with the political and constitutional developments in the erstwhile princely State of Manipur from 1919 till its merger with India in 1949. Bordered with Burma, she occupies one of the strategically situated states in the north-eastern region. In the wake of the political upheaval of 1891, Manipur lost her identity and became a protectorate of the British Government of India.

Since the Manipuri uprising of 1891 against the British Government, the Kuki insurgency during 1917-19 was the most significant political occurring during the entire period of the British rule in Manipur. The Kukis, one of the most powerful tribes of Manipur, revolted against foreign domination. The administration was very much upset by the disturbances in the hills. The Government felt considerably annoyed with frequent troubles which often resulted in losses of life and property. The Government could, however, bring the situation under control only in 1919. The experience of the Kuki rebellion made the British Government realise the inadequacy of the rules which were framed for the administration of Manipur State in 1916.
The unrest among the Kacha Nagas and the Kabui Nagas of the north-west of Manipur during the early 1930s was a turning point in the political history of tribal Manipur. This pseudo-religious movement soon assumed political overtones and had its adherents even long after it had been suppressed. The political aims of the movement were the subjugation of the Kukis, the suppression of the Meiteis, the overthrow of the British Government, and, lastly, the establishment of the 'Naga Raj'.

Thirdly, the question of Manipur's accession to the proposed all-India federation under the Government of India Act, 1935, became a major political controversy and was hotly debated in the State. The ruler of the State was of the view that the Government of India should leave intact some of the absolute princely rights, which demand made the British apprehend that the ruler was setting forth conditions of all sorts and using delaying tactics to keep away from the envisioned federation. The Government of India did not see any reason in meeting all the demands and the reservations put forth by the ruler. However, with the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 the question of the
federation was relegated to the background. Manipur's accession to India was not taken up before India became independent.

Fourthly, the food agitation of 1939, caused by exorbitant rise in the price of rice which made the lives of the poor especially the womenfolk almost impossible had an important role to play in the political awakening of the people. A local party, Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha, had aroused and stirred up the feelings and sentiments of the women agitators, who also received encouragement from the Indian National Congress. Had not the price of paddy come down as a result of the women's mass agitation, a sort of a general revolt would have taken place. The British authorities were forced to concede certain social and economic reforms.

Fifthly, the idea of establishing an integrated north-eastern India Frontier province consisting of parts of Manipur, Assam, was a brain-child of the frustrated Bengali elites, who were allegedly discriminated against and suppressed by the local Assamese majority in the heterogeneous province of Assam. The Bengalis questioned the majority of the
Assamese in Assam in view of the fact that they were only about two and half millions, whereas the other groups had a population of about six million of the whole Assamese population. The 'Purbachal' movement failed to catch public attention and died in infancy because of its colonialist antecedents. The government too did not pay any heed to it as it was simply out of tune with the fastly changing political environment.

Sixthly, 1946 would be recorded in the political history of Manipur as the year of full political awakening among the people. The people felt tired of the authoritarian dynastic rule and openly demanded the end of autocracy and introduction of responsible government. The issue of the constitutional reform split the local Congress into two groups. The institution of an Interim Council and the 'Rules for the administration of Manipur' did not meet the demand of the dissident Congressmen for full democracy and eventually led to the launching of the first satyagraha in the State against the Maharaja. The satyagraha succeeded in clinching from the ruler a promise to establish a responsible government.
Finally, the question of the merger of Manipur with the Indian Union became the principal political issue and the public opinion was sharply divided over it. When the British announced their intention to transfer power to the Indians, some selfish and ambitious leaders saw an opportunity to reap a rich harvest by creating political upheaval in the State. A section of people preferred rather the creation of a composite north-east India frontier province comprised of Manipur, Tripura, Cachar and Lushai Hills; the another section desired the integration of Manipur with Assam; some leaders advocated the idea of creation an independent Manipur. In the meantime, the Communist Party of Manipur was carrying out subversive activities along the Manipur-Burma border. Besides, the Nagas demanded the amalgamation of all the Naga inhabited hill areas in the eastern region with a view to form a separate Naga state. They claimed that the Nagas were never Indians and the Naga Hills had never been a part of the Indian territory and independence was an inalienable right of the Naga people. On the other hand, the Maharaja of
Manipur was not in favour of Manipur's merger with the Indian Union, he rather wished to be grouped with Sikkim and Khasi states.

Being aware of the political problems of the north-eastern region, the Indian leaders were afraid that the Assam province might possibly develop fissiparous tendencies. Therefore, the need for an immediate Central take-over of Manipur's administration was emphasized. Thus, with the merger of Manipur into the Indian Union, a new chapter was opened ending the age-long dynastic rule in Manipur. Today, Manipur is one of the full-fledged states of the Indian Union having an equal status with the other states. Since then the process of democratisation of administration has been going on; and people are very much involved in politics.