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Research Paper

Resisting the Raj: Causes, Colonial Responses, and Impact of the Nupi Lan Movements

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Abstract

Women's collective resistance formed an important, though often under-recognised, part of anti-colonial movements in British India. Within this wider history of women's resistance, the experience of Manipuri women is unique, as their participation in resistance was not confined to the spaces of formal nationalist politics but emerged directly from their social and economic roles. Following the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, British colonial rule brought significant changes to the political authority, economic practices, and social life of Manipur. Changes in labour and trade practices created tensions in everyday community life, with women particularly affected because of their central role in household economies and local economic activities. Their strong public presence enabled them to organise collectively when colonial policies and economic practices threatened their livelihood and social interests. It was within this setting that the Nupi Lan movements of 1904 and 1939 emerged. Based on secondary materials, this study examines the causes of the two movements, the responses of the colonial administration, and their historical impact. It argues that the Nupi Lan movements were not isolated episodes of protest but important expressions of women's collective resistance that challenged colonial authority and contributed to the development of women's political agency in Manipur.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As Women's collective resistance formed an important, though often under-recognised, part of the history of anti-colonial movements in British India. While nationalist histories have often centred on male leaders and formal political organisations, women in different parts of the country participated in resistance through their social, economic, and community roles. Their involvement was not limited to formal political activity; concerns relating to livelihood, food security, household welfare, and local economic life often became the basis for collective action.

Within the wider history of women's resistance, Manipur presents a distinctive case. Manipuri women occupied a visible position in the economic life of the society, particularly

through their involvement in markets and local trade. These spaces also provided opportunities for communication and collective action. As a result, women were able to respond directly when political and economic changes affected their everyday lives. Their participation in resistance developed not simply through formal political organisations but also through existing social and economic networks.

The establishment of British colonial control after the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891 brought significant changes to Manipur's political and economic life. Changes in administrative practices, labour arrangements, and trade affected existing patterns of community life. Women, whose everyday responsibilities sclosely connected them with household needs

and local economic activities, were particularly positioned to experience these changes. Hodson's (1908) early account of Manipuri society also provides evidence of the prominent economic and social position occupied by women. Within this 3. changing colonial context, the Nupi Lan movements of 1904 and 1939 emerged.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Recent studies on Nupi Lan increasingly recognises the central role of Manipuri women in shaping collective resistance during the colonial period. These studies suggest that women's participation was closely connected with their everyday economic responsibilities and experiences rather than being confined to formal political organisations or established political ideology. Hodson's (1908) ethnographic study *The Meitheis* provides an early colonial-era account of Manipuri society, including observations on the social and economic position of women. The author notes women's active participation in trade, household management, and public life, highlighting a social structure in which women exercised visible economic authority. Although his work does not discuss Nupi Lan directly, it offers valuable contextual insight into the pre-existing social conditions that later enabled women's collective mobilisation.

Kamei (2013a) provides a detailed narrative account of the active participation of women in the 1939–40 agitation. He describes women's defiance of police in the streets as well as their participation in the obstruction of the functioning of the bureaucracy. He stated that the 1904 and 1939 uprisings were the result of women's participation in the markets and their roles in the households, which led to quick mobilisation as colonial policies interrupted the social order.

Surchand (2020) relates the Second Nupi Lan of 1939 to the large-scale export of rice from Manipur at a time when scarcity and rising prices were causing considerable economic hardship. The article notes that rice continued to be sent out of the state in bulk through mills and trading networks, aggravating shortages and price rises. By documenting women's opposition to this large-scale export, the account provides important factual detail on the immediate economic causes of the movement, though it remains largely narrative in approach.

Chakraborty (2020) provides a consolidated account of the Nupi Lan movements, highlighting the scale of women's participation and the role of market networks in mobilisation. However, the discussion remains largely descriptive, with limited comparative analysis of the two movements.

Although existing studies examine the Nupi Lan movements of 1904 and 1939, much of the available literature remains descriptive, particularly in its treatment of their causes, colonial responses, and longer historical significance. The two movements have also received limited integrated attention in terms of how the nature of colonial response differed between the two periods and what these movements meant for the history of women's anti-colonial resistance in Manipur. The present study addresses these gaps through a comparative

examination of the causes, colonial responses, and historical impact of the two Nupi Lan movements.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to examine the Nupi Lan movements of 1904 and 1939 in relation to their causes, colonial responses, and historical impact. It specifically focuses on the nature of women's participation and leadership, the changing response of the colonial administration, and the significance of the two movements in the history of anti-colonial resistance in Manipur.

4. METHODOLOGY

The present study is based entirely on secondary sources and uses a descriptive and qualitative approach to examine the Nupi Lan movements of 1904 and 1939. It draws on historical writings, journal articles, and newspaper-based accounts to examine the causes of the movements, the responses of the colonial administration, and their historical impact.

Background of The Movements

To understand the Nupi Lan movements, one must understand the political and economic changes that took place after British control of Manipur in 1891. The British colonial administration began to control local governance, labour, and trade, ignoring local customs and social structures. These tensions impacted the daily lives of the people, especially the women, who were the central figures in subsistence and local trade (Kamei, 2013a).

Manipuri women were in a unique societal position as a result of the patriarchal social structure, which allowed them to take charge of economic activities, particularly in the markets. Marketplaces run by women were economic as well as social structures that provided a venue for the channelling of ideas, collaboration, and leadership. Since women were the primary providers of food, managed household budgets, and facilitated local commerce, they felt the effects of the colonial policies first. The social and economic structures that enabled women to sustain local trade also facilitated their mobilisation and organised collective action in response to challenges.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, repeated administrative interventions and changing trade practices had intensified economic pressure on local society. These background conditions created the setting in which women emerged as key agents of collective resistance, laying the foundation for the Nupi Lan movements.

Causes of the 1904 Uprisings

While the two Nupi Lan movements were varied and complex, the findings suggest that the direct causes of the movements, in both cases, resulted from the material situations of their daily lives, specifically, food, work and domestic survival.

The immediate cause of the First Nupi Lan was the colonial administration's decision to revive **Lalup**, or forced labour, for rebuilding the bungalow occupied by Captain Nuthall and the Assistant Political Agent, Dunlop, after it had been destroyed by fire. The order required men to be engaged in construction

work rather than in agriculture and trade, thereby affecting the normal economic functioning of households. A petition submitted to the Political Agent in September 1904 expressed the people's opposition to the order. Women became directly involved as the consequences of the labour demand were felt within the household. When thousands of women gathered at the Residency, they stated that their husbands were unwilling to undertake the work and that, as the **bread earners**, they would ultimately have to bear the economic burden of the order (Singh, 2006).

The issue, therefore, was not simply about the withdrawal of male labour from productive activities. It affected the balance between household livelihood, agriculture, and trade and created a sense of insecurity among families. For the women, the compulsory use of men's labour for the reconstruction work was also experienced as an affront to their social dignity. The agitation can thus be understood primarily as a collective defence of family livelihood and social interests rather than as an explicitly ideological opposition to colonialism. Yet, the immediate grievance acquired a wider political meaning when women collectively confronted the colonial administration. In this sense, the First Nupi Lan shows how a policy imposed through administrative authority could turn an everyday economic burden into a wider public protest.

Causes of the 1939 Uprisings:

Kamei (2013b) states the second Nupi Lan, which began on 12 December 1939, was a major popular agitation against the exploitative socio-economic and political conditions created by the combined feudal and colonial system in Manipur. It also reflected the growing political consciousness of the people and the emerging demand for political reform, marking an important turning point in the history of Manipur. About the Nupi Lan incident of 1939–40 Surchand (2020) writes that because of colonial export permissions, massive quantities of rice started to leave Manipur through its rice mills and trading networks, even as the local population became increasingly rice-deprived. Despite the existence of shortages in households and markets, rice was flowing out of the Imphal and peri-urban areas (Surchand, 2020). During the scarcity, women, who normally were the rice paddy cultivators, and the ones who stored and retailed the rice in the markets, knew that there was danger to the local economy from the rice exports.

While the above brushstrokes illustrate the situation leading a considerable number of women to undertake the 1939 movement, it must also be noted that 1939 is characterised by several unexplained administrative decisions that reflect systemic economic injustice. The span of time of the unfolding of the crises is also notable. The second Nupi Lan continued for weeks, as compared to 1904, and as such resulted in considerable movement depth and resource continuity.

Colonial Response to the Two Nupi Lan Movements:

The response to the First Nupi Lan in 1904 began with the administration's determination to enforce the order for rebuilding the burnt bungalow through *Lalup*. After a petition

from the people of Imphal, H. Maxwell refused to change his decision and threatened to impose a punitive police force on the town if the order was not carried out. When large gatherings continued, the administration prohibited assemblies and deployed police to disperse them. Several men regarded as leaders were arrested, while the authorities also sought additional military assistance. The participation of thousands of women made the situation particularly difficult for the administration. Women gathered at the Residency, confronted the authorities and continued their mobilisation even after the arrests. Police were reinforced and the demonstrations were eventually dispersed by force. The administration later withdrew the rebuilding order, while Maxwell was transferred from the Political Agency. The incident thus exposed both the coercive character and the limits of colonial authority in dealing with organised popular resistance (Singh, 2006).

The response to the Second Nupi Lan of 1939–40 developed around the rice-export question and was initially handled through the institutions of the Manipur State, including the Durbar and the Political Agency (Kamei, 2013a). Women had been pressing the authorities to stop the export of rice, but the Durbar remained divided over the issue. On 12 December 1939, hundreds of women went to the Durbar office and demanded an immediate ban. When T. A. Sharpe, President of the State Durbar, explained that the Maharaja's approval was required, the women took him to the Telegraph Office and insisted that a message be sent to the Maharaja. Major Bulfield of the 4th Assam Rifles and the Civil Surgeon, Major Cummins, also became involved in the confrontation. When a platoon of the Assam Rifles attempted to clear the gathering, violence followed. Twenty-one women were injured by bayonets and rifle butts; five of them were injured seriously. (Kamei, 2013b)

The violence did not bring the agitation to an end. After the Maharaja authorised the stoppage of rice exports, the women turned their attention to rice mills and obtained assurances from mill owners that milling would cease. When attempts were made to resume milling, large numbers of women again intervened. The agitation subsequently widened beyond the immediate rice question. The boycott of Khwairamband Bazar continued for a prolonged period, while political groups and leaders, particularly Neta Irabot and the Praja Sammelini, increasingly became involved. The authorities responded with arrests, prohibitory orders and attempts to restore normal market activity. Irabot was arrested in January 1940, and the government later faced continued civil disobedience and demands for political reform. The prolonged unrest eventually led Robert Reid, Governor of Assam, to urge the Maharaja to introduce reforms and restore public confidence. (Kamei, 2013b)

The two episodes therefore reveal a significant difference in the nature of official response. In 1904, the principal issue was the enforcement of a compulsory labour order, and the administration relied on police action, arrests, restrictions and military support before eventually withdrawing the disputed order. In 1939–40, the response involved a much wider

institutional and political setting in which the State Durbar, Maharaja, Political Agent and security forces were all drawn into the crisis. The use of force against the women was followed not by an immediate end to the agitation but by its expansion into questions of administration and political reform. The contrast is important to the present study because it shows how the authorities encountered women's resistance differently in the two periods and how the Second Nupi Lan developed from an economic protest into a wider challenge to the existing political order.

Historical Significance of the Two Nupi Lan Movements

The significance of the First Nupi Lan lies in the visibility it gave to women as active participants in public resistance. The agitation began with opposition to the forced labour imposed for rebuilding the burnt bungalow, but women's participation soon made it a much wider public confrontation with the administration. The presence of thousands of women at the Residency and their continued mobilisation showed that issues affecting household livelihood could become matters of public and political action. The episode also exposed the difficulties faced by the colonial administration in controlling collective resistance when it extended beyond formal political actors. The First Nupi Lan, thus, occupies an important place in the history of women's participation in public life in Manipur Singh, 2006).

The Second Nupi Lan had a broader significance because the agitation moved beyond the immediate question of rice exports and developed into a wider challenge to the existing political and economic order. Women's prolonged resistance brought questions of food security, trade, administrative responsibility and political reform into the public sphere. The involvement of political organisations and leaders, followed by arrests, continued civil disobedience and demands for reform, indicates that the movement had consequences beyond the original economic grievance. The eventual pressure for political reforms further demonstrates that the agitation could not be treated merely as a temporary disturbance (Kamei, 2013b).

Taken together, the two movements are significant because they show the changing character of women's resistance in Manipur. The First Nupi Lan demonstrated the ability of women to challenge an administrative decision that affected everyday livelihood, while the Second developed into a sustained movement with wider economic and political implications. Their historical importance therefore lies not only in the particular demands raised in 1904 and 1939, but also in the space they created for women's collective action in the public sphere. The two movements form an important part of Manipur's history of resistance and offer a different perspective on anti-colonial politics, one in which women's everyday experiences became a basis for confronting authority (Singh, 2006).

5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the Nupi Lan movements of 1904 and 1939 as significant forms of women-led anti-colonial resistance in Manipur. The findings demonstrate that these movements were not spontaneous emotional reactions but carefully grounded collective responses to economic and administrative injustices introduced under colonial rule. Women's resistance emerged from their everyday responsibilities in managing households, food supply, and market activities, which enabled them to identify and respond to crises more immediately than formal political institutions. The immediate causes of the two movements were different. The First Nupi Lan emerged against the imposition of forced labour, while the Second Nupi Lan was closely associated with the movement of rice out of Manipur at a time when local availability had become a serious concern. Yet, in both cases, women responded to policies that they experienced as affecting the welfare of their families and communities. Their response turned these everyday concerns into collective resistance. The comparison also shows a change in the way the colonial administration dealt with women's mobilisation. The withdrawal of the forced labour measure in 1904 stands in contrast to the more coercive response to the women's agitation in 1939–40. The difference suggests that by the late 1930s women's collective action had acquired a wider and more sustained political character. At the same time, the response of the authorities shows that the colonial administration increasingly regarded such mobilisation as a challenge to its authority. The historical importance of Nupi Lan, therefore, lies not only in the immediate issues around which the women protested. The two movements brought women into direct engagement with questions of colonial policy, economic control, and public authority. They also demonstrate that anti-colonial resistance in Manipur cannot be understood only through formal political organisations or male leadership. Women's participation, rooted in their everyday social and economic position, formed an important part of that history.

The Nupi Lan movements therefore deserve a place in the wider history of anti-colonial resistance in India. Their importance lies not only in the immediate demands raised in 1904 and 1939, but also in the way women's everyday experiences became a basis for questioning authority. The two movements reveal a gradual widening of women's public political role and provide an important perspective on how economic grievances, community concerns and resistance to colonial rule could come together in the history of Manipur.

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