

## Hijam Irabot and the Radical Socialist Democratic Movement in Manipur

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Hijam Irabot dominated the politics of the north eastern Indian state of Manipur<sup>1</sup> throughout the most traumatic period of its modern history between 1938 and 1951. His achievements are the more remarkable in that he spent in all little over fourteen years in political activity, and for more than half of this time he was either in prison, in exile, or working underground. Though, in the final analysis, his aims were largely frustrated by the superior power of the feudal system and British colonial control over Manipur during the period up until 1947, and by the ruthless march of Indian integrationism thereafter, his legacy remains strong within Manipur today, not only in the political mythology of folk memory but, more concretely, in the continuing activity of Meitei 'insurgency' movements.

### I. Early Life and Career

Hijam Irabot was born on September 30th 1896, a few years after the defeat of Manipur by the British.<sup>2</sup> During his early years he experienced the traumatic changes which accompanied the British control of Manipur<sup>3</sup>, and in particular the growing plight of the peasant farmers and urban poor as a market economy was introduced into Manipur.<sup>4</sup> Irabot's family was forcibly

<sup>1</sup> Situated between Myanmar and the Indian states of Mizoram, Nagaland and Assam: roughly two thirds of the population are Meiteis, who inhabit the Valley; the remainder of the population of the state are Naga and Kuki tribals, whose traditionally occupied the hill regions.

<sup>2</sup> See John Parratt and Saroj Arambam Parratt *Queen Empress vs Tikendrajit: the Anglo-Manipuri Conflict of 1891* (New Delhi 1992).

<sup>3</sup> The state was effectively ruled by a Political Agent during the minority of the rajah, Chura Chand, who was appointed by the British (though he had no legal claim to the throne). After his coronation in 1907 the British retained direct control of the Hills and the 'Reserve' in the heart of the capital, Imphal, as well as considerable influence over the running of the Valley: see especially J. Shakespear *Manipur under British Management 1891–1907* (Shillong 1907), Lal Dena *British Policy towards Manipuri 1891–1919* (Imphal 1984).

<sup>4</sup> See N. Lokendra Singh *The Unquiet Valley; society, economy and politics in Manipur 1891–1950* (New Delhi 1998) pp 48–65, N Basanta *Socio-Economic Change in Manipur 1891–1947* (Imphal 1998).

removed from their ancestral home in the newly created British Reserve without compensation, and both his parents died while he was still young.<sup>5</sup> Fortunately the boy was taken in by his maternal aunt<sup>6</sup>, who was connected by marriage to the royal family, and was able to attend both primary and the only secondary school in Imphal at the time.<sup>7</sup> Oral tradition has it that while at school he participated in protest movements, and it is certain that he did attend the informal discussions of older men<sup>8</sup> on contemporary cultural, social and political issues. He subsequently accompanied his elder cousin<sup>9</sup> to Dacca to act as a companion-cum-helper to him, while at the same time being able to further his own education. It was here that he first came into contact with the Meiteis of the diaspora, and in 1915 he left Dacca to tour other parts of India which had substantial concentrations of Meiteis.<sup>10</sup> This seems to have marked the beginning of Irabot's deep immersion in Meitei culture.<sup>11</sup>

On his return to Imphal, at the age of about nineteen, he did not go back to his aunt's house, perhaps because of growing ideological differences between himself and his cousin. His growing prominence in the burgeoning Meitei renaissance, however, brought him to the attention of the Maharajah, Chura Chand, and not long after he married Rajkumari Khomdonsana, the daughter of one of the Maharajah's elder brothers.<sup>12</sup> Such a marriage brought

<sup>5</sup> His father died in Burma and his mother was reduced to domestic labour. Two valuable Manipuri sources on Irabot's life are Soiyam Chatradhari *Manipurgi Itihasa Irabot* (Imphal 1972) and M. Ritichandra *Miyangi Luchingba Irabot* (Imphal 1972)

<sup>6</sup> Songaijam Ongbi Ibepton; her husband (whose father was a former chief minister) was a member of the Manipur State Durbar, the ruling council appointed by the Maharajah with the Assistant Political Agent as its chairman

<sup>7</sup> Both founded by Europeans: the primary school was founded by the first missionary in Manipur, William Pettigrew, the secondary school by a former PA Lt Col Sir James Johnstone

<sup>8</sup> Called *leipung phamba* – lit. 'village gathering place'

<sup>9</sup> Songaijam Somorendro, later to become one of the leaders of the Manipur Congress, and a political opponent of Irabot: he was the first Manipuri graduate

<sup>10</sup> Especially Cachar, Guwahati and Sylhet. Many Meiteis had fled to these areas during the period of Burmese devastations between 1819–25, and others were forcibly taken captive to Burma. Irabot continued his close contact with diaspora Meiteis throughout his career.

<sup>11</sup> Irabot's cultural activities merit fuller study: he was a founder member both of the Manipuri Sahitya Parisad and the Manipur Dramatic Union and an enthusiastic actor; he founded the first vernacular journal, *Meitei Chanu*, and was a prolific writer – his book of poems *Saidam Seireng* was one of first school texts accepted in 1925; he was a good singer and musician, and sang at the *shraddhas* of those formally outcasted by corrupt brahmins; he is also said to have excelled in Manipuri traditional sports such as polo and *muknakanjei* (a kind of hockey-cum-wrestling). He founded the Boy Scout movement in Manipur.

<sup>12</sup> Chandras Singh alias Sanakhwa (i.e. Rajkumar) Heinou Makhong Taba.

with it some of the privileges dispensed by the king and in 1930 Irabot was appointed as a member of the Sadar Panchayet Court.<sup>13</sup> There is clear evidence that Irabot used this position not as an opportunity to take bribes but in the genuine interests of the welfare of the poor in Meitei society. About this time too he probably began to study the writings of those involved in the freedom struggle in India.

The culmination of Irabot's early career was the founding in 1934 of the Nikhil Hindu Manipur Mahasabha.<sup>14</sup> The organising committee (or 'Reception Committee' as it called itself) under the presidency of Irabot held its first meeting in November 1933. It included a number of prominent Manipuris, among them the poet Hijam Anganghal.<sup>15</sup> The inaugural meeting of the NHMM was held in the palace complex on 20th May 1934 and celebrated with some pomp and pageantry.<sup>16</sup> Though Maharajah Chura Chand agreed to be the president of the NHMM he made only a brief appearance and did not preside over the proceedings.<sup>17</sup> Irabot, in his capacity as president of the Reception Committee and as General Secretary, delivered a lengthy speech in which he set out the main aims of the organisation.<sup>18</sup> Since the NHMM was explicitly a cultural, rather than a political, organisation we shall not here examine its main platforms in detail. It is worth noting however that these included the unifying of the Meitei people, both within and outside Manipur state, the encouragement of Meitei culture, arts, language, script and sports, and the acceptance of Vaishnavite Hinduism as part of Meitei tradition.<sup>19</sup> While the need for education was seen as important, the NHMM at this stage was largely deferential to the authority of the Maharajah. What Chura Chand's own motives for supporting the movement were

<sup>13</sup> Besides a salary the post also carried with it a grant of land and the provision of servants.

<sup>14</sup> Henceforth referred to as NHMM: in some of the earlier correspondence it is styled the 'All-India Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha' in deference to its explicit aim of including the Meiteis of the diaspora. The committee of the NHMM set up after the 1934 meeting included representatives from Cachar, Tripura, Assam, Dacca and Burma.

<sup>15</sup> On Hijam Anganghal see E. Dinamani Singh *Hijam Anganghal Singh* (Calcutta 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Including a guard of military police and an eleven gun salute.

<sup>17</sup> This was left to his brother in law, Tomchouba Singh, to Lairenmayum Ibungohal Singh (a lawyer and politician, and author of one of the earliest books on Meitei culture), and to Atombapu Sharma (a court brahmin who was deeply implicated in the outcasting scandals of the 1930s).

<sup>18</sup> The text of the speech and the resolutions of this meeting are given in full in English in Karam Manimohan Singh *Hijam Irabot Singh and Political Movements in Manipur* (New Delhi 1989) pp 48–52, and in Manipuri in Chatradhari *op cit* pp 73–76.

<sup>19</sup> Though in fact Vaishnavism had only been forcibly adopted in Manipur during the reign of Garib Niwaz (1709–51); see Saroj Arambam Parratt *The Religion of Manipur* (Calcutta 1980) pp 143–61, and 'Garib Niwaz: wars and religious policy' (*Internationales Asienforum* vol. 20 1989 pp 295–302).

are unclear, though it has reasonably been suggested that he saw in it a means of controlling the more radical socialist and democratic trends within the state.

## II. The Politicisation of the Mahasabha

It was not until four years later that the NHMM became overtly political. The third annual session<sup>20</sup>, held in Mandalay in 1937 had stressed the need for economic revival in Manipur, and drew attention to the plight of the peasant farmers. Irabot's visit to Mandalay seems to have caused some antagonism on the part of the Maharajah, and there was an attempt to forbid his attending. He was elected Vice-President at this meeting. By this time tension was beginning to develop between the NHMM and the State Durbar. The Fourth Session was held at Chinga Hill, south Imphal in December 1938 and with it, as Karam Manimohan remarks, 'the political history of Manipur entered into a new era'.<sup>21</sup> A number of important decisions were taken. The word 'Hindu' was deleted from the name.<sup>22</sup> More important, Irabot was elected president in place of the Maharajah. Besides reiterating the necessity of economic progress (including the need for Manipuri control of the marketing of locally produced fabrics) the movement now set out an explicit political agenda. The central planks in this were a proposal for common administration of the Valley and Hills together<sup>23</sup> and, more radically, for the establishment of a representative democratically elected government. The NMM demanded the setting up of a Legislative Council for the attainment of a fully representative form of government elected by adult franchise.<sup>24</sup> Irabot's presidential speech underlined the need to change the feudal nature of authority within the state in the following words:

<sup>20</sup> The second session (January 1936) was held in Silchar. Irabot's speech at this session included a plea for Manipuris to take up business ventures (which were largely dominated by outsiders).

<sup>21</sup> *Op cit* p74.

<sup>22</sup> The Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha is henceforth referred to as NMM. One element in this move was undoubtedly the wish of the leaders to dissociate the organisation from the *mangba-sengba* ('unclean-clean') controversy caused by the indiscriminate outcasting and charging for 'purification' on the part of the brahmins, and king himself. Resolution 13 of this session stressed the need to reorganise the Brahma Sabha: the text is given in Karam Manimohan *op cit* p76. On the Meitei reaction to the outcasting abuses see S. Arambam Parratt and John Parratt 'Reclaiming the Gods: a neo-traditional protest movement in Manipur' in *Archiv Orientalni* 67 (1999) pp 141-48.

<sup>23</sup> The British retained administration of the Hills in 1907.

<sup>24</sup> Karam Manimohan *op cit* p76. The NMM committee had submitted representations for this earlier than 1938.

'Manipur is now under the administration of the State Durbar Members, who are all appointed by the Maharajah out of his personal interest and matrimonial relations. These members were not elected by the public and hence they would never think of happiness and prosperity for the common subjects. Elected members only will satisfy the people's wishes and needs. I humbly appeal to all peasant brothers that these nominated high officers of Manipur will one day fall into your hands when the decorated legs of their chairs are suddenly broken.'<sup>25</sup>

The NMM's resolutions were a direct challenge to the authority of the Durbar, and were forwarded to that body in February. Later that month the Durbar put out a statement declaring that since the NMM was now a political organisation no government employee was permitted to belong to it or to assist it in any way.<sup>26</sup> All those who were state employees, with the exception only of Irabot and Elangbam Tompok, immediately resigned their membership of the NMM.<sup>27</sup> Irabot, to the contrary, resigned from his lucrative position in the Sadar Panchayet Court, and was obliged also to hand back all his wife's landed property.<sup>28</sup> The Maharajah henceforth cut off all contact with the NMM, and the split between Irabot and the ruler was now complete.

In the following months Irabot, in his capacity as president of the NMM, lobbied the Durbar on social and economic as well as political matters. High on his agenda was the proposal to abolish the many taxes which had been imposed on the common people.<sup>29</sup> Irabot's socialist vision also included the demand to abolish large estates, the public ownership of the hills and lakes, the removal of taxes on ferries, putting in place a fixed price for paddy, and most important of all the demand that the ownership of land should be granted to the peasant farmers who tilled it. Above all, however, was his key demand for replacing the feudal government by a democratically elected one. By early 1939 the Durbar had already been under pressure from the

<sup>25</sup> The full text is given in Karam Manimohan *op cit* p 78.

<sup>26</sup> Manipur State Archives, Imphal (henceforth MSA), Durbar Minutes, decision of the Durbar 15th Feb 1939.

<sup>27</sup> Elangbam Tompok later became one of the leaders of the Manipur State Congress, and a political rival of Irabot.

<sup>28</sup> He subsequently made a dramatic burning of all his foreign clothing before the Cherap Court to shouts of '*bande mataram*' and vowed that he would henceforth wear only Manipur khadi.

<sup>29</sup> Including, besides those associated with the outcasting scandal, *yairek sentry* (forced guard duties), *amin chakthang* (forced hospitality for the land registration officers), *pothang begar* (forced portage), *chandon senkhai* (charge for the *tilak* mark), *in senkhai* (tax on fishing nets), and *napet senkhai* (compulsory payment to non-Meitei barbers). He also strongly advocated better access to the courts and the abolition of payments for bringing cases to the courts.

British to submit plans for reform (though the Maharajah was very reluctant to do this).<sup>30</sup> In the November the NMM put forward its own proposals for a legislature which would have 80% of its members elected by direct adult franchise.

### III. Growing State Opposition

Towards the end of 1939 there was a serious rice shortage, caused by the combination of a poor harvest and the cynical exploitation of the export trade by the Marwari traders in Manipur. The ensuing protest, known in Manipur as the *Second Nupial (Women's War)*<sup>31</sup> because it was set in motion by a spontaneous rising of Meitei women market traders, broke out on December 12th 1939. Irabot was out of the state at the time, but on his return a few days later sought to use the protest, which was at the outset about a purely economic issue, to further his campaign for democratic government. Mass protests, mainly by women, occurred almost daily during the December of 1939 and January 1940 and the response of the state police was often brutal. On January 7th 1940 the Working Committee of the NMM met to consider its response to the women's protest. A split occurred within the leadership. The more conservative group (including Elangbam Tompok) distanced themselves from the movement. Irabot and the more radical members wholeheartedly declared their support for the struggle, and formed a new party, the Manipur Praja Sanmeloni. Later that same day Irabot addressed a large crowd and is reported to have said:

'We begged for rice and in return we received bayonet wounds and wounds from gun butts. For one handful of rice we paid two handfulls of blood ... The women's work is finished and now has come the time for the men. Let us take revenge for the spilt blood of the brahmani.'<sup>32</sup>

The authorities reacted swiftly to Irabot's attempt to channel the popular discontent over the rice exploitation into an attack on the whole feudal system of administration in Manipur, and he was arrested two days later. How-

<sup>30</sup> This was part of the British plan for the Princely States in the 1930's, though Irabot's movement was quite independent of this: cp I. Copland *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire, 1917-1947* (Cambridge 1997) p 165

<sup>31</sup> Documented in detail in the MSA, file on 'Women's Agitation 1939-40. See also Saroj Arambam Parratt and John Parratt 'The Second Women's War and the Emergence of democratic government in Manipur' in *Modern Asian Studies* (forthcoming).

<sup>32</sup> MSA Civil Case 4 of 1940. His speech referred to the women who had been injured in the riot of December 12th by troops of the Assam Rifles, and a later fracas when a brahmin woman was kicked in the forehead by a police inspector.

ever the demonstrations continued, orchestrated by Irabot's colleagues in the urban based Praja Sanmeloni and in the peasants' party, the Krishak Sanmeloni. After being held in prison he was eventually convicted by the Durbar of making a seditious speech and jailed for three years.

Irabot's period in jail however was not unproductive. During the brief time he was held in Imphal he engaged in representations, which were partly successful, for the alleviation of the very poor conditions within the prison. He was subsequently transferred to serve the remainder of his sentence in Sylhet jail. This proved a fruitful period for his political education, for his fellow detainees included a number of Indian Congress and Communist workers.<sup>33</sup> Irabot was able to gain a greater understanding of Marxist-Leninist ideology and his left-wing convictions were strengthened. It is also significant that from his prison cell he wrote asking for an early release so that he could mobilise Manipuri support for war against what he called the 'fascist Japanese'.<sup>34</sup> On his release in March 1943 Irabot was refused permission to return to Manipur at the instigation of the Maharajah.<sup>35</sup> He spent some time in Cachar under the auspices of the CPI, attended the Inaugural Communist Party Congress, and was narrowly defeated as Communist candidate for the Silchar constituency in the Assam Provincial elections.<sup>36</sup> All the while he was becoming more deeply involved in movements on behalf of peasant farmers. Partly because of his association with the Communists he was again detained (this time by order of the Governor of Assam) for several months in September 1945. He had been allowed a brief visit to Manipur, on compassionate grounds because of the death of his mother-in-law, the previous month, but it was March 1946 before the ban on his entering his home state was finally lifted.

<sup>33</sup> Jyotirmoy Nandy and Biresh Mishra became especially close friends of Irabot at this time, though there is little evidence that the Indian Congress had much impact on him.

<sup>34</sup> Karam Manimohan *op cit* pp 156, 161. Very few Meiteis in fact joined the Indian National Army. It was largely a group of Brahmins, who had earlier been displaced from Manipur, who formed the pro-Japanese Paona Independence League in Mandalay after the occupation of Burma. Their contacts in Imphal and in India were also mainly brahmins and Kukis; these contacted the Praja Sanmeloni, a few of whom were sympathetic to the INA: see Ritichandra *op cit* pp 72-3, also Lal Dena 'INA Movement' in *The History of Modern Manipur* ed Lal Dena (New Delhi 1991) pp 174-83. British reports mention one 'Bijoy, associate of Irabot' giving information to the enemy, but conclude there was no desire among Manipuris to help the Japanese (British Library, London, Oriental and India Office Library Collection (henceforth O&IOL) file L/P&S/13/1003 memo from J.P. Mills, secretary to the Governor of Assam, dated 3.6.1944).

<sup>35</sup> Karam Manimohan *op cit* p 157; MSA letter of Maharajah Bodh Chandra to the President Manipur State Durbar dated 9th April 1943. Chura Chand had been succeeded by Bodha Chandra in 1941.

<sup>36</sup> June 1946; he lost to the Congress candidate by 13,357 to 17,340 votes.

#### IV. Irabot's Role in Post War Manipuri Politics

The Manipur to which Irabot returned had undergone severe and traumatic changes during the Second War.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless Irabot quickly established contact with his former political colleagues, and on 5th April 1946 attended a joint meeting of the NMM and the Manipur Praja Mandel<sup>38</sup> in Imphal as a nominated member of both organisations. Most of the resolutions adopted at this meeting were concerned with the need to improve social and economic conditions.<sup>39</sup> The last resolution, however, addressed the question of the status of Manipur after Indian independence.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Refugees from Burma began to arrive in Imphal in 1942, and the following year attacks began on Imphal itself. For four months in 1944 the city was entirely cut off and the siege was only lifted on 22nd June 1944. Besides the destruction of property, there were severe food shortages, and the pattern of traditional life had been severely disrupted: see Lt.-Gen. Sir Geoffrey Evans and Anthony Brett-Jones *Imphal: a flower on lofty heights* (London 1962), also N. Lokendra Singh *Manipur during World War II (1944-45): socio-economic change and local responses* (Imphal 1993).

<sup>38</sup> The Praja Mandel and the Praja Sanmeloni combined under Irabot's leadership in 1946 to form the Manipur Sangha Praja; these movements represented the radical wing of the NMM and were urban based. The peasant organisation, the Krishak Sanmeloni, was originally formed in 1935 but transformed by Irabot into a political party (the Krishak Sangha) also in 1946. Irabot was also instrumental in reconstituting the Mahila Sanmeloni as a political grouping for college educated young ladies, and the Youth Front, which subsequently became the Manipur Student Federation and included some communist members. Irabot's very extensive role in the formation of the political parties in Manipur during the 1930s and 1940s deserves more attention.

<sup>39</sup> Especially, among many other demands, calls for the speedy payment of war compensation, a reduction in land revenue, abolishing of fines, tolls and numerous taxes levied on peasant farmers, a proposal for a food rationing system, and most important the abolition of the powers of the king and establishing self-rule.

<sup>40</sup> 'This conference has further decided that after India has won independence Manipur would become a part of India but self-administered as regards her educational system, her cultural tradition, social and political administration etc.' The statement goes on to advocate that Manipur would be one political entity with equal rights for hill peoples, Muslims and Meiteis, but it also envisaged that the Meiteis of Cachar would have the right to vote on whether they wished to join Manipur. It continued, 'But the question whether the Sovereign Manipur should be merged into any Indian Province, or whether it should have a separate entity would be decided by the general public after voting.' The full text is quoted in English in Karam Manimohan *op cit* p 172 and in Manipuri in Loitam Yaima and RK Maipak-sana *Nikhil Hindu Manipur Mahasabha* (Imphal 1973) p 174.

The position of the so-called 'princely states', which at independence covered about two fifths of the total land area of the subcontinent and which were not directly controlled by the British, perhaps requires further comment. From the 1930s the British encouraged democratic movements in these states to counteract the autocratic powers of the rajahs. The 1946 Cabinet Mission envisaged the states as either retaining their independence within a federalist structure or else amalgamating with the Indian Union. Sardar Patel, the Deputy

Just five days later tension between Irabot and the leadership of the NMM came to light, when the Calcutta police intercepted a memo from the president of the NMM demanding that Irabot should explain his attitude to the CPI to the NMM Working Committee. The Mahasabha itself, the memo declared, 'sympathises with the aims of the Indian National Congress and is anti-communist'.<sup>41</sup> Irabot replied publicly to these accusations in several issues of the magazine *Bhagyavati Patrika*. He claimed that even while in exile he had never ceased to work for the NMM, and demanded that the accusation that he was a member of the Communist Party be withdrawn. However the rift between the NMM - which by now was deeply under the influence of the Indian National Congress and supportive of its intentions with regard to Manipur - was irreparable. A few days later, on 15th April, the NMM in a memo sent to the British Cabinet Mission through Nehru, in which it demanded an elected legislature for Manipur and what it called a 'united kingdom of the whole of India, with a central government which would have control of defence, finance, trade, communications, roads and transport, taxes and foreign policy'.<sup>42</sup> This seemed to be going further than the Standstill Agreement envisaged.

Clearly personal and political rivalries had begun to play a crucial role in the struggle for power in Manipur, and Irabot, whose past association with the CPI rendered him suspect in the eyes of the pro-Congress elitist group of would-be politicians, was becoming increasingly marginalised. Things came to a head on 4th October 1946 when a group of activists proposed another joint meeting at the Aryan Theatre in Imphal to form a United Front which would bring together the NMM, the Manipur Praja Sangha, and the Manipur Krishak Sangha. Irabot was nominated to represent both of the two latter parties at this meeting. However his membership of the joint committee was rejected by some other delegates (mostly, but not entirely, from the NMM), again on the grounds that he was a communist. Delegates of both the Praja Sangha and the Krishak Sangha walked out of the meeting in protest at the chairman's refusal to accept Irabot's nomination. This effectively

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Prime Minister to Nehru and also Minister for the States, pursued an aggressive integrationist policy through his agent V.P. Menon, which is reflected in the latter's semi-official and at times very partisan account *The Integration of the Indian States* (Bombay 1956). Manipur was in the last group of states to be absorbed, in 1949 (Menon is inaccurate regarding the date as well as the circumstances). See further T.S. Mansergh's twelve volume documentation *The Transfer of Power 1942-47* (London 1970-84) and the stimulating revisionist account of Ian Copland *The Princes of India in the Endgame of Empire 1917-1997* (Cambridge 1997).

<sup>41</sup> MSA, memo of 24.4.1946 forwarded to the Political Agent by the Deputy Commissioner, Police Special Branch, Calcutta.

<sup>42</sup> For the full text see Karam Manimohan *op cit* pp 174-5.

left the way clear for the NMM to seize the initiative, which they did by reforming themselves into the Manipur State Congress, which, they claimed, was the only party representative of the people of Manipur.<sup>43</sup>

The remainder of 1946 and first half of 1947 was marked by frenetic activity on the part of all the political parties. By March 1947 a Constitution Making Committee had been appointed, partly by election and partly by the Maharajah's nomination of Durbar and Hill members. This Committee was dominated by Congress members and sympathisers<sup>44</sup>, and the Praja Sangha and Krishak Sangha responded by trying to mobilise mass support. In a series of meetings Irabot and his allies denounced the Constitution Making Committee as undemocratic, and also attacked numerous other social evils.<sup>45</sup> They also began to create political cells among the peasants and urban poor. Congress responded vigorously, and the political battle continued right up until the elections for a legislature. Manipur signed the Instrument of Accession on 11th August 1947, and an Interim State Council consisting of six appointed members and two Hill representatives took control of government in the same month. Maharajkumar Priyabarta, brother to the king and a Congress sympathiser, was made Chief Minister. The first democratic elections, on the basis of full adult franchise, were held in June and July 1948. Since no party had an absolute majority it was agreed that the Praja Santi (a loose grouping of pro-royalists) should form a government in coalition with the Krishak Sangha and the Hill members. The Manipur Congress had been relegated to being the main opposition party. Irabot himself was elected as member for the Utlou constituency with a large majority.<sup>46</sup> However the new Assembly was not to take office until 18th October, and in the meantime the unelected Interim Council continued to control the administration. It seems clear enough that the Congress representatives on the Council made it a priority to remove Irabot from the political scene before the Assembly could assume power. Their opportunity came in the September.

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<sup>43</sup> Lokendra *op cit* p 196.

<sup>44</sup> It is very clear that the President of the Manipur State Durbar at the time, Frank Pearson, who was largely responsible for setting up the Constitution Making Committee, was (by his own admission) utterly against the principle of one man one vote and was instrumental in ensuring the dominance of Congress supporters: see O&IOL, MS Eur. F226/21 (Pearson Collection). The Governor of Assam somewhat naively regarded Pearson as the best person to advise on reform in Manipur (O&IOL L/PS/13/1003 memo to Mountbatten 11.7.1947). The Praja Sangha and Krishak Sangha boycotted the elections to the Constitution Making Committee on the grounds that the rules in setting it up, which limited voting participation to land owners, effectively disenfranchised the peasant farmers and the urban poor.

<sup>45</sup> Lokendra *op cit* pp 201–5, Karam Manimohan *op cit* pp 186–92.

<sup>46</sup> Lokendra *op cit* p 219.

In the meantime the Indian government had made known its plans to create a new state of Purbanchal Pradesh, which would incorporate Cachar, Tripura and Manipur. One faction of the Manipur Congress was ready to agree to this incorporation of Manipur into a larger state: for Irabot and the Manipuri nationalists, however, this was an unacceptable denial of Manipuri autonomy. Consequently the Manipur Krishak Sangha and the Manipur Praja Sangha organised a meeting on September 21st in the Manipur Dramatic Union Hall to protest against the Purbanchal Pradesh proposal. Irabot had been careful to obtain police permission to hold the meeting, though a ban on processions remained in place.<sup>47</sup> Delegates from the Lamlai area of the Krishak Sangha, however, decided to march to the meeting as a group. The police, taking this to be a violation of the ban of processions, attacked the delegates violently with lathis at Pungdombam, causing injuries to women as well as men. According to the Krishak members the police began firing, and in the scuffle a sub-inspector, Keisam Naran Singh, was killed.<sup>48</sup> When the news reached Irabot in the Dramatic Union Hall he realised that the Interim Council would use the incident as a pretext to arrest him, so he cancelled the meeting and went into hiding. At a secret meeting later in the day the Krishak Sangha passed a long resolution explaining the cause of the shooting and complaining against the police lathi charge and the subsequent use of the Assam Rifles by Chief Minister R.K. Priyabarta to harass its members.<sup>49</sup> This resolution they sent to Nehru, Patel, and to the Governor of Assam. Predictably their plea fell on deaf ears. The Chief Minister seized the opportunity to declare both the Krishak Sangha and the Praja Sangha illegal organisations and put a price of Rs. 10,000 on Irabot's head. Despite repeated demands no public inquiry into the Pungdombam incident and the death of Naran Singh took place, and instead large numbers of Irabot's supporters, women as well as men, were arrested, tortured and jailed. When the Assembly finally convened in October the ban remained in force, even though the elected members of both parties took their seats. Irabot did not resurface, and his seat was subsequently declared vacant. His public career was effectively at an end.

The democratically elected state government of Manipur was destined to endure for less than a year. By September 1949 the Government of India had to all intents and purposes annexed Manipur, and on 15th October the Manipur State Assembly and Council were dissolved on order of the 'Chief

<sup>47</sup> The Manipur Krishak Sangha had been banned from holding processions and meetings without permission at the meeting of the Interim Council in May 1948, on the (highly doubtful) grounds that it had been actively involved in the anti-state activities of the Naga National League and that it was a Communist organisation.

<sup>48</sup> See further Karam Manimohan *op cit* p 312 and Ritichandra *op cit* pp 100-103.

<sup>49</sup> For the full text see Karam Manimohan *op cit* p 312.

Commissioner' Maj.-Gen. Rawal Amar Singh who assumed complete control of the administration.<sup>50</sup> There was very little opposition. The Manipur State Congress, which had actively agitated for union with India, welcomed the integration, the Praja Sangha (along with all other parties and with much popular support) opposed it and was promptly labelled 'communist' by the Chief Commissioner.<sup>51</sup> Now at last Irabot yielded to pressure from younger colleagues and began to advocate overtly Marxist policies from his underground headquarters. In a pamphlet entitled *Punjabad* (Capitalism)<sup>52</sup> he discussed the nature of the capitalist-socialist divide, and late in 1949 a constitution was proposed by the District Organising Committee of the Communist Party of Manipur, with plans for village cells and the dissemination of communist literature. The military wing of the movement, the Red Guard, started training in guerilla tactics some eighteen months later.<sup>53</sup> Thus began the Meitei 'insurgency' movement, which subsequently fragmented into several armed factions, which have continued up to the present day to press for autonomy or for the complete separation of Manipur from India.<sup>54</sup> Irabot himself would not live to see these developments. He had been in touch with Burmese Communist movements since first going underground,<sup>55</sup> and they had allowed him to set up a headquarters in the Kabaw Valley.<sup>56</sup> Early in 1951 he had gone to Burma to arrange for military training for his supporters. On a subsequent visit later that year he was attacked by typhoid at the village of Tangbo. After a brief illness he died on the morning of 26th September. A memorial stone there bears the name 'Comrade I. Singh.'

<sup>50</sup> MSA, Manipur Gazette for October 26th 1949.

<sup>51</sup> The paranoia over suspected communists dates back to the end of the British period, and even after independence the British continued to monitor closely the possibility of Communist infiltration: see O&IOL file L/P&S/13/1003 memo of Shattock to Rumbold 3963/48. In fact Irabot only founded the Communist Party in Manipur, and then at the level of District Organising Committees, in August 1948. He did not at this time espouse B.T. Randive's philosophy of armed revolution, but believed that Manipur required its own peculiar brand of Communism.

<sup>52</sup> It was not openly published until 1987.

<sup>53</sup> With some initial success, although the back of the movement was subsequently broken by the arrest of several of the younger leaders: see 'Manipur Conspiracy Trial', the full transcript of which may be found in the personal papers of the District Magistrate who tried the case (O&IOL.MS Eur. F230/43, Moon Collection).

<sup>54</sup> For a good survey see Phanjoubam Tarapot *Insurgency Movement in North East India* (New Delhi 1993), also Naorem Sanajaoba 'The Genesis of Insurgency' in N. Sanajaoba ed. *Manipur Past and Present* vol. 1 (New Delhi 1988) pp 245-90.

<sup>55</sup> He is credited with reconciling the various factions, so N. Joykumar Singh *Social Movements in Manipur* (New Delhi 1992) p131 and Bira *op cit* p36 (quoting PCP circular 58/A3/51UB dated 20.6.1951).

<sup>56</sup> Situated between Manipur and the Chindwin river, it had been in Manipuri possession until handed to the Burmese by the British (for an annual fee) at the Treaty of Yandaboo.

## V. Assessment

Hijam Irabot was a convinced nationalist. Ambivalent towards the Indian Union, he envisaged the continued existence of Manipur as a self-governing state under an elected legislature, which would embrace, on an equal footing, both Hills and Valley. His involvement with the Meitei diaspora, furthermore, led him to call for the return of the Kabaw Valley to Manipur and for a referendum among the Meiteis of Cachar on whether they also should join the state.<sup>57</sup> None of these aims, of course, came to fruition. His decision to go underground after the Pungdongbam incident, which effectively removed him from public politics, was probably a tactical error, though an understandable one given the strength of the forces ranged against him.

On the other hand, Irabot's impact in pointing Manipuri politics towards democracy and socialism was great. While there had been popular outbursts against autocratic feudal rule – most notably in the Second Women's War of 1939–40 – it was Irabot who gave to these movements a clear sense of political direction. He also, well ahead of time, advocated a 'one person one vote' system, and (as with the elections for the Constitution Making Committee) vigorously protested against the franchise being conditional on land ownership or education. This battle, at least, he won – though, as we have seen, the democratically elected legislature was swiftly dismantled by the profoundly undemocratic imposition by India of Chief Commissioner's rule in October 1949. Irabot, along with most other Manipuri leaders who were not part of the Manipur Congress, regarded the enforced merger as an act of deceit on the part of the Indian Government, and it finally convinced him that there was no alternative to armed resistance. Irabot's relation to Communism is more problematic. While he freely associated with the Communist Party of India, he maintained that radical socialism in Manipur had to be different and take into account the peculiarities of the Manipuri context. His grasp of theoretical Marxist-Leninist dogma was no doubt quite weak, though in his later 'Self-Criticism'<sup>58</sup> he began to move more closely towards the Party line. Ironically, one of the most positive assessments of Irabot's life has come from Maharajkumar Capt. Priyabarta, the (unelected) Chief

<sup>57</sup> This was a somewhat dangerous precedent for the integrity of the State: already at least one group of Manipuri Nagas was agitating to join the Naga Hills, and some of the southern Kukis wished to join the Lushai Hills.

<sup>58</sup> For the full text of the 'Self-Criticism' see Karam Manimoham *op cit* pp361ff. In it he, among other things, confessed that he had been something of an individualist in following a Titoist line, and expressed his desire henceforth to support the stance of the CPI. Irabot's relation to the Manipur Communist Party is discussed in Thokcham Bira *Comrade Irabot* (in Manipuri) (Imphal 1990, 3rd edition), and the Pan-Manipur Youth League publication *Bharatki Loilam Manipur* (Imphal 1993), and in Lokendra *op cit* pp215–17.

Minister of the government which secured his political downfall. 'He was, in my mind', Priyabarta wrote, 'the true leader of Manipur in recent years ... Had he been Chief Minister in my place, because of his working in a party and his love for the Manipuri farmers and Manipur, I am of the opinion that he would have gained for the State a position similar to the status of Sikkim'.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>59</sup> 'Reminiscences of the First and Last Chief Minister' in Naorem Sanajaoba ed. *op cit* p 140.