

IRAWAT SENTINEL OF THE EAST

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E.M.S. NAMBOODIRIPAD *is the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPI (M).*

JYOTIRMOY NANDY *is the Associate Editor of the daily 'Kalantar' published from Calcutta.*

HEMANGO BISWAS *was a leading revolutionary singer, poet and composer. He was one of the founders of IPTA. He died in 1987.*

NIKHIL CHAKRAVARTI *is currently Editor of the weekly "Mainstream" published in New Delhi.*

PREFACE

The hallowed name of Comrade Irawat Singh needs no introduction. It was under his leadership that the people's movement grew not only in Manipur, but also in Cachar and Sylhet districts of Assam, of the then undivided India. The people saw in him the symbol of indomitable fortress in the battle against British colonialism and the feudal exploitations. In fact, his unflinching struggle and leadership has become legendary in Manipur and Cachar.

However, not all of his works and contributions are known in Manipur. This has urged the Irawat Centre for Marxist Studies to undertake to produce a work wherefrom one can know the hitherto unknown aspects of Irawat's life and activities.

The present work is a compilation of the articles written by comrades Hemango Biswas and Jyotirmoy Nandy and those published in the "People's War" and "People's Age" which were the organs of the pre-split CPI. Our thanks go to comrade Nungleppam Shyamkanhai who took the trouble to contact the said comrades and also collect the articles from the said journals at Muzaffar Ahmad Pathagar, Calcutta. Our thanks also go to comrades D. N. Sinha Roy and Ajitkhastagir of Muzaffar Ahmed Pathagar, Calcutta who helped comrade Nungleppam Shyamkanhai in his work of collecting the articles at M. A. Pathagar.

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Lastly and the most important, we are grateful to comrade EMS Namboodiripad, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPI (M), who had promptly responded to our request for writing an introduction to the work, in spite of our short notice.

Editorial Board

INTRODUCTION

It was in Bombay in 1943 – at the first Congress of the pre-split CPI – that I saw the late Irawat Singh for the first time.

Those were the days when the party was under concerted political attack as “British agents stabbing the Quit India struggle in the back.” Like the old Babas of Punjab, well-known revolutionaries from Bengal and the northern provinces etc. who, after a long search for the correct path for India’s freedom, had joined the Communist Party, Irawat Singh also had joined the Party.

Before joining it he had become the leader of the Manipuri people in their struggle for democracy in their autocratic state. Intimately connected with all the socio-cultural, economic and political struggles of his people, he chose the Communist Party as the reliable and unerring leader of the people’s struggles.

Barring that one occasion and a few subsequent meetings of the Kisan Sabha, I could not get properly acquainted with him and his work. I, however, knew from comrades in the state, and many outside, that his was a personality that inspires the common people everywhere. His entry into the Communist Party, like the entries of other revolutionaries from the rest of the country, helped expose the canard that the Communists had sold themselves to the British. Working in the Party also helped him to improve his qualities as a people’s leader.

It is, therefore, right and proper that a Centre for the study of Marxism is being set up in Manipur in his name. I am sure that the studies undertaken in the Centre would enrich the theory of Marxism in general and in the state of Manipur, thereby helping the improvement of practical activities.

New Delhi,
September 14, 1988.

E.M.S. Namboodiripad.

Builder of Manipuri's Freedom Movement¹

Irawat Singh is the unquestioned leader of Manipur State (Assam) people and is regarded as a legendary hero in every Manipuri Home. He lost his parents in his infancy and had to struggle along in the world all alone. He had to work as a cook in a student's mess for getting a little education because he could not afford even the monthly tuition fees of four annas. Being a very talented sportsman, Irawat, soon, attracted the attention of the Maharajah of Manipur and with his help finished his education. He got married to the Maharajah's niece and went to Calcutta for further study.

Turning Point in His Life

Those were the great days of the Non-Co-operation Movements. At Calcutta, Irawat heard Gandhiji in 1922 addressing mass meetings and that was the great turning point in his life. He got his first baptism in the fight for freedom and returned to Manipur as an ardent patriot. He was the first man in Manipur State to wear khaddar. This turn in his life towards independent patriotic activity brought on him the wrath of the Maharajah: He was socially ostracised for three years. Irawat's first activity in Manipur State was to take up the question of education. He realised that unless the deplorable state of education under the State regime was remedied, there was no taking the Manipur State people forward. He, therefore, started the Manipuri Institution which today stands as the Maharajah High School in Imphal.

Founder of First People's Organisation

He became a Magistrate in 1927, but he was an entirely different type of Magistrate from others. He, used his position in order to go among the people, study their problems and organise them, a task which he found impossible through any other channels under rigorous feudal regime. He started his first mass campaign for socio-economic uplift of the people; the result was the formation of the MANIPUR MAHASABHA³ in 1933 mobilising all Manipuris inside and outside the State.

Irawat rose against the Brahma Sabha, a reactionary religious body sponsored and presided over by the Maharajah, which used to ex-communicate progressives arbitrarily and extract heavy penalties from them as punishment. In this he came into sharp conflict with the feudal court. He mobilised 3,000 people and was able to defeat the reactionary game of the Brahma Sabha.

This was the first time in the history of the Manipur State that the Maharajah's unquestioned authority had ever been successfully challenged by anybody.

Campaign for Popular Franchise

His campaign gathered momentum rapidly and he soon became the Vice-President of the Manipuri Mahasabha at its Mandalay Session in 1937³. The same year, Irawat attended the Assam Provincial Rastriya Conference and exposed for the first time to the outside world the extremely reactionary regime of the Manipur State dominated by the British Political Agent.⁴

Irawat soon organised the first political mass campaign in the Manipur State for a Legislature based on a popular franchise and mobilised 4,000 signatures to a memorandum. Soon after 1938, the Manipur Mahasabha Conference elected him as President, defeating the Maharajah's candidate by 700 votes.³

The Manipur Mahasabha, under Irawat's leadership, began to grow rapidly as a true people's organisation for winning the freedom of the Manipuris in alliance with the Indian National movement. The Feudal Court, instigated by the British Political Agent banned the entry of all officials into the Mahasabha.

Conflict with British Political Agent

The political Agent soon found a plea to bring, though unsuccessfully, a criminal case against Irawat, as he had got a resolution passed by the Mahasabha condemning shooting of the Digboi Oilfield strikers by the Assam Government Police. Knowing that sharp conflict with the authorities was coming, Irawat resigned from the State service to give all his time to the people's service. As a result the mass movement for popular franchise grew in strength; a wave of patriotic awakening with Khaddar, Gandhi cap and the National Flag as its symbols swept Manipur.

The need of organising the thousands of Manipuris outside the State was now realised by Irawat. He visited Cachar in 1938, and for the first time roused the Manipuri masses there to work in co-operation with the local Congress.

While in Cachar, Irawat heard of the first mass movement in Imphal (Manipur State) against the indiscriminate rice export by vested interests, with the connivance of the corrupt administration, leading to starvation among the people and of the police repression when peaceful women deputationists were bayoneted, and over a hundred wounded.⁵

Irawat returned to Manipur immediately and went straight to hospital to see the wounded. His presence enthused the people and gave an organised shape to the movement. Within the first night of his arrival, he organised 4,000 volunteers for picketing trunk roads to stop rice exports.

He organised the Manipur PRAJA MANDAL to raise the movement to a higher pitch and exposed the Political Agent's fabrications that there had been no police atrocities by publishing actual pictures in the Calcutta Press. He succeeded in linking the Manipuri People's movement with the democratic movement outside and secured the sympathy of the Congress for it. The movement now became as under: the boycott of foreign clothes, complete hartals in the bazars and non-payment of the forest tax were organised and in the face of severe repression involving over a thousand arrests.

Arrest: Towards Communism in Jail

In December, 1939, Irawat was arrested for sedition and sentenced to three years' hard labour⁶. The jail gate became a place of pilgrimage for thousands. Six thousand attended his trial and the demonstration against his conviction. The authorities became panicky, promulgated Section 144, transferred Irawat to Sylhet and intensified repression in Manipur.⁶

While in Sylhet jail, Irawat came in contact with Surma Valley Communist leaders who were also detained there at the time. His inherent love for the people and the revolutionary will to work for their liberation attracted him towards communism.

He carefully studied communist literature and policy during his jail life.

Irawat came out of jail in 1943, a confirmed believer in the policy and ideology of the Communist Party. His entry into the Manipur State was promptly banned. He went to Surma Valley⁷ and plunged into the Kishan movement there. He was a delegate at the All India Kisan Conference at Bhakna.⁸

Irawat attended the first Congress of the Communist Party of India in 1943⁹ as a fraternal delegate of the Manipuri people. What he saw at the Congress made him take the last step and he joined the Party.

Works Underground for Resistance To Japs

He returned from the Party Congress to Cachar and resumed his work among the Kisans. In 1944 came the laps thrust into his Manipuri homeland and days of acutest danger for his people. He announced his burning eagerness to go back to Manipur and help his people to fight the Japs, promising to raise 20,000 volunteers if the authorities allowed him to return.

He issued a public call to his people to resist the Japs. The Government broadcast his statement the world over, but shamelessly issued a warrant for his arrest while he was actively organising a Grow More Food and anti-Jap campaign among the Cachar Kisans.

Irawat immediately went underground, refusing to be drawn away from his people at such a critical hour.

But he was arrested in September, 1944 and released after four months.

Years in jail, a hard life outside as a Party whole-timer, and his life underground have affected his health badly, but not his spirit and love for the people. Coming out, he took the lead again of the newly awakened Cachar and Manipuri peasants as President of the Surma Valley Kisan Sabha.

His work has brought a patriotic awakening to the Manipuris in Cachar District who have never before participated in the freedom movement in such numbers.

Fifty of their best sons are in the Communist Party, ten of them whole-timers and of a total of 8,000 Manipuris, 3,000 are members of the Kisan Sabha.

Not only the Manipuris, but all the other oppressed minority peoples are being roused by Irawat Singh and like the Burmans are rising again after a century's slumber. Minor National groups and minorities, oppressed from all sides, are seeing new hope today for their free growth. Irawat is the chief architect of this hope as of the 8,000 strong District Kisan Sabha organised jointly of Manipuris, Bangalis, Burmans and Hindusthanis of the Cachar District.

Irawat speaks five languages, he is a poet and musician. His patriotic songs and tunes resound in every Manipuri village. At the age of 49, he leads. Cultural Squad personally and participates in all its performances. A keen sportsman, he is a great lover of nature and of outside life even now.

To all the rising national groups, many hitherto unknown, whose common motherland is Assam, he represents the symbol of a united struggle for freedom from imperialist tyranny and for free and equal development of all in a new free Assam of tomorrow.

Hijam Irawat Singh The Great Leader Of Manipur

Jyotirmoy Nandy

I have been asked to write about Hijam Irawat, as I saw and knew him. I am afraid, I have no documents with me to write about him in a convincing way. Whatever I can say or write of him now shall be based on personal memory only, and everyone will agree that an individual's memory, however sharp and comprehensive, can fail particularly in narrating details about an event or an episode, more so about a man's life, especially when that man is of an outstanding stature. Hence, I must admit at the outset that what I am stating about the great departed leader may have some shortcomings, though I am sure that the main traits and trends of the narrative shall be unimpeachable.

Nine Months' Acquaintance In Sylhet Jail

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the Manipur Raja under the direct guidance and instructions of the British Raj detained Hijam Irawat Singh, the undisputed leader of Manipuri people, without trial.⁶ No, they were not sure that Irawat can be made ineffective, if they keep him confined in any Manipur jail. So they packed him off to Sylhet District Jail, then in Assam province of undivided India. At that time, I was also undergoing imprisonment in Sylhet District Jail along with Shri Biresh Mishra, Secretary of the Sylhet District Congress Committee, Arun Chanda, Congress leader of Cachar, Rabi Aditya, Congress leader of Karimganj and others.

I was then the editor of 'Naya Duniya', a weekly published from Sylhet, a semi-official organ of the Communist Party of India, till then an illegal party. Shri Mishra wrote a series of articles bearing the nature etc. of the Second World War and I published them in 'Naya Duniya'. Hence we two were convicted for a period of nine to eleven months of rigorous imprisonment in Division Two. Others were detainees under Defence of India Rules.

Irawat was kept in the Detenue Ward along with Shri Chanda, Shri Aditya and others, while myself, Shri Mishra and some others were kept in the Division Two Ward in the jail.

After a few days of official tangle the jail authority was forced to allow us to mix together for a few hours in the evening for playing badminton. And those few hours used to be the period when myself and Mishra particularly befriended Irawat, knowing from him the experiences of Manipur people's movement and its peculiarities, while telling him about the principles of Marxism-Leninism and the experiences of the working class movement all over the world and especially of the Soviet Union. We used to give him some books and pamphlets about the Soviet Union as well as some literature of the Communist Party of India, illegally brought inside the jail from outside.

Needless to mention that other non-communist Congress leaders were also trying in their own way to draw Irawat towards Gandhian programme and its philosophy, with which he had acquaintance already. But at last the programme and philosophy of the communist movement won the day. The struggle of the working people and the downtrodden for freeing themselves from the shackles of capitalist and feudal exploitations and oppressions in the course of their fight for the country's freedom from the clutches of imperialist oppressors, carried more weight than the ideal of freeing the country from the burden of foreign rule alone.

It Was A Tough Battle Indeed

Irawat, though a fighter for Manipur's as well as India's freedom from the double shackles of imperialist and feudal oppressions of the Britishers and the Manipuri monarchy, had his first baptism in Gandhian philosophy no doubt, though he used to behave a bit differently from other Gandhites from the very beginning also. Thus, while still a Gandhite, he along with the entire Manipur Mahasabha of those days gave full support to the struggle of the Digboi Oil Workers of the thirties, when Gandhite Congressmen of Assam generally did not do so. This was his positive difference from other Gandhites.

Irawat was the man who persuaded others of the Manipur Mahasabha to change its name and nomenclature to Manipur State People's Conference and joined All India States People's Conference, a sister organisation of the Indian National Congress. But then the methods and aims of the All India States People's Conference also could not satisfy him. The vision of a socialist Manipur in Socialist India, free from imperialist, feudal and capitalist shackles that we could open up before him could reach both his head and heart. Himself imbued in Vaishnavite and Gandhite philosophy he at times would not agree that an inevitable fierce class struggle including civil war would be necessary to achieve these goals. Narration of Russia's experiences in detail and those of Hungary and others where people's power was drowned in blood by the indigenous and foreign reactionaries at last convinced him that while it would be very nice if the socialist transformation would be possible to be achieved peacefully, it will have to be achieved even with arms in hand if the exploiting and oppressing classes force us to do so.

Thus our mutual discussions, reading of books and other literature made Irawat an ardent believer in Marxism-Leninism, and when after expiry of my prison terms I was to leave Sylhet Jail, Irawat told me plainly that we can tell everybody including his followers in Manipur that he will join the Communist Party after his release. That he himself communicated this decision of his to his near and dear ones in Manipur secretly was realised by us when some of his close associates came to Sylhet to meet me. Very naturally I arranged their meeting with the leadership of the Party in Sylhet.

Understanding from them that some of them wanted to cross the borders and meet the Japanese with a view to get India and as such Manipur free with the help of the Japanese also, we tried our level best to make them understand that if the Japanese come, they will not make us free, but enslave us instead. We understood from them that Irawat himself also told them so through clandestine communication from Sylhet Jail. We told them to pursue a different course of action rallying all freedomloving men and women in Manipur for the struggle for freedom from both the British imperialist and the possible threat from the Japanese, under Irawat's direction, and nobody else's. They took with them some Bengali books available in those days and promised to get these read by their other friends with the help of a Bengali teacher of Imphal, who was also a very close friend of our Party. Later we learnt that these Manipuri contacts sent to Irawat news about our meeting and he also told them to do as we suggested.

Party Policy Changes And Irawat Agrees

With the invasion of the Soviet Union by the Nazi Germany, our Party changed its strategy and tactics of our freedom struggle. We sent message of this change to Irawat in Jail. He later informed us that he also agreed with us. Accordingly, he told his followers in Manipur to change their tactics also.

At one stage the British Government was forced to legalise the Communist Party and one of our very first demand was to release all communists from all jails and detention camps, and Irawat's name used to be one of the foremost among them. Party adherents in Manipur also raised these slogans and thousands rallied around them. Probably in 1943 the Manipur Raja was forced to release Irawat; but he was not allowed to enter Manipur.

Communist Party leadership decided that Irawat will remain in Cachar District, which is nearer to Manipur on the one hand, and wherein a good many Manipuris live on the other. Communists in Cachar took the initiative to fix up an area where Irawat will work mainly among the Manipuri peasants and also among the non-Manipuri ex-tea-garden workers. This area being very close to Manipur border, Irawat's comrades in Manipur also could come and go now and then through clandestine tracks of Churachandpur area of Manipur.

Irawat's Struggling Career In Cachar

As far as I can recollect, Irawat was released from Sylhet Jail in 1942 end or 1943 beginning⁶ and was invited to attend the First Congress of the Communist Party of India held in Bombay as a special observer (May, 1943).⁹

As a communist organiser of Kisan movement he carved a special place of honour in Cachar and Sylhet Districts of the then Assam province. As a result he became a member of the leadership of the then Surma Valley⁷ Kisan Sabha and during the general elections held in pre-Independence India, he fought as a candidate of the Communist Party of India in one of the Assam Assembly seats in Cachar. He was defeated but could attract considerable number of votes even from non-Manipuri voters of that constituency.

Irawat could understand Bengali well. He could also read and write in Bengali. But speaking in Bengali particularly on political matters would be somewhat difficult for him. Several years of work among the peasants of Cachar later made him a good Bengali speaker also.

He was himself a prominent writer in Manipuri. I heard that he used to write dramas also in Manipuri. There in Cachar he along with others built some cultural squads singing patriotic and democratic songs in Manipuri, Bengali and also in the spoken of the ex-tea-garden labourers, which used to hold shows particularly in the rural areas and rouse people to join the peasant movement and the Communist Party of India to liberate themselves from the yokes of the foreign ruler as well as from the shackles of feudal and other oppressions. And these commonly known as 'Swadeshi Ganer Dal' were very popular among the masses. When "Indian People's Theatre Association" or "I.P.T.A."¹⁰ organised its branch in the districts of Sylhet and Cachar, these singing squads were incorporated in the same organization.

In 1945, during the session of the 'All India Kisan Sabha' at Netrakona in Mymensingh district in Bengal, a well-prepared squad led by Irawat himself presented some attractive shows, including dances and songs and won high tributes, from the leaders of the organisation. In the districts of Cachar and Sylhet Irawat was considered to be one of the outstanding leaders of the I.P.T.A. also.

At last, either in 1946 or so, before India was partitioned and power was transferred to India and Pakistan, Manipur Raj was forced to waive its restriction over Irawat, he went back to Manipur.

When after a long forced separation, the leader of modern Manipur went back to Manipur, thousands of men and women greeted their beloved leader. At one stage after power was transferred Manipur Raj agreed to set up an Assembly with limited advisory powers and Irawat along with some other supporters of the Communist Party standing as Kisan Sabha candidates were elected to the same.¹² They then raised the slogan of full responsible government from both within and outside the Assembly.

At another stage when power was transferred to India the question of accession of Manipur State came, and Irawat and the Communists fully supported its accession to India.

Before that happened, I was deputed by the Party to go to Imphal as a reporter of the Communist Party weekly 'People's War' to meet leaders of different parties and also the Chief Minister of Manipur to have interview with them. I had in my bag another circular also. The Assam State Organising Committee of the Communist Party of India, of which I was also a member, asked all Communist Party members of the state to form a unit of the Party under my supervision and guidance. I did both the jobs and Irawat along with a band of fighting workers duly signed the party pledge and a unit was formed with Irawat at its head.¹³ In the same meeting a decision was taken to rally all democratic parties of Manipur around the slogan of full responsible government in Manipur as also to see that the reactionary elements may not play any tricks on the accession question.

In this connection I should also admit that in my interviews with leaders of different parties and the then Chief Minister (Priyobarta Singh) it was found out that on accession question certain elements were for mischief, though they all claimed that accession to India is a certainty. Except the Chief Minister all agreed that Manipur should have full responsible government even before accession to India. The Chief Minister, however, thought that it could come only after accession.

After my Manipur tour, Irawat along with other delegates attended as full delegates to the Assam Provincial Conference of the Communist Party of India held probably after the partition of the country when party members were also divided between those remaining in India and those going to Pakistan wings of the Party. And, in that Conference Irawat was elected to the Assam Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of India. Manipur unit of the Party remained as a unit of the Assam State unit of the Party till Manipur was constituted as a separate state unit by the Party later.

In the year 1948 when the Congress Government of West Bengal declared Communist Party illegal and the Party was virtually banned and repressed all over India, I was forced to go underground and later had to cross over to West Bengal for treatment. So also was the case of Party members of some stature in Manipur. I heard from my Gauhati hideout in Assam that Irawat along with some important Communist Party leaders had to go underground because of indiscriminate arrests of communists in Manipur sometime in September, 1948.¹⁴ Since then I personally lost direct contact with communists in Manipur, though some loose contacts remained through Manipur students and artists coming to Gauhati or Calcutta now and then.

Probably this was why the West Bengal secret police and the administration stated in their charge-sheet against me in 1949 that I was maintaining contact with Irawat Singh and others of Manipur. The said charge-sheet was handed over to me later in the Presidency Jail, where I was detained under the Preventive Detention Act of that time. Released from that detention I was persuaded to remain in Calcutta to join the staff of daily 'Swadhinata', the organ of the Communist Party of India in Bengali. Hence my contact with Manipur was further loosened and one day we had to publish the news of Irawat's death in a jungle hideout due to illness on 26th September, 1951¹ with heavy hearts on the pages of "Swadhinata."

This is the broad outline of Irawat as I saw and knew him. But, Irawat the man is not complete without his ever-smiling face, kind and lovable nature and indomitable courage of conviction, evident to all to see and feel every moment one was with him. But to go into these sides of the man would require many more pages to write.

Let me state only some epitomes to show how human he was. In jail, during badminton play I used to be defeated almost everyday with everyone. As a result I was almost giving up the play. But Irawat would not allow me to do so. He was the best among us; but to encourage me to continue playing he used to get defeated sometimes in a manner which would not be apparent to others. As a result, subsequently, I used to play well. Insignificant though it speaks volumes about his friendly aid to help others to develop.

During his Cachar days, I was once attacked with strong stomachache in the village where he used to stay also. He rallied some young people of the village, sent one of them to Silchar for a doctor and arranged everything in a manner as would ensure due care and nursing for me. Was it so because I was the victim? Indeed not. Everyone around him could narrate such stories about his paternal care for the ill, whether he or she was a party man or woman or an ordinary villager. Love for common man was almost an instinct with him.

One can cite thousands of such stories about him, showing how great this leader was.

Irawat Singh – The Artist In Arms

In my more than forty years of experience of a movement for a People's Culture, I rarely met a person of a stature of Irawat – perfect man, a fighter and an artiste, I came a very close to him and our intimacy grew into a profound friendship – of which I am so proud.

It was in 1943, after being released from Sylhet jail, ⁶ he came to stay for sometime in the Communist Party Commune, where I was putting up at the time. While he was in jail he came into close contact with some Marxists and felt drawn towards Marxism. He was then seriously reading books to grasp the fundamentals of Marxism and drew me into discussion on different questions. Irawat was a charming personality, soft-spoken, modest, ever-smiling having a limitless fund of humour. Our life was not easy at the time. A decent meal was a rare thing. Irawat still was not a party member, but shared our life as one of us.

He got intensely interested in the progressive writers and the People's Theatre movements, we were then organising in Sylhet and Cachar. I discovered in him a creative artiste – who could compose, sing and dance. His talks enlightened me a lot about the rich traditions of Manipuri culture. I learnt first from him the epic story of *Khamba and Thoibi* – the theme weaving the fabric of Manipuri life and culture. At the time he translated into Manipuri some of the mass songs composed by me, of which two became very popular in Manipur. One is "*Thangol Adu Maya Thangu Thouna, He Lou-uba*" and the other is "*Houro Awaba Ahingi*". The first was the rendering of my song (Sharpen your sickle, brother kisan). The second is of the (Arise, the dark night of agony ends). The original tune of my songs were maintained. The above two songs were recorded by Chandrakala Devi, the then leading female voice in HMV disc, which had a record sale in Manipur. Actually Irawat launched the new mass song movement in Manipur. He also composed a red flag song and rendered some other popular mass songs.

From Sylhet he went to Cachar where he plunged headlong into the peasant movement. He soon became the most popular peasant leader of Cachar. At his instance all sections, particularly Manipuri peasants, joined the kisan movements in their thousands. He also mobilised the village artistes. It was due to his influences that Guru Kamini Singh, the leading exponent of Manipuri Dances joined our People's Theatre movement. I took a photo of Irawat Singh along with Guru Kamini Singh. I still preserve it.

In 1944 with a singing troupe I went to Katakhal village in Cachar, to attend the District Kisan Sabha Conference. In the open rally, Irawat was in the presidential chair. He could speak Bengali though haltingly. His words came from the depth of his belief. He was always simple and to the point spiced with occasional humour and sarcasm. I had an exhilarating experience then. There was a cultural programme at the end of the conference and I was conducting it. The tea labourers of Atharaitla were presenting a Jhumur dance. At the peak moment of the dance Irawat left the presidential chair and joined the dancers, making no mistake in step and rhythm, and continued till the end. He was not only a mass political leader, but also a cultural leader who helped to build up the IPTA movement in the Barak valley. Later in 1945, we met again in Netrokona, Mymensingh, ¹¹ where he led a delegation from Cachar to the All India Kisan Conference. The Conference lasted for three days. During daytime he participated in the deliberations and at night he took part in the cultural programme with his troupe. In the open rally, which was a mammoth gathering, he presented his vigorous dance composition "*Thangol Adu*" with his troupe inspiring the memorable gathering of about 2 lakhs.

In 1943, on special invitation from P.C. Joshi, he went to Bombay to attend the first party Congress of the CPI as an observer. ⁹ Since then he formally joined the CPI. The ban on him being lifted, he returned to Manipur in 1945. He was given a hero's welcome.

Next time I met him in 1948 at Gauhati when he came to attend the Assam State Conference of the CPI. By the end of the year I met him again in Calcutta where both of us came as delegates in the second party Congress. ⁹ There was a sharp political confrontation between the old line and the new line. In the congress pandal we were sitting very close I could get his opinion on and his reaction to the deliberations that were going on. He enthusiastically supported and voted for the new line of armed struggle – Telengana way; which was adopted in the Congress by a majority vote.

At that time he was having a gastric pain very often, but he did not hesitate for a moment to undergo the most hazardous life of extreme suffering and sacrifice.

That was our last meeting. The party remained banned for more than three years. At that time we heard about his underground activities. ¹⁴ He already became a legend in Eastern India.

In 1951 I was overwhelmed with grief when I heard of the death of Irawat at the Burma borders ² where he went to contact guerilla leaders. One of those leaders, Thakin Than Tun came to our second Congress in Calcutta and Irawat met him there. Irawat wanted me to go to Imphal once, to help him in building IPTA. I could not fulfil Irawat's behest while he was alive. But I did never forget his call. In 1955 I went to Imphal and met a wide circle of Manipuri artistes. I got a ready reception among them when I was introduced as an original composer of the "*Thangol Adu*" song. After I went to Imphal, I discovered the full stature of his genius. When I met Shri Lalit Singh, Director of MDU (Manipur

Dramatic Union), the father of Manipuri modern drama, who was endearingly called by all as “*Pabung*” which means fathers he told me that the first drama to be staged was written jointly by him and Irawat on a social theme. Irawat appeared in the main role. The title of the drama was called “*Areppa Marup*” (Inseparable friend). Lalit Singh told me that Irawat was always with him at the head of modern drama movement in Manipur. I came to know many other things about Irawat from Lalit Singh. Irawat was not only a mass leader but also a pioneer in the movement for a new literature and journalism in Manipuri language. Some of his poems at that time were included in the school text.

He was considered top in many fields –a top polo player (a game which originated in Manipur), a top hockey player etc.

On my return from Manipur I wrote a long-poem on Manipur which was included in my book of poems entitled “Simanta Prahari”. The book was dedicated to the memory of Irawat. “Simanta Prahari” means “Sentinel of the Frontier.” I called Irawat “Sentinel of Eastern Frontier.”

When I was in Manipur in 1955 none there believed that Irawat was dead, “Irawat will come”, was the general feeling.

One evening I went to a village nearly 8 kms. from Imphal to attend a rural cultural gathering organised by the Kisan Sabha. There I heard a song on Irawat sung by a soprano in the traditional *Khullang Ishei style*¹⁵ in a doleful tune:

Irawat, our beloved leader
Manipur wants you to come back
You have sacrificed everything for us
You have suffered for us
Oh! You come back.

I was moved to tears, as these lines today the haunting song is still pursuing me.

Irawat Singh Of Manipur¹⁶

– Nikhil Chakravarti

Manipur is in the news today, for it is on the soil of Manipur that India is being defended against the invader. But except for its famous folk dances, very little is known about this Indian State on our eastern border. Hemmed in by uncharted mountains and dense forests, Manipur before the War was one of the quietest nooks in the world. Its 6,00,000 of sturdy, brownish, Mongoloid people perhaps never dreamt that their insignificant native-land would one day spring into limelight as one of the key points in the World War.¹⁷

But Manipur does not lack in traditions¹⁸

British overlordship has not led to the development of the State nor has the material well-being of the Manipuris been raised. Their poverty is proverbial, while all political movements are strictly taboo. No wonder, therefore, that the Japs have for their part been trying to stir up “Pan-Mangol” slogans among these backward people as a cover for their imperialist designs.

Early Life

Irawat Singh, the people’s leader of Manipur, has had a very chequered career. Coming from humble origin, he lost his parents in childhood. He was sent off to Dacca to stay with his well-off relatives. By manual labour, he earned his living and bore his cost of education. A good student, he was better still in sports and this brought him into the notice of the ruler of Manipur, and soon he found a place in the Raja’s Hockey team. The Raja was impressed with his talents and later gave his niece in marriage to Irawat.²

About this time, in 1924, Irawat had his first contact with the national movement. He attended a huge meeting in Calcutta just after Mahatmaji’s release. Here it was that he found a purpose in life and pledged himself to serve his people.

Meanwhile, he was appointed a Magistrate by the ruler of Manipur. Ignorant in law and jurisprudence, he worked hard to learn them, and he was always anxious to reform them so that the inequalities might be eliminated. At the same time, remembering his hard days at school, he devoted himself to the spread of education in Manipur. Primary schools began to spring up all over the hills despite the unsympathetic attitude of many of the state officials. High Schools too were opened in Imphal.

Realising that an organisation uniting all the Manipuris was necessary for large-scale reforms in the State, Irawat took the initiative in forming the Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha with the clear aims of striving for national unity, and social uplift.³ The Mahasabha drew the patronage of the Raja. At the third session of the organisation held at Mandalay in Burma, Irawat was sent by the Raja to preside on his behalf and he was elected a Vice-President.

The wave of State People’s movement in 1936-38 touched the shores of distant Manipur as well, and the Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha moved forward from a purely social welfare organisation to a political movement with demands for reforms. The organisation built under the patronage of the Raja turned into a liberal body, in the ensuing tug of war between the loyalists and reformists, the reformists won and Irawat was elected President by an overwhelming majority.³ But the reformist character of the movement soon gave way to more radical mass demands.

Irawat and his group carried on a campaign for reforms and collected mass signatures of thousands of Manipuris demanding responsible government.

Fight For Food

With the outbreak of the War¹⁷ in 1939, Manipur State’s People’s movement got in touch with the Congress in Assam mainly through the initiative of Irawat. The growing economic crisis hit the people and the prices went up. Big monopolists and rice-mill owners started grabbing all the stocks of paddy, and the poor Manipuris were threatened with famine. The Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha demanded the control of the rice-monopolists then. But this was ignored by the authorities.

This led to the starting of mass satyagraha by heroic Manipuri women. Military police charged them, resulting in injury⁵Irawat rushed back from Silchar where he was then organising the Manipuris in co-operation with the Congress.

Satyagraha found the Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha shaky and it backed out. Irawat and his group, however, realising the great significance of the movement not only welcomed it but formed the Praja Mandal with a more radical programme.

Repression, however, could neither break the Praja Mandal nor cow down the Satyagraha; and the authorities had to climb down and ban the export of paddy. This victory consolidated the Praja Mandal but its leader was clamped down in jail with three years’ R.I.

Inside jail, Irawat came in touch with the communist prisoners, and by studying Marxism grasped the full significance of the working-class and peasants' movements in the battle for freedom.

With the onward march of Fascism, he could not keep quiet and when the Japs reached the borders of Assam he gave out the call for defence of the Motherland against the aggressor. But he was not released until the expiry of the full term of his sentence in March, 1943.⁶

Under The Red Flag

On his release, not only did he at once join the Kisan Sabha, but attended the First Congress of the Communist Party as an invited visitor in June, 1943.⁹

It was on the floor of the historic session, moved by the strength and patriotism that stands under the Red Flag, that he made known the memorable decision to join the Party and serve his people.

Meanwhile, Irawat applied for entry into Manipur, and pledged to raise a guerilla band of 25,000 from among his people to fight the Japs. Under his inspiring leadership, the Praja Mandal came out with a stirring call for the defence of Manipur.

Repression Helps The Japs

But the wooden-headed bureaucracy learns nothing and forgets nothing. Today, not only is Irawat banned from entering Manipur, but in course of his rousing patriotic campaign among the Manipuris in Cachar, ten of his co-workers were arrested and when I was in Assam, a report came that a warrant was issued for Irawat's arrest!

This senseless vendetta of the bureaucracy helps, not certainly the Allied soldier at the front, but the Japs and their agents who give out that repression hounds Irawat and his band, because they have gone over to the Japs. The *burrah sahibs* in the Shillong Secretariat will never realise that Irawat among his own people can rouse such patriotism as will outshine half a dozen military victories.

But the true patriot does not whimper nor loses heart. "WITH FOLDED ARMS AND BENDED KNEES", AS HE PUTS IT IN HIS MESSAGE, THIS HERO OF MANIPUR APPEALS TO LEADERS ALL OVER INDIA TO UNITE TO SAVE THE COUNTRY. IT IS UPTO US TO RESPOND TO THIS MIGHTY CALL OF PATRIOTISM.

APPENDIX – I

Irawat's Application for Party Membership

I greet this first congress of the great Communist Party of India on behalf of the six and half lacs of Manipuri people of whom five and half lacs live in the Manipur State in Assam – bordering on Burma – and the rest in Surma Valley districts.

I was almost at the border of Manipur when the news of the Session of this great Congress reached me. I travelled eighteen hundred miles to greet this first Congress of the Communist Party of India on behalf of the Manipuri people. Pray accept their Red Salute

Comrades, our great and ancient country faces the outrages of the Jap marauders. My homeland has been severely hit by Jap machineguns and bombs. Imphal has been bombed time and again. On the 20th of April bombing took a heavy toll of my compatriots. Only very good military reasons prevent my disclosing the number.

TO RAISE THE BITTEREST HATRED OF OUR PEOPLE AGAINST THESE PESTS OF HUMANITY IS THE SACRED DUTY OF ALL PATRIOT, TO RESIST THEM WITH ALL THE FORCE AT OUR DISPOSAL IS THE PRIMARY PATRIOTIC TASK TODAY.

I have been refused entry into Manipur. What can I do now except work amongst my own people in the Surma Valley, rousing them against the Japs, isolating the fifth columnist from them?

Comrades, I have applied for membership of the great Communist Party of India and I shall consider it a revolutionary priviledge if I am accepted as a member. I pledge my whole time and energy for the work of the Party – for implementing the patriotic policy of the Party in action.

[The above message was conveyed by Comrade Irawat Singh, on behalf of the people of Manipur at the 1st Congress of the Communist Party of India held at Bombay from May 23 to June 1, 1943. He was a special invitee at the Congress. This is a reproduction of the article entitled "People's Leader of Bombed Manipur Applies for Revolutionary Priviledge of Party Membership", published in the "People's War" Vol. 1, No. 49, June 13, 1943. Mr. P. C. Joshi edited the "People's War" on behalf of the Communist Party of India.]

APPENDIX – II

Defending Our Motherland

The Supreme Task

Irawat Singh, Leader of the Manipur Praja Mandal was also interviewed. He is unquestionably the most popular leader of the Manipuris. Before the war he had organised and led a mighty people's movement for democratic rights. He and his comrades got a long sentence and after his release he has been served with orders not to enter his own homeland. He has been always aware of the Jap danger and knew much more about the Firth Column atrocities in the State than either the Government or the Military Command.

He offered to raise a volunteer force of 20,000 Manipuris to aid the allied forces and to save his people from fascist danger. The bureaucrats hated his patriotism, and refused his offer. Prevented from rousing and organising the Manipuris settled in the Cachar district.

He is today very much upset by the Japanese attack and said:

“Today our beloved Manipur is desecrated by the brutal lap fascists. The beautiful plains of Imphal are smeared with the innocent blood of our own brothers and sisters, because together with the mighty allied armies, they won't let the Japs break through. To all Manipuris my message is “Let not a single soul help the Japs in any way, not even with a glass of water. Ruthlessly we have to crush the enemy that comes to destroy our peaceful homes, and shackle us with the chains of Fascist slavery. Let the hills of Manipur re-echo the call of her people: the Fascists shall not pass.”

“I urged the Government to let me return to Manipur and unreservedly devote myself together with my people to the supreme task of helping the defence of my country. The arrest of ten of my co-workers in Cachar has also come to me as a shock, for we all pledged ourselves to rouse the people of Assam and strengthen her defence. Such acts certainly do not help to keep up the morale of our people. Our entire Praja Mandal stands with unshakable determination to render active and complete support in this war against fascism.”

“To our leaden all over India, I appeal with folded hands and bended knees to close our ranks and unite together. With the enemy within our gates, the prevailing feeling of despair helps none and least of all the cause of freedom. In the name of threatened Assam, I ask them to act at once and act together.”

[Comrade Irawat Singh was interviewed by Nikhil Chakravarty. He later also interviewed some leaders of Assam. The above excerpt is a reproduction from the article (interviews) entitled “Defending our Motherland – The Supreme Task. Assam And Manipur Leaders Call” by Nikhil Chakravarty published in the “People's War” Vol, II No. 43, April 23, 1944]

APPENDIX – III

A Patriotic Notebook

Only Japs Gain

Meanwhile in Assam the rumour is spread assiduously by Jap agents – Bordoloi has issued no statements, all Congressmen are devoted admirers and followers of Netaji Bose and are only waiting for the day of liberation. They even go to the extent of saying that Irawat is Bose's man; that is why the police are after him and all Manipur should follow Bose.

Fantastic propaganda – who will believe it? Some might ask. But just read the black tale of the bureaucrats' actions. These men who have been born in pigeon holes and cradled in red-tape do not know the meaning of patriotism. When will they learn that to keep the leaders in jails is to play into the enemy's hands?

Birds Of Same Feather

These army bosses' ideas about morale are the same as those of the bureaucrats. Look at the way they go about rousing the people to defend their land.

Sjts. Bordoloi, B K. Das and A. K Chanda – the only leaders of the Assam Congress today outside jail – have all issued appeals to their people to resist Jap aggression. So has Irawat Singh, the unchallenged leader of the Manipur Praja Mandal.

What is the answer of the bureaucracy to this? Does it allow them to campaign among the people and rouse them to defend their country; does it release other Congressmen?

Here are facts

Sjt. Bordoloi is interned at Gauhati; Sjt. Chanda at Calcutta (and on top of this warned if he comes to Assam he will be put into jail) Ten of Irawat's colleagues have been arrested at Cachar. And biggest crime of all, warrant has been issued against Irawat himself and that too, after he issued his statement.

[The above appendix is an excerpt from the article entitled "A Patriotic Notebook" published in the "People's War" Vol. II No. 44, April 30, 1944.]

APPENDIX – IV

When Japs Attack: What Happened In Assam:

Blind Stupidity

You would think that our Party at least would be free to do propaganda, etc. But you do not know the Assam bureaucracy, which is worse than any, anywhere else, and the Jap attack has only made it more panicky and crazy.

Who does not know, that Irawat Singh is the most popular Manipuri Communist leader in Assam. A warrant has been issued against him. After the fall of Burma, even when he was in jail, he had issued a ringing call to the Manipuris not to welcome, but help to fight, the Japs. Under his leadership, the Manipur Praja Mandal has consistently stuck to the anti-fascist line. Even though he was banned from entering Manipur and the Praja Mandal workers have no civil liberties, they have been doing anti-Jap propaganda. Imagine anti-Jap propaganda having to be done secretly in Manipur!

A large number of Manipuris live in Cachar district also. Ever since his release, Irawat Singh has been rousing them against the Jap danger and for the Grow More Food campaign through the Kisan Sabha of which he was the Secretary. Ten of his co-workers, all Manipuris and communists, have been arrested.

When he was in jail to humbug the simple Manipur tribesmen, the Tokyo Radio was bellowing that he was at Bose's Headquarters! You can imagine how they will exploit his arrest or absence underground now.

[The above excerpt is from the "People's War" Vol. II No. 44, April 30, 1941]

APPENDIX – V

Manipur Secretariat Record: Political Agency File No. J – 5: Subject: Hijam Irawat Singh (Maintenance allowance and detention etc.):
Cabin 4 Page 4 (a)

To
His Highness the Maharajah of Manipur State, Imphal.
Through His Excellency the Governor of Assam, Shillong.
Dated, Sylhet Jail, the 18th April, 1942.

Your Highness,

I, the undersigned political prisoner, who is a subject of Manipur State and who is now undergoing imprisonment in Sylhet Jail feel that the war which is being waged by the people of England in co-operation with the people of Russia, China and America against the menace of aggression by Germany, Italy and Japan has become a deep concern for me. The international alignment or the progressive forces of the people of the world against fascism has convinced me of the bounden duty of the people of India, of which we are a component part, to shake off all their prejudices and to participate in this total war and to make victorious the cause of world people as a whole.

Even from behind the prison bars, I feel that if fascism be victorious today the world civilisation and culture will be at stake, the freedom movement of the people of all lands will die for ever, smaller nations and minorities will suffer the most under the vile yoke of fascist militarist regime, And from behind the prison bars I am feeling extremely perturbed by the daily news of the Japanese advance in Burma, which means that the freedom and integrity of the State of Manipur is immediately threatened with invasion by the Japanese hordes. Moreover, it is learnt that thousands of evacuees from Burma are daily passing through Manipur, thus greatly complicating the problems of the people of Manipur mainly economic and hygienic. The strains of such complicacy as the State suffers now, must be equally borne by Your Highness and all the people of Manipur. Everyone must take up his due responsibility and fulfil his own task.

In the name of all humanity, in the name of the glorious tradition of the people of Manipur, which has been created by the life and blood of all freedom-loving men and women of Manipur, I invite to-day my own countrymen to understand the significance of the present world war and to play their role for the Allied cause, preparing to the full for the defence of their own land when enemy invasion is quite imminent. I hope the whole people will act as one man, and putting aside all differences of the past will organise themselves for the sake of successfully carrying out all war efforts, for maintaining peace and tranquility of the State, and for economic self-sufficiency. It is necessary that under circumstances of a total war the people of the State and its officers and administration make a common cause. I hope Your Highness will create conditions for the same and thus mobilise the full force of the State for the maximum utilisation of its energies in different spheres of activities of the total war e.g. military training and equipments, maintenance of peace and tranquility, food production and supply etc.

But all my appeal to my countrymen means nothing if I do not myself share the responsibility in the humblest way possible. I feel it a bounden duty at this supreme hour of peril of human history, and at this moment of all moments when the very border of my beloved Mother State is threatened with enemy invasion. I feel that I must take my own share of responsibility. But confined as I am within the four walls of prison it is not possible for me to take an active part in the common cause against the aggression unless your Highness offers me proper facilities.

I, therefore, fervently urge Your Highness to allow me free scope for mobilising people in support of this anti-fascist war against Japanese aggressors by setting me, and other political prisoners if there be any, who may share my views, free. And I hope, if, set at liberty, I shall be able to render sufficient amount of service towards that end. It may be made clear that my urge of release has simply been actuated by a sincere love for my own country and for my own people and by a genuine desire for the growth of human civilisation unmolested by the fascist hordes.

Your Highness's obedient
Servant,
Irabot Singh.

Countersigned. Sd/ – A. M. Philip, Supdt. Dist. Jail, Sylhet.
Sd/ –A Jailor, Sylhet Jail.
4. 5. 42

NOTES

1. The article “Builder of Manipuris’ Freedom Movement” is a reproduction of the article “Life story of Irawat Singh – Communist Candidate from Assam. Poor Orphan to People’s Hero. Builder of Manipuris’ Freedom Movement” which was printed in the front page of “People’s Age” Vol. IV, NO. 7, Dec. 30, 1945 (Election Supplement). The “People’s Age” was an organ of the then C.P.I.
2. Hijam Irawat Singh was born at Imphal on September 30, 1896. His father was Hijam Ibungohal Singh and mother – Chongtham Chanu Thambalnganbi. Irawat married Khomdonsana, niece of Churachand Maharajah, King of Manipur. He died on the 26th September, 1951 at Tangbo, Burma.
3. Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha: Founded on May 30, 1934 as Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha, its aim was to unify the Manipuris inside and outside Manipur based upon the Hindu religion and to reform the society in social, cultural, economic and educational fields.
The third session of the Mahasabha was held at Mandalay a town in Central Burma from the 28th February to the 2nd March, 1937.
The fourth session of the Mahasabha was held at Chinga ground, Imphal on December 29 and 30, 1938. It took a political character. Thereby it changed its name to Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha. He was elected President of the Mahasabha. The session adopted a number of radical economic, political and social slogans.
4. The British Political Agent was C. Gimson, I.C.S. He was incumbent of the post from 1933 to 1946.
5. The movement is known as “Nupi Lal” (Women’s War in Manipur). The major event of the movement took place on December 12, 1939.
6. Irawat was arrested on the 9th January, 1940 on the charge of sedition and detained in Imphal Jail and then transferred to Sylhet Jail. He was released on March 20, 1943 from Sylhet Jail.
7. Surma Valley: The whole valley area covered by Barak river (Known as Surma river in Bangladesh) including Cachar and Sylhet District in Bangladesh.
8. Bhakna Session of A I K S: The seventh session of the A I K S was held at Bhakna Kalan in Amritsar District of Punjab from April 2 to 4, 1943.
9. The first Congress of CPI was held at Bombay from the 23rd May to the 1st June, 1943. The 2nd Congress of CPI was held at Calcutta from February 28 to March 6, 1948.
10. Indian People’s Theatre Association (I P T A) was established in 1942.
11. Netrakona Session of A I K S: The ninth session of the A I K S was held at “Kisan Nagar” on the outskirts of Netrakona town in Mymensing District, Bengal (now in Bangladesh) from the 5th to the 9th April, 1945.
12. Twentytwo Krishak Sabha candidates were fielded in the Manipur Assembly Election held in 1948. Five of the candidates were elected to the Assembly, including Irawat.
13. Manipur unit of the C P I was formed on August 23, 1948.
14. Irawat and the C P I of Manipur went underground on September 21, 1948. On that fated day, Irawat was organising a public meeting at the Manipur Dramatic Union hall in Imphal against the formation of the Purbanchal Pradesh in which Manipur was to be one of its districts.
A contingent of peasants from Lamlai (about 16 kms from Imphal) and the surrounding areas proceeded towards Imphal to participate in the said meeting. The procession was stopped by a police party at Yourabung. In the scuffle that ensued a police officer was killed accidentally. A cruel repression followed in the area. The Party and the allied organisations were banned. All the leading cadres of the Party and the allied organisations went underground from that day.
15. Khullang Ishei – Manipuri anti-phonal singing style.
16. The article “Irawat Singh of Mahipur” written by Nikhil Chakravarty is reproduced from the “People’s War” Vol. II, No: 45, May 7, 1944. The “People’s War” was an organ of the then C P I.
17. World War II.
18. The full paragraph “But Manipur does not lack in traditions – Vabruvahan, the legendary king of Manipur is famous in the Mahabharata as having defeated Arjuna. And this tradition was reinforced in modern times when in the 19th Century, British forces entered the state by driving a herd of sacred cattle before them. So that the Manipuris would not kill them, for they found it hard to face the Manipuri army in open combat” is deleted.