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PARTICIPATION OF THE VAIPHEIS IN ELECTORAL POLITICS OF MANIPUR

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Abstract: The Vaiphei tribe is one of the officially recognised scheduled tribes of Manipur. For ages, they have been inhabiting the remote hilly region of the present Churachandpur district. Their indigeneity is solidly evident in the rich cultural heritage that they have developed. Their lives were guided by traditional wisdom and knowledge that form part of customary practices. The dawn of modern civilisation particularly in the realm of education ushered in a new awakening and awareness among this tribe. This awareness immensely helps them to participate in the electoral politics of the state. Though they are small in numbers their political intuitiveness prompts them to find a niche for themselves in the political annals of the state.

Key Words: Vaiphei, Electoral Politics, Democracy, Marginalisation.

Introduction

The Constitution of India, in its philosophy and institutions, embodies the objectives of enhancing "national unity and integrity", building the "institutions and spirit of democracy" and "fostering a social revolution" (Granville 1999, 6). The three levels of governance that are part of the intrinsic federal system in the country directed towards those objectives are the parliament, the State Assembly, and the local self-government (Chandra, Mukherjee and Mukherjee 1999 [2008] 71-77). Inclusive participation of the populace in the public sphere, including in representative politics, is an important aspect of a democratic society. To secure unhindered people's participation in politics, it is necessary to adopt inclusive laws and institutions for effective governance accessible to the people.

The primary objective of the democratic system of representation is to give the citizenry a voice in the decision-making process. In the First Past the Post system in India, the elections are monitored by the Constitution of India's mandated body, the Election Commission of India. The Constitution of India provides socially, economically, and politically marginalized groups with an avenue of mobilisation and assertion in decision-making (Singer 2012). This possibility has brought about positive changes today, in that it made the system more alert and sensitive to the needs of a wide array of social groups while legitimising democratic institutions. This was not always the case for tribes in Manipur, including the Vaipheis, who have suffered from historical marginalisation and exclusion.

Apart from the constitutional and democratic changes that took place after the independence of India that significantly improved the scope for political participation, the introduction of Western education has had one of the most profound impacts on creating political consciousness among the Vaipheis (Suantak 2010, 268-269). Dena (2008, 72), in his seminal work *In Search of Identity: Hmars of North-East India,* also noted, "The introduction of Western education by the missionaries with the backing from the colonial authorities provided the material basis for the emergence of a new educated group, which provided two kinds of leadership: church leaders and political leaders…" Western education also provided the general Zo population with social mobility within the new political system, accompanied by the emergence of an elite leadership which posed challenges to traditional structures of power (Dena 2015, 112).

This paper is a critical examination of the participation of the Vaipheis in the electoral politics of the State and its impact on the community – at the Lok Sabha elections, the State Assembly elections, and the District Council elections. This study makes use of primary and secondary sources, along with interviews with important stakeholders and political leaders within the Vaipheis, to identify the nuances and intricacies of political representation within the ambit of electoral reservation.

The paper also briefly traces the importance of electoral reservation for marginalised communities and the evolution of representative democracy in Manipur. It concludes by identifying challenges to the political representation of the Vaipheis.

ELECTORAL RESERVATION IN INDIA

Historically, the political participation of tribals in Manipur has been either non-existent or very limited. The colonial administration in Manipur also provided little or no scope for the political participation of tribals apart from the village administration. The *lam subedars* (revenue officers), assisted by subordinate *lambus* remained the only connection between the tribals and the colonial administration (Dena 2020). Throughout India, the exclusionary nature of the colonial administration prompted popular demands for participation and representation in legislative and executive bodies (Saksena, 1981, xi).

The political future of tribes in Northeast India also presents a peculiar interest for British administrators due to the distinct socio-economic composition of the region. As independence of India dawned on the horizon, notes by British officers such as Sir Robert N Reid (*A Note on the Future of the Present Excluded, Partially Excluded and Tribal Areas of Assam*), JP Mills (*A Note on the Future of the Hill Tribes of Assam*), Sir Andrew G Clow (*The Future Government of Assam Tribal People*) and Phillip F Adams (*Some Notes on the Policy for the Hill Tribes of Assam*) all dealt with policy proposals for future administration of tribals in the region.[1] The problem was also taken up and debated in the Constituent Assembly at great length, which subsequently decided on the status of tribals based on the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India.[2]

[1] A compilation of policy notes can be found in Syiemlieh, David R. 2014. *On the Edge of Empire: Four British Plans for North East India, 1945-1947.* New Delhi: Sage Publication.

[2] Also refer to the Constituent Assembly debates on the Sixth Schedule at https://khadc.nic.in/acts_rules_regulations_bills/misc/Constituent%20Assembly%20Debate%20relating%20to%206th%20Schedule_excerpts_.pdf.

The Constitution enacted after independence sought to remedy deprivation and marginalization and provided avenues for inclusive governance, including electoral representation. For the first time, the adoption of the Manipur State Constitution Act of 1947[3] before the merger of Manipur into the Indian Union as a Part C State and the subsequent adoption of the democratic Constitution of India in 1950 brought about far-reaching changes in the scope of political participation for the people of Manipur. As per the Manipur State Constitution Act 1947, the hill people of the State were to occupy about 36% of the seats in the Assembly. Moreover, as per Section 10(d) of the Act, out of seven ministers (including the Chief Minister), two are to be elected from the hill community (Banerjee 1958).

In independent India, affirmative action in the area of electoral representation is informed by the historical exclusion and discrimination experienced by the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities. Following the decision of the Constituent Assembly, it was decided that tribals themselves would best represent the interests of tribals (Ambagudia 2019, 47). While granting equal citizenship rights is considered necessary, it was felt inadequate in the representation of tribals in political institutions. Hence, institutional safeguards and mechanisms were adopted to ensure fair representation of tribals in the Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies. The Sixth Scheule was also adopted for tribals in the former Assam province. However, there is no reservation of seats in the indirectly elected upper houses of the parliament, as their scope of operation differs from the directly elected house.

These constitutional and institutional mechanisms provide marginalised communities with a "substantial quantitative presence" that would otherwise be missing (Galanter 1984, 50). The electoral reservation aims to address marginalisation by including those who have been structurally excluded from formal political institutions to ensure adequate representation in the democratic process. It also aims to create a more inclusive political system. It may be noted that affirmative action for marginalized groups is not limited to electoral representation, it is also extended to education (Article 15 [4] and 29) and public employment (Article 16 [4], 324 [4], 333, and 335). These preferential treatments are subject to a constitutional time limit but have been extended periodically until today. Reservation policies also significantly improved access to decision-making, including at the local representative bodies (Duflo 2005), including in the District Councils in Manipur.

Apart from the representation of marginalised communities, reservations also lead to corresponding changes in public expenditures directed towards the group that benefits from the reservation (Duflo 2005, 671). On the developmental plane, electoral reservations have been most beneficial, as Galanter (1984, 53) notes, in areas such as:

(1) establishing programs of which they (*marginalised communities*) are the beneficiaries;

(2) insuring deployment of resources to these programs;

(3) pressing for better administration of these programs;

(4) resisting cut-backs and premature termination of such programs.

[3] A copy of the Manipur Constitution can be accessed at https://manipur.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/act-1.pdf.

Furthermore, Article 330 of the Indian constitution ensures the reservation of seats in a "quota system" for SCs and STs in the lower house of the Indian parliament, known as the Lok Sabha, while Article 332 mandates the reservation of seats for STs in the legislative assembly of every state in India in proportion to their numerical strength. Throughout India, the first general election to the Lok Sabha was held in 1952, and the first Lok Sabha was constituted in April 1952.

HISTORY OF DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION IN MANIPUR

After the adoption of *the Manipur State Constitution Act of 1947*, accompanied by *the Manipur State Hill Peoples (Administration) Regulation of 1947*[4], an interim council was formed consisting of two tribal cabinets, TC Tiankham (Minister of Forest and Agriculture) and Major R Khathing (Minister of Hill Administration and Manipur Rifles), apart from four non-tribals (Sinha, 1987). Following the first democratic elections based on universal adult suffrage in 1948, a total of 53 legislators were elected from across Manipur. The first cabinet consisted of Major R Khathing, Teba Kilong, and TC Tiankham from the tribal community (Dena 2020).

After Indian independence, the Constitution of India established a federal structure whereby there is a separation in the legislative, executive, and financial functions between the centre and the States. When Manipur was incorporated into the Indian Union, it was categorised as a Part C State in 1952. As a Part C State, Manipur has a 30-member electoral college. This continued till 1957 when Manipur was made a Union Territory following *the State Reorganisation Act of 1956* (or the 7th Amendment Act of 1956).

As a Union Territory, Manipur was provided with an elected 30-member Territorial Council following *the Territorial Council Act of 1956*. The Council was also empowered with limited administrative powers under a Chief Commissioner, who represents the President of India. The structural and functional limitations of the arrangement led to widespread protests and demands for a responsible government. Thereafter, the institution of the Territorial Council was abolished in 1963, and it was replaced by a Territorial Legislative Council with Council of Ministers to assist the Chief Commissioner. The Council was also provided with a committee known as the Hill Standing Committee, consisting of members from hill constituencies to look into matters of the hill districts. Manipur became a full-fledged State following the enactment of the *North-Eastern Areas (Re-organisation) Act of 1971*. Following this, the membership of the Manipur Legislative Assembly was also increased from 30 to 60 members. Correspondingly, a special provision was inserted in the Constitution of India as *Article 371C* to safeguard the rights and interests of the hill people. A distinctive feature of the new setup is the institution of a Hill Areas Committee (replacing the Hill Standing Committee) following the promulgation of *the Manipur Legislative Assembly (Hill Areas Committee) Order of 1972* following Article 371C. The first election to the State Assembly was held in March 1972.

Manipur has two Lok Sabha seats. The Outer Manipur Constituency is reserved for the Scheduled Tribes (STs), while the Inner Manipur Constituency is unreserved. Even though the Outer Manipur parliamentary constituency is reserved for ST candidates, the constituency has a significant percentage of non-tribal voters. In

[4] The regulation can be accessed at https://www.independentmanipur.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Manipur-State-Hills-Peoples-Administration-Regulation-1947.pdf.

the State Assembly, the 19 seats in the hill areas are reserved for the STs. One constituency is reserved for the Scheduled Castes (SCs), and the remaining are unreserved constituencies.

As to local governance and decentralisation, *the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act of 1971*[5] established six District Councils in the hill districts of Manipur, which continued to exist instead of Panchayati Raj Institutions.[6] Under the *Act*, the entire hill area of Manipur was divided into six District Councils namely Tamenglong District Council, Ukhrul District Council, Senapati District Council, Sadar Hills District Council, Churachandpur District Council, and Chandel District Council. These Districts each have District Councils constituted under them, elected through universal adult franchise. With the Sixth Amendment of 2022, the number of District Councils was increased to 10. The elected members were known as Members of District Council (MDC).

The Act and its subsequent amendments provide only limited administrative, financial, and representative changes. Provisions of the Councils have been amended over the years, in 2000, 2006, and 2008, but to the dissatisfaction of tribal groups. As a statutory institution, the District Council suffered from serious structural and functional irregularities and needed reforms to satisfy the decentralisation aspirations of the people (Kom 2010). In 2021, the HAC forwarded a comprehensive draft Bill called *the Manipur (Hill Areas) Autonomous District Council Bill 2021*, aimed at structurally and functionally empowering the District Councils, to the State government in August 2021. However, it was not introduced by the State government. Against the expectations of tribal groups, the government adopted another bill known as *the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Councils (Sixth Amendment) Bill of 2022*[7], which increased the number of District Councils to ten along with other minor changes. At the village level, *The Manipur (Village Authority in Hill Areas) Act of 1950* mandates the formation of Village Authorities.

As demands to strengthen the District Council gained traction, elections were boycotted from the late 1980s, and no elections were held for over 20 years. Organizations such as the All-Tribal Student Union Manipur (ATSUM), and the Sixth Schedule Demand Committee spearheaded the demand for empowering the District Councils and implementing the Sixth Schedule in Manipur (Kshetri 2006, 22–25). Fresh elections were held in 2010 under the Amendment Act of 2008, with the next election held in 2015. As the term of the previous election had expired in 2020, elections have been delayed for over three years now. The Councils are tended to by government-appointed caretaker chairmen, leading again to another round of widespread discontentment concerning local empowerment in the hill districts.

[5] https://satp.org/Docs/Document/1163.pdf

[6] Hill areas of Manipur are exempted from the application of Part-IX (dealing with panchayats) of the Constitution as per Article 243(M) of the Constitution.

[7] The Sixth Amendment Act can be accessed at https://manipurgovtpress.nic.in/en/details_gazzete/?gazette=1574

PARTICIPATION OF VAIPHEIS IN ELECTORAL POLITICS

In studying the participation of the Vaipheis in electoral politics, the role of social organisations such as the Vaiphei National Organization – VNO (now renamed the Vaiphei Peoples' Council) and other sister organizations is indispensable. The VNO, in particular, was an organisation formed for "political unity or political growth" of the Vaipheis (Suantak 2015, 273). However, as the focus of the next Chapter will be on the socio-political organisations of the Vaipheis and their contribution, this section will primarily restrict itself to the domain of political representation.

Many Vaipheis have been involved actively in electoral politics since the introduction of democratic representation in Manipur, but very few of them are successful in the endeavour. This may be attributed to the fact that the Vaipheis are one of the minority-recognized tribes of Manipur – scattered in the entire hill districts of Manipur, and therefore they have no compact constituency where they can regularly send a representative from their tribe, like other Zo kindred tribes such as Thadou, Paites, and Hmars. The Vaipheis thus remained underrepresented in the current set-up.

The under-representation of the Vaipheis, particularly in the Assembly seats of Manipur, is also due to the prevailing identity-based politics. At the time of elections, political parties hardly influence the electorate, and voters, in general, are not so concerned about party ideologies and manifestos but are rather swayed to support the candidate who belongs to their community. The quality of the candidate or the ideology of the party is seldom accounted for in supporting a candidate. However eligible a candidate may be, if the candidate belongs to a minority community among the electorate, there is often a reduced chance of him or her getting elected, albeit with few exceptions.

In exercising political acumen, prudence, and sensibility to the socio-political atmosphere, Vaiphei candidates do manage to get elected from time to time to the State Assembly as well as in the Lok Sabha election. The following sections study the participation of the Vaipheis in the Lok Sabha elections, the State Assembly elections, and the District Council elections.

Lok Sabha

Since the first Lok Sabha general elections in 1952, there have been five successful candidates from the Zo community – Pu[8] Paokai Haokip, Pu N Gouzagin, Pi Kim Gangte, Pu Holkhomang Haokip, and Pu Thangso Baite.

Among them, Pu Thangso Baite, formerly a State legislator, is from the Vaiphei tribe and served two consecutive terms from 2009 to 2019. He is a native of Dongjang village, Churachandpur, and was a member of the Indian National Congress (INC). His achievement as a Member of Parliament (MP) is a new record in the history of Vaihpeis in Manipur, as he is the first and only Vaiphei to date to be elected an MP. Pu Thangso Baite

[8] Pu and Pi are honorary prefix used by the Zo people.

is also the first Vaiphei Minister of State in the Manipur Assembly. At present, Pu Thangso Baite and Pu T Manga Vaiphei, another seasoned State legislator, are considered the most competent Vaiphei politicians in the political arena of Manipur.[9] Despite the highly stratified nature of electoral competition, his success highlights how his acumen helped him navigate the political and electoral landscape to represent the Outer Manipur constituency.

During his tenure, he has actively supported the promulgation of anti-racism law.[10] He also raised pertinent issues of concern for the Northeast in general and Manipur in particular, including the District Councils of Manipur, Indo-Myanmar border issue, insurgency, infrastructure development, the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill 2016, agriculture, and deforestation.[11] During his first tenure, he was a member of the Advisory Committee of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and Chairman of the Food Corporation of India (FCI), Manipur State. Between 2009 and 2012, he was also a member of the Standing Committee on Agriculture. Between 2012 and 2014, he was a member of the Standing Committee on Rural Development. In his second tenure, he was a member of the Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare and of the Consultative Committee of the Ministry of Tourism and Culture.

State Assembly

In the history of representation to the State Assembly, five Members of Legislative Assembly (MLA) from the Vaiphei tribe have been elected in the Assembly seats of Manipur. They are Pu Damjakhai, Pu Pauneikhai Suantak, Pu T Manga Vaiphei, Pu Thangso Baite, and Pu LM Khaute.

In the political history of Manipur, Pu Damjakhai Vaiphei was the first Vaiphei to become a member of the Territorial Council in 1948. He remained in office for only one year and retired from politics at the end of his term. Pu Damjakhai Vaiphei continued his academic career after he retired from politics and became the first veterinary doctor among the Vaipheis in Manipur. He was the architect of growth in the field of politics and education for the Vaipheis. Pu Damjakhai Vaiphei opened the road to politics and created a new era in the political history of the Vaipheis in Manipur.[12]

According to Pu Nengdolian, former President of Vaiphei National Organization (VNO) Headquarters, at the time Pu Damjakhai was elected as a member of the Territorial Council, the total number of voters from the Vaipheis tribe in Churachandpur constituency was only around 2000. He further stated that Vaipheis are not less politically inclined compared to the majority tribes in the district. However, the failure of Vaipheis in the field of politics in the succeeding years was mainly due to the significantly lower number and percentage of Vaiphei

[9] Interview with Pu Paokholal Vaiphei, Ex. MDC, Chief of Pengjang Village, on March 25, 2009.

[10] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/northeast-students-march-to-parliament-demand-anti-racism-law/articleshow/29961544.cms.

[11] For more details on parliamentary engagements, see https://eparlib.nic.in/browse?type=members&sort_by=1&order=ASC&rpp=20&etal=-1&value=Thangso+Baite&offset=40.

[12] Interview with Pu Paokholal Vaiphei, Ex. MDC, Chief of Pengjang Village, on March 25, 2024.

voters compared to other Zo tribes in Churachandpur district. The rise of identity politics in the State is another main factor in the failure of Vaipheis in the Assembly of Manipur. The rise of identity politics raised awareness among the hill people and motivated voters, especially those from the majority Zo tribes, to elect candidates belonging to their community or tribe for the Assembly seat. Pu Nengdolian also asserted that while identity politics may be a curse for minority communities or tribes, it is a real blessing for the majority communities or tribes, allowing them to hold the Assembly seats of Manipur permanently as they have inherited the political fortunes of reservations. He also recounts how difficult it was for a minority candidate to convince voters from the majority to obtain their support during elections. As a result, getting elected as an MLA for the minority seems like a difficult accomplishment; indeed, it is an infrequent occurrence in the electoral political history of Manipur.

Despite facing numerous challenges, Pu Pauneikhai Suantak was elected as a member of the Territorial Council of Manipur from 1962 to 1967, becoming the second Vaiphei MLA in Manipur. He represented the Churachandpur constituency, and he was elected on the Congress ticket. He was also an active member of the Congress party from Churachcndpur district. This was a historic achievement, as he was elected from a minority tribe. During his time in office, Pu Pauneikhai Suantak served as Deputy Minister from 1963 to 1967 under Chief Minister Mairembam Koireng Singh, in charge of Agriculture, Tribal Welfare, Labour, and Employment. He also became the first Vaiphei Minister in the Manipur Assembly.

During World War II, Pu Pauneikhai Suantak served the Allied forces in the Department of Intelligence. He was also formerly the School Master of Kangvai Government School from 1942 to 1943, and the Head Master of Chongkhozou Government School from 1945 to 1950. He was also instrumental in bringing about a peace agreement in 1960 between Kuki and Hmar of the Zo community, who were then engulfed in a conflict. Pu Pauneikhai Suantak was also the founder and vice-chairman of Manipur state level 'Nisha Band Committee' from 1963 to 1968 and the founder chairman of Churachandpur Government College in 1964. From 1962 to 1964, he was a member of the Tribal Welfare Advisory Board, Government of Manipur. Known for his anti-corruption activities, he deeply influenced Shri Koireng, the then Chief Minister (CM) of Manipur, Mairembam Koireng Singh, who always recalled his activities as a good example for his colleagues to transform Manipur politics from the affliction of corruption.[13] Together with the CM, they successfully took up the possession of Manipur Bhavan, located at Sardar Patel Road in New Delhi. His contribution, not only in the field of State and local politics but also in education and peacebuilding, is unparalleled till today. Unfortunately, he was not re-elected for a second term, leading to the Vaiphei community being unrepresented in the Manipur Assembly for thirty-three years until Pu T Manga Vaiphei was elected in 2000.[14] His participation in the District Councils will be discussed in the following section.

In 2000, Pu T Manga Vaiphei was elected from Henglep Assembly Constituency in Churachandpur District, becoming the third MLA elected from the Vaiphei tribe. He was further re-elected from the same

[13] Suantak, Joseph, A brief History of Panuneikai Suantak (1921-2014), p.1.

[14] Interview with Pu, Nengdolian, Ex. President, VNO.

constituency. During the same year, Pu Thangso Baite was also elected from the Singngat Assembly Constituency, becoming the fourth Vaiphei MLA. In 2002, both Pu T Manga Vaiphei and Pu Thangso Baite held positions as Cabinet and State Ministers, respectively, under the ministry of the then Chief Minister of Manipur O Ibobi Singh. In a cabinet reshuffle in 2016, Pu T Manga Vaiphei was allocated the portfolios of the Public Health Engineering Department (PHED), Labour and Employment, and Science and Technology. From 2002 to 2005, Pu Thangso Baite held the post of Minister of State in the Government of Manipur, and from 2003 to 2005, he held the post of Minister of State (Independent Charge). During his tenure as MLA from 2002 to 2007, Pu Thangso Baite served under the Ministry of O. Ibobi Singh.

The simultaneous success of Pu T Manga Vaiphei and Pu Thangso Baite in the Manipur Assembly is a significant political achievement in the history of the Vaipheis in Manipur. However, Pu Thangso Baite could not be re-elected in the next election held in 2007. But in the same year, in 2007, he was elected as an MP in the Lok Shaba elections and became the first Vaiphei to get elected as MP in India. The period when Pu T Manga Vaiphei and Pu Thangso Baite were elected as members of the Manipur Assembly, marked a significant moment in the political participation history of the Vaipheis.

Pu T Manga Vaiphei was re-elected in 2007 and 2012 for the third and fourth terms from the same Henglep constituency, making him the only person from a minority tribe to win four consecutive terms in an Assembly election. Despite his continuous victories, the number of Vaiphei voters in his constituency is only slightly above 3500 out of a total of 22,000. Pu T Manga Vaiphei is not only the first Cabinet Minister from the Vaiphei tribe, but he has also made history in the electoral history of Manipur by winning elections for four consecutive terms from the same constituency.

The latest entrant to the list is Pu LM Khaute, the incumbent MLA from Churachandpur Assembly Constituency as per the election of 2022. Pu LM Khaute is a former Director General of Police (DGP), Manipur, who retired voluntarily in 2021 to contest the State Assembly elections the following year. Pu LM Khaute, contesting in the Janata Dal (United) ticket, bagged the seat by defeating his nearest contender by winning 18,231 votes of the 47,671 total votes polled in Churachandpur AC. Pu LM Khaute was an Indian Police Service Officer (1985 batch) with a Master's degree from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

District Council

The institution of the District Council facilitated the penetration of democratic politics at the local level. The institution also expanded the scope for participation in local government and the democratic decision-making process in the districts. Accordingly, the participation of the Vaipheis in the District Councils surpasses their involvement in the State Assembly and helps in grooming political leadership among the Vaipheis. This section surveys District Council elections until 2015.

The District Councils are the institutions of local self-government or decentralisation in the hill districts of Manipur. Local self-government can be understood as "the administration of local areas run by its elective representatives"[15]. Despite limitations, the advantages of the District Councils are fundamentally in the areas of:

Service Delivery: As a district-based institution, the District Councils understand and address specific community needs for improved service delivery in areas such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure.

Political Participation and Empowerment: It also empowers local communities, fostering participation, accountability, and democracy.

Economic development: It also tailors context-based policies for economic development and promotes economic upliftment of the general population, promoting local business and job creation.

First Election

In the first election to the District Councils held in 1973, Pu. Pauneikhai Suantak, former MLA, and Pu Tongneithang Vaiphei were the only two Vaipheis elected as MDC from Haopi constituency in Churachandpur District Council and from Kangchup constituency under Sadar Hills District Council (then in unbifurcated Senapati district), respectively. Both MDC also held the post of Chairman in their respective districts during the first term of the District Councils.[16]

Second Election

The second District Council election in 1979 witnessed a landmark election of eight Vaipheis from constituencies in Churachandpur District Council, Tamenglong District Council, Sadar Hills ADistrict Council and Chandel District Council and the nomination of one member. Pu. Pauneikhai Suantak was elected from Torbung constituency for his second term under Churachandpur District Council, Pu Lengpau Vaiphei was elected from Kangchup constituency under Sadar Hills District Council and he also assumed the Chairmanship of District Council, Pu Johan Suantak was elected from Kamuching constituency and he also assumed the Vice-Chairmanship under Sadar Hills District Council, Pu Jamngam Baite was elected from Tuining constituency under Churachandpur District Council, Pu Paokholal Vaiphei was elected from Henglep constituency under Churachandpur District Council, Pu Pumthang Neihsial was elected from Longpi constituency under Tamenglong District Council, Pu. Haokhothang Baite was elected from Mangkang constituency under Chandel District Council, Pu Solun Baite was elected from Jalenbung constituency under Ukhrul District Council, and Pu Onsei Baite was nominated from Chandel District Council.

[15] https://www.politicalscienceview.com/importance-of-local-self-government/

[16] Interview with Pu Paokholal Vaiphei.

Third Election

In the third election in 1983, Pu. Paukholal Vaiphei and Pu. Lengpau Vaiphei again re-elected from the same constituencies where they were elected in 1979. Pu. Lengpau Vaiphei held the post of Chairman under Sadar Hills District Council for the second time. Due to the demand for full implementation of Sixth Schedule in the hill areas, the tribals of Manipur boycotted the elections of District Councils and thus District Councils remained without elections for more than two decades.

Fourth Election

After a gap of two decades, the election to the District Councils was resumed in 2010 with the hope of having a more empowered decentralisation. The election saw the success of six Vaipheis from Churachandpur and Chandel District Councils. Pu Ngamkholal Baite was elected from Sugnu Hill Area constituency under Chandel District Council, Pu Genneikhup was elected from Chongkhozo constituency under Churachandpur District Council, Pu Tongkhokai Baite was elected from Sangaikot constituency under Churachandpur District Council, Pu Pauminlian was elected from Haopi Range constituency under Churachandpur District Council, Pu. Jangkhongam was elected from 17-Moreh A under Chandel District Council, and Pu S Khuptinthang Vaiphei was elected from Kangchup constituency under Sadar Hills District Council.[17]

Fifth Election

In the fifth election in 2015, two Vaiphei candidates were successful from Churachandpur District Council. Pu Genneikhup was reelected from Chongkhozo constituency under Churachandpur District Council and Pu Kamkholal was elected from Haopi Range under Churachandpur District Council. Both were independent candidates. The independent candidates from Chrachandpur District Council flaunted a new party known as Hill People's Alliance (HPA), of which the Vaipheis were also a part.

CHALLENGES IN POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Despite being a minority tribe, the Vaipheis managed to get elected in the three levels of democratic elections at the Lok Sabha, State Assembly, and District Councils. As we have observed, their greatest presence is at the District Councils. However, they faced unprecedented challenges in the demographically divergent and ethnicity-divided socio-political landscape of Manipur. This section deals with some of the problems and challenges facing the political representation of the Vaipheis.

The first problem concerns identity politics in a demographically diverse[18] Manipur. While electoral reservation for marginalised groups for the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe has been extended to Manipur,

[17] Interview with Pu. Kamkholal Vaiphei, former President, VNO, April 2, 2024.

[18] While it is commonly understood that the main ethnic composition of Manipur consists of the Meitei, Naga, and Zo (Kuki, Zomi, and Mizo), these ethnic groups further consist of a number of sub-groups (see Oinan and Akoijam [2002] and Shimray [2001]).

it, however, fails to capture internal diversities within the marginalised groups themselves. Manipur included as many as 33 recognised tribes, with the least population number being only a few thousand. In this scenario, smaller tribes tend to be underrepresented in the reservation scheme for tribals. This is particularly aggravated by inter-tribal power struggles between tribes, where the numerical majority becomes the deciding factor in electoral politics. The lack of political representation also creates the fear of loss of identity, Thus, identity-based divisions are a crucial factor for electoral success in Manipur, including in the hill districts. It has been observed that in elections, electorates tend to vote for candidates having close ties to their kin (Oinan and Akoijam 2002, 520-521).

Ethnic assertions have become more and more visible since the 1980s. This has pervaded not only the social sphere but also electoral politics in that calculations are based on identity. The rise of social organisations, political parties, and insurgent groups based on ethnic lines has further intensified divisions. The pervasiveness of identity in Manipur is captured by Shimray (2001, 3677) as follows:

> …ethnic-based social manifestations capture the overall sociopolitical processes in the state. Ethnicity as well as insurgency based on it is very much alive and mobile. The current popularity of the principle of 'self-determination' based on ethnicity too came into centre stage in the state's socio-cultural scenario. Even the people's representatives are compelled to incline towards their ethnic bases; at the same time those more aware remain fearful of being assimilated into dominant socio-cultural and political groups.

Political participation has been steadily increasing in the hill district. Faith in electoral democracy has been evident from the District Council election of 2015, which was, to date, the most keenly contested election, characterised by a high voter turnout, a high number of candidates, and the entry of national and regional parties to the electoral fray (Hausing 2015, 79). He also observed a "localisation of politics, wherein the specificity of local interest, ethnic agenda, and winnability of a candidate determined the voters' preference," while finding the development reassuring to a healthy culture of democratic politics. Hausing (2015, 83), thus argues for a concerted and meaningful effort towards the devolution of power to local institutions like the District Councils and accommodation of tribal "rights and aspirations" in Manipur. Moreover, across India, tribals had shown a higher turnout in elections as compared to other social groups, exhibiting their political awareness and commitment towards democracy.[19] In studying the history of ethnic conflicts in Manipur, Oinam (2003) concluded that the assertion of hegemony by any of the ethnic groups in Manipur, has to be done away with and an alternative vision of integration has to be built through increasing political participation and economic development. Oinam (2003, 2037) cautioned, "Unless sincere efforts are made towards ending the politics of dominance and hegemony, the problem of conflict, and subsequently violence, is still a faraway dream."

The second challenge concerns structural and functional challenges. The District Councils provided the best opportunity for political representation, but the inherent structural issues with the Councils prevented the

[19] See https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/surat/tribals-continue-to-lead-with-tradition-of-higher-voting/articleshow/109961410.cms

proper and smooth functioning of the local self-government institution. Apart from lacking legislative and judicial powers, the Councils are made dependent on the State government impairing the functioning of the Councils. In addition, elections are irregular, and the schedule of elections is fraught with discrepancies. Elections after the expiry of the previous term in 2020 were also delayed and postponed time and again on several pretexts, including the COVID pandemic and pending delimitation exercises. Attempts to empower the Councils by the HAC and tribal groups were also derailed by the State government (James 2024, 30). This has inversely impacted the political representation at the district level, including that of smaller tribes like the Vaipheis. The District Council also, unlike the Autonomous District Council under the Sixth Schedule, has no provision for the formation of Regional Councils for smaller and less represented tribes, impacting their political presence (Haokip 2022, 27). He further noted that "...in an ethnically divided state like Manipur, reservation based on geography does not ensure the nomination of minority tribes in the district to the councils. The provision also fails to, once again, include a provision for woman nomination…"

The third challenge concerns internal dynamics within the Vaiphei society and the precedence of social identity. Social identity significantly influences voting patterns, as people's identification with particular social groups and their interests strongly impact electoral preferences and behaviour (Kulachai, Lerdtomornsakul and Homyamyen 2023, 5-6). Individual voters often align their choices with their identities to support candidates or parties that address their concerns about equality and social justice. The Vaiphei National Organization (VNO), now renamed Vaiphei Peoples' Council (VPC), has historically played a crucial role in influencing the voting behaviour of Vaipheis in Manipur. It offered support and involvement in elections at various levels, ensuring that Vaiphei candidates were represented and also supporting candidates in constituencies where there were none from the Vaiphei community. Once a candidate is chosen and decided on for support by VNO headquarters, the functionaries at different levels become active workers for the supported candidate. Thus, it is traditional for an intending candidate from the District Councils, State Assembly, and Lok Sabha to seek the blessing and support of VNO.[20] Moreover, even if the Vaiphei electorates are the most concentrated in Churachandpur, they are scattered in the hill districts, making them a minority electoral constituency-wise.

Many Vaiphei MDCs, MLAs, and MPs had prior associations with VNO before being elected to their political seats. Pu Pauneikhai Suantak served as General Secretary of VNO from 1958 to 1960 and then became its President from 1960 to 1963. Similarly, present MLA Pu T. Manga Vaiphei and MP Pu Thangso Baite, along with many other Vaiphei MDCs, had a strong association with the VNO. In 1962, Pu Pauneikhai Suantak, who was then the President of VNO, declared VNO's support for his candidacy in the Assembly election. The dedicated efforts and support taken up by VNO could not be ignored for his success, despite many other factors being in play. Pu Pauneikhai himself stated that, without the support of the VNO, no Vaiphei could win the election. When there is a unanimous consensus within the VNO and among the intending candidates, there is no issue. However, when more than one Vaiphei intending candidate seeks support, it can lead to a divided camp, charges of favouritism, and a division of Vaiphei votes, which hamper their chances of political representation.

[20] Interview with Pu Kamkholal Vaiphei,former. President, VNO, on April 2, 2024.

As in any democracy, it is the constitutional right of any citizen to freely stand for election, and declaring public support for a particular candidate can end up sacrificing the democratic right of candidacy for the sake of social identity. An incident during the Assembly elections is a case in point.

When the Election Commission of India announced the date for the Manipur Assembly election, two Vaiphei candidates, Pu T Manga Vaiphei and Pu SL. Soineimang Vaiphei, sought VNO's support for the same constituency (Henglep), where the Vaipheis are a minority. This posed a dilemma for the VNO, as both candidates were actively associated with the VNO. Moreover, allowing both to contest freely would diminish their chances of winning. Both candidates exerted pressure on the VNO to support their respective campaigns.

During the election, the VNO split into two camps, supporting different candidates. Eventually, VNO declared Pu T Manga Vaiphei as its sole candidate and instructed Pu SL Soineimang Vaiphei to withdraw his candidature. However, as the voting date approached, Pu SL Soineimang Vaiphei and his supporters continued their campaign instead of withdrawing, intensifying the conflict between the camps. The VNO President instructed Vaiphei voters to follow the decision of the VNO or face stern action. The VNO further made a renewed appeal to Pu SL Soineimang Vaiphei to withdraw from the election in the interest of the Vaipheis. Volunteers were organized to enforce the decision of the VNO and sensitize the Vaiphei voters. Subsequently, Pu SL. Soineimang stood by the decision of the VNO and appealed to his supporters to vote for the VNO candidate in the larger interest of the Vaipheis.

In the ensuing 2000 Assembly election, the author himself was the Chief Agent of Pu T Manga Vaiphei and was involved in coordinating, campaigning and public relations for the candidate. The author observed from the voting that there was as high as ninety-nine per cent voter turnout among the Vaipheis in favour of Pu T. Manga Vaiphei, leading to his winning the seat in the Henglep Assembly Constituency. Pu T Manga Vaiphei was again declared as the candidate of the Vaipheis by VNO in the Assembly elections of 2002, 2007, and 2012, and he was elected for four consecutive terms in the same constituency.

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