CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

History of the emergence of political parties in Manipur can be traced back in the movement for socio-religious and political reforms during the 1930s. Starting with demands for socio-religious reforms, the Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha (1934) not only changed its name to Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha (NMM) but also passed many resolutions demanding a number of political reforms thereby evolving itself as the first ever political party of Manipur. This was followed by the emergence of a number of other political parties like the Manipur Praja Sanmelani (1940), Manipur Praja Mandal (1946), Krishak Sabha (1946), Manipur Praja Sangha (1946), Manipur State Congress (1946), etc. They may be considered as the first generation of political parties in Manipur. The main demands of these political parties were those of the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Manipur, a popular Legislative Assembly formed by the elected representatives of the people and a government responsible to them. Except for the Congress, Hijam Irabot Singh was the moving force behind the formation of all these parties. The efforts of these parties greatly contributed to the adoption of the Manipur State Constitution Act, 1947. Their participation in the first ever general elections held in 1948 on the basis of universal adult franchise for constituting a popularly elected Legislative Assembly marked the beginning of electoral politics in Manipur conducted on lines of party competition in Manipur.

The beginning of democratic electoral politics after India became a republic saw the emergence of a new generation of political parties. These included parties like Achumba Pamba Congress, Historical Research Committee, Gandhi Sevak Sabha, All Manipur National Union, Naga National League, Mizo Union, Manipur Zeliangrong Union, Mao Maram Union, etc. By this time most of the parties which were there before the merger of Manipur
into India have withered away. The main reason behind it was that of the exit of Hijam Irabot Singh, who was responsible for the formation of many of them, from Manipur politics as a result of his going underground by the end of the 1940s. The Manipur State Congress and Socialist Party were the two main parties which survived. Most of these parties were elitist in nature in the sense that they were formed mainly by some politically aware section of the intellectuals, altogether lacking mass basis. Many of them were also inspired by the ideals of Gandhi and the Indian National Congress. In the absence of any significant mass base, they withered away soon. Perhaps, the broad ideological basis of the Congress has already occupied the political space they could have aspired to occupy. The Socialists were also on the way out by the mid-1960s inside the state. This meant the Congress was the only party remaining that continued to sustain itself over a long period of time with the Communist parties beginning slowly to make their presence felt in the electoral politics of the state.

However, the people of the state were also becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the Congress party as Manipur was not given statehood till 1972. This meant a more than 20 years of the denial of the Right to Self-Government to the people of the state and the people had to struggle for two decades to get statehood. As more and more people became dissatisfied with the Congress which was in power both at the Centre and the state, the time for the formation of a new political party to represent the new sentiments of the people became ripe, and it was against the backdrop of such political developments that the Manipur People's Party (MPP), still the most significant state party in Manipur emerged.

Once Manipur got statehood in 1972, the ground for electoral politics on lines of party competition at regular intervals to constitute a popular
legislature comprising elected representatives of the people and a government responsible to it was fully secured. Obviously the situation was conducive to the emergence of more state parties in Manipur. In fact the first two decades of the post-statehood period in Manipur saw a mushrooming of state parties. Some of the state parties which emerged during this period included the Manipur National Organization (MNO) 1972, Manipur Hills Union (MHU) 1974, Ireibak Leishemba Party (ILP) 1980, Manipur Nationalist Democratic Party (MNDP) 1982, National People’s Party (NPP) 1989, Manipur Hill People’s Conference (MHPC) 1989, etc.

Overall the state parties which have emerged in Manipur till then were characterized by a number of things. For instance, one finds a clear difference about the state parties emerging from the hills and the valley regarding their overall objectives. The main objectives of most of the parties from the hills remained protection and promotion of either the overall interests of the hill people or that of a group of tribes there. While parties like the MHU and the Manipur Hill People’s Council are examples of the former, the KNA and the NNP are the examples of the latter. On the other hand the state parties which originated from the valley aimed at the protection and promotion of the overall interests of the state and the people living inside it. This will be true for all of them without exception. The MPP and the Kanglei League earlier, and the MSCP and the DRPP later, proves it.

The above reality about the state parties of Manipur also means that the geographical support bases of such parties originating from the hills obviously remain confined to either the hill areas of the state as a whole or only those areas inside it which are inhabited by the group of tribes whose interests they want to promote. So far they have not succeeded in expanding
their support bases in the valley and have not contested in any of the constituencies there.

On the other hand, about the state parties originating from the valley, the entire territory of the state is intended to be their geographical area support base. However, in reality many of them have also failed to expand their support bases beyond the valley though the entire territory of the state is intended to be their area of operation. For instance parties like the DRPP, MPP (D), MNC, PMSCP, etc. which emerged in the valley have contested Assembly Elections only in the valley, and they have no support bases in the hills.

The above considerations also means polarization of state parties in Manipur on geographical lines in the sense that many of them have remained confined to either the hills or the valley. The MPP, MSCP and the FPM have been the three significant exceptions to these. These three have not only the promotion of overall interests of the state and the people living inside it but have also been successful to a great extent in expanding their support bases in the hills of the state over a long period of time.

One more thing about the emergence of state parties in the hills of the state that may be noted here is that these parties have also become polarized on ethnic lines. This is because of the emergence of such parties with a view to promote the interests of either the Nagas or the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group of tribes there. The separation is very clear as represented by the Naga Nationalist Party and the Kuki National Assembly. This at length means that the state parties in the hills remain representing sectarian interests and they have failed to expand across to the different cross sections of the people living in the valley. The polarization of most of the state parties of Manipur on
geographical and ethnic lines also further means their failure to have a state wide mass basis which further minimizes the prospects of their electoral success. It also means that they were not so helpful in promoting the overall interests of the state and its people like that of the territorial integrity of the state or the basic unity and oneness of the people living inside it.

Another feature of the state parties in Manipur is that the more successful of these parties have also been parties with broader outlook in the sense that they stand for the promotion of the overall interests of the people. The success of the MPP, MSCP and the FPM proves it. On the other hand the parties confining themselves to the promotion of the overall interests of the people in the hills or a group of tribes there have consistently failed to make much of an impact in state politics. Most of them have also failed to last long. The KNA will be a possible exception in the sense it has contested a number of State Legislative Assembly Elections in the past but even then it had very limited electoral success in terms of the number of Assembly seats won, and whatever success it had obviously remained confined to areas dominated by the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group of people.

It was in such a state of affairs concerning the state parties that the MPP emerged and sustained itself as the only regional party having a social base cutting across the different cross-sections of the society both in the valley and hills. It has been not only the only party that has consistently joined all the ten State Assembly Elections held so far inside the state, but have put up candidates in the hill ACs in all but two of these ten Elections. These two were in 1974 and 2012. It put up candidates in as many as six, 11 and 16 ACs out the 20 ACs in the hills in years 1984, 1990 and 1995 respectively. It also won from the hills on three Assembly Elections (one in 1984, two in 1990 and five in 1995). Even then, this party has been on decline after having won 16
seats in the 1995 Elections. It won only six, two and three seats in the 2000, 2002 and 2007 Elections. In addition, for the first time it failed to win a seat in the 2012 Assembly Elections. It also failed to win any seat in the hills from the 2000 Assembly Elections onwards and the number of ACs the party contested in the hills has also very much declined in the years following 1995 elections. In fact there was no MPP candidate contesting from the hill ACs during the 2012 Assembly Elections.

Coming to that of the FPM, the Party emerged in 1993. Right from the very beginning it was supposed to be “a party with a difference” for many reasons. First of all, unlike many other state parties which have emerged inside the state, it was not one formed by defectors or dissident groups of other political parties. Secondly, the founding members of the Party also included eminent academicians and other prominent figures of credibility who have not been associated with any other political party earlier. The party was also the first among the state parties of the state to raise the issue of federal restructuring of the Indian Union as one of its cardinal concerns. In fact no other party, state or national in Manipur raised the issue to the extent the party did and this has become one of the hallmarks of the party which made the party different of other state parties of Manipur.

Again, the Party also appealed to the general public in a very positive manner because of yet another reason. It was a time when the demand for integration of Naga inhabited areas into one political unit, independent or otherwise, was being increasingly felt in Manipur. This has been due to the fact that since the emergence of the NSCN (IM) under the leadership of one Tangkhul Naga of Manipur in 1980, the Naga inhabited areas of the state in general and the Tangkhul Naga inhabited areas of it in particular, have became the mainstay of Naga insurgency. These developments have obviously
posed a threat to the territorial integrity of the state. It also had caused considerable constraints in the relationship between the Nagas and the people in the valley as the latter have always viewed the hills and plains of the state as constituting an organic unity, and never to be severed from one another. Given this reality, the emergence of a state party organized by people from both the hills and plains with outright commitment to the protection of the territorial integrity for the state and the basic unity and oneness of the people was very much a welcome development to the general public of the state.

One also cannot lose sight of the fact that the Party emerged at a time when the entire state was reeling under the grip of the Naga–Kuki clashes in the hills of the state. Starting around the middle of 1992, the clashes continued for most of the remaining period of the decade with strayed cases of ethnic violence being reported in the local dailies till the closing months of 1999. Once started, the clashes spread like wildfire, and within no time the entire state was under the grip of the clashes. Though initially the clashes were mainly between the Nagas and Thadou speaking tribes of the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group of tribes, a number of other tribes were also in one way or the other drawn into the whirlwind of the clashes which led to further catastrophic consequences, most notoriously in the form of the Kuki-Paite clashes in 1997. Overall, the violent clashes have claimed about 2000 lives and many more were injured. Many were maimed for the rest of their lives. More than 500 villages were attacked and about 7000 houses were burnt down to ashes. Altogether, it also led to the displacement of around 15000 families and more than one lakh people. The clashes inflicted serious damages to the inter-community relationship in the hills. In such a situation the party not only

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emerged with absolute emphasis on the basic unity and oneness of the people of the state but also advocated principles like that of social federalism to secure communal harmony and collective advancement of the different sections of the society. The fact that many of those in the helm of the Party's affairs were prominent figures from the hills belonging to both the Naga and Kuki-Chin-Mizo group of tribes added the appeal of the Party to the people of the state living in the hills as well as in the plains.

It also came into existence with a view to evolve itself as a party not confining itself to one particular geographical region or community or group of tribes which was earlier the case with regard to the nature and dynamics of most of the state parties of the state. All these considerations made the people think of the FPM as a party with a difference, a party having its own clear basic principles and aims and objectives. People never thought of the party as one formed by unprincipled politicians whose concern has been the pursuit of positions of power for personal gain.

Though the FPM had joined only three State Assembly Elections in Manipur, no other party, state or national has had a better and more consistent upswing success graph in the history of electoral politics of the state. Starting with winning two seats in the first Assembly Elections it contested in 1995, the party went on to win six and 13 respectively in the next two Assembly Elections held in 2000 and 2002. However, the party could not make much of an impression in the Lok Sabha Elections inside the state. It failed majorly in the Outer Manipur Parliamentary Constituency in particular. Apart from an irrevocable commitment to the protection of the territorial integrity of Manipur, and also to the basic unity and oneness of her people, the Party also raised during its lifetime a number of significant issues which have hitherto been seriously raised by any other party – national or state.
These included issues like that of federal restructuring of the Indian polity, reorganization of Centre-state relations with a view to secure greater autonomy for the states, principles of social federalism as the basis of peaceful coexistence by the various communities inside the state, etc. and succeeded in drawing the attention of the people to these ideas. Along with these, the Party also raised many other important issues facing the people of the state like that of the problem of human rights, demand for the removal of the AFSPA, finding a meaningful and lasting solution to the problem of insurgency through peaceful political dialogues, shifting of the Assam Rifles from Kangla, establishment of a human rights commission as well as a women’s commission for the state, etc. Because of all these considerations, the FPM, in spite of the fact that it lasted less than one and a half decade, shall always be remembered as one of the most significant state parties in the post-independence period of Manipur.

Regarding its disappearance from state politics, the FPM which was launched with much fanfare in 1993, and grew from strength to strength during the next 14 years or so of its existence, made an abrupt exit from the scene of state politics on the eve of the 9th State Assembly Elections 2007. Various factors were responsible for it. By the end of the 2002 Elections the Party became more valley-based. Out of the 13 seats it won, ten were from the valley and only three were from the hills. It was also a time when the demand for the unification of Naga inhabited areas into a political unit, independent or otherwise, was very much in public focus. As one of the fall-outs of the Indo-NSCN (IM) Agreement without territorial limits, people in the valley obviously had a positive notion about the FPM (as it stood for the preservation of the territorial integrity of the state) while it became difficult for the Party to gain popularity in the Naga areas. Besides, within the next couple of years or so the
Party became ridden with politicians notorious for defecting from one party to another. Then, as the 2007 Assembly Elections came closer, there was a concerted effort on the part of the opposition parties to put up a combined opposition with a view to defeat the Congress which had been in power non-stop since 2002. This was a move allegedly supported by some of the underground organizations in the valley. It was against the backdrop of such a socio-political background that the FPM got merged into the MPP on 18 September 2006 along with the DRPP, another state party in Manipur which won two seats in the 2002 Elections. That the Party was already disintegrating on the eve of its merger into the MPP was obvious from the fact that not less than eight of the 13 MLAs of the party contested the 2007 Elections as candidates of political parties other than the MPP.

The abrupt end of the party was not an isolated occurrence. Rather it was a part of a process of decline of regional parties which started after the success of these parties in the 2002 Elections, and also because of the efforts for unification of regional parties with a view to strengthen regional forces. What actually happened was that though congress won only 20 in the 2002 Assembly Elections, it succeeded in forming a coalition ministry with the CPI and the MSCP, and without the MPP and the FPM. Again, though the number of seats won by the state parties was 25, this was soon followed by the coming of the 91st Amendment of the Constitution which effectively put an end to individual as well as group defection. As a result, the state parties did not have much of a chance to dethrone the coalition ministry or to join or merge into the ruling side. As a result the Congress ministry lasted the full term of five years which was something that never happened in the history of Manipur. And it was evident to everyone that the Congress has reached a position where it can further consolidate its hold on state politics of Manipur.
It was in the context of such a state of things that the need for revitalizing regional forces with a view to serve regional interests of the state as well as provide an alternative to the Congress dominance was felt by some section of the people as well politicians inside the state and the process for merger of state parties into one was initiated. However, the supposedly rejuvenated MPP (because of the so called merger of three other regional parties namely the FPM, DRPP and Manipur Nationalist Congress into it) turned out to be utterly incapable of challenging the Congress as the process of merger ultimately did more harm than good. On the one hand, the merger adversely affected the MPP’s distinctive identity, and on the other, the Party also became more of a group of politicians who over a period of time have gained something of a notoriety as defectors. As a result, the MPP won only five in spite of all the shows and talks of coming together of state parties to strengthen regional forces inside the state. Thus the party which started with much promise and much fanfare sadly disappeared completely after climbing the ladder of success for three consecutive State Assembly Elections, and before it could fully realize the lofty ideals it set for itself.

The prospects for the emergence of regional parties with a state-wide mass basis in near future in Manipur seems to be bleak. There are many reasons for this. For one, the polarization on ethnic lines continues to be there in the electoral politics of the state. It will also take a long time for the MPP to recover from the blow it received in the hands of the Congress during the last Assembly Elections. For the first time the party failed to win even a single seat in the State Assembly Elections. The number of candidates the Party had put up in 20 ACs of the hills during the past Assembly Elections have also very much decreased. It put up only two and three candidates in the 2002 and 2007 Assembly Elections respectively. It has also failed to put up even a single
candidate in the hill ACs during the last Assembly Elections held in 2012. In addition to that the Congress, having grown from strength to strength during the last three Assembly Elections is not likely to lose its position of pre-eminence in state politics any soon. In fact, its position has become very strong as never before after winning 42 seats out of 60 in the last Assembly Elections. It has also won both the Inner and Outer seats of the state in the last Lok Sabha Elections. Then there is also the 91st Amendment of the Constitution which has successfully dealt with the problem of group defections. This Amendment along with the 1985 Amendment has very effectively taken care of both individual and group defections. And it is not a mere coincidence that the decline of state parties in Manipur has coincided with the coming of the 91st Amendment of the Constitution. For defections has been one of the breeding grounds for the emergence of state parties in Manipur. The stringent Anti-Defection Laws along with its winning more than 2/3rd majority of the seats in State Assembly, the present Congress ministry can easily be assured of lasting another full term of five years. All these considerations do not augur well not only for the prospects of emergence of state parties with a state-wide mass base but are also not so conducive to the emergence of regional parties formed on an ad-hoc basis and driven by personality conflicts or intra-party factions. Instead, they have enhanced the credibility of the Congress as the only party with a long standing record of having a state-wide social base and also as the party that can provide a stable government. As such, the pre-eminence of the Congress party is likely to continue for at least another ten years or so.