

Will Keishing's retirement mark the end of Nehruvian era politicians in NE ?

When 94-year-old Rishang Keishing's Rajya Sabha term ends on April 9, he will finally hand up his boots and quit active politics. A four-time Chief Minister of Manipur and four-time member of Parliament, his political career spanning more than six decades will perhaps be unmatched in the history of Indian politics. This Nehruvian era politician has witnessed the best of India's parliamentary democracy, first entering the hallowed portals of Parliament in the first Lok Sabha, and the worst in the outgoing 15th Lok Sabha, where there was shouting and more shouting, as he put it.

As Keishing walks into the sunset, he will soon be joined by three other veteran politicians from the Northeast, who are only marginally younger to him. Mizoram's Brig Thenphunga Sailo, 92, Nagaland's Senayangba Chubatoshi Jamir, 82, and Meghalaya's Paty Ripple Kyndiah, 85, are the other long running politicians from the Northeast who have given Keishing some competition, though none has come close to Keishing's chequered stint in politics. At least three of the quartet entered public life during India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, when some of India's top ranking politicians of today had not even cut their teeth in politics and dirtied their hands.

Consider this: When Keishing entered the halls of the first Lok Sabha in 1952, rubbing shoulders with the likes of Pandit Nehru and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had just finished his bachelor's degree in economics from Panjab University in Chandigarh. And when Nehru inducted Keishing into the Congress in 1964, Singh was still a student, at Oxford University in the United Kingdom.

When Jamir was part of a delegation that held talks with Nehru in 1960, leading to the 16 Point Agreement between the Naga People's Convention and the Central Government, Congress President Sonia Gandhi was still a teenager living in Orbassano, a town near Turin in Italy. And when Jamir was first elected to the Lok Sabha in 1961, Sonia was still in school, being raised in a traditional Roman Catholic way.

Kyndiah was first elected to the provisional Meghalaya Assembly in 1970, the year the Congress Vice President Rahul Gandhi was born. In fact, Rahul's mother Sonia had not even met his father Rajiv. They only did so in 1964, in the United Kingdom where both were students, marrying eventually in 1968 after a four-year courtship.

When Brig Sailo launched his party, the Mizoram People's Conference, in 1975 and became Mizoram Chief Minister for the first time in 1978, the Bharatiya Janata Party's Prime Ministerial candidate Narendra Modi was not even in the BJP. Modi was still in his RSS knickers, being a pracharak like lakhs of others. He joined the BJP only in 1987, by which time Brig Sailo was already a two-time Chief Minister of Mizoram.

Last week, when Keishing walked out of Parliament, perhaps for the last time, the national media, which had ignored him for many years, suddenly took note, eulogising him for his service to the nation. Back home in Manipur now, he hasn't stopped meeting people, public service running in his veins. For Keishing, who first started teaching at the age of 16, it has been a long journey. Slightly hard of hearing because of his advanced age, Keishing's doors are still open for the people.

Being a Tangkhul Naga, that Keishing became Chief Minister in Meitei-dominated Manipur for four times, speaks volumes of his political acumen. "Meiteis were in majority but Keishing, a Tangkhul Naga by ethnicity, was the only candidate among the State legislators to be elected the leader for chief ministership," a former IPS officer who watched him closely said. He inspired awe among the younger generation, he added.

But Keishing had his share of controversy, too. He was often accused of being close to the NSCN (I-M), though he survived a vicious attempt on his life by the Naga rebels. His alleged links with the NSCN brought him under the gaze of the Army, which suspected him of harbouring the insurgents. On one occasion in the mid-eighties when Keishing was the Chief Minister, Lt Gen V.K. Nayar, then a Major General and commander of the Army's M-Sector, raided Keishing's house in the middle of the night,

looking for Naga rebels.

The general is said to have personally led the raid. Army soldiers first disarmed the police guarding the Chief Minister's residence while an officer woke up Keishing from his sleep and led him out of his house, where Lt Gen Nayar waited in his jeep. The word is that the armyman caught Keishing by his collar and threatened the Chief Minister.

The next morning, Keishing is said to have bitterly complained of this high handedness to the then Union Home Minister S.B. Chavan, who took up the matter with the Defence Minister, who in turn talked to the then Army Chief Gen K.V. Krishna Rao. It is learnt that Lt Gen Nayar was told to exercise caution after this incident.

Another nonagenarian is Brig. Sailo. Till November last year, Brig Sailo used to listen to the news while his wife read the regional newspapers loudly to him over piping hot tea in the morning. But, as he turned 92 this January, Brig Sailo has slowed down and spends his time with his wife, the couple got married in September 1946. "He leads a quiet, retired life now," his son Lalmangaiha said.

The founder president of the Mizoram People's Conference, Brig Sailo was chief minister twice. He remained a member of the Mizoram Assembly till November 2013, and his party contested the recently held Assembly election in alliance with the Mizo National Front.

E.N.Rammohan, a former Director General of the BSF, who was SP CBI posted in Shillong and occasionally had personal interactions with Brig Sailo during the latter's visit to the place, said "he (Sailo) was an upright, honest and clean man. He was opposed to Laldenga. He was clear that Laldenga would have to contest elections democratically to be the Chief Minister. The Congress at the Centre never supported Sailo because he never toed their line."

It is said that Brig Sailo was quite dogmatic in his approach. "In politics, one needs to adjust a bit but he was not the kind," said a retired officer who was posted in the Northeast for almost a decade.

Meghalaya's Kyndiah is also almost inactive in politics now. Having started his political career in the early sixties with the All-Party Hill Leaders' Conference when Meghalaya was part of the undivided Assam, Kyndiah never rose to the top in State politics, though he remained one of Meghalaya's tallest leaders. He was a Minister in both the State as well as the Central Government. Close associates of him said he now mostly keeps away from the public eye.

Nagaland's Jamir, the Odisha Governor, is the only one of this vintage to be still active in politics, though he has to be satisfied with only gubernatorial assignments, not Ministerial posts. As the four enter the last lap of the careers, it is perhaps time to doff our hats in respect, their drawbacks notwithstanding.