

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE BRITISH AND THE MANIPURI RESPONSES TO IT IN 1891 WAR

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ABSTRACT

The kingdom of Manipur, now a state of India, neighbouring with Burma was occupied by the Burmese in 1819. The ruling family of Manipur, therefore, took shelter in the kingdom of Cachar (now in Assam) which shared border with British India. As the Burmese also occupied the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam and the Cachar Kingdom threatening the British India, the latter declared war against Burma in 1824. The Manipuris, under Gambhir Singh, agreed terms with the British and fought the war on the latter's side. The British also established the Manipur Levy to wage the war and defend against the Burmese aggression thereafter. In the war (1824-1826), the Burmese were defeated and the kingdom of Manipur was re-established. But the British, conceptualizing political economy, ceded the Kabaw Valley of Manipur to Burma. This delicate issue, coupled with other haughty British acts towards Manipur, precipitated to the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891. In the beginning of the conflict when the British attacked the Manipuris on 24th March, 1891, the latter defeated them resulting in the killing of many British Officers. But on April 4, 1891, the Manipuris released 51 Hindustani/Gurkha sepoys of the British Army who were war prisoners then giving Rupees five each. Another important feature of the war was the involvement of almost all the major communities of Manipur showing their oneness against the colonial British Government. But in the following battlefields, the Manipuris were defeated resulting in the execution of five Manipuri leaders and deportation of other twenty-two Manipuris.

Keywords: haughty British acts, war prisoners were released, oneness, executed

The princely kingdom of Manipur bordering with Burma was occupied by the latter in 1819. Therefore, the Manipuri ruling family and many Manipuri masses took shelter in the kingdom of Cachar (now the Barak Valley of Assam state) bordering with the British Sylhet. Since the Burmese also occupied the Ahom territory of Assam and Cachar threatening the British India, the then Governor General, Lord Amherst, declared war against Burma on 5th March, 1824. The Manipuris, under their prince Gambhir Singh, agreed terms with the British and fought the war

on the latter's side. In this Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826), the Burmese were defeated and the kingdom of Manipur was re-established under Raja Gambhir Singh. But, since the British interest in the region was mainly economic, they tactfully ceded the Kabaw Valley of Manipur to Burma, and the Manipur Levy which was established during the war was also discontinued. These delicate issues coupled with other haughty British acts towards Manipur precipitated to the Anglo-Manipur War-1891. In the beginning of the conflict, attacking Imphal on the 24th March, 1891, about fifty Manipuris including Pukhrama Tanka, Khumbong Subedar, Leisang Jamadar and Athokpa Dewan were killed. Two Tangkhuls were also among those killed in hand to hand fight. Lt. Brackenbary and some sepoy of the British Army lost their lives on the side of the British. In the aftermath of the palace attack, owing to the demand of the Manipuri masses, seven high ranking British officials were killed. But on the 4th April, 1891, the Manipuris released fifty-one arrested Hindustani/Gurkha sepoy of the British Army giving them Rs. 5 each for their survival and return journey.¹ Therefore, the disposition of the Manipuri masses towards the Indian sepoy of the British Army was different. After the events of the 24th March, the British Indian Government sent three powerful British Armies to Manipur from the side of Kohima, Tamu and Silchar and continued the war. The Battle of Khongjom was the greatest battle of the Anglo-Manipur War. Reporting on the real picture of the battleground, Captain Rundall who had commanded the British Army at Khongjom expressed: "Of the enemy 76 dead were counted inside the work (clay made Manipuri fort) and two wounded and just outside the work 52 dead were counted those killed in the nala (which surrounded major portion of the fort) were not all counted as they laid in heaps in the water nor did he counted those killed by the guns and mounted infantry. The mounted infantry estimated that they killed about 50 and some villagers have since told me that 400 fell on that day."²

On this epoch making event previous scholars had given their views on the genesis, results and other aspects of the war. But these historians neglected how the Manipuri masses responded to the design of the colonial British Indian Government. Besides, the scholars also studied hardly on the concerted efforts of both hill and plain peoples of Manipur and their disposition to the Indian sepoy of the British Army. Keeping in view of these missing areas, the paper makes an attempt to study the reasons why the Manipuris demanded capital punishment for the British officers resulting in the killing of seven high ranking British officials viz. Mr. J.W. Quinton CSI, Chief Commissioner of Assam, Lt. Colonel C. McDowal Skene, D.S.C., Commanding the 42nd (Gurkha) Regiment of Bengal Light Infantry, Mr. F. St. Clair Grimwood, ICS, Political Agent in Manipur, Lt. W.H. Simpson, 43rd (Gurkha) Regiment of Bengal Light Infantry, Mr. W.H. Cossins, ICS, Asst. Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Mr. W.B. Melville, Superintendent of Telegraph, Assam Division and Mr. O' Brien. This paper also highlights the concerted wartime efforts of almost all the major Manipuri communities viz. the

Meiteis/Meeteis, the Nagas, the Kukis and the Tangkhuls. The source materials are from different archives, chronicles and secondary source books.

1. Historical developments and the anti-British mindset of the Manipuri

In the last part of 1823 when Gambhir Singh of Manipur was ruling over South Cachar, the Burmese had not only occupied Assam and Manipur but also invaded Cachar from three directions viz. Assam, Jaintia and Manipur. The third party from Manipur attacked South Cachar and defeated the army of the latter (mainly Manipuris) under Gambhir Singh. Thus, the British Indian Empire was threatened by the Burmese. In a letter to the Court of Directors, it was stated later: "Under such an emergency it was natural that every resource, however trifling, should be sought after and the re-establishment of the Munnipore dynasty seems to have been a scheme peculiarly favoured by the late agent Mr. Scott."³ Accordingly, it was accepted to assist the British Army at Badarpur (Assam) by a group of Manipuris known as 'Raja Gambhir Singh's Levy' comprising 500 infantry and 40 cavalymen.⁴ 'Raja Gambhir Singh's Levy' joined the British outpost at Badarpur in April, 1824. The Levy was supplied with arms, and its expenses were also borne by the British. However, they were irregulars as no pay was entitled to them.

The number of the Burmese Army in Cachar was estimated at about 8000. The British Army under Lt. Col. William Inns arrived at Badarpur on June 20 and then proceeded by water along the river Barak to Jatrapur. On the way, he tried to dislodge the Burmese from the heights of the Talain where they strongly fortified. For three days (July 6, 7, 8) British guns fired on the stockade; Gambhir Singh with his excellent local knowledge, assisted the operation.⁵ By the end of October, 1824, the entire Burmese Army in Cachar retired to Manipur. On the role played by Gambhir Singh in Cachar, it was stated: "Gumbheer Sing ... with whom we had negotiated, raised from among his own followers a body of 500 men, who actively co-operated with our troops in expelling the Burmese from Cachar."⁶

At this juncture, Brigadier-General Shuldham, commanding the Eastern Frontier of British India, decided to march to Manipur so that the gravity of the war in the Arakan frontier could be diverted to the advantage of the British Army. However, because of the hopelessness of this wet and mountainous kingdom, the General's mission was suspended. Yet, Gambhir Singh, proposed to take up the task condemned as hopeless by the General. Earlier, the former had also been induced by David Scott to lead an expedition for the conquest of Manipur. He was also told that "Manipur would be placed under him if he could liberate it."⁷ Consequently, Gambhir Singh's proposal was accepted and the Prince made preparations with his own Levy. The 'Raja Gambhir Singh's Levy' left for Manipur on 17th May, 1825, with Lieutenant R.B. Pemberton.⁸ At this mission, the latter volunteered to accompany Gambhir Singh to Manipur with the additional objective of obtaining some accurate information about the passes into Manipur, its resources

and the strength of the Burmese Army. The party, after facing so many difficulties, reached Maklang (a village in Manipur) on June 10. Hearing their arrival, the Burmese Army in Manipur was divided into four sections making stockades at Kameng, Andro, Nambol and the Phunal Hills. Gambhir Singh and his levy fought bravely for two days and ultimately the Burmese were expelled from the valley of Manipur.

The Levy successfully captured Kangla (the capital of Manipur) on 12th June, 1825. In this way, the Levy executed the task which General Shuldham had failed to do. On this Levy, it was stated: "The men could move lightly equipped without a paraphernalia of a regular army."⁹ Once more, it was complimented: "The primary objects in view, viz. The expulsion of the Burmese from Manipur was, however, achieved by Gambhir Singh.... These men had been provided with arms by the British Commander"¹⁰ Therefore, the conquest of Manipur in the First Anglo-Burmese War was the handiwork of the irregular and unpaid 'Raja Gumbhir Singh's Levy.'

The Levy faced untold difficulties due to the lack of provisions as there was less cultivation in Manipur. Consequently, Gambhir Singh left 300 men in Manipur and returned to Sylhet by the end of June, 1825 to discuss his problems and other policy matters. Lt. Pemberton, returning to Sylhet with Gambhir Singh, reported on the latter that "the success of the enterprise was due mainly to his energy, perseverance and skill."¹¹ At Sylhet, Gambhir Singh was intimated with the orders of the British Government which had accepted the inclusion of the former's Levy in the British Indian Army with a new denomination. With this happy news, Gambhir Singh left Sylhet for Manipur on 4th December, 1825 along with Captain F.J. Grant and Lieutenant R.B. Pemberton. Reaching Kangla on 23rd of the instant, Gambhir Singh declared that his Levy would be a part of the British Army with a new denomination-the 'Manipur Levy'; the British Government had accepted to increase its strength to 1500 infantry and 150 cavalry; the pay, provisions and all equipments of the Manipur Levy would be borne by the British Government and the same would be collected from the Magazine at Chandrapur (a place in Cachar); Cap. F.J. Grant and Lt. R.B. Pemberton would be the Commissioner and the Assistant Commissioner of the Manipur Levy with Lt. George Gordon (who had not arrived at Imphal that time) as the Adjutant.¹² Cheitharol kumbaba (the chronicle of Manipur) also mentions that the Maharaja coming with two Ferunghees entered the capital on Friday, the 23rd December, 1825, and arranged a grand feast for the 'Four Victoria Battalions.'¹³ On this occasion, Alexander Mackenzie also stated: "In 1825 the force was increased to 2000 men, and placed under the command of Captain Grant; it was denominated the Manipur Levy."¹⁴ In this way, the members of the Manipur Levy, becoming regular army of the British Government, enjoyed many facilities, and Manipur had a sizeable inflow of currency. On the other hand, this kingdom was projected seriously for war against Burma, and also, to defend the eastern frontier from the latter's aggression thereafter.

Gambhir Singh now decided to expel the Burmese from the Kabaw Valley (now in Burma) which had been for Manipur for ages in the past. Nur Singh was, therefore, sent along with 1000 men to Tamu on 1st January, 1826. On being asked for reinforcement, Gambhir Singh along with the two British Officers left for Tamu on 13th January, 1826. The Burmese fort at Tamu was a very strong and well protected one. Therefore, the two Sahibs suggested the need for cannons. But, Gambhir Singh, disfavoured the proposal, planned to send Nur Singh to invade Samsok with 300 selected men. Meanwhile, surrounding the Tamu fort to obstruct provisional supply for five days, the Burmese were compelled to leave the place in the night of 23rd January 1826.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Nur Singh, crossing the Ningthee (the Chindwin River), broke the capital of Samsok on the same day. Receiving the message of the fall of Samsok capital, Gambhir Singh, along with the two British officers, arrived on the bank of the Ningthee on 1st February, 1826. Hereafter, declaring his conquest up to the Ningthee River, Gambhir Singh unfurled the flag of Manipur on the bank of this river.¹⁶ Hence Gambhir Singh completed the re-conquest of the Kabaw Valley. On Gambhir Singh and his followers, Captain Grant reported, "...the activity, judgement, and skill, he (i.e., Gambhir Singh) had displayed on this occasion, have proved the justice of the opinion previously entertained of his merits. The steady gallantry which, without the usual aid of cannon, could force a brave enemy to evacuate a strong fortified position, is a very satisfactory illustration of the character of his followers...."¹⁷ Indeed, had the British not received the timely help from this brave son of Manipur, it would have been impossible for them to launch an attack on Ava through Manipur and bring the war to conclusion so early leading to the Treaty of Yandaboo, 24th February, 1826. Although the treaty recognised Gambhir Singh as the Raja of Manipur, yet it did not mention anything on the Kabaw Valley. Soon after the treaty, the Burmese started encroaching into the territory of Manipur crossing the Ningthee River. It resulted in a serious headache to the Manipuris and they were not satisfied with the British policy.

2. Dispute over South Cachar

Before the First Anglo-Burmese war, Gambhir Singh and his brothers had established their political hegemony in South Cachar ruling over its territories for about six years (1818-1823). His followers, the chunk of the Manipur Levy, had enjoyed the wealth and prosperity of South Cachar. Although they were defeated by the Burmese in the last part of 1823, yet they extended their maximum support to the British in expelling the Burmese from Cachar. Therefore, after the Treaty of Yandaboo, Gambhir Singh and his followers encroached upon Cachar establishing their outpost at Chandrapur. After the death of Govindachandra (Raja of Cachar) in 1830, there was a serious question of succession in Cachar. Gambhir Singh became a strong claimant submitting a proposal to the British Government "to farm out Cachar for a period of twenty years in return for an annual revenue of rupees fifteen thousand."¹⁸ However, the British policy on

Cachar and Manipur had already been designed with the logic of political economy as it was expressed: "By the improvement of Cachar country, therefore, it is to be hoped that our means might be facilitated of assisting Munnipore against Ava (Burma)."¹⁹ They also considered Cachar the granary of this region. Therefore, after the Treaty of Badarpur (1824), the Commissioner of Sylhet had instructed "to keep a keen watch on the conduct of the Raja (Gobindchandra) and to ascertain whether he will be willing to cede the territory to the British."²⁰ Ultimately, the British Government annexed South Cachar in 1832 to the great dissatisfaction of Gambhir Singh and his followers.

3. Territorial expansion towards Assam valley forbidden

It is rightly stated that the Court of Directors represented a mercantile company and was naturally very sensitive in money making. Therefore, the Company's Government always tried to annex those resourceful plains areas leaving behind those mountainous terrains to the indigenous rulers. When the Naga Tribes raided the neighbouring plains protected by the British Government, the latter stated: "Gambhir Singh should be held accountable for the behaviour of the Nagas thus considered to be placed under his permanent authority."²¹ But, when Gambhir Singh intended to conquer the Naga Hills permanently, the British Government felt that "the ambitious Manipuris would have been a very dangerous neighbour of our vassal Purander Singh, whom we were then enduring to establish on the throne of upper Assam....It did not absolutely prohibit him (Gambhir Singh) from subjugating the Nagas; but it forbade him to descend into the plains on the Assam side."²² Indeed, in 1835, the forest between the Doyeng and the Dhunsiri was declared to be the boundary between Manipur and Assam.²³ Hence the Manipuris were not allowed to expand their territory towards the Assam Valley where the British had established tea industry in a large scale.

4. Kabaw Valley of Manipur ceded to Burma: A British design of political economy

Kabaw Valley, mainly the plain area between Manipur and the Chindwin River, had been under Manipur during the most part of its political history. It is stated, "For the greater part of the century (18th century) the Kubo Valley unquestionably belonged to Manipur and it was never in any sense a Burmese province, being, when not under Manipur, a feudatory of the great Shan Kingdom of Pong."²⁴ Later, it was given to Burma by Marjit Singh (1813-19) in order to acquire the throne of Manipur with the help of the Burmese. After seven years Burmese devastation of Manipur (1819-1825), the latter was re-conquered by Gambhir Singh with the help of the British. When the prince became the Raja of Manipur after the Treaty of Yandaboo, this valley became a hot spot of political dialogue between Burma and the British Indian Government (an ally of Manipur). In June 1826, Major General Archibald Campbell was informed that "the Government should maintain the right of Gambhir Singh over northern and middle portion of Kabow Valley

(Samjok and Khampat) but the southern portion (Kule) had to become a subject of negotiation."²⁵ However, the Burmese court objected to the line of boundary proposed by the Government of India. The latter appointed Captain F.J. Grant and Lieutenant R.B. Pemberton as the Commissioners of Manipur. Lieutenants Montmorency and Rawlinson were deputed to accompany the Burmese Commissioners to the meeting on the Chindwin River which was scheduled to be held in February 1828. As the season was quite advanced, they postponed their programme.

The British Commissioners met the Burmese in January 1830, and fixed the Chindwin River as the future boundary between Burma and Manipur planting flags accordingly; but the Burmese refused their witness. The latter's court was greatly agitated over the step of Grant and Pemberton which they thought was unwarranted by any instruction of the Government of India and decided to send a deputation to Calcutta. Accordingly, two Burmese envoys arrived in Calcutta in 1830, and their first and the foremost demand was "the restoration of the Kabow Valley."²⁶ Before their arrival in Calcutta, the British Government also sent Major Burney as the British Resident in Ava in April, 1830. He was instructed that "your attention should be given to the trade of Ava with a view to reporting to his Lordship-in-Council the practicability of extending and facilitating British commerce and the consumption of British manufactures."²⁷ In the previous letter from Burney, it was stated that the importation of British goods in Burma was on the rise, but in December 1830, he stated: "Some of my former reports expressed an opinion that the present king of Ava will take the first favourable opportunity of engaging in another contest with us."²⁸ The Burmese Government appointed military chiefs as the Governors of Prome, Bassein, and other cities in the delta. In this way, the Government of Ava was in a state of war against the British Indian Government. On the other hand, the British Government felt the difficulties and the huge loss of resources in the form of money and men in the First Anglo-Burmese war.²⁹ Above all, the authorities of Calcutta were also very serious about the trade facilities which they could enjoy when they developed a good relationship with Ava. The Burmese mainly exported vegetable oil, petroleum and teak-wood. About the latter, it was stated: "It is found also in Bombay, but in small quantities, and is extremely dear; whereas in Pegu and Ava there are such immense forests of it, that it can be sold to as many ships as arrive, at a moderate price."³⁰

Having felt the lucrative Burmese trade, the British designed political economy in the region and stated: ".....the Supreme Government still adheres to the opinion that the Ningthee (Chindwin River) formed the proper boundary between Ava and Manipur; but that in consideration for His Majesty's (Burmese king) feelings and wishes and in the spirit of amity and good will subsisting between the countries, the Supreme Government consents to the restoration of the Kubo Valley to Ava, and to the establishment of the boundary at the foot of the Yoomadoung hills."³¹

Accordingly, Major Grant and Captain Pemberton handed over the Kabaw Valley to Burma on the 9th January, 1834. To alleviate the great loss of the Manipuris, the British Government paid 500 Sicca Rupees per month to this Kingdom. This disposition of the British implies that they could save their resources avoiding another Burmese war and, on the other hand, get economic facilities from Burma. To the Manipuris, the loss of Kabaw Valley was just like snatching of a child from a mother's lap. The Court of Directors also expressed: "We are glad to find that the transfer of the Kuboo Valley to the Burmese authorities took place so satisfactorily....Major Grant and Captain Pemberton, the Commissioners and Lt. Macleod, deputed by the resident to accompany the Burmese Officers are entitled to commendations for the manner in which they executed their rather delicate duty."³² Raja Gambhir Singh died because of the deep sock. In this way, the British Government, in order to safeguard its economic design in respect of Burma, sacrificed the interest of a less powerful kingdom of Manipur by ceding the Kabaw Valley to Burma.

5. Ill-treatment to the Manipur Levy and other British excesses

Being ceded the Kabaw Valley to Burma, the British Government conceptualized that the Burmese would not aggress towards the Company's frontier in near future. Therefore, in order to save the expenditure on the Manipur Levy, the British severed the latter's connection with the British Government issuing this order in 1835: "It has been resolved to discontinue the British superintendence over the body denominated the Manipur Levy, and to leave it optional with the Government of the country to maintain that force or not as it please."³³ Hence, the Company, fulfilling its political economy in the region, betrayed its most reliable friend in its eastern frontier. The Manipuris had not only lost their Kabaw Valley but also lost their life giving services under the British Government. Since the Levy's connection with the British was discontinued, the latter appointed their first Political Agent at Imphal in 1835, and the Raja of Manipur also sent his Agents- one in Calcutta and the other at Lakhipur in Cachar. Hence, status-quo was maintained between the two powers. But the Company, later on, tried to interfere into the internal affairs of Manipur. In 1850, when Chandrakirti Singh ascended the throne of Manipur, in the name of maintaining peace in the kingdom, the British Government made a public avowal to punish any contender to the throne of Manipur. Hence, the British Government started to interfere into the internal affairs of Manipur making Manipuri masses extremely annoyed. In the mean time the payment of Kabaw Valley compensation was also restricted to those Rajas of Manipur until they were recognised by the British.

6. Anti-British mindset of the Manipuris became prominent in the Revolt of 1857

In the event of 1857 Revolt, the British Government decided to establish a Manipur Regiment thinking that the latter would be very useful for the maintenance of peace in its eastern frontiers.

Hence, in a letter sent to the Court of Directors in 1857, it was stated: "On the 4th of August it was suggested to the Govt. of India by the Lt. Governor of Bengal, that it might be easy and expedient through the civil and military authorities in the N-E Frontier and Munipore to raise a very useful body Muneeporees, and Cacharees for general service...."³⁴ Accordingly, orders were issued to the Political Agent in Manipur and to the officer commanding the Sylhet Light Infantry Regiment to raise a corps each of 1500 Manipuris to be drilled at Cherraponjee. There, the old jail was repaired for their accommodation. It was stated, "Natives of Muneepore were recommended for enlistment in preference to Cacharees. The former being more active and warlike it was suggested that they should receive the same pay as the Sylhet Light Infantry while under training and that their pay should be increased when they became general service corps"³⁵ However, the people of Manipur did not like to extend their support to this recruitment rally keeping in view of those previous events beginning with the loss of Kabaw Valley. McCulloch, the Agent then, reported on the 12th February, 1858: "During the last two days the common conversation of the Munniporees has been in a style showing they would rather have nothing to do with the mutineers; saying that as they (Hindustani rebels) are co-religionist they (Manipuri Masses) can meet no harm from them and that all mutineers want is the Sahibs life and why sacrifice lives for the Feerunghees."³⁶ Hence, by 1857, the animosity felt by the Manipuris towards the British was remarkably high.

7. Immediate cause

Maharaja Chandrakirti died in 1886, and his son Surachandra Singh ascended the throne of Manipur. The new king was incompetent and, therefore, was dethroned after a palace revolt engineered by Bir Tikendrajit Singh on September 21, 1890. Kulachandra ascended the throne on 23 September of the instant. Surchandra, reaching Calcutta, applied to the Viceroy to regain his lost throne. After due discussion, Lord Landsdown directed the Chief Commissioner of Assam to recognise Kulachandra as the Raja of Manipur, and at the same time to deport Tikendrajit Singh beyond Manipur. This latter provision was the culmination of the British interference in the affairs of the independent kingdom of Manipur. Mr. Quinton, Chief Commissioner of Assam, arrived at Imphal on 22nd March, 1891, with an escort party of 400 British Army. Repeated Darbars (conferences) were scheduled to arrest Tikendrajit, but failed. Ultimately, in the early morning of the 24th March, the British Army under Lt. Brackenbary fired the first shot at Kangla with an objective of arresting Yuvaraj Tikendrajit. On the same day, Manipuris declared war against the British.

8. Impact of the attack of Kangla (capital of Manipur)

After the whole day's fight on the 24th March, the British declared ceasefire at 8 P.M. For a Darbar to be held instantly at Kangla, 5 British Officers and a Hindustani bugler came to Kangla.

In the Beginning of the Darbar, those Manipuri nobles expressed their willingness to hold the conference with the British Officers only. Therefore, they asked the Sahibs to allow the Indian bugler to go back to the residency.³⁷ It also indicated that the Manipuris did not like any Indian to join the meeting at that critical moment. When the conference failed, the exited Manipuri masses killed Mr. Grimwood, and on their pressing demands, other four Officers- Mr. Quinton, Colonel Skene, Lt. Simpson and Mr. Cossins were also killed inside the Kangla Fort. At Mayangkhang (near Senapati), another two British Officials- Mr. Melville and Mr. O'Brian were also killed by the army of Manipur in collusion with the Nagas of the place.

9. Battlefields at Thoubal Athokpam, Kakching and Khongjom

Having heard the British setbacks at Imphal, Lt. Grant of the 12th Burma Madras Infantry advanced to Manipur from Tamu and reached Thoubal Athokpam with 85 rifles on 31st March. On this day the British also declared war against Manipur. In the ensuing engagements at Thoubal Athokpam, about 50 brave Manipuris sacrificed their lives. Sanakhya Haojou (Yaiskul Lakpa) and his son Sengoisana breathed their last at this place on the 6th April, 1891. War being declared, in the second week of April, three powerful columns of British Army were sent to Manipur via Silchar, Kohima and Tamu. Manipuris had to challenge this powerful British Army. On the number of Manipuri warriors and their war equipments, the Hindu reported on the 9th April, 1891: "The state had an army of 5439 infantry, 501 artillery, 400 cavalry and 700 Kuki irregulars. But the Ex Maharaja says he had a regular army of 8000 men not including the Kukis and the hill Levies. The hillmen said to be always at the service of the ruling family consisting mostly of Kukis are faithful but difficult to control. They number 10,000 and receive no pay but are exempt from taxes."³⁸ To resist the British column from Tamu, 700 Manipuris were sent to Thoubal under Wangkheirakpa and Yenkhoiba Major. At this critical time the Maharaja appointed Subedar Paona Brajabasi and Chongtha Mia Singh to the posts of Major and four hundred sepoy under the two Majors were reinforced to oppose the British force from Burma (Tammu Column).³⁹ At the Battle of Kakching, Wangkhei Meiraba and about 19 of his followers laid their lives on 23rd April. Earlier, orders had been issued to Major Chongtha Mia Singh (Manipuri Commander at Khongjom) and Paona Brajabasi to proceed towards Pallel by the Burma Road. But seeing the British reconnoitring party, the two Manipuri Majors constructed their clay fort on the bank of the Khongjom River. On 24th April, Lt. Cox spied out the disposition of the Manipuri troops at Khongjom. But the Manipuris opened fire to Cox's party. Realising the gravity of the situation, the two Majors requested the Commander-in-charge at Thoubal to supply the pounders of high calibre. Failing which, those 400 Manipuri warriors had to face the British Army with their small weapons. The historic Battle at Khongjom was fought on the 25th April, 1891. On this day, 50 Gurkha Rifles under Captain Drury, 50 Madras Infantry (Burma) under Lt. Grant and 35 Mounted Infantry of the 12th Madras Infantry (Burma) under Lt.

Cox surrounded the fort of Manipur at Khongjom. Thinking that the force under Captain Drury was not strong enough for the purpose, General Graham ordered out another 200 rifles of 2-4th Gurkhas with Captains Rundall and Carnegy, and 2 guns of No. 2 Mountain Battery, under Lt. Persse for reinforcement and attack of the Manipur fort which was poorly equipped. When the war began, powerful British guns effected fatal impacts at the fort of Manipur, but those Manipuri warriors fought gallantly. At this last battlefield the Manipuris were defeated and about 300 Manipuri warriors including Major Paona Brajabasi, Khumbong Major, Chinglen Sana, Loitongba Jamadar, Keisa Jamadar, Heirang Khongja made their supreme sacrifices. Major Chongtha Mia who narrowly escaped death had three bullet injuries. On the date of the Battle at Khongjom and the Manipuri Commander- Chongtha Mia, the Genl. Officer Commanding, Tamu Column, Manipur Field Force reported through Telegram No. 206-M from Pallel on 3rd May, 1891: "The Tamu Column left Manipur in detachments on 30th April and 1st and 2nd May. I myself left on the 2th May. On arrival at Thobal I found that Moug Bah Hlaing, a Burmese Magistrate, who was acting as Assistant to Mr. Soppit, Political Officer, and who left Manipur on the 30th April with Mr. Soppit, had, while at Thobal, received information that Mya-Minzarrow (Major Chongtha Mia), who was supposed to have been killed in the fight near Pallel on the 25th April, was hiding in a village about fifteen miles distant from Thobal. Moug Bah Hlaing at once proceeded with only his own Burman followers, and arrested Mya-Minzarrow and brought him into Thobal. The Minzarrow is stated by all villagers *en route* to be the man who actually cut down and murdered Mr. Quinton. He is very badly wounded with bullets in three places, and it is marvel he lives. I sent him into Manipur this morning for disposal. I think Moug Bah Hlaing's action in the matter is worthy of commendation. I hope to arrive at Tamu on 6th May."⁴⁰ On the 27th April, 1891, the British Forces occupied Kangla and the Manipuris lost their independent existence.

10. Concerted efforts of the Manipuris in the war

It is really undeniable that the Manipuris living both in the hills and the plain fought the war united. Traditions express that the Maharajas maintained a very sound relationship with the hill people of Manipur. Till today, everyone could see Manipuri festivals like Lai-haraoba, and Mera Hou Chongba at which all the Manipuri communities join together and witness these festivals with great joy. Having this unbreakable bond of unity, there were many Manipuri hill people at Kangla Fort when it was attacked on the 24th March, 1891. It has already been stated that two Tankhuls also lost their lives in hand to hand fight on that morning. At Mayangkhang, as mentioned earlier, when the British Officers-Mr. Melville and Mr. O'Brian were attacked, the Nagas of that place played a great role under their chief- Chirai Naga. The Kukis and the Nagas of the Southwest Manipur also showed their great animosity resulting in repeated skirmishes when Mrs. Grimwood and the British Army retreated on the Cachar Road in March, 1891. At the

time of advancing the British column from Silchar, the Kukis of Manipur broke the suspension bridge over the Irang River to check the British advance.⁴¹ When the Manipuris were defeated, Maharaja Kulachandra, his brothers and a great number of Manipuri followers took shelter at Chassad for some days. The then Chief Political Officer in Manipur also reported on 27th April, 1891: "The Regent, Senapati, and brothers left palace for Tangkul hills 8 p.m. 26th."⁴² After the war, 5 Manipuri leaders viz. Jubaraj Tikendrajit, General Thangal, Niranjana Subedar, Kajao Singh, Jamadar and Chirai Naga of Mayangkhang were hanged to death by the British Authorities. Another 22 leaders- Kullachandra Dhaja Singh (Ex-Regent), Prince Angao Singh (Senapati), Lokendrajit Birjit Singh (Wangkheirakpa), Samu Singh (Colonel alias Luwang Ningthou), Chongtham Nilamani Singh (Ayapurel Major), Chongtham Mia Singh (Major), Uru Singh (Usurba), Chaoba Hida (Machahal), Gun Singh (Kongdram), Kumba Singh (Laisraba), Dhaja Singh (Mayengba), Nam Singh (Nepra, Machahal), Trilo Singh (Nongtholba Satwal), Dhon Singh (Sagolsemba), Ghuna Singh (Ingujamba Jamadar), Ningthouba Singh (Chingshuba), Thaoba Singh (Phanjao Jamadar), Tonjao Singh (Mangsatba Jamadar), Chaobatol Singh (Heigrujamba Subadar) Paradhumba Singh (alias Ashangba Kut), Chowkami Naga of Mayangkhang and Gowho Naga of Mayangkhang were transported for life.⁴³

11. Conclusion

The Anglo-Manipur War-1891 was, obviously, a remarkable event in history as those Hindustani/Gurkha war prisoners were released by the Manipuris with some payment. The Manipuris also did not like the Indian bugler to join the Darbar on the night of the 24th March, 1891. To the freedom loving Manipuris, the political economy and other over bearing acts of the British made a deep rooted anti-British feeling. Hence, almost all the Manipuri communities contributed to the war efforts. It is quite apparent that the aged Thangal General knew and felt the ultimate objective of the British was to annex Manipur. It is also apparent that the Manipuris were not in a position to challenge the might of the British. This could be the reason why they expressed their deep rooted anger and animosity towards the British by executing the British Officers.

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