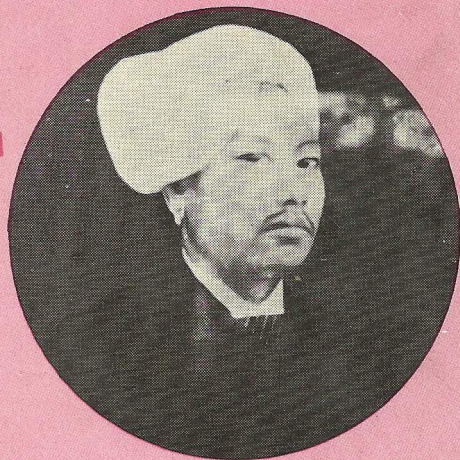


**QUEEN
EMPRESS**

VS

**TIKENDRAJIT
PRINCE OF
MANIPUR**



**THE ANGLO-MANIPUR
CONFLICT OF 1891**

JOHN PARRATT • SAROJ PARRATT

The conflict between Manipur and the British Raj of 1891 has never been documented, and it is fitting that John and Saroj Parratt's account and analysis of the event should appear in the centenary year of the event. It is an extraordinary narrative in which multiple British diplomatic and military blunders led to the decisive defeat of a force of crack Gurkha troops at the hands of the tiny state of Manipur, and to the public execution of five high-ranking British officers. Following the inevitable crushing of Manipur by the might of the Raj, the leading figure on the Manipuri side, the young and popular Crown Prince Koireng Tikendrajit, was arraigned before a military tribunal in a trial which violated a good many of the tenets of British justice, and condemned to be hanged.

The Manipuri affair of 1891 symbolised a tragic struggle for national identity. It is a story of the complex tangle of the relationship between British power and an independent state, and of the personal tragedies of Koireng Tikendrajit, Political Officer Grimwood and his beautiful and resourceful wife.

This book is based on detailed archival research in London, Delhi, Calcutta and Imphal, and on field research in Manipur. This gripping narrative is recounted here with great vividness and elegance.

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SAROJ NALINI ARAMBAM PARRATT was born in Manipur. She studied at the Universities of Calcutta and London, and obtained her Ph.D. from the Australian National University. Besides carrying out ongoing research in Manipur she has taught at several African Universities. Her previous publications include *The Religion of Manipur* (Firma KLM, Calcutta) a pioneering work and standard text on Manipuri culture.

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PREFACE

The sketches from which the illustrations of Manipur are taken first appeared in the *Illustrated London News*. April to June 1891; the photographs of Mrs. Grimwood and Frank Grimwood are from *My Three Years in Manipur*. Other photographs have kindly been provided by Ibema K. Sobita, Deputy Director of the Manipur State Museum; Ibema K.H. Sarojini, Deputy Director of the Manipur State Archives; N. Tombi, Director, Directorate of Information and Publicity, Government of Manipur; N. Khelachandra, and Major M. Ranjit. The two paintings appear by permission of R.K.C. Studios. Our thanks are also due to Alpha Studios, Carlisle and X Studio, Imphal, for photographic work; to B. Makwiti and Maisnam Modhusudon for mapwork, to S. Kula for inscribing the dedication in Meitei Mayek, and to our son Christopher for technical assistance with the illustrations and for the cover design. We would especially like to thank Ibungo Pehari Nongmaithem for as long as twenty years ago, first awakening our interest to the events of 1891, and to him and Ishen-Ibungo Dr. Subhas Arambam for commenting on the manuscript.

During this centenary year there have been several publications in Manipur on the conflict. Of special usefulness is N. Khelachandra's publication of some of the main sources, and the *One Hundred Years* centenary volume issued by the Directorate of Information and Publicity, Imphal.

The authors, one Meitei the other English, have tried to be as fair as possible to both sides in the conflict. How far they have succeeded in this, and in analysing the deeper reasons behind what happened,

we leave to the reader to judge. Apart from minor discrepancies between some of the sources or particular points, on which we have felt free to make our own assessments, the only serious problem has been in a difference in dating in some of the events between the British sources and the Manipuri Chronicles. In such cases we have generally followed the former. Manipuri readers may wish to be assured that the words of Lukramba on page 42 are taken from the Cheitharol Kumbaba. In the spelling of place names we have followed colonial usage except where confusion seemed likely.

Imphal
January 1992

John Parratt
Saroj N. Arambam Parratt

CHAPTER ONE

MANIPUR

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CHAPTER ONE

MANIPUR

"A story of long, long ago :
"Manipur, the land of gold"
Sung only by him who loves.
How can one gainsay a dreamer?"

Sarat Arambam *Matam Amagi Wari.*

" The valley of Manipur lies between Cachar, the Kubo Valley, and Kohima, and is surrounded by six ranges of hills which separate it from the tracts of country named. A pretty place, more beautiful than many of the show places of the world; beautiful in its habitable parts, but more beautiful in those tracts covered with forest where the foot of man seldom treads."

Ethel St. Clair Grimwood *My Three Years in Manipur. London 1891*
p.2.

The Manipur affair leapt like a comet suddenly and spectacularly into the view of Victorian England in March 1891. In the following few months it created much heat and controversy before burning itself out with a final splutter in the August. For half of a year the politicians and the military exchanged frantic telegrams and memoranda, the press raged and accused, and the honorable members of both Houses of Parliament debated and argued. Then, as the last act was played out, the monarch herself, entered the controversy by taking

the matter up with both the Secretary of State for India and the Viceroy and making her own appeal for clemency for the main actor in the drama, the Manipuri Crown Prince Koireng Tikendrajit. The cause of the furore was not just that a British force had been scattered by the army of a tiny state in a remote corner of British India; nor was it simply that several high-ranking officers had been executed, shattering to Victorian morale though these things were. What generated so much heat about the Manipur affair was the alarming possibility that the Government of India may have been guilty of negligence or even of criminal incompetence, that its chief officers on the spot may have practised a deviousness bordering on treachery, and that a crack regiment of Gurkhas appeared to have acted with such unsoldierly conduct that there was more than a suspicion that they had mutinied.

Manipur had first come to the attention of the British as far back as 1762, when the British Resident in Sylhet, Mr Verelst, had unexpectedly received a representative from the Manipuri rajah seeking his aid against incursions of the Burmese on his eastern border. No one on those eastern reaches of British India at that time knew very much about the little kingdom to the east of Cachar, even its name was uncertain¹. However the British obligingly sent a detachment of sepoys in aid of Rajah Gour Shyam and his co-regent Jai Singh, otherwise known as Bhagya Chandra. Nothing much was accomplished. The sepoys advanced only as far as Kanpur, the capital of the then independent kingdom of Cachar, and then, for reasons unclear but probably because of the inaccessibility of the swampy and hilly country, retired back to Sylhet without firing a shot. The little state was left to itself to oppose the threat posed by its giant neighbour as best it could.

Manipur's contact with Burma had been a long one, and one which had come to a climax during the reign of Jai Singh's grandfather, Garib Niwaz. Arguably Manipur's greatest king, Garib Niwaz had, during the first half of the eighteenth century, taken advantage of the temporary weakness of Burma and devoted much of his energies

¹Capt. R. Boileau Pemberton, writing in 1835, noted that the country was variously called Kathe, Moglie, Meklee, and Cassay : in 1891 the Manipuris still called it Meitei Leipak, "Land of the Meiteis".

to devastating and plundering upper Burma and destroying successive Burmese armies sent against him. He had made no attempt at conquest, however, and on his death roles had been reversed. The resurgence of Burmese power under the formidable Alaungpaya resulted in one invasion after another of Manipur. Garib Niwaz had sown the wind, his grandsons reaped the whirlwind. During Jai Singh's long reign, between 1764 and 1796, he was forced to flee repeatedly to Cachar, leaving his kingdom in the hands of the invaders, whose possession of firearms had made them more than a match for the formerly invincible Manipuri cavalry. After a period of chaos and internecine feuding among the Manipuri princes, some semblance of order had been restored when Marjit Singh ruled as a puppet king under Burmese suzerainty. Marjit's ill-fated attempt to throw off the Burmese yoke in 1819, however, resulted in the utter devastation of Manipur. Extreme cruelty was perpetrated upon the population, many fled, and others were deported as captives to Burma. The several claimants to the Manipuri throne fled westwards, and in their turn attacked the raja of Cachar and possessed themselves of much of his land. Then, in 1824, the first Anglo-Burmese war broke out.

The British had by this time come to realise the strategic importance of both Cachar and Manipur for the security of the north eastern border. Early on in the war the Burmese had made a fierce attack on Cachar from Manipur. Consequently, when the Manipuri princes there, led by Gambhir Singh, appealed to the British for aid a force of sepoys and artillery was despatched. The combined Anglo-Manipuri troops inflicted a heavy defeat on the Burmese near Silchar, and they retreated into Manipur. Gambhir Singh was now acclaimed rajah, and together with his cousin Nara Singh, who was the Senapati (commander of the army), he asked the British to help him recover his country. As in 1762, however, the British troops were unable to penetrate through the swamp and jungle into Manipur and had to retire back to Cachar after losing many men through fever. Gambhir Singh then decided to attack the Burmese on his own. The British for their part agreed to arm 500 of his men with muskets and to provide a British officer, Capt. R. Boileau Pemberton, to lead them. Gambhir Singh's campaign was a complete success. He ejected the invaders from Manipur and pursued them to the banks of the Ningthee River in the

Kabaw Valley. When the Anglo-Burmese war ended in 1826 the treaty of Yandabo declared Manipur an independent kingdom, with Gambhir Singh as its rajah. Cachar became a British protectorate.

Gambhir Singh died in 1834, leaving a two year old son, Chandra Kirti, as his heir. Nara Singh became regent, but after a plot to assassinate him, in which he believed the ex-maharani, Chandra Kirti's mother, to have been implicated, he was declared rajah by popular acclaim. Chandra Kirti meanwhile was taken by his mother to Cachar, where he was put under British protection. During this period, in 1835, the British found it expedient to establish a Political Agency in Manipur; it was in the nature of an embassy in a friendly foreign independent country.

By this time more knowledge was coming to light about this previously impenetrable state. A treaty made with Gambhir Singh had, among other things, committed the Manipuri government to maintain a road between the Cachar border and the capital Imphal, and communications had been considerably improved. Meanwhile two army captains, F. T. Grant and R. Boileau Pemberton both published detailed reports on the eastern frontier areas, including Manipur. The heart-land of the state was found to be a fertile valley, some 36 miles in length, north to south, and about 18 miles across. To the south was a large lake, Loktak, swarming with wildlife, through which the Imphal river drained on its way southwards. The capital, called Imphal² was situated towards north of the valley. The eastern border was bounded by teak covered hills which swept down into the Kabaw Valley. On the west and south the Jiri and Barak rivers marked the border with British territory. Between these rivers and the central valley were mountains, stretching some 80 miles from north to south and rising to 8000 feet. The road from Imphal had to traverse nine ranges of hills before reaching the border with Cachar. The Manipuris had by this time once more regained authority over the peoples living in the hills surrounding the valley. These were mainly Nagas and Kukis, and were not Hindus as most Manipuris were. By the mid-eighteen fifties the Manipuri population was around 50,000, and it could scarcely have been more than double that in 1891.

²corruption of Yumphal, meaning "place of many dwellings"

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Nara Singh died in 1850, and after an abortive attempt by his brother Debendra to seize the throne, the young Chandra Kirti Singh eluded his British guards and returned to Manipur amidst popular support to regain the throne. Initially Chandra Kirti's attitude to the British seems to have been rather cool, but as time went on a more cordial relationship prevailed. At the time of the mutiny he helped in the capture of fugitive mutineers, and later provided troops to support Col. James Johnstone for the relief of Kohima following the rising of the Angami Nagas. When the last Anglo-Burmese war irrupted he again sent Manipuri troops, this time to support Johnstone's occupation of Kendat in the Kabaw Valley. The British agreed to guarantee his rule against attempts to overthrow him, and in 1880 took the unusual step of awarding him the Order of Knight Commander of the Star of India.

Chandra Kirti's reign came to an end in 1886. There was no rule of primogeniture in Manipur, and since Chandra Kirti had six wives, all of whom had produced sons, the situation was fraught with potential for palace intrigue. Before his death the king had nominated his eldest son, by the principal queen, Sura Chandra as his successor. Contrary to the advice of the Political Agent, Johnstone, he had further decreed that the succession should thereafter pass not directly to Sura Chandra's son, but should first be enjoyed by his own sons born of the junior queens. The British undertook to guarantee only the immediate succession of Sura Chandra. Sura Chandra was in his late thirties when he ascended the throne. Contemporary accounts describe him as short and somewhat fat, fairer than most Manipuris in complexion, but with a face much scarred by small-pox. His mother, Angom Lokeshwari, had borne Chandra Kirti three other sons, Paka Sana, Kesarjit and Gopal Sana. According to Manipuri custom each had a position in the court hierarchy, and each prince had his own personal bodyguard. Paka Sana received the title of Sagol Hanjaba, (Commander of the Royal Horses), and his brothers became Samu Hanjaba, (Commander of the Royal Elephants), and Dolairoi Hanjaba, (Commander of the Royal Palanquins), respectively. Paka Sana in particular was to play a significant role in the events of 1890. The second rani bore two sons. The elder of these, Kula Chandra Dhuj Singh, became Jubraj, or Crown Prince. Slightly taller than Sura Chandra, and darker in

complexion, he shared with his elder brother a tendency to stoutness. During his father's reign he had taken part in several military campaigns along with Tikendrajit, whom we shall meet below. He was on the whole of a somewhat easy-going disposition, and less interested in the exercise of power than in enjoying the comforts which royalty afforded him.

This was not the case with the son of the fourth rani, Tikendrajit Bir Singh. When the only son of the third rani died, Tikendrajit became Senapati, or Commander of the armed forces. He was in his late twenties when Chandra Kirti died, and was by then far the most popular of the princes. Slim and of medium height, his dark and piercing eyes were well set off by his clear and fair complexion. Though something of a ladies' man and always impeccably (perhaps even showily) dressed, he had at the same time a reputation for physical strength not shared by his elder brothers, and excelled in such traditional Manipuri athletic past-times as polo and weight-lifting. It was Tikendrajit, alone of all the princes, who made a favourable impression upon Mrs Grimwood, and in her memoirs she has far more to say about him than about any of the others. Despite the tragic role he was to play in the future conflict, Ethel Grimwood seems to have had a genuine affection for Tikendrajit. He was among those who first welcomed the Grimwoods on their arrival in Manipur, and his dark eyes and ready smile, together with the fact that he alone possessed a knowledge of Hindustani, made an immediate impact upon her. As they settled into life in the Residency it was again the Senapati who showed them acts of kindness and courtesy and brought them gifts from time to time. For Mrs Grimwood there was something about him which set him apart from the other princes. "He was", she recalled, "manly and generous to a fault, a good friend and a bitter enemy. We liked him because he was so much more broad-minded than the rest". Especially she enjoyed watching his brilliance at polo, as much as her husband, for his part, enjoyed Tikendrajit's company and expertise on shooting expeditions. He became a frequent visitor to the Residency, sometimes bringing with him the young princesses. Although there is no real evidence to support the Manipuri tradition that Mrs Grimwood nourished a romantic attachment towards the prince, there can be no doubt either that she found him attractive and enjoyed his company.

This adds a certain poignancy to the role that Tikendrajit was subsequently to play in the lives of her husband and herself.

The two younger princes, Angou Sana and Zillah Singh, sons of the fifth and sixth queens respectively, were also to feature prominently in the future events. Angou Sana could not have been more than twenty-two or twenty-three, and his younger brother only about seventeen, when the Grimwoods first arrived. Angou Sana was a somewhat unruly young man, much given to gambling, pigeon fighting and betel nuts. Zillah seems to have been a younger reflection of Tikendrajit, slim, lively and athletic.

The political administration of Manipur was to some degree a result of its peculiar history. Originally several different groups (or yeks) had settled in the valley, each with its own ningthou or "king". At some time during the eighteenth century the strongest of these yeks, the Ningthoujas, had gained the ascendancy and their ningthou had become the supreme ruler over the whole nation. The ningthous of the other yeks had, however, continued to wield some influence and occupied important positions in the political administration. Foremost among these were the Angom Ningthou (chief of the Angom yek) and the Luwang Ningthou (chief of the Luwang yek), both of whom had wide ranging powers within the state. Other important positions were those of the Ayapurel, the officer of state whose responsibility was for the security of the eastern part of the country between the capital and the Burmese border, and the Wangkheirakpa, the second in command to the senapati. All these, together with the princes, were members of the Durbar or the "Top Guard", the supreme ruling council. At a lower level commoners were appointed as lalupchingbas, officers in charge of the lalup or levy. Originally a means of levying forced labour upon the population for the service of the maharajah and the country in lieu of taxation, the levy in later times came to be a kind of compulsory military service. High-ranking military officers were also often members of the Durbar. One of these, Thangal General, alias Kangaba Tulinaha Major, played an especially prominent role in the events of 1891, and merits some comment here. Thangal was born around 1817. Though some authorities claimed that he was a Naga, this is very unlikely. Manipuri tradition has it that he received his name when he conducted a punitive expedition against the Naga village of Thangal

at Mayangkhang during the reign of Chandra Kirti. Earlier he had accompanied the boy king into exile during the period when the regent Nara Singh had occupied the throne, and returned with him in 1880 after Nara Singh's death. Thangal had quickly established for himself a reputation for bravery in battle and for his statesmanship. Though not of noble birth he had occupied many important positions of state, and eventually rose to the highest rank in the Manipuri army. Col. Johnstone, whom Thangal accompanied at the head of a contingent of Manipuri troops to relieve Kohima in 1876, had a great admiration for him. "His bold and energetic character," wrote the former Political Agent, "always brought him to the front when hard or dangerous work had to be done. Though a very devoted and patriotic Manipuri, he was extremely partial to Europeans," Johnstone added, perhaps over-sanguinely. Nonetheless even Johnstone recognised the trait of ruthlessness and unscrupulousness in Thangal. After 1884 (when Johnstone returned for his last period of service in Manipur) he noticed that the General began to exert his leadership more and more openly during the declining years of Chandra Kirti. By the time the 1891 conflict broke out Thangal was already well advanced in age, well into his seventies. Though still active, he suffered recurrent bouts of sickness. Contemporary accounts describe him as short and stocky, with white hair and piercing eyes, and with a flair for dressing well and for adorning his turban with the orchids which are so abundant in Manipur.

Such then was the little state to which the Grimwoods came. Frank St. Clair Grimwood had been educated at Winchester and Oxford. He had qualified for the Bengal Civil service by examination in 1874, and arrived in India in November two years later. After a short spell in Bengal he had transferred to Assam and had been appointed to what Mrs Grimwood called "a very junior position in Sylhet". Mrs Grimwood was herself no stranger to India, and two of her brothers were at that time officers in the Indian army. Grimwood was promoted to the position of Political Agent in Manipur in mid-1888, and he and his wife went there firmly believing that Imphal would be their home for several years. But they had been in Manipur for barely six months when Grimwood was advised that a more senior officer had returned from leave, and they would have to make way for him. Both were deeply disappointed. Mrs Grimwood in particular had begun to

love the country and their new home, especially her garden with its imported roses upon which she lavished great care. Frank Grimwood, too, had come to enjoy not only his new elevated status as Political Agent, but also the polo and the duck-shooting in which his not very onerous duties gave him ample time to indulge. However, they bowed to the edict of their superiors, packed their bags and departed for a much less attractive posting in Jorhat and subsequently in Gauhati. Grimwood's successor, Heath, seemed from the first to have a death wish about him. Reluctant from the beginning to spend the autumn of his days in so remote a spot as Manipur, he was only two months in the country when he succumbed to dysentery. Within twenty-four hours of his death Grimwood had once again been offered the Political Agency. Since the monsoons were now beginning it was agreed that he would return to Manipur alone and that his wife would see out the wet season in Shillong and follow him towards the end of the year. Though outwardly happy at this unexpected turn of events, Mrs Grimwood later recalled (perhaps with the benefit of hindsight) that she felt an "indefinable dread" at the prospect of going back to the life they had both loved so much. However by November 1889 she had joined her husband in the Residency at Imphal, and with her firm hand had once again put the house, servants and the garden in order. Only the former agent's grave in the Residency grounds served as a reminder of the unfortunate Heath.

About a year after their return the Grimwoods began to realise that all was not well between the royal princes. Rumours reached them of conflict among the half-brothers, and it was not long before, despite their attempts to keep on good terms with all the royal family, they became the unwilling observers of a sharp antagonism between Paka Sana and Tikendrajit. Issues petty in themselves became inflated, and then jealousy erupted over the affections of a young local teenage beauty, Maipakpi by name. Soon the princes were ranged into two camps, and Paka Sana and his two brothers found themselves opposed by a coalition of their half-brothers Tikendrajit, Angou Sana and Zillah Singh. The Maharajah and the Jubraj initially, as far as they could, kept aloof from their turbulent younger brothers, but it was not long before Sura Chandra, weak-willed as he was, entered the field and put the weight of his authority behind Paka Sana. Kula Chandra now came to realise that his best hopes for the future lay in throwing in his

lot with Tikendrajit, and thus the power struggle escalated. Things came to a head in the September of 1890, when a long-standing feud between Paka Sana and Zillah Singh led to violent exchanges. The former then managed to persuade the Maharajah to expel the young Zillah from his seat on the Durbar, and to deprive him of his other official functions. Then towards the end of the month, Paka Sana accused his younger brothers of plotting to overthrow the Maharajah, and preparations were made to arrest them and bring them to trial. Angou Sana and Zillah Singh resolved on a preemptive strike against their enemies and together with Tikendrajit hatched a plot which was to alter the whole subsequent history of Manipur.